



MAIL-ORDER BRIDE INK

*Dear  
Mr. Comforts*

KIT

MORGAN

BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR

Mischief, Marriage  
and Mayhem,  
these brides have  
something to  
write about!

DEAR MR. COMFORTS

KIT MORGAN

**Dear Mr. Comforts**

(Mail-Order Bride Ink, Book Seven)

by

Kit Morgan

ANGEL CREEK PRESS

**Dear Mr. Comforts**

**(Mail-Order Bride Ink, Book Seven)**

by Kit Morgan

© 2018 Kit Morgan

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without permission in writing from the publisher. All characters are fictional. Any resemblances to actual people or livestock are purely coincidental.

Cover design by Angel Creek Press, The Killion Group and Hotdamndesigns.com

# CONTENTS

[License Note](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Kit Morgan](#)

[About the Author](#)

## LICENSE NOTE

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

## CHAPTER 1

DENVER, COLORADO, 1902

Fantine LeBlanc smiled at the young gentleman behind the meat counter. He was a few years older than her, with dark hair, blue eyes and a dazzling smile. Fantine sighed as he wrapped Mrs. Lewis's pork chops, tied the bundle with string and handed it over the counter. "Thank you, Mrs. Lewis – come again," he said in his dreamy voice. He glanced around the shop. "Next!"

Fantine hurried forward. "Good morning, *Monsieur* Lundstrom."

Tobias Lundstrom looked her over and smiled, though not as bright a smile as it was for some of his other customers. "Oh, you're here for Mrs. Pettigrew's order," he said flatly.

"*Oui, Monsieur.*" Her face bright, she nervously brushed at her skirt. He was so handsome, so wonderful ... and so not interested in her.

He turned without a word and disappeared into the back of the butcher's shop. A few moments later he re-emerged and dropped a heavy bundle on the counter. "That will be two dollars."

She nodded and pulled the money from her reticule, but didn't set it on the counter. She let her hand hover and, as anticipated, he put his open palm beneath hers. She let the money fall into it, her fingers touching his. She enjoyed the

thrill that raced up her spine at the contact, then cleared her throat. She didn't want him to suspect anything.

“Are you catching cold?”

“Oh no, *Monsieur*,” she stated emphatically.

His eyes roamed over her. “Good. I wouldn't want you to sneeze on the liverwurst.” He went to the cash register, put her money in the till, then called, “Next!”

Fantine sighed, picked up her package and left. Tobias Lundstrom had scores of women vying for his attention every Tuesday and Thursday, when he manned the counter for his father Bernard. The father-and-son duo bought the shop six months ago and business was good, especially on the aforementioned days.

Fantine looked for excuses to visit the shop on those days, and stood in line waiting to get as close as possible to the Adonis on the other side of the counter. It was a good thing Mrs. Pettigrew liked giving soup bones to the many dogs that visited the manse every week. Otherwise Fantine would never get to lay eyes on him.

“You look sleepy, *ma petite*,” Mrs. Pettigrew commented as Fantine entered the kitchen, package in hand.

“No, not at all, *Madame*.” She set the soup bones on the counter near the sink. “Are you having visitors today?”

Mrs. Pettigrew blew her nose. “Not today, Fantine. I seem to have caught a chill.”

“Oh no, but that is terrible!” Fantine put a hand on the woman's forehead. “You are warm, *Madame*. You should be in bed.”

Mrs. Pettigrew smiled. “You are like an old mother hen, *ma cherie*. One of the things I like about you.”

Fantine smiled. She wished others noticed her gifts the way her employer did. Tobias probably didn't even notice that she was French, something every other man she encountered did. She wasn't like Mrs. Pettigrew, who enjoyed “being



French” when it suited her. Fantine, born in a village near Orleans, was French all the time.

Mrs. Pettigrew went to the counter and examined the package. “Put these away, Fantine, then meet me in my office.”

“*Oui, Madame.*” She did as instructed and prepared some tea to boot. Her employer looked pale, and Fantine didn’t want her condition to worsen.

“How thoughtful,” Mrs. Pettigrew commented as Fantine poured. “When you’re done, sit down. I want to talk to you.”

Fantine stiffened. Had she done something wrong? Was she to be discharged? She’d been with Mrs. Pettigrew for a year now and loved assisting the matchmaker in her work. “What is it, *Madame*?”

“Sit and I will tell you.”

Fantine set the woman’s tea before her, prepared a cup for herself and sat. “What is it?”

Mrs. Pettigrew studied her. “Why do you look ...” She slowly tilted her head side to side. “... forlorn?”

Fantine gulped. Oh blast, she noticed.

“But you do not look that way all the time, *ma belle*. Only on Tuesday and Thursdays, after you go to the butcher’s. Is the new butcher cruel to you?”

Her eyes rounded to platters. “Oh no, *Madame*, never!”

Mrs. Pettigrew didn’t look convinced. “Then what is it? Why do you mope?”

“Mope? What is this, *mope*?”

Mrs. Pettigrew sighed, took a sip of tea and set her cup in its saucer. “It is when you wear sadness like a cloak. Everyone can see it.”

Fantine swallowed hard. “Oh.”

“So tell me, what makes you this way?”

She sighed in defeat. If there was one thing she learned being in this woman's employ, it was that the eccentric matchmaker could read people well, her included. Blast it all. "I ... well, I ..."

"Don't stammer – out with it."

"I ..." She looked at the desktop. "I like the butcher's son."

Mrs. Pettigrew stared, took another sip, stared some more. "Why?"

Fantine's head came up. "Oh," she whispered. "Because he is handsome and strong – he does much of the butchering, you see – and he is smart. He never miscounts my change ..."

"I see. Hmm ..."

"Hmm?"

"*Oui*, hmm," Mrs. Pettigrew said. "Why have I not seen him?"

"Because ... because ..." Why was she asking? Mrs. Pettigrew never went to the butcher shop. "Well, you ... you ..."

"Stop that," Mrs. Pettigrew said. "You sound like a parrot."

Fantine took a quick sip of tea. "*Madame* does not go into the butcher shop. How could you have seen him?"

"If he is so wonderful, then why has he not come to call?"

Fantine's heart plunged to her toes. "Because he does not notice me." She hung her head and folded her hands in her lap. Now what? Would she not be allowed to fetch soup bones anymore?

Mrs. Pettigrew picked up her teacup and sipped thoughtfully. "Ah, unrequited love."

Fantine looked at her. "*Madame*?"

"You like this man, *oui*? But he does not show interest."

She stared at the desktop. The only thing Tobias Lundstrom had ever showed her were pieces of bratwurst he was setting out as samples. Nothing special.

“I will take your silence as a ‘no’,” Mrs. Pettigrew remarked.

Fantine sighed and shook her head.

Her employer set her cup down again and leaned forward. “Go to the far wall, *ma petite*, and bring me the third letter from the left, fifth row up from the bottom.” The walls of her office were covered with framed letters, each from a mail-order bride she’d sent off to be married.

Fantine went and plucked the frame off the wall and brought it to the desk. “Here you are.”

Mrs. Pettigrew took it from her. “Did you read it?”

“No, *Madame*, I brought it straight to you.”

Mrs. Pettigrew handed it back. “Read, *ma coeur*. What does it say?”

Fantine read the first line. “Dear Mr. *Comforts*?” She gave her employer a bewildered look. “Is this the same Mr. Comfort you told me about some time ago? The one that married the woman in Clear Creek?”

“No, these are three of his brothers.”

Fantine fell into her chair. “You ... you sent a bride to marry three brothers?!”

Mrs. Pettigrew laughed. “Don’t be absurd, *ma belle*. I sent *three* brides to marry them.”

Fantine blinked in confusion. “All at once?”

She nodded. “*Oui*. And what a time that was – ‘time’ being the operative word.”

Fantine stared at her, then the letter. “I do not understand.”

“There was no time to match them properly – they had to muddle through on their own.” She took a sip of tea before continuing. “Sometimes, Fantine, what we think we want isn’t

what we need. What we need has a way of finding us – so long as we don't get in the way.”

Fantine's face showed her confusion. “Pardon?”

Mrs. Pettigrew laughed. “You have set your cap for the butcher's son, *no*?”

Fantine blushed anew.

“I thought so. But he hasn't eyes for you. So why pine for someone that will not return any affection? And if he did, only to find you are not a match for him, would you still pursue him?”

Fantine's eyes widened, scandalized. “A lady does not pursue a man.”

Mrs. Pettigrew sighed. “Ah, *ma belle*, you know so little. But let me tell you a story and you will see what I mean.”

Fantine looked at the letter in her hand. “The Mr. Comforts?”

“*Oui*. Do you recall what I told you about Pleasant Comfort and her six brothers?”

“I remember that Major Comfort, the oldest, married Honoria Cooke. Pleasant, their sister, married Eli Turner the lawman. But that is all – you told me last year, after all.”

“No worries, the rest will come back to you as I tell you this tale ...”

\* \* \*

***CLEAR CREEK, Oregon, April 1879***

PLEASANT TURNER WATCHED her brother Michael hammer shingles onto his roof. The one-room cabin was coming along, and she was proud of his accomplishment. In fact, she was proud of all of her brothers. Michael, Darcy and Zachary Comfort had worked hard over the last year to get where they were. The younger boys, Benedict and Pleasant's twin

Peaceful, were still living at the men's camp outside town but working toward the goal of having homes of their own.

Michael, Darcy and Zach had built their cabins near her house, a simple structure her husband Eli constructed years ago. When she came to Clear Creek as a mail-order bride it wasn't fit for a woman, but his sister soon fixed that. By the time she saw the house, it was quite charming. She hoped her brothers were able to make theirs as lovely. She wanted them wed and happy like she was. She enjoyed married life.

But one thing was missing. If she and Eli had a child, she believed she would feel complete. The good Lord hadn't seen fit to bless them that way yet, but that was fine. It was all in His timing.

"I see Michael's hard at work," her oldest brother commented.

Pleasant shaded her eyes against the afternoon sun and smiled. "Good afternoon, Quince. How nice of you to come visit."

"I came to tell our brothers they're needed at the Cooke ranch this week." Major Quincy Comfort – Quince to his siblings, and never an actual major – dismounted and joined her on the log where she sat. "Michael's house is coming along," he commented in his Southern drawl. "He should be proud."

"Yes, and so are Darcy and Zachary's, though they're far from livable. But I suspect at the rate they're going, all three will be done by midsummer."

"I'm glad to hear it – they've worked hard. I feel almost guilty with my living situation. But then, they're not exactly envious of me."

Pleasant giggled. "Living with the Cooke family isn't everything you thought it would be?"

"On the contrary, dear sister – it *is* everything I thought it would be and then some. They're good people and I don't mind it for now, but my dear in-laws Sadie and Harrison have

gotten used to having Honoria and I in the house. I think they'd prefer it become permanent."

"And you?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Absolutely not."

She giggled again. "Come now, Quince, it can't be as bad as all that."

"Oh, it is. Harrison is a dutiful father and prides himself on being a dutiful father-in-law. Which means he forgets that I'm a grown man and can think for myself."

She smiled. "That's all right. Tom and Rose can be – how should I say? – less than confident in my abilities as Eli's wife."

"What?" Major said, annoyed. "Why would they think that?"

She plucked a few blades of grass near her feet. "You know I'm not the best cook, and I don't mind Rose giving me recipes. But when she sends food home with me after we visit, I feel like Eli prefers her cooking over mine. He wolfs it down like he hasn't eaten in days."

Major picked up a stick and tapped the ground with it. "She *is* the better cook, admittedly."

"But I am improving."

"What are you worried about, then?"

"I ... I just don't want to feel like he's comparing me to his brother's wife."

Major put an arm around her. "Don't worry, sister. Tom and Rose are older, more experienced, and Harrison and Sadie older still. We Comforts just don't care to take advice. We want to learn and do things on our own. We've always been that way."

She tossed the grass to the ground and smiled. "That we have. Which makes me wonder how our three brothers will get along."

"On their own? Admirably I would think – why?"

“Now that they’re going to have homes of their own, don’t you think it’s time they settled down?”

“Those three?” he said with a laugh. “Hardly, though it would do them all good.” He rubbed his chin a few times. “Hmm ...”

“Oh, I like the sound of that,” she said with a wide grin.

“I haven’t said anything yet.”

“No, but when you make that little noise, it means you’re thinking of something clever.”

“It *is* clever, actually,” he said with a devilish smile. “Would you like to hear it?”

“Of course.” She straightened and folded her hands primly in her lap. “I’m all ears.”

“Well, you became a mail-order bride, right?”

“Oh, I see where this is going. You want to order brides for Michael, Darcy and Zach?”

“Why not? It worked for you and Eli.”

“Yes, but *I* was the bride.”

“What difference does that make?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a shrug. “It’s just such a gamble.”

“True, but if you want to see the three of them wed, it’s the only course of action to take. There aren’t any women within a hundred miles of here, Pleasant – well, none we’d want our brothers to wed. And we both know it.”

She watched Michael climb down a ladder to get more shingles. He smiled and waved at them before getting another load and scrambling back up. “He looks so happy. I don’t want to ruin it.”

“Getting the man a wife won’t ruin his happiness. On the contrary, I think.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She drummed her fingers on the log. “Why not let them settle in their homes first, then talk to

them about it?”

“Of course – I wasn’t suggesting we send off for brides this minute.”

She smiled. “Forgive me, but I thought that’s exactly what you meant.”

“No, no. But I do think it wise to contact the matchmaker that sent you to Eli and inform her we’ll be in the market for several brides come harvest time. How often does she get them?”

Pleasant shrugged. “I have no idea. I declare, but so much has happened since I arrived in Clear Creek that I don’t recall the exact process.”

They watched Michael a few moments more before Major said, “I’ll write her. Do you still have her address?” He stood and went to his horse grazing nearby.

Pleasant got to her feet, brushed off the back of her skirt and followed. “What are you going to say?”

“Exactly what I told you. But don’t tell our brothers, and especially don’t tell Benedict and Peaceful. Neither of them can keep a secret.”

“Oh, so it’s a secret now?”

He smirked. “Hardly, but you know how the older boys will get if they find out too soon what we’re thinking.”

“Yes, and I’m thinking they won’t like it.”

He mounted his horse. “True, but by the time they figure things out, the idea will be theirs.”

“Courtesy of a little prompting from you?”

“Naturally,” he drawled. “Tell Michael to be at the ranch first thing in the morning.” He gave his horse a nudge and trotted off.

Pleasant shook her head as she watched him go, then turned back to Michael, happily hammering atop his roof. “Oh, my dear sweet brother,” she mumbled to herself, “I hope by the time you finish, you’re ready for a wife.” She picked up



the basket she'd brought and headed for the house. Even if Eli didn't always like her cooking, her brothers never turned down food.

She entered the unfinished cabin. Michael hadn't ordered glass for the windows yet, but had tacked hides over them to keep out the weather and cold. His bedroll was on the floor. He had no stove, no dry sink, nothing. He had, however, built a privy out back, and from the looks of it, completed the fireplace. The roof was only half done, and he was hurrying to finish it before the next rain.

It might be months before he could afford to buy a stove and furnishings. Michael, Darcy and Zach had earned just enough money to accomplish one project at a time. They'd started last fall and worked steadily ever since as weather and time allowed, either for the Cooke family or doing odd jobs around town.

She went back outside, shaded her eyes and looked up. "Michael?" He must be on the other side of the house. She couldn't see him.

"Pleasant?" he shouted back.

She walked around the cabin to see him crouched on the roof, a few nails in his mouth. "I brought you lunch."

He pulled the nails out. "You are an angel of mercy. May your husband bless you with many children."

"I'd settle for one. Come down and eat with me."

"As soon as I finish a few more shingles. Let's sit outside where it's warm. It's too chilly inside."

"Are you warm enough at night?" she asked with concern.

"Usually." He positioned a nail on a shingle, pounded it in, then placed another. "Darcy and Zachary don't seem to mind, but I've given them two of my blankets."

"That's hardly fair," she commented.

"It's all right. I have enough money now to buy more. I'll be paying Mrs. Dunnigan a visit soon. Won't that be fun?" He looked at her and winked.

She rolled her eyes. No one knew what sort of greeting Mrs. Dunnigan would bestow. She was crotchety at the best of times, and at her age you never knew what you'd get day to day. But they liked her nonetheless.

Michael went to the other side of the roof, scrambled down the ladder and met her as she came around the house. "What did you bring me?"

"Nothing exciting, I'm afraid – ham sandwiches. I'll take some to Darcy and Zach too."

"What?" he asked in feigned shock. "You mean I can't have them all?"

"No, you get two and that's it. I brought you some dried apples as well."

"I'll take them – I'm starved." He went into the house where she'd left the basket and brought it out. "Let's sit down, shall we?"

They sat on the same log she'd occupied before, and she watched Michael tear into a sandwich like a ravenous wolf. "I declare, you act like you haven't eaten in days. What are you going to do when you can no longer eat at the men's camp?"

"I only eat there a couple of times a week as it is, and that's to spend time with Benedict and Peaceful. But I can cook – I've cooked for myself before."

"Rations during the war?" She looked at his right hand, where two fingers were missing due to a Union Minie ball at Milledgeville. Hmm ... she might as well help Quince plant a few seeds. "Won't it be nice when you have a wife one day? Think of all the wonderful things she can cook for you."

"A wife! For crying out loud, Pleasant, don't even suggest such a thing."

*That* wasn't the reaction she'd hoped for. "What do you mean? You'd have someone to cook for you, keep your home clean ... keep you warm on long winter nights ..."

"Pleasant Turner, I'm shocked."

"One would think you'd be in want of a wife at this point."

“I’m not ready for a wife.” He wolfed down the rest of his sandwich and reached for the other. “And neither are Zach or Darcy. Our cabins aren’t finished and we don’t have enough money saved up.”

“Yes, I know that. I was just suggesting ...”

“I know what you’re suggesting.” He put his hand on hers. “And I appreciate it. But now is not the time.”

“I only wish to see all of you happy. Look at how happy Quince and Honoria are.”

“Yes,” he said with a faraway look. “They do appear gloriously blissful, don’t they?”

“Michael, do I detect some jealousy?”

“Me, jealous? Of course not. So what if Quince gets to live in the Cookes’ big ranch house, eat his mother-in-law’s fabulous cooking, not to mention the rest of the family’s, and share a wonderful, soft, comfortable feather bed with his wife ...”

“You *are* jealous.”

“I’m nothing of the kind,” he said with a teasing smile. “How can you even suggest it?”

“What about Darcy and Zach? Are they jealous too?”

“Of course not,” he stated, then took another bite.

“I see,” she drawled. Now she knew why Quince wanted to get a hold of Mrs. Pettigrew early on – their brothers wanted to prepare themselves. Good. But that meant cabins built and money put away, if not by harvest time then definitely by next spring. Excellent! “Take your apple slices, I’ve got to go to Zachary’s and feed him before he expires. You know how often he has to eat.”

Michael laughed. “He eats like a horse, that one. When it comes time for him to get a wife, I hope she knows how to cook.” He looked at what remained of his sandwich, picked something out of it and flicked it away.

Pleasant's cheeks burned. People were always finding little surprises in her cooking. A tiny speck of dirt, a hair, something unidentifiable. She just couldn't seem to get things right. She gave him the apple slices, snatched up the basket and stood. "I'm off to Zachary's. Are any of you coming to supper tonight?"

He looked at her, an apple slice halfway to his mouth. "Er ... no, I'm not."

"No? But it's Thursday – you always come on Thursday."

"I received another invitation."

"And who gave you this invitation?"

"The Dunnigans."

She threw a hand in the air. "The Dunnigans! Is she bringing food to the men's camp tonight? Is she making pot roast?"

Michael went silent.

Her eyes narrowed. "They invited you to supper, didn't they? Michael Comfort, are you leaving me for that woman's roast?"

"Well ..."

"Fine, that's just fine." She turned, stopped and looked over her shoulder. "What about Darcy and Zachary?"

"Their plans haven't changed. They'll be dining with you."

She squinted at him again. "Promise me you won't say anything to them about where you're eating this evening."

He held up a hand. "I promise."

"Good. I'd hate to cook for the lot of you, then none of you show up."

"You'd still have Benedict and Peaceful."

"Benedict and Matt?" she said, calling Peaceful by his nickname. "They're still eating at the men's camp."

"Oh, are they?"

He didn't fool her for a moment. "Yes, and now I know why they don't mind it so much anymore." She growled and marched away.

Zachary's house was a few hundred yards from Michael's. At least Zach liked her cooking. But then, Zachary ate anything – she could hardly use him as a gauge for her culinary skills. She openly used her brothers for practice, and once they married she'd lose her guinea pigs. "Oh dear ... I'd better get good at this while I've got them." Heaven forbid their new wives took a few lessons from Mrs. Dunnigan and turned out to be better cooks than she was.

She continued down the trail to test her ham sandwiches on her other brothers.

## CHAPTER 2

The following Thursday at supper, Pleasant studied her siblings. Zachary gulped down her fried chicken, almost not leaving the bones. Michael and Darcy picked at theirs with care. Miracle of miracles, no one had found a hair, a pebble or an ant in their food yet. “What’s for dessert?” Darcy asked.

“You’ll be happy to know I made two pies,” she said with pride. “Apple and blackberry.”

Her husband Eli winked. If there was one food she’d perfected since marrying him, it was apple pie. She could make other kinds of pie, but he was partial to apple.

“Thank the Lord,” Michael muttered under his breath.

“I heard that.” But she limited her umbrage to that. She didn’t want to upset them before she planted a few more seeds on Quince’s behalf.

“By the way,” Zachary said, “it was kind of you to show up this week, Michael.”

“Yes, we missed you last Thursday,” Darcy added. “I trust you’re feeling better?”

Michael winced, then turned to his brothers. “Yes, much better.”

“I hear Mrs. Dunnigan gave you something for your ailment,” Pleasant said with an arched eyebrow.

Michael coughed a few times, took a sip of milk and beat his chest with his fist. “Yes... *cough* ... she did.” He looked at

Pleasant and smiled. "It worked wonders."

Her brow creased. "I'm sure it did." True to his word, he hadn't mentioned anything to Darcy or Zach about his dinner at the Dunnigans' last week. Neither did she. For one, they'd feel put out. Two, they'd start to wonder when they'd get an invitation. Three, it would only invite further comparisons of her cooking to Irene's – a battle she knew she'd never win.

"How's work out at the ranch?" Eli asked, reaching for another piece of chicken. He studied it, poked at a burnt spot with his fork, then decided it was acceptable and took a bite.

"As well as can be expected," Michael said. "Thankfully they've had plenty of work."

"It was nice of Quince to get us jobs out there," Darcy added.

"Not that I'd wish misfortune on anyone," Zachary said, "but the Cookes losing two of their hired hands helped."

"I heard about that from Honoria," said Pleasant. "They decided to return to her father's ranch, the Big J?"

"Can't say as I blame 'em," Eli commented. "Those fellas were older. Horatio Jones is a generous man and he'll work 'em, but not near as hard as they'd work on the Triple-C."

"Which in turn, works for us." Darcy grinned at his brothers and bit into a biscuit. "Ow!"

Pleasant cringed. "Oh dear, what now?"

Darcy pulled a pebble from his mouth. "I love you, sister, but how do you manage it?"

"I don't know." She sank in her chair. Just when she thought she'd finally gotten it ...

"And to think we ain't even got younguns yet," Eli said with a smile. "Who knows what they'll put in the biscuit dough?"

She glared at him. "Eli Turner, don't even suggest that!"

Her brothers laughed.

“Er, when do you think you will?” Darcy asked. “Have children, I mean.”

Eli and Pleasant exchanged a quick look. “We don’t know,” she replied, bowing her head. Thinking about it was one thing, talking about it another. Time to change the subject. She straightened in her chair. “Michael, do you remember what we talked about last week?”

“Can’t say as I recall.” He studied his chicken with a suspicious eye.

Darcy and Zachary looked at her, then each other. “Why do I get the feeling this is going to involve us?” Darcy asked.

She smiled. “I talked with Michael last week about other women’s cooking.”

Zachary’s eyes lit up. “Whose? And when?”

“That remains to be seen.” Pleasant buttered a biscuit. “But Michael and I did speak of wives.”

“Wives?” Zachary, Darcy and, to her surprise, Eli said at once.

“That’s right. Wives.” She took a cautious bite and chewed thoughtfully. “You have to start thinking about them at some point. I can’t keep feeding the lot of you.”

“I don’t mind the company for supper,” Eli smiled. “Sharin’ a table is what families do.”

“That’s not what she means,” Michael replied.

“Surely she’s not suggesting that we ...” Zachary said, aghast. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Not at all,” she said. “You’re of age.”

“So is Benedict, but you don’t see him chasing after a wife,” Zachary said.

“Or Peaceful,” Darcy tacked on. “Though they’re both too young in my book.”

“Agreed,” Michael said. He tapped his plate with his fork a few times. He couldn’t think without some sort of movement.



“Pleasant,” he finally said. “Are you lonely?”

“What?” Eli said in surprise. “Lonely?”

“For *female* company,” Michael clarified.

She fought a smile – this was a perfect opportunity! “Well, I am here by myself most of the day ...”

Eli’s eyes filled with concern. “I’m sorry, darlin’.” He reached for her hand. “I had no idea you were lonely here by yerself.”

Oh, this was too perfect. “Well, it does get terribly quiet around here,” she said with a tiny pout. “Eli is gone, all of you are working most of the time. Let’s face it, chickens are poor company and the cow doesn’t talk much.”

Eli stared at her in shock. “I thought ya liked bein’ alone most of the day. We could get a dog.”

She waved the suggestion away. “Eli, dogs aren’t much for conversation either.”

“She’s right,” Darcy cut in. “We’re with each other all day while Pleasant’s alone. Even after our places are built, she’ll still be by herself because we’ll be working. It’s not like she can walk down the trail to Michael’s or my place and say hello – not with a house to run.”

“No, I suppose not.” Eli stared at her, nodding in understanding.

She put her hand over his. “Really, Eli, I’m all right. Besides, with my brothers building houses so close to ours, won’t it be nice when they’re married and we can have supper at each other’s homes?”

Eli nodded. “Yer right, that will be nice. We can get together for Christmas and other holidays, go to the town picnic together ...”

“Picnic?” Zachary said as his eyes lit up. “You mean like last summer?”

“That’s the one,” Eli said. “Wouldn’t it be fun to go as one big family?”

Michael, Darcy and Zach looked at each other as the idea began to sink in.

Pleasant smiled. Quince would be proud. “Who’s ready for dessert?”

“I am!” Zachary pushed his empty plate away. Michael and Darcy shoved theirs to the side, neither quite finished. She’d have to bring herself to beg a few lessons from either Irene Dunnigan or Sally Upton at the hotel. She’d always meant to, but never found the time.

She sat for a moment and thought of the bait she’d dangled before her brothers. It would be so nice to have female company during the day. She and another woman could do washing together, sew together, let their children play together. In fact, the more she thought about her own words, the more appealing they became. Maybe she could even get help with cooking ...

“Darlin’?” Eli said.

“Oh yes, the pies. Sorry.” She pushed away from the table and looked at Zachary. “Think of all the pies and cookies a wife can bake for you?”

His eyes gleamed. “Don’t get me started,” he said with a smile. “I never gave it much thought myself. But to be married to someone who can cook, *really* cook? That would be Heaven.”

“Yes, sister, I see your point,” Darcy said. “All of us have been so busy trying to make money, we hadn’t thought about the real goal, only the means to get there.”

“Well, it’s never too soon to think about it,” she said. “Remember, I’m here all by my lonesome with neighbors that are never home.” She gave them each a pointed look.

“I suppose once we’re married, you women will be yapping it up while cooking enormous dinners,” Zachary said, almost drooling in anticipation.

Michael laughed. “With your luck you’ll get a woman who can’t cook a-tall.”

“Perish the thought,” Zach shot back.

Pleasant fought the urge to sink in her chair. She’d been doing her best to make a decent meal for Eli since they married. “Decent” was about as good as she could manage – and that only occasionally.

“Pleasant,” Darcy said, “you have nothing to worry about. We’ll marry, then before you know it Benny and Matt will be ready for wives.”

“Yes, you’ll have plenty of company,” Michael agreed. “I don’t know why you fret about it. You know it’ll happen one day.”

“Yes, you’re right. I suppose I’m being selfish wishing for it sooner than later. None of you should marry before you’re ready.”

Darcy cocked his head. “Were you ready?”

“Me?” she said in surprise. She looked at Eli and squeezed his hand. “No, I wasn’t. But everything worked out.”

“Sure did,” he agreed with a grin. “And still does. Maybe we should work on somethin’ else to keep you busy ‘til yer brothers get hitched ...”

“Isn’t it time for pie?” Zachary hinted.

Eli laughed. “Yeah, I suppose it is. Darlin’, will you do the honors and fetch ‘em?”

She got up and went to the kitchen with a wry smile. “Pie” was a code word in Clear Creek that had different meanings to different people. For Pleasant and her husband, it meant attempts at having children. Hmm ... maybe she should have baked three instead of two.

She brought the pies and some plates to the table, served the men – and got no complaints, even though she thought the crust on the blackberry was a little underdone. As they ate, she pondered everything they’d discussed. Now there were more reasons to see her brothers happily married. As soon as they went home, she’d look for Mrs. Pettigrew’s address so she could give it to Quince next time she saw him.

\* \* \*

**ONE WEEK LATER ...**

*DEAR MRS. PETTIGREW,*

*MY NAME IS Major Quincy Comfort. I'm sure you will recall that I wrote you over a year ago in regard to a mail-order bride sent to me by mistake. You will be glad to know that Miss Lynch is now living happily in Oregon City with her new husband and son.*

*This time I write on behalf of my three brothers, Michael, Darcy and Zachary Comfort. They are preparing homes, saving money, and in general preparing themselves for matrimony. I understand you do not always have brides available, so took it upon myself to inform you of my brothers' situations well in advance. My guess is they will be writing to you themselves come autumn. By then you will have had the chance to find them suitable wives, and once letters are exchanged they might marry in spring or summer of next year.*

*Let me tell you a little about each so you can keep an eye out. Michael John is two years my junior. He served in the militia with me, fought at Milledgeville and was wounded but recovered. He is a hard working man, tall with brown hair and green eyes. He would be a good provider, as would all of my brothers, and loves to read.*

*Darcy Jefferson, three years my junior, also fought in the war. He is a skilled rider and marksman and is well-read. Like Michael, he is a hard worker, brown-haired, but his eyes are a bluish-gray, a very unusual color. He is "easy on the eyes," according to the women of town.*

*Zachary Nathaniel, five years younger than myself, served in the war briefly but with distinction. He is of the same stature as the rest of us (a family trait) and likes to build things. He is also very fond of fine foods, and would be most interested in a wife who can cook very well and in quantity.*

*All three brothers are working to finish their homes by autumn, and will continue to save their money and create a sustainable environment to provide for a wife and family. In aid of that, they are planting large gardens this year and purchasing livestock.*

*Please write and let me know if requesting three brides at once is feasible. I shall understand if it is not.*

*SINCERELY*

*Major Q. Comfort*

“WHAT ARE YOU WRITING?” Honoria asked as she entered the bedroom.

Major folded the letter and stuffed it in an envelope. “Nothing of importance.” He stood, turned and kissed her on the cheek.

“Nothing of importance, eh? Is it a letter to your father?”

Major sighed. He hadn’t written his father for several months, and her comment reminded him he should. Buford Comfort was increasingly forgetful of late and often forgot to write back until their Aunt Phidelia reminded him. The two lived together in Denver. “I’ll write him later and post both letters tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Aren’t you helping my father with the branding tomorrow?”

“Oh yes, how could I have forgotten?” He pulled her into his arms. “Probably because you are such a distraction.”

She smiled and kissed him on the cheek. “So are you, but you don’t see me shirking my chores.”

Major laughed. “I can think of one both of us have shirked lately ...” He held her tighter and kissed her, long and slow.

When he broke the kiss she gasped and laughed. “Trust me, you have not been lax in your duty.”

“Nor you,” he confessed with a grin.

“Are you going to tell me who you wrote to?” she asked innocently.

He sighed. His wife had a curious nature that often got her in trouble. “Fine, but you can’t say a word to anyone – *especially* your mother.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Really? This must be good. Tell me.” She took his arm and led him to their bed to sit down.

Once seated, Major handed her the letter. She arched an eyebrow, took it out of the envelope, scanned it and quickly stuffed it back with a mischievous smile. “Why, Major, whatever will your brothers say?”

“My brothers don’t know, and aren’t going to until the time is right. I’m just trying to prepare the way, make straight a path.”

“Well, there’s plenty of time,” she pointed out. “They have all summer to finish their cabins, then they can work on furnishing them and adding finishing touches. What are you worried about?”

“That I need *three* brides. It’s easy enough to get one at a time, but I know my brothers. Better they get them all at once.”

“That does seem like a tall order. What happens if you *do* get three and two of them are wonderful but the third is ...” She shrugged. “... not?”

“How so?”

“Perhaps she has more hair on her face than her head? Or perhaps she can’t speak the language?”

“Like old Mrs. White at the stage stop?” he asked in horror.

“Not exactly like that, but perhaps she just got off the boat from somewhere.”

“Yes, that’s a risk one has to take. But all in all, things tend to work out. Can you post the letters for me, seeing as I’ll be

occupied?”

“Yes, I’ll take care of it – Aunt Belle and I are going to town tomorrow. Are you sure I can’t tell my mother and aunt?”

“Positive. You know how they get. They want everything done decently and in order – in *their* order.”

“You’re afraid they’ll interfere.”

“You know your mother better than I do, my dear. I *guarantee* they’ll interfere.”

Honorina laughed and fell back on the mattress. “They weren’t too bad with us.”

“No, but your father made up for the both of them.” He lay back beside her. “Thank Heaven my brothers aren’t part of his immediate family. There would be no rest for any of us.”

She snorted. “You might not have any rest as it is.”

“What’s so funny?”

She shook her head and giggled. “Nothing, I’m just trying to picture your brothers’ faces when they find out you’ve written Mrs. Pettigrew.”

“They’re not going to find out, are they?” He tickled her.

She laughed and squirmed away. “*I* won’t tell them. But I don’t know how long *you* can keep a secret.”

He caught her again, pulled her close and kissed her. “Honorina Comfort,” he whispered after he broke the kiss, “I do love you.”

“That’s good to know. I love you too.” She smiled. “But seriously, do you really think it’s going to be that hard for Mrs. Pettigrew to come up with three brides at once?”

“I don’t know, but I imagine it could be. Which is why I’m alerting her now.”

“You always are well-prepared,” she commented with a grin. She put her hand on her belly and belched.

“Honorina!” he said in shock.

“I’m sorry. Indigestion has plagued me lately.”

“I’m the one that should have indigestion. I ate at my sister’s tonight. You missed something that resembled a pot roast in dim light.”

“That’s all right, I’ll eat with you next time. *If* I’m not too busy.”

His eyes narrowed. “I find it interesting that when Pleasant invites us to supper, dear wife, you suddenly have to stay home for some reason.”

“Why, whatever do you mean?” she asked innocently.

He narrowed his eyes. “Just be sure to post that letter tomorrow, all right? And not breathe a word to anyone of its contents.”

“Why? Are you afraid your brothers aren’t going to like your getting them wives behind their backs?”

“I’m doing nothing of the kind. I’m merely inquiring on their behalf.”

She sat up and tapped the letter against her knee. “If Mrs. Pettigrew is able to send three brides at once, we’re going to have quite a wedding. It could be fun.”

He sat up and put his arm around her. “I agree. But I want this to be my brothers’ idea. I don’t want them to send away for wives, then find that Mrs. Pettigrew can’t accommodate. They’d be gravely disappointed. I’d hate to see them go through that.”

“As would I. I love my brothers-in-law, all five of them. And if this works out for those three, then Benedict and Matt will be more comfortable with the idea of mail-order brides when their time comes.”

“That won’t be for a few years, I imagine. They might consider themselves men, but they need to learn to act like it. Matt especially – Benedict will marry before he does.”

“No doubt he will.” She brushed a lock of hair out of his face. “All the Comfort men are good, from what I’ve seen. Give Matt a chance to prove it.”



“I know my brother’s a good boy, I don’t doubt it for a second. But he is a boy.”

“Just do me a favor,” she said.

“What, oh wife of mine?”

She smiled at the remark. “Let your brothers decide what they want and when they want it. You can’t put them on a schedule, you know.”

“I suppose not.” He sighed. “We had a tough time of it, you and I. Because of that phony mail-order bride Mrs. Pettigrew sent last year, we almost didn’t get married.”

“There was no almost about it,” she shot back. “But I’d have dragged you to the altar if I had to.”

He wrapped his arms around her. “Would you, now?”

“Yes, and don’t you forget it.”

He kissed her again, released her and stood. “By Heaven, you’re wonderful.”

Her cheeks pinked as they so often did when he complimented her. The sight made him smile. His brothers didn’t know what they were missing. How could they not want to send for brides once their cabins were done?

Major smiled in satisfaction, pulled his wife closer and kissed her again.

\* \* \*

MICHAEL, Darcy and Zachary sat outside Darcy’s half-finished cabin. It was clear and cool but not cold, the sky bright with stars. “This is the life, isn’t it,” Darcy enthused.

“You sound as if you’re trying to convince yourself,” Michael commented.

Darcy stopped his stargazing to look at him. “I didn’t imply that in the least.”

“Didn’t you?” Michael asked. “My cabin has more than half a roof. You have less than half.”

Zachary laughed. “I don’t even have that!”

“But we get along well enough, don’t we?” Darcy asked. “You don’t believe we should think about getting married, do you?”

“Not for a long time,” Michael said. “None of us are ready.”

“Besides which, we have to set a good example for Benedict and Matt,” Zachary said. “Especially Matt.” Peaceful hadn’t been “peaceful” for some months now.

“When do you think *he’ll* be ready to settle down?” Darcy asked, staring up at the sky again.

“Not until he stops being angry at everything,” Michael said. “Benedict is over what happened with the war, losing Comfort Fields, our birthright ...” He sighed.

The other two sighed as well. They had fought to defend the glorious South – and lost, badly. It was still a sore spot, but more so for Peaceful Matthew Comfort, Pleasant’s twin brother. Too young to fight in the “War of Northern Aggression” – he insisted on calling it that, even though they all knew the South fired the first shot – he felt cheated somehow, and no amount of explaining that life wasn’t fair would help.

The Comfort brothers and their father had once owned one of the largest plantations in Georgia. But a crooked land speculator and sawmill owner named Rupert Jerney promised to bail their father out of debt in exchange for Pleasant’s hand in marriage. Their sister, beyond uninterested in the oily Rupert, promptly ran away to become a mail-order bride. Buford sent his sons to track her down and bring her back – and they did the former. But they never got around to the latter ...

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Michael said, “but I’m glad things turned out the way they did. We’re here, Father is safe with Aunt Phidelia and we’re finally getting on our feet. The past is the past,” he added, looking at where his missing fingers would be.

“You’re right,” Zachary agreed. “We have nothing to complain about.” He glanced at his brothers. “Quince especially.”

Darcy and Michael snorted. “I should say not,” Darcy said. “He’s a lucky man, Quince is.”

“Indeed,” Michael said. “Even if his father-in-law is a little ... overprotective.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Zachary said with a laugh. He calmed himself with a sigh. “We’re doing just fine, though, wouldn’t you say?”

The three brothers exchanged the same look of concern. “Of course we are,” Michael said. “We’re making this happen, getting settled at last. What could go wrong?”

They looked at the star-filled sky. Everything was going more or less perfectly.

## CHAPTER 3

MEANWHILE IN DENVER ...

Rosie Callahan waved at her latest suitor as he ran down the porch steps. “Goodbye, Nicholas – I hope you call on me again!” She closed the door, groaned and let her head fall against it. “Rats. Lost another one.” She turned with a sigh and went into the parlor.

“Well?” her sister Georgie said. “Is he going to call on you tomorrow?”

Rosie shook her head, fell into the nearest chair and groaned again. “How does Aunt Henrietta expect us to get married when she chases off every potential groom?” She glanced around the room. “Where *is* Aunt Henrietta?”

“Upstairs in her room.” Her eyes flicked to the ceiling and back. “I hope she stays there.”

“Where’s Hunny?” Rosie asked. Their older sister, Phryne Hunnicutt Callahan, had gone by that nickname ever since she was ten, when she found out what historical figure her parents had accidentally named her after. Rosalind and Georgina were thankful that their Christian names lent themselves to comfortable shortening.

“She hasn’t returned from choir practice. Maybe that nice Mr. Edmonds will walk her home.”

“Mr. Edmonds the land agent? I thought he left town to go further west.”

Georgie shrugged. “Maybe he did. I can’t keep track anymore.”

Rosie beat her head against the back of the chair a few times. “At this rate we’ll never get married.”

“I’m worried you’re right,” Georgie agreed. “The way Aunt Henrietta acts, you’d think she doesn’t want us to marry, yet she’s always talking about it. I don’t understand her at all.”

“Nor I,” Rosie picked at a fingernail. “What if we never marry?”

Georgie’s eyes widened. “Don’t talk like that. Of course we’ll marry – it’s only a matter of time.”

“Only a matter of time before Aunt Henrietta chases off every viable suitor in the city. That woman is missing a wagon wheel.”

“Quiet, or she’ll hear you.”

Rosie folded her arms and sat back. “So what if she does? Tarnation, you know it’s true.”

Georgie gasped. “Rosie, watch your language!”

“What does it matter? I’m never going to be in a room with a man long enough for him to notice my manner of speech.” She got to her feet and paced. “Maybe I’ll bake some cookies. That always helps.”

“You can’t bake something every time this happens,” Georgie pointed out. “Even if it was you this time. My suitors never last past one visit. At least with Nathaniel Bridgewater you got two.”

“I know, but cookies make me feel better no matter who it happens to.” She turned and headed for the dining room.

Georgie jumped out of her chair. “Wait for me!”

Rosie crossed the dining room to the rear door that led to the kitchen downstairs. Aunt Henrietta had a large two-story townhome in Denver, complete with servant’s quarters, a

summer kitchen and a lovely backyard with a gazebo. She didn't actually keep servants – she was too cheap for that. Instead she had three nieces to boss around and keep the house clean and the meals cooked.

Rosie – the cook – went into the larder to gather what she needed. “Sugar or molasses?” she asked Georgie.

“Molasses. We ate sugar cookies the last time Hunny got jilted.”

Rosie nodded. “True. Maybe we should make a different cookie when she gets jilted next time.”

“Yes, or we could bake a pie.”

Rosie laughed, though their current state of affairs was no laughing matter. Their aunt managed to scare off every man the sisters had attracted over the last two years. Now Hunny was 22 and, as Aunt Henrietta put it, losing her bloom and about to be put on the shelf. But the more she talked about finding them husbands, the more she ranted and raved at potential candidates. Usually she'd blow within ten minutes of their arrival.

The sisters busied themselves with baking for the next hour. Once they were done Rosie, whose ample waist let everyone know she liked her cookies, happily munched one while Georgie made some tea. “Should we take some up to Aunt Henrietta?” Georgie mused.

“No, she's probably napping.” Rosie took another cookie and bit into it. “Do it when she wakes up. I'll be busy with dinner by then.” *And won't have to deal with the harpy*, was left unspoken.

Georgie shook her head in annoyance. “Rosie, don't talk with your mouth full.”

Rosie shrugged and took another bite.

Georgie sighed in exasperation. She was eighteen, the youngest of the three, served (slaved?) as Aunt Henrietta's personal maid and kept the upstairs rooms (especially Aunt Henrietta's) tidy. It was a laborious task – she felt like she was doing the work of three maids. But poor Hunny was assigned

the downstairs – she had to scrub and clean and keep the fires going, and act as the gardener besides.

Rosie was the lucky one – she spent most of her time in the kitchen, though she also had to do the shopping, and take out and pick up the laundry. If she didn't have time, that fell to Hunny. At least they were able to leave the house. Poor Georgie was stuck inside most of the time, subject to their aunt's whims.

An hour and two plates of cookies later, Hunny came downstairs and entered the kitchen. "Oh, what kind of cookies did you bake?"

"Molasses," Rosie and Georgie said at once.

Hunny made a face at Rosie. "Was it you this time? Nathaniel?"

"It was." Rosie reached for another cookie.

"Oh no. What did she do?"

"Well ..." Rosie took a sip of milk, set the glass down and smiled at her older sister. "First she accused him of being a gold digger, which is her usual. Then she accused him of being the sort of man who would keep a mistress. Then she said his nose was too long..."

"What?!" Hunny blurted.

"I've never lost a suitor on account of his nose. This is the first." Rosie picked up her milk and took another sip.

Hunny covered her mouth to stifle a giggle, snorted instead, then burst out laughing.

"Next thing you know, the man's *ears* will be too big," Rosie commented dryly.

"Or his hair too long," Georgie added, reaching for another cookie.

"Or he doesn't dress right," Hunny said through her laughter. She calmed and stared at the last two cookies on the plate. She took them, bit into one and looked at her sisters. They sighed together. Such was their lot.

“How was choir practice?” Georgie asked. “Did anyone in particular ask to walk you home?”

Hunny stop chewing and took a sudden interest in Rosie’s glass of milk.

“Hunny,” Rosie said. “Anyone?”

Hunny sighed. “No, not even when *I* asked.”

Georgie gasped. “You *asked* someone to escort you home?”

“Two different gentlemen.” Hunny took a sip of Rosie’s milk. “Both of them refused and ran out of the church as fast as they could.”

Georgie shook her head. “We can’t go on like this. Pretty soon Hunny won’t get asked to any more parties or dances. She’s the oldest – we should at least try to get her married.”

“She’s right,” Rosie said. “Georgie and I have a few more years to hope things work out. But you ...”

Hunny’s mouth dropped open. “For Heaven’s sake, I’m not dead. But ...” She stared at the empty plate. “Are there any more cookies?”

“I have another batch in the oven,” Rosie said.

“Good,” said Hunny. “I need more.”

\* \* \*

THE CALLAHAN SISTERS picked at their dinner as Aunt Henrietta scrutinized their every move. Meals with their aunt were like being on trial. She glared at them between bites, some outrageous demand simmering on her lips, waiting to burst forth.

Sure enough ... “Rosie,” she said in her shrill voice. “I want you to polish my jewelry after dinner.”

“Me? But ... what about Georgie?”

“Georgie has enough work for now. You need some extra.”



“Polishing the silver isn’t enough?” Rosie quickly bit her tongue. Of the three, she got riled the easiest.

“Are you complaining, girl?” Aunt Henrietta asked.

Rosie glanced at her sisters and back. “Yes.”

Georgie gasped as Aunt Henrietta leaned toward Rosie, eyes narrowed to slits. “Then you can polish the silver too.”

“I just polished the silver yesterday.”

“Do it again. Or shall I send for Mr. Boone?”

Three sets of eyes widened. Mr. Boone was Aunt Henrietta’s “man” for odd jobs around the townhouse. One of those odd jobs was to “discipline” Hunny, Rosie and Georgie. They’d been locked in closets, spanked with his belt and denied food as children. Who knew what tortures he’d conjure now that they were grown?

Mr. Boone’s punishments were a far cry from their parents, whom they’d lost to a house fire ten years before. Thankfully, the sisters were away visiting Aunt Henrietta and Uncle Samson at the time. After their parents died, their aunt and uncle took them in and life was wonderful for a few years. But Uncle Samson died back in ’72, and something in Aunt Henrietta had broken. She’d been horrible ever since.

Rosie wisely pressed her lips together and said no more on the matter.

Aunt Henrietta sat straighter and smiled. “I’m glad you see reason, child.”

“Aunt Henrietta,” Hunny said, trying to steer her away from Rosie. “Mrs. Minx, the one who owns those lovely general stores?”

“What about her?” her aunt snapped.

Hunny looked at her sisters and swallowed hard. “Well, I overheard her talking with Mrs. Jones about her daughter Dorcas, and ...”

“Don’t waste my time, girl – what?”

Georgie and Rosie frowned. The only one wasting time was Aunt Henrietta by interrupting.

Hunny took a deep breath and said, “Dorcas became a mail-order bride.”

The younger sisters froze. That Dorcas Minx got married wasn't anything new – she ran off to become a mail-order bride two years ago. But did their aunt recall? Was Hunny suggesting what they thought she was? Rosie took a breath and got a kick in the calf from Georgie, who shook her head in warning. Rosie got the hint: *don't say a word*.

Aunt Henrietta glared at Hunny. “Don't tell me you're considering becoming a mail-order bride?”

Hunny stayed calm. “No, ma'am. I was just telling you about Dorcas.”

“I don't care about Dorcas!” she said, glowering. “I know all about it! That ungrateful trollop left her poor groom standing at the altar! To think of poor Vernon Fink, humiliated like that!”

The sisters all knew the story, but still gasped – more at their aunt's venomous outburst than what Dorcas had done. They couldn't blame Dorcas – Vernon Fink was a horrible person.

“Yes, shocking, isn't it?” their aunt went on, completely misinterpreting their reaction. “When the three of you marry, I hope you realize it's for the rest of your lives! Don't treat people the way Dorcas treated him!”

The sisters exchanged a quick look. Aunt Henrietta had conveniently forgotten that Vernon Fink was currently in jail for assault of a U.S. marshal and abduction.

“Finish your dinners!” she barked.

Hunny, Rosie and Georgie glanced at one another, bent their heads over their plates and got back to eating. At this point, they felt like they were prisoners eating their last meal.

\* \* \*

GEORGIE LAY in bed that night, her heart in her throat. “We’re never going to get out of here,” she said through tears.

Rosie got out of bed and went to her. “Don’t cry. We’ll find good husbands and leave this house, you’ll see.”

Hunny got out of bed and joined them. They shared one of the townhouse’s six large bedrooms. Aunt Henrietta had another, and insisted the other four be saved for guests. They never had guests, however, as no one wanted to stay overnight in the same house as Henrietta. “She’s right, Georgie,” Hunny said. “This won’t be forever.”

Georgie wiped her eyes and sat up. “How do you know? You’re twenty-two, Hunny, and you haven’t married yet!”

Hunny drew back, stung by her words. “Not yet, but whose fault is that?”

Georgie sniffed a few times. “Aunt Henrietta’s.”

“Exactly,” agreed Rosie. “Aunt Henrietta says she wants us to marry, but does she really?”

“It doesn’t seem so, does it?” Georgie wiped her eyes again.

“You don’t think she’s sabotaging us on purpose, do you?” Rosie asked.

“Why would she?” Hunny said. “Unless ...”

“Unless she wants to keep us the way she has, as servants,” Georgie sobbed.

“What?” Rosie gasped. “She can’t do that!”

“She could and she is,” Hunny said dourly. “The miserly old witch. I’ve never seen anyone so cheap – no wonder the merchants call her ‘Cheapbottom’.” Henrietta’s married name was Longbottom.

Rosie burst out laughing. “That’s a good one! Where did you hear that?”

“From Mr. Edmonds.”

“The land agent that wanted to call on you?” Georgie asked dismayed.

“Yes,” Hunny said with a sigh. “But he’s leaving for a mining town called Noelle next week. I’ll never see him again.”

Rosie put an arm around her. “Don’t worry, sis, we’ll find you a new fellow. Right, Georgie?”

Georgie nodded. “If only one of us manages to get married, it should be you, Hunny. At least you’ll escape this place. Then I’ll help Rosie do the same.”

“No,” Hunny insisted. “No, we’ll all find beaus and get married. But we need a plan. Can you think of anyone?”

“To marry?” Rosie clarified.

Georgie groaned. “No.”

Hunny’s shoulders slumped. “Neither can I. I think every bachelor in Denver has called on us. Even the ones who were only interested in Aunt Henrietta’s money.”

“What if she didn’t have any?” Georgie asked.

Rosie rolled her eyes. “Then she’d have thrown us out. And we’d all have been married a long time ago.”

“But what if Hunny is right and she’s keeping us as slave labor?” Georgie said. “At least servants get paid.”

Hunny took their hands. “Then let’s promise one another that we’ll see each other wed no matter what. Aunt Henrietta has chased off every suitor we’ve had so far. If we work things right, maybe we can get her out of the house when someone calls, or have them call on us while she’s sleeping, or ... something.”

“You mean lie to her?” Georgie asked, horrified.

“No, I’m not saying that. Just make sure she’s not around when a gentleman calls.”

“But she’ll find out sooner or later,” Rosie warned.

“She might, but at least by then the gentleman will have a chance to get to know us,” Hunny argued. “One of us, anyway. The other two can chaperone.”

The three sisters smiled. It was a plan. “All right, I’ll see what I can do,” Georgie said.

Rosie put an arm around her. “Are you sure? Aunt Henrietta picks on you most of all.”

“Only because she spends the most time with me.”

“We’re agreed then?” Hunny asked.

Rosie nodded. “Agreed.” They hugged each other, kissed each other on the cheek, then crawled back into their beds. The sooner they got away from their aunt, the better. The only problem was, whom could they marry that would take them away?

\* \* \*

*THE FOLLOWING WEEK ...*

“MRS. LONGBOTTOM, how lovely to see you again.”

Henrietta gave Mr. Samuel Spicer of the Spicer & Downing Railroad an assessing glare. They were meeting in his office. “Well? Have you looked at the contracts?”

“Yes, they are most agreeable.” He adjusted the sleeves of his crisp white shirt. “Mr. Dodge and Mr. Wills are most satisfied with the arrangement. Of course they’ll have to inform their mistresses first.”

“Of course,” she said. “Young, are they?”

Mr. Spicer stroked his white beard. “As young as we like them. We gentlemen of a certain age have particular tastes in the fairer sex when it comes to ... recreational activities. I’m sure your nieces will keep us most amused. You will, of course, have the money deposited in our individual accounts?”

“Naturally,” she said with a stiff nod. “Mark my words, Mr. Spicer. If any one of them gets out of hand, you have to

come down hard and right away. Those ungrateful girls have been nothing but trouble for me over the years and I won't take them back. Now considering the generous trade of my nieces and their dowries, I expect you to be just as generous."

"But of course," he said. "You have shares in all three of our companies. I'm sure you'll get an ample return on your investment."

"I'm investing flesh, Mr. Spicer, not money, as you well know. If I don't get a good return, then Mr. Boone will be paying you each a visit."

Mr. Spicer arched a thick white eyebrow. "Are you threatening me, Mrs. Longbottom?"

"Of course I am." She leveled a steely gaze at him. "And you'd best not forget it. I have plenty of Mr. Boones on my side. You don't acquire as much money as I have without them."

Mr. Spicer cleared his throat and tugged on his jacket. "I like you, Mrs. Longbottom. If I didn't have such an eye for the younger of your gender, I might ask you to marry me."

Now she raised an eyebrow. "Over my dead body."

He smiled. "Well, with the size of your accounts, we can't have that, now can we?"

"Not until I change my will. That's the valuable piece in this chess match, isn't it?"

"Indeed. You hold the power, Mrs. Longbottom. Don't think that we'll cheat you. We are men of our word."

"Glad to hear it. How much time do you need?"

"Mr. Dodge is on holiday and will return in a few weeks. I myself have some business trips to make and Mr. Wills is building a summer house. He should be back in Denver about the same time Mr. Dodge returns."

"Very well. In the meantime I'll make sure my nieces learn the value of hard work."

“See that you do,” he said with a lecherous smile and a wink. “Not that we’ll be working them the same way you will.”

Henrietta rolled her eyes and snarled. She couldn’t stand lechers, but in this case she was getting quite a bit of money out of them - money she planned to invest in other things, unbeknownst to her three lascivious colleagues. She hoped her ungrateful nieces appreciated the trouble she was going through to get them husbands.

Mr. Spicer stood. “Will there be anything else?”

Henrietta rose as well. “No. I’ll send Mr. Boone to you in a few weeks and see what progress has been made. We’ll set a date to meet then.”

“Splendid,” he said. He bowed and ushered her to the door.

She smiled to herself as she left the office. The westward movement was growing and so were the railroads. At long last, she’d found a way to get in cheaply. Now all she had to do was keep her nieces occupied until the time came to turn them over to their future husbands.

She couldn’t wait to see the looks on the girls’ faces when she gave them the news. She wondered if they’d scream. Georgie might – she had the weakest constitution of the three. Hunny would try to reason with her, as she always did, the idiot. And Rosie ... Rosie would explode – she might even throw something, and that would mean an appointment with Mr. Boone. At this point, she wouldn’t care how he punished her, save that she’d promised Mr. Spicer her nieces were ... unsullied.

“Ungrateful wretches,” she spat as she lifted her skirt to enter the carriage she had waiting. “Stupid girls.” She sat, adjusted her hat, then tapped the roof of the carriage with her walking stick and bellowed, “Home!”

The carriage lurched forward, throwing her back against the seat. “Imbecile!” But then all men were except her Samson. Now there was a man. If they hadn’t taken in his sister’s children, he’d probably still be alive. But those little

strumpets lured him away – he spent more time with them than her in the end. And they'd killed him, dragged him out into the dark night in the middle of a storm because they couldn't find Georgie! What sort of stupid child stays in a treehouse during a rainstorm?

She shook her head and watched the houses become grander as the carriage rolled on. She'd been so busy fuming over her nieces she hadn't noticed how far they'd gone. She was almost home.

Henrietta hid the contracts in her coat, lest one of her nieces see them. Heaven forbid they did and bolted. She'd have to make sure Mr. Boone and some of his ilk were present when she informed the girls they were to wed Messrs. Spicer, Dodge and Wills. No doubt after the screaming was over, they'd need an escort back to their room. She'd post guards to make sure they didn't escape. Then once the deed was done, she'd be rid of them at long last.

“Don't worry, Samson my love,” Henrietta murmured. “It's only a matter of time before I avenge your death.”



## CHAPTER 4

A MONTH LATER...

Georgie wiped her brow with her sleeve and blew a wisp of hair out of her face. “If I have to scrub another floor, I think I’ll scream.”

“She has me polishing the doorknobs again,” Rosie complained.

“I’d rather polish doorknobs than chop down another tree.” Hunny dipped her mop into a bucket. “If I’m not in here scrubbing floors with you two, I’m scrubbing the front steps, the back patio, the back steps, the gazebo, not to mention hacking down trees.”

“I liked that tree,” Georgie said. “I liked our treehouse.” She wiped her eyes and got back to scrubbing the floor.

Hunny patted her on the shoulder. “We all loved it. I helped Uncle Samson build it, remember?”

“Yes, and we helped you help Uncle Samson,” Rosie said with a laugh. “What a fiasco that was.”

Hunny and Georgie giggled. Despite their circumstances, they could always find humor somewhere. A good thing too, as the last several weeks had been awful. Aunt Henrietta had them clean the house from top to bottom, then do it all over again. And again. And again! All three had lost weight and the

neighbors were beginning to notice. Georgie especially didn't look well. Aunt Henrietta worked her hardest, as usual.

"I miss Uncle Samson," Georgie remarked. "If he were here, none of this would be happening."

Hunny stopped mopping. "No, it wouldn't. But don't worry, we're working on it."

"Yes, but what do you have to work with?" Georgie asked in dismay. "There are no men brave enough to set foot on our doorstep. Unless they're armed – how else are they to deal with Aunt Henrietta?" She glanced at the ceiling and back. "She *is* still asleep, isn't she?"

"Yes, it's her naptime," Hunny said, then looked both ways for good measure.

Rosie glanced upward. "Aunt Henrietta always was a cold fish. But she got worse after we lost Uncle Samson. Do you think she's mean because she's lonely?"

Hunny thought a moment. "You're right. I thought she was angry and cantankerous because she lost her husband. It happens, you know – some women never recover from such a loss. It's one of the reasons I pray I never become a widow. I hope my husband and I will pass in our sleep at the same time."

"As if that were possible," Rosie remarked.

Hunny shrugged. "It could happen. You never know."

"I want my husband to come rescue me," Georgie whispered.

Hunny went to her. "Right now we all wish that. Wouldn't it be nice to have three handsome men come knocking on our door and carry us away like they do in novels?"

"You've been reading too much again." Rosie got back to polishing a doorknob.

"I wouldn't mind," Georgie said with a far-off look. "It's what I pray for every night."

Hunny and Rosie stared at her. “Georgie, we will get out of here,” Rosie said.

“YES, there’s a young gentleman at church,” Hunny added. “I think Rosie’s caught his eye.”

“What?” Georgie said. “I haven’t noticed anyone new.”

“That’s because Aunt Henrietta kept you from going to Sunday services the last two weeks. His name is Mr. Frey.”

“How old is he?” Georgie asked.

“He looks a few years older than Hunny,” Rosie volunteered. “That means she should have him.”

“Hunny is only two years older than you are,” Georgie pointed out. “Why don’t you take him if it’s you he’s sweet on?”

“We agreed, remember?” Hunny reminded. “Though if he sets his cap for Rosie, that’s fine.”

“No, it’s not,” Rosie said. “If you don’t get married soon, no one will want you. You’ll be considered too old.”

Hunny massaged her forehead with her fingers. “Don’t remind me.”

“What if he sets his cap for me?” Georgie asked.

“Then he’s yours,” Rosie said with a shrug. “So long as he marries one of us, it’s a start.”

“You don’t think I’m too young for him, do you?”

“At eighteen?” Hunny said. “Of course not.”

“I don’t know ...” Georgie hedged.

“He has to be at least twenty-four,” Rosie said. “Six years isn’t so bad.”

Georgie looked at her sisters, hope in her eyes. “I hope he gets sweet on you, Hunny. You need to get out while you can.”

Hunny let her mop fall to the floor and took Georgie in her arms. “We all will, you’ll see. In fact, I think Aunt Henrietta

might be changing her mind about using us as servants the rest of her life.”

Rosie rolled her eyes. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

“No, I’m serious,” Hunny said. “Mr. Pearson, her lawyer, came to see her the other day and I overheard them talking about *dowries*.”

Rosie’s jaw dropped. “What? Are you sure?”

“Yes, I distinctly heard Mr. Pearson say ‘dowries,’ ‘husbands,’ ‘weddings’ and ...” Hunny screwed up her face. “... something about trains.”

Georgie’s eyes lit. “Honeymoons, maybe?”

“Trains could mean anything.” Rosie said as her brow creased. “What is she up to?”

“I think she’s finally relented,” Hunny said with confidence. “What else can it be? And he’s been here several times in the last week, meeting her in her office.”

“Yes, I saw him a few days ago,” Georgie mused. “I didn’t realize he’d been back.”

“That’s because you’re upstairs all the time,” Rosie glanced at the ceiling and stuck her tongue out at it.

“She’s looking for husbands for us?” Georgie asked, still unable to believe it.

“Maybe she’s decided we’re more trouble than we’re worth,” Rosie suggested. “I think that’s the only reason she’d want to get rid of us.”

“That and the cost of feeding three mouths,” Hunny said. “At least we eat well – she doesn’t have us on a diet of gruel and twigs.”

They laughed at her remark. “Will we have wedding dresses?” Georgie asked, warming to the idea.

“Of course,” Rosie said. “You can’t get married without one.”

“But who would she arrange marriages with?” Georgie asked.

Hunny and Rosie paled. “Arrange?” Rosie said. “Oh, I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Neither do I,” Hunny picked up her mop and dipped it in the bucket again. “What made you think of that, Georgie?”

She dipped her mop too and wrung it out. “What else can it be? There aren’t any bachelors within a hundred miles that would come near us without her say-so.”

Rosie made a face. “She’s got a point.”

“Maybe they’re from out of town,” Hunny suggested.

“Maybe we should be nicer to Aunt Henrietta,” Georgie said. “So she’ll tell us what’s going on.”

Hunny and Rosie looked at each other, then at Georgie. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt,” Hunny said.

“No it wouldn’t,” Rosie said. “But she’d better not load more work on us. My back is killing me.”

Georgie started to cry.

“What’s the matter?” Hunny put an arm around her again.

“It’s the thought of getting out of here. It just makes me...” She waved at her eyes. “... do this!”

Hunny smiled and hugged her. As soon as she let go, Rosie did the same.

“Finally,” Hunny picked up her mop. “There’s a light at the end of the tunnel.”

Rosie shot her a quizzical look. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Hunny shrugged. “Believe it or not, I heard Aunt Henrietta say it. I think it’s a railroad term.”

“Yes,” Georgie nodded and smiled. “Yes!”

\* \* \*

“AND THIS, Mr. Spicer, is my niece Hunny,” Aunt Henrietta said.

Mr. Spicer had to be at least seventy. His hair was white and thinning, but his eyebrows were as thick as his beard and mustache. “Miss Callahan, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” He took her hand, bowed and kissed it.

Hunny fought the urge to yank it away. She didn’t want to be rude, but for all his manners, the man looked at her like she was a T-bone steak. Aunt Henrietta’s dinner guests weren’t savory characters – prominent businessmen, to be sure, but acting less than gentlemanly.

Henrietta and her guests moved to Rosie. “And this is my middle niece, Miss Rosalind Callahan – Rosie for short.”

Mr. Spicer took Rosie’s hand and kissed it as he had Hunny’s, who in turn was getting her hand kissed by Mr. Wills. Mr. Dodge positioned himself to follow.

Aunt Henrietta moved again. “And this is our little Georgina. Georgie for short. Greet the gentlemen, Georgie,” she ordered.

“Yes, Aunt Henrietta.” Georgie faced Mr. Spicer first. “How do you do?”

“Very well, thank you,” he took her hand and kissed it.

Once all the hand kissing – slobbering, really – was done, each man offered his arm. Georgie looked at Mr. Dodge’s and cringed. “Auntie, shouldn’t one of the gentlemen escort you into the dining room? After all, you’re their hostess.”

“Nonsense, child. Let them escort whom they will. Mind your manners.”

Georgie gave her sisters a tiny shrug, reluctantly took Mr. Dodge’s arm and let him lead her into the dining room. Mr. Spicer offered his to Hunny, Mr. Wills to Rosie. As they passed a large mirror in the hall they reminded Georgie of three girls out with their grandfathers. It was all she could do not to laugh.

Once seated, the girls glanced at one another, then their aunt. Usually Rosie served the food. What was going on?

Aunt Henrietta picked up a bell and rang it, and an older woman walked in with a soup tureen and began to serve. Rosie leaned toward Hunny. "Who is that?" she hissed.

"No idea."

Georgie, sitting next to their aunt, looked at her and smiled. "Auntie, have you hired a new maid?"

"What if I have?" she said as if in challenge.

Georgie sat back. Perhaps she'd hired the woman only for the evening. She half-smiled at her sisters and allowed the woman to ladle soup into her bowl.

"Will that be all, Mrs. Longbottom?" the woman asked when she was done.

"Yes, Clarice. I'll ring you when we're ready for the next course."

The three elderly gentlemen ignored the maid as she curtsied and left. They began to eat, stealing glances at the sisters between mouthfuls.

Hunny, Rosie and Georgie exchanged a few knowing looks. Could these gentlemen be the fathers or grandfathers of their prospective grooms? Had Aunt Henrietta *really* arranged marriages for them? And were the sons or grandsons as unpleasant as their elders? Good heavens!

The sisters began to eat. The meal was good, as it always was with Rosie's cooking. Their aunt demanded that. As for conversation, Messrs. Spicer, Wills and Dodge treated it more like an interview than anything else. "Do you sing, Miss Callahan?" Mr. Spicer asked Hunny.

"Oh, um, yes. I took singing lessons as a child. We all did."

Mr. Dodge and Mr. Wills looked at each other approvingly. "And what about you, Miss Callahan," Mr. Wills asked Rosie. "Do you play any musical instruments?"

Rosie chewed her potatoes and swallowed. “Yes, the piano and violin.”

“And you?” Mr. Dodge asked Georgie.

“The piano, yes – I’m not very good at the violin. Rosie is, though.”

The three gentlemen smiled at each other and nodded. “Paint?” This from Mr. Dodge, looking at all three girls.

The sisters exchanged a quick glance and nodded.

“You can view some of their paintings in the drawing room,” their aunt commented. “Hunny is very good. Georgie could improve. Rosie...” She waved the idea away. “Well, perhaps Rosie should give it up.”

Rosie stiffened. Why did Aunt Henrietta have to be so horrid – and in front of guests?

“Painting is a talent that can be improved upon,” Mr. Wills stated. “I myself have tried my hand at it on several occasions. But it’s not a gentleman’s activity. Ladies, however ...” He grinned at them. “... should seek to expand their artistic abilities.”

Hunny glanced at her sisters before she smiled back. “I’m glad to hear you say so, sir.”

“Splendid! I have a solarium where the lighting is perfect for such endeavors. I’m sure Rosie will find it quite satisfactory. Or would you prefer I call you Rosalind?”

She stared at him in confusion. “Rosie is fine, sir.”

He cut into his steak, took a bite, chewed and swallowed. “I have a lovely home in the country I’m sure you’ll like. But don’t worry, I’ll bring you into the city twice a year.”

Rosie’s mouth dropped open. “Excuse me?”

Hunny exchanged a quick look with Georgie. “What are you saying, Mr. Wills?”

Mr. Spicer, Mr. Wills and Mr. Dodge looked at each other, grinning like hyenas.



It was Aunt Henrietta who clarified. “Hunny, Rosie, Georgie, these gentlemen are your betrothed.”

Hunny’s breath caught, her mouth opening and closing. She couldn’t breathe. Rosie jumped to her feet so fast her chair crashed to the floor. Georgie slowly stood, took one look at the three gentlemen, then her sisters, and screamed.

“Betrothed!” Rosie cried over Georgie’s shriek. “Aunt Henrietta, what are you talking about?”

Their aunt stood. “Get a hold of yourselves, all of you!” She rang the bell, but instead of Clarice, Mr. Boone and two of his cohorts entered, looking meaner than usual. The girls had seen the other two men several weeks ago when they came to meet with their aunt about something. Now they knew what.

“Aunt Henrietta,” Hunny cried. “What have you done?”

“Something I should have done a long time ago,” she snapped. She shoved Georgie into her seat, then did the same to Rosie. “Sit, all of you, while I explain.”

“Yes,” Rosie said, glaring daggers at her aunt. “Please do.”

Aunt Henrietta returned to her seat as Mr. Boone and his minions took positions behind the sisters.

“Your aunt has allowed us the extreme honor of your hands in marriage,” Mr. Spicer explained.

“I thought Aunt Henrietta was going to tell us what was going on,” Rosie said none too kindly. The man behind her put a hand on her shoulder, and she tried to squirm away but he held her fast. Georgie shrank in her chair as Hunny’s jaw went slack.

“Don’t interrupt me again, Rosie,” her aunt threatened. “Or you’ll be locked in your room. These gentlemen are willing to marry you. Heaven knows no one else will.”

The sisters exchanged a knowing look. *No one else will because of your tantrums, old woman* was the obvious thought.

“You’ll not want for anything,” Mr. Dodge assured Georgie. “We’ll take good care of you. Once you give us each

an heir, you'll be occupied with the children so you won't be lonely. Won't that be grand?"

Rosie looked ready to vomit. "Ch-children?" Hunny covered her mouth. Tears flowed down Georgie's face.

"Come now, ladies," said Mr. Wills. "We're three harmless gentlemen, lonely in our old age. Your aunt is doing us a kindness, as she is you. You'll be well cared for, well fed, and you'll love the countryside."

"Countryside?" Hunny managed. "What countryside?"

"Like your aunt, I have a lovely townhome here in Denver," explained Mr. Spicer. "But my main abode is a small ranch near Carr, in the northern part of the state. It's an easy train ride. You'll love it there."

Rosie looked aghast at her aunt. "You mean to not only marry us off to these men, but exile us from Denver as well?"

"Why would you want to stay here?" Mr. Wills asked. "When you could be breathing fresh air, communing with nature, perfecting your artistic abilities?"

"Not to mention working on providing us each with heirs," Mr. Spicer added with a wink.

Georgie wailed in despair.

The man behind her stood her up and flung her over his shoulder. "My thoughts exactly," Aunt Henrietta barked. "Take her to her room before she makes a bigger fool of herself."

Georgie's eyes were the size of platters as the thug carried her out of the dining room. The men behind Rosie and Hunny tightened their grips. "Aunt Henrietta," Rosie said threateningly. "You can't do this."

"My dear, I most certainly can. Your mother and father left you in Samson's and my care with explicit instructions to find suitable husbands for you when the time came. Now is the time, and these are the most suitable I could find."

Hunny held her hand to her forehead, looking ready to faint. Rosie grabbed her before she fell out of her chair.

“I see that another niece is ready to retire as well,” her aunt said. She snapped her fingers and Mr. Boone removed Hunny from Rosie’s grasp, slung her over his shoulder like a sack of flour and carried her off.

This left Rosie alone at the table with three aging lechers and her aunt who was prepared to sell her and her sisters to them like some pre-War slave trader. “No,” she whispered. “This can’t be happening.”

“Oh, but it is, my dear,” Mr. Wills purred as he leaned over the table toward her. “I myself am looking forward to a happy marriage. From the look of your hips, I’ll sire several heirs on you.”

Rosie gagged.

Aunt Henrietta smiled. “Well my dear, are you ready to retire, or do you need the same sort of escort as your sisters?”

Rosie stood, fists clenched. “I’ll take myself up, thank you very much.” She spun on her heel and looked straight into the chest of the man behind her. “Out of my way!” she snarled, shoving past him.

He raised a hand to strike her, but Aunt Henrietta stilled him. “Tell your sisters what’s done is done,” she declared to Rosie’s retreating back. “Your weddings are in two weeks. That should be enough time to have dresses made. All the other arrangements have been seen to.”

Rosie turned slowly. “How long have you been planning this?”

Her aunt smiled wickedly. “Since the day you and your sisters killed my Samson.”

“You can’t mean that.”

Aunt Henrietta stood. “I most certainly do! If it weren’t for the three of you, my husband would still be alive.”

“Uncle Samson died of the influenza!”

“Because *your stupid little sister didn’t come in out of the rain!* He searched for her with you! He was out there for hours!”

Mr. Spicer, Mr. Dodge and Mr. Wills exchange the same bewildered look. “Mrs. Longbottom, what are you saying?” Mr. Spicer asked.

She pointed at Rosie. “I’m saying that my nieces killed my husband!” she yelled, her voice more shrill than ever. “The youngest, for whatever reason, hid in her treehouse during a horrible storm. He went with the other two to look for her and got sick. If she’d had the good sense to come inside, none of this would have happened!”

“Aunt Henrietta!” Rosie scolded. “We were children!”

“That’s no excuse!” she screamed.

Mr. Spicer cleared his throat. “Perhaps, gentlemen, we should depart. This is obviously a family discussion.” He nodded to his counterparts. They stood and headed for the pocket doors that led into the parlor.

“Fine, do what you must,” Aunt Henrietta said. “Everything still stands, does it not?”

Rosie watched the exchange with interest. If she and her sisters were lucky, the trio would rightly deduce their aunt had gone mad and could not be relied upon. She’d certainly come to that conclusion.

Unfortunately not. “Of course,” Mr. Spicer said. “Why would we break our agreement?”

Aunt Henrietta took a deep breath and sighed in satisfaction. “Excellent. I will have them prepared and ready for their nuptials at the appointed time.”

Rosie stared at her in shock. Should she tell her sisters their aunt’s claims about Uncle Samson? No, perhaps not. There were too many other things to worry about right now. She glared at her aunt one last time before turning and finishing her ascent of the stairs. Aunt Henrietta snapped her fingers. Rosie’s guard followed like an obedient dog all the way to the bedroom, joined the other two men waiting outside their door even as she went in and slammed it behind her.

\* \* \*

“WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?” Georgie whimpered through her tears. “This is awful!”

“Truly,” Rosie stated as she paced in front of one of the windows. She stopped and looked down. Their bedroom was on the second story, facing the street. Someone would see them if they tried to tie sheets together and climb down, but she’d be more than willing to try it.

Hunny stood beside her. “Georgie’s afraid of heights,” she whispered.

“You had the same idea, I see.”

Hunny nodded. They looked at their sister sitting on the bed sobbing. “Poor thing. Aunt Henrietta has struck us such a blow, but especially Georgie.”

“I know.” Rosie met her sister’s gaze. “What are we going to do?”

Hunny’s eyes flicked to the door and back. “What would you wager is outside that door?”

“Aunt Henrietta’s little militia, what else?”

“Right. If we try to escape, we won’t get five yards.”

“Dear Auntie has thought of everything.” Rosie turned to the window. “I will not marry that disgusting man. If they force me to, I’ll slit my throat at the wedding banquet, I swear before Almighty God.”

Hunny winced – she knew Rosie didn’t bluff. She really thought being dead was better than being married to Mr. Wills. And Hunny tended to agree, about both him and Messrs. Spicer and Dodge. But surely there had to be a better solution than suicide ...

... oh. Hm. Yes, that might work. She glanced at the door and back. “Then I suppose we’ll just have to brave it, dear sisters,” she said in a voice louder than normal.

Rosie’s eyes bulged.

“Don’t you agree?” Hunny said even louder, nodding emphatically.

Rosie finally got it. “Oh, um ... yes! For what else can we do? Besides, they *are* rich.”

“Oh yes,” Hunny said with a nod. “Very rich indeed.”

Georgie sat on the bed like a rag doll propped against the pillows. She looked up, her eyes wide.

Rosie rushed to the bed and sat. “Don’t you agree, Georgie?” she said in her best stage voice. “We don’t have a choice – we might as well make the best of it.”

Georgie’s face twisted in confusion. She looked at Hunny, whose head was going up and down like a pump handle. “Yes ... I suppose ...”

Hunny went to the writing desk, pulled out pen, ink and paper. She waved at Rosie to keep talking and began to write.

Rosie nodded back. “I guess this means we’d better start preparing for our weddings – right, sisters?”

Georgie made a face like she’d just bit into a lemon, but she picked up her cue. “Yes, indeed we must. Before this month is out we’ll be women well wed. I do hope we live close enough to each other to visit ...”

Rosie looked at the door with a devilish grin. “These men do seem to know each other – I’m sure that can be arranged.”

Hunny hurried over, bringing the paper she’d written on. “This is our means of escape,” she whispered with a nervous smile. “It’s got to work.”

Georgie glanced nervously at the door, then at the paper ... and she and Rosie breathed sighs of relief. The page simply said:

*Mrs. Pettigrew. It worked for Dorcas.*

## CHAPTER 5

For the next few days, Aunt Henrietta refused to let the sisters leave the house. She kept her “help” around the entire time. Only once she was satisfied her nieces were compliant did she get rid of two of them, and even then Mr. Boone remained.

Hunny brought a basket of laundry down to the kitchen to prepare it for Mrs. Bell, the laundress. Rosie stood at the stove, stirring a pot of soup. They exchanged a quick look, then turned to Mr. Boone, who hovered in the doorway between the kitchen and stairwell. “Mr. Boone,” Rosie said. “Would you like a bowl? I think it’s finished.” Mr. Boone didn’t usually eat around them, but they knew he hadn’t eaten since last night – Rosie had made sure she put everything away the night before where he couldn’t find it.

He stepped into the kitchen and sniffed. “Hm, don’t mind if I do.”

She went to a hutch, took out a soup bowl and spoon and served him. He sat at the kitchen table and began to eat, while she sliced some bread and set it in front of him. “You can’t have soup without bread.”

He eyed her a moment. “Much obliged.” He tore into the bread with relish and continued to slurp his soup.

Hunny and Rosie exchanged another look. The plan was working. Hunny risked a tiny smile as she put the laundry in a sack and slung it over her shoulder. “I’m off to Mrs. Bell’s.”

Mr. Boone looked up. “What? No you’re not,” he said gruffly.

“Well, you can come along,” she offered.

“Wait until I’m finished eating.”

But Rosie went to the table and snatched his soup away. “You can’t eat if you’re going with Hunny.”

His face contorted. “Give me that soup!”

“Certainly, as soon as you get back.”

“Oh for Heaven’s sake,” Hunny said, rolling her eyes. “I’m just going to Mrs. Bell’s. You know where that is.”

“Oh, while you’re out, could you pick me up a few things?” Rosie asked. “Then I don’t have to go out too.”

“Pick you up ...?” Hunny whined. “Aunt Henrietta wants me back right away.”

“I’ll tell her you’re saving me a trip. She won’t mind,” Rosie still held Mr. Boone’s bowl.

He reached for it but she stepped out of range, so he slammed his fist on the table. “Give me back my soup!”

“Fine, fine, eat your soup,” Rosie said. “But don’t blame me if Aunt Henrietta gets upset when dinner’s late.”

“What?” he said, clearly confused. “Why would it be?”

“She wants a specific menu tonight, and I don’t have time to run to the stores for the ingredients. Hunny will be heading that way – she can pick them up easily.”

“Then she can wait until I’m done,” he grouched.

“That will make dinner late,” Rosie said in a voice usually reserved for explaining things to small children.

Mr. Boone looked ready to explode.

“More bread and butter?” she offered diffidently.

He looked at her, mouth half open, and licked his lips. “Yeah, a couple of slices.”



“Hunny, just go,” Rosie said. She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a list. “Be sure you get that special kind of cinnamon Aunt Henrietta likes. I’ll need it for the dessert.” She reached into her other pocket and pulled out some money. “If they don’t have any at Brown and White’s General Store, then try Bolen’s - they always carry the exotic stuff.”

Hunny set down her load, took the list and money and stuffed them into her reticule. “Cinnamon, right. I’m off, then.”

“Hey, wait!” Mr. Boone barked past the bread in his mouth.

“Oh dear, your soup must be getting cold. Let me get you some more.” Rosie whisked his bowl away, ladled in another serving and set it before him as Hunny slipped out the door. “Cheese? It’ll go nicely with the bread.”

He looked at the bowl, the bread, the door, then finally said, “Yes, much obliged.”

Rosie headed for the larder, a smile on her face. So far, so good.

\* \* \*

HUNNY DROPPED the laundry at Mrs. Bell’s, rushed to Brown and White’s and left Rosie’s list with Mr. Brown. “I’ll be back – I have another quick errand to run for Rosie.”

“Certainly, Miss Callahan. I’ll fill this and have it ready for you when you return.”

“Thank you!” She hurried out the door and down the street. As soon as she was around the corner, she waved down a cab – Mrs. Pettigrew’s mansion was at least a mile away. She’d get there and back quicker this way.

“Where to, Miss?” the driver asked as he guided his horse and carriage to the curb.

“231 Baker Lane.” She opened the carriage door.

He nodded before his eyes bulged. “231 ... the Pettigrew Mansion?” He looked at her as if she’d just asked him to set

his horse on fire.

“Yes, and hurry.”

He shuddered as she climbed in, picked up his whip and gave the horse a tap on the rump. “Walk on.”

“I said hurry!”

He tapped the horse again. The animal broke into a trot and off they went.

Hunny breathed a sigh of relief. Their plan was working. Distract Mr. Boone with food, drop off the laundry, go to the grocery, then “search” for Aunt Henrietta’s favorite cinnamon. It was just enough time to get to Mrs. Pettigrew’s, explain their situation and get back. What to do next, they hadn’t figured out yet, but at least this was a start.

The driver brought the carriage to a stop in front of a Second Empire-style mansion surrounded by lush grounds and flowerbeds. Everyone knew Mrs. Pettigrew was rich, but she hadn’t realized how rich until she disembarked from the carriage and saw the house for herself. “Wow.”

“You do know that she’s, um ... odd?” the driver commented.

“I’ve heard, but that won’t deter me. Wait here.”

“What?”

“Wait here,” she said with more force. “She’s a matchmaker, not a murderer.”

He paled. Some did believe the famous Mrs. Pettigrew murdered her husband. But Hunny and her sisters, like most of Denver, knew he’d died of influenza.

Hunny approached the massive front doors, took one look at the knockers and made a face. “Oh my ...” They resembled the late Mr. Pettigrew. She’d seen his picture on the society page of the *Denver Post*. She grabbed one large metal ring and banged it against Mr. Pettigrew’s chin a few times, then waited. And waited.

At last the door slowly creaked open. “Yes?” a butler asked, his hand covered in soap suds.

“Um, is Mrs. Pettigrew at home?”

“Yes.” He opened the door wider. “Shall I say who is calling?”

She swallowed hard. “Miss Hunny Callahan.”

He motioned her inside. She entered the house and her jaw slackened. “Oh my!”

“Indeed,” he replied dryly. “Follow me.” He led her into a drawing room and motioned to a chair. “Please be seated. Mrs. Pettigrew will be with you shortly.”

She smiled, nodded and took a seat. After a moment she heard an odd sound. “What is that?”

Before she had another thought, the distinct *clip-clop, clip-clop* of a horse approached the drawing room. “Ah, a guest!” Mrs. Pettigrew, riding sidesaddle, ducked under the lintel of the drawing room door. The horse was beautiful, a large sleek black beast with a white strip down its face. But why was the famed matchmaker riding it through her house?!

Mrs. Pettigrew dismounted, brushed off her riding skirt and smiled. “What can I do for you, *ma chérie*?”

Working past her shock, Hunny reached into her reticule, pulled out a letter and handed it to her. “We n-need your help.”

“Mr. Tugs!”

The butler walked around the horse to stand before her. “Yes, Mrs. Pettigrew?”

“Tea. Then take Mars out to the stable and see he’s taken care of.”

“Yes, Mrs. Pettigrew.” He turned, took a look at the horse and cleared his throat. “Would Mars like some tea?”

“Of course not, he abhors tea. Just the usual bucket of beer.”

Mr. Tugs groaned and hurried off.

Hunny prayed this visit wasn't all for naught. This matchmaker, despite her seeming insanity, might be their only hope.

Mrs. Pettigrew patted the horse on the neck, then sat in a chair opposite Hunny's. "Now what can I do for you?"

Hunny gulped. Was Mrs. Pettigrew French? She hadn't noticed the woman's accent until now. "I ... my sisters ..."  
She glanced at the horse and back. The animal nibbled at some flowers in a vase on a nearby table. "We need you to save us from a terrible fate."

"Sisters? There's more than one of you, then?"

Hunny nodded. "Three of us."

"Wonderful! And you are all seeking husbands?"

Hunny watched the horse, bored with the flowers, head for a large window across the room. "Yes. Right away. Now in fact."

"What?" Mrs. Pettigrew said, a hand to her chest. "I'm afraid that's impossible, *ma belle*. I haven't any applicants this week. Too bad you didn't come last week – I had two, but I've already matched them."

Hunny bit her lip. How was she going to explain? "Please read the letter. It tells something about each of us, and our predicament." She stood. "You have to help us. If we don't get out of Denver, our aunt is going to ..."  
She gripped her hands in front of her. "... force us to marry these horrible old men."

"Well, sometimes older is better."

"Not when they're fifty years older," Hunny said desperately. "And rakes besides."

The matchmaker's eyes widened. "Oh dear, that won't do, will it?" She stood, went to a bell pull and gave it a yank.

Mr. Tugs appeared out of nowhere, tea tray in hand. "You rang?"

"Ah, there you are, Tugs. Have we received any more applicants?"

“Not today. Perhaps tomorrow.” He set the tray on a table near a sofa, prepared two cups and handed them to Hunny and his employer, then turned to the horse. “Come along, you.” He clapped his hands, and the horse turned from the window, trotted across the room and obediently followed him out.

Hunny almost dropped her teacup. “How ...”

“Oh,” she said with a giggle. “Mars finally has Mr. Tugs trained. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Hunny shuddered. The woman was mad, stark raving! Now what were she and her sisters to do?

“My, my,” Mrs. Pettigrew read the letter in her hand. “You three are wonderful! I’ll have no problem matching you.”

Hunny took a deep breath to gather her wits. “Mrs. Pettigrew, it is of utmost importance that you find us husbands immediately.”

“So you can avoid these future husbands, is that it?” She indicated the letter. “And *oui*, I know one of these men, this Mr. Wills. He tried to apply here, once. To call *him* a rake is an insult to rakes, and perhaps other gardening tools as well.”

Hunny bit her lower lip to keep from laughing at the pun. If she started laughing, she’d be crying within a minute, she was so on edge. “Yes.”

“Very well. If you are all sure, I’ll study every applicant that comes in and find the three best possible matches.”

“But we are supposed to be wed in ... in just ten days!”

Mrs. Pettigrew’s eyes rounded. “Oh dear, that does pose a problem.” She sipped her tea as her brow creased. “Why is your auntie forcing you to marry these gentlemen when it is clear you don’t want to?”

Tears stung the back of Hunny’s eyes. “I don’t know, but Aunt Henrietta has been so horrid to us for so many years!”

Mrs. Pettigrew stood. “Henrietta ...” She glanced at the letter again. “You’re Henrietta Longbottom’s niece?”

Hunny drew back in panic. “Please, she can’t know ...”

“On the contrary, she *should* know. She always was a miser and a, a *mégère*. The thought of her cheating you and your sisters out of decent marriages is appalling!”

Hunny shook her head. “Please, Mrs. Pettigrew, you can’t tell her! We’re practically prisoners in her home as it is! She just wants to be rid of us and ...”

The matchmaker held up a hand. “No need to explain. I know Henrietta doesn’t do anything unless there’s some coin in it for her.” She looked Hunny up and down. “Given that *Monsieur* Wills is in the railroad business, I can well imagine what that is.” She went to a small desk in the corner, pulled out paper and pen and began to write. “Fear not, my dear, I will see to it you have husbands, and with all due haste.” She looked over her shoulder. “You can’t leave town on your own, I take it? No money to your names?”

“Very little,” Hunny said. “I could barely afford the cab here. She controls every cent.”

“Shameful. But alas, not surprising. Very well, I’ve made a list of what you’ll need.” She stood, went over and handed Hunny the paper.

“What’s this?”

“Well if you are to run away, you must take what is most vital, *no*?”

Hunny nodded numbly.

“Good. Prepare yourselves. When I send word, you will need to leave at a moment’s notice. You do realize the risk you and your sisters are taking?”

She not only realized it, she hadn’t slept in almost two days because of it. She was surprised the woman didn’t comment on the dark smudges under her eyes or the paleness of her skin. “Yes, we know. We might end up in an even worse situation.”

“You won’t. Trust me, I will see this through. You will escape, my dear, have no fear.”

The tension in Hunny's shoulders lessened, and she smiled. "Thank you, thank you so much!"

Mrs. Pettigrew gave her a hug. "I have a good feeling about this."

"Thank you again." Hunny stepped out of her embrace and forced a smile. The woman was mad, but she was on their side. Time would tell if she came through for them. All she and her sisters could do in the meantime was pray.

\* \* \*

*EIGHT DAYS LATER ...*

"WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?" Georgie sobbed into her hands.

"In two days we'll be married to those evil men," Rosie groaned. "I can't believe this is happening. Are you sure Mrs. Pettigrew said she would send word?"

"Yes," Hunny paced the room. "But she didn't say how."

"Maybe she sent a note and Auntie intercepted it," Georgie said through her tears. "Our lives are ruined!"

"Shhh." Rosie sat next to her. "Don't say that. We still have ..." She looked at the clock and grimaced. "... some time."

"I can't marry that awful man," Georgie said weakly. "I can't. I can't."

"None of us can," Hunny said.

"And we won't," Rosie added as she went to the window. She looked out – and gasped.

Hunny and Georgie were at her side in an instant. "Who's that?" Georgie asked.

"Some sort of delivery?" Rosie said. "Or something from Mrs. Pettigrew?" They looked at the door, but didn't move.

Mr. Boone would be out in the hallway ready to stop them should they try to leave without their aunt's permission.

"Probably a wedding gift," Hunny said, disappointed. "They're starting to arrive."

Rosie sighed, put her arm around Georgie and led her back to the bed. "Would you like to do some embroidery?"

"I can't concentrate." Georgie kicked at the floor. "Thoughts of marrying that man make me want to crawl under a rock and never come out."

"Don't talk like that," Hunny said. "You mustn't give up hope."

Georgie looked at her sisters. "But what hope have we now? We're to be married day after tomorrow and Mrs. Pettigrew hasn't called on us. What else are we supposed to think?"

"I really will slit my throat if it comes to that – see if I d –" Rosie stopped at the sound of a knock at their door. She exchanged a quick look with her sisters, then rushed to open it.

Aunt Henrietta stood on the other side. "This came for you," she snarled. "I must say, they're the ugliest flowers I've ever seen. I won't have them in the foyer or any of the downstairs rooms. You can keep them up here with you." She shoved the vase at Rosie.

Rosie took it with caution. The flowers were tall, green and purple. "Oh dear. Are these corpse flowers?"

"Whomever sent them has very poor taste," their aunt said. "There's a card. See who the idiot is."

Hunny took the card and read it. "Why, these are from that Mrs. Pettigrew." She exchanged glances with her sisters before turning to her aunt. "Did you invite her to the wedding?"

"Of course. I can't stand the woman myself but anyone who's anyone invites her to social events. She has more money than all of our class combined."

"I've heard she's very odd," Hunny mused, staring at the card.



“Odd isn’t the word I’d use.” Aunt Henrietta turned on her heel and walked past Mr. Boone in the hall. As soon as she was gone, he stepped forward and closed the door.

Georgie stared at the arrangement. “Auntie’s right, these are ugly flowers.”

Hunny studied the vase and motioned Rosie to carry it to the writing desk. “She must have put a note inside,” she said quietly.

Rosie pulled the flowers out of the vase and peered into it. Sure enough, there was a wrapped bundle. “I see something!” She reached in, pulled it out and studied it. Mrs. Pettigrew, or her butler, had wrapped the contents in oiled leather to protect it.

Hunny sighed in relief. Between the vase, the water and the flower arrangement, their aunt wouldn’t suspect anything was hidden inside. “Hurry, Rosie, open it.”

“I can’t – I’m too nervous.” Rosie handed it to her older sister.

The bundle was tied with string and it took Hunny a moment to loosen it enough to yank it off and unfold the leather. The three sisters stared at what lay inside, blank looks on their faces.

“Train tickets?” Georgie asked hopefully.

“Looks like it.” Rosie picked one up. “These are for tonight!”

“Tonight?” Hunny said. “But how do we get out of here?”

“I have a plan for that,” Georgie said.

Hunny and Rosie’s eyebrows went up. “You have?” they said.

Georgie smiled. “I took some of Auntie’s laudanum from the vial she keeps in her room, thinking it might come in handy. Rosie can slip it into Mr. Boone’s tea tonight. Once he’s asleep, we sneak out. We’ve packed according to Mrs. Pettigrew’s list haven’t we?”

Rosie raised her hand. "I have."

"As have I." Hunny stared at the train tickets, then lifted them to find money and a note underneath. She glanced at the door, then her sisters, and began to read the note in a whisper:

*MY DEAR MISS CALLAHAN & sisters:*

*TAKE these train tickets and stage fare and embark on your new journey. I am sending you to Clear Creek, Oregon, to three brothers named Michael, Darcy and Zachary Comfort. Their older brother has requested I keep an eye out for three suitable brides for them, and I received his request yesterday. How fortuitous that I met you! You and your sisters are perfect. The train goes to Baker City, Oregon, and you can purchase stage tickets from there to Clear Creek.*

*I WISH YOU WELL, Miss Callahan, you and your sisters. I leave you with one of my cards. Please write me and let me know when you have arrived in Clear Creek safe and sound, and I pray your grooms will be a comfort to you in your dire situation.*

*SINCERELY,*

*Mme. Adelia Pettigrew*

GEORGIE COVERED her mouth to stifle a sob. "It's happening!" she hissed. "We're going to get out of here!"

Hunny took a deep breath. "We're going to do this. We're going to make it to this Clear Creek. Agreed?"

"You have to ask?" Rosie said.

"Just checking."

Rosie pulled Hunny into her arms and reached for Georgie. They hugged each other for a moment, broke apart and began to discuss their plans.

\* \* \*

LATE THAT EVENING, Rosie opened the door a crack and peeked into the hall. Mr. Boone was slouched in his chair, snoring, the cup of tea she'd given him earlier on the floor next to it. She prayed their aunt didn't hear him. She glanced over her shoulder and motioned to the others. "Quick, now's our chance."

The three sisters tiptoed into the hall, each carrying a small satchel, and carefully made their way to the staircase, downstairs, across the foyer and out the front door. Feigning compliance over the last twelve days had worked. Aunt Henrietta thought they'd accepted their fate, relaxed her vigil and kept only Mr. Boone on the premises. Thank Heaven for that.

Once outside, they rushed down the front walk, through the gate and across the street. "Hurry," Hunny said. "The train station's this way." Rosie was about to break into a run, but Hunny grabbed her arm. "Hurry, but don't draw attention. Some of the neighbors are still up."

Rosie and Georgie glanced up and down the street. The gentle glow of lantern light poured from the windows of various residences. They walked to the corner, rounded it, walked two more blocks and Hunny hailed a cab. She didn't recognize the driver – a good sign. Often cabbies frequented certain neighborhoods, but this man didn't. The fewer witnesses there were to their escape, the better. "The train station," she told him. "And please hurry."

"Right away, Miss."

They climbed in and were off at a good clip. None of them were ready to relax until they were safely out of Denver. Escaping to Clear Creek was good, but they didn't want to risk being followed by Aunt Henrietta's hired men. They'd left no trace of their contact with Mrs. Pettigrew, and took as few

possessions as possible so as not to be missed. Hopefully their aunt would think they were still in the city – after all, how could they leave without money?

But would Aunt Henrietta pursue them? That was the real question. She was sure to figure out they must have had some sort of help. But Mrs. Pettigrew was clever. The oiled leather Mrs. Pettigrew had placed their tickets and stage fare in was safely tucked in Hunny's satchel. Hopefully by the time anyone figured out they were no longer in Denver, it would be too late. Mrs. Pettigrew seemed to have thought of everything.

The carriage reached the station and the sisters disembarked. Hunny paid the driver, and they reached their train just in time. Had they left the house any later, they'd have missed it, and what would they have done then? They found seats and sat, Georgie and Rosie next to each other, Hunny across from them.

Georgie pulled a handkerchief from her reticule and began twisting it in her hands.

"Stop that," Rosie urged. "You're going to worry yourself sick. We've gotten this far. We're going to make it."

Georgie's eyes were drawn to a man walking down the aisle. He looked at each of them a moment before spotting a woman and child at the other end of the car. He waved, went to them and sat, and the child hopped into his lap. "Papa!"

Georgie breathed a sigh of relief and squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't know how much more I can take."

"Shhh," Rosie warned. "We have to watch what we say. We don't want to give anyone any clues as to what we're doing."

Georgie nodded. "You're right, I'm sorry. I'm just so nervous."

"And for good reason," Hunny said then lowered her voice. "Not only are we escaping, but we're off to marry three men we've never met. What if they're worse than the gentlemen Aunt Henrietta arranged marriages with?"

"Is that even possible?" Rosie muttered.

Georgie glanced up and down the aisle again. “Do you trust Mrs. Pettigrew?”

Hunny thought a moment. The woman was eccentric, possibly mad, but she wasn’t mean. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

“Then if you trust her,” Rosie said, “we do too. Right, Georgie?”

Georgie took a deep breath and let it out. “Do I have a choice?”

“At this point, no,” Hunny said. “None of us have.”

“Then we’ll have to hope she’s done right by us,” Georgie said. The sisters sighed collectively and settled in for the long journey.

## CHAPTER 6

“Clear Creek!” Willie the stage driver called. “Comin’ into Clear Creek!”

Hunny, Rosie and Georgie each pushed a dust flap aside and got their first look at their future home. “Why, just look at it,” Hunny said happily.

“At what?” Rosie replied as she viewed the tiny town. “There’s nothing here.”

“At least they have a mercantile,” Georgie commented as the stage pulled up in front of it.

Hunny read the brightly colored sign on the front of the building. “‘Dunnigan’s.’ This looks like a nice quiet place.”

“You’re always so optimistic.” Rosie straightened her hat. “My goodness, I’m tired.”

“Me too,” Georgie put on her gloves. “Will they meet us here?”

“I hope so,” Rosie said.

“Why wouldn’t they?” Hunny asked as she reached for her satchel.

“I don’t see anyone waiting on the mercantile steps,” Rosie pointed out. “Do you?”

The three stared at the empty front porch of the mercantile and frowned. Where were their intendeds? “Oh no – what if they changed their minds?” Georgie asked in panic.

“Let’s not even consider such a thing,” Hunny scolded.

Georgie turned away from the stagecoach's window. "It could happen."

"No," Hunny insisted. "I will not entertain such thoughts and neither should you."

"I'm just saying ..."

"Yes – now stop saying it."

Georgie snapped her mouth shut and picked up her satchel. They'd brought so few belongings, the driver didn't even have to store their bags atop the stage.

He climbed down and opened the door, making up in enthusiasm what he lacked in teeth. "Here we are, ladies – Clear Creek!"

"Thank you, sir." Hunny took the hand he offered to help her down. She stood and looked around as he helped Rosie next. "There's not much here, is there?"

"Sure there is," he said.

He helped Georgie as Rosie joined Hunny. "Like what?" Rosie asked. "And where?"

"Like the Van Cleet Hotel," he said, pointing down the street. "Finest hotel 'tween Baker City and Oregon City. Only one, come to think of it, 'less ya count the Whites' stage stop. But it's awful fine anyways."

"Driver," Georgie said. "Is this the usual place you drop passengers?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a wide if interrupted smile. "Can I show ya inside the mercantile so ya can wait for yer intendeds? They must be running late ... er, ya are here as mail-order brides, ain't ya?"

The sisters glanced at one another. "How did you know?" Georgie wondered.

Willie laughed. "Aw, we get a lot of 'em here. No young women 'round, so once a year or so another bride comes to town from someplace. Haven't had three at once since the

Sayer sisters came to town. We done had two sets of them. But that was years ago.”

Hunny found the strange little man amusing, even as she studied the empty porch before them. “But where are our grooms? Are they waiting for us at the church?”

“This town *does* have a church, doesn’t it?” Rosie inquired.

Willie scratched his graying beard. “Yes, ma’am – a mighty fine one, too. As to yer intendeds ... well, frankly, ma’am, I usually know everythin’ goin’ on in this town, but the first I heard that ya were comin’ was when I picked ya up in Baker City.”

Georgie dropped her satchel, turned to Hunny and folded her arms. “See? I warned you. Oh dear ...”

“Oh, stop,” Hunny scolded. She turned to Willie. “Kind sir, perhaps if we gave you the names of our intended husbands, it would bring the matter of our arrival to mind?”

“Ya can give me names, ma’am, but I still ain’t heard nothin’ ‘bout no brides comin’ to town this year.”

Hunny’s eyes flicked between Rosie’s frown and Georgie’s look of triumphant despair. She knew her little sister was using it as something to hang on to, lest she become hysterical. “They are three brothers named Comfort. Michael, Darcy and Zachary Comfort.”

Willie looked at each in turn, his eyes getting wider as he did. “Comfort, ya say?”

“That’s it, we’re ruined!” Georgie blurted.

“Well, that would explain it,” he said with a wide smile. “They don’t come into town that often, so no wonder I hadn’t heard they’d sent off for mail-order brides. Well, good on ‘em.”

“Sir, they did, and we’re here,” Rosie said. “Now, if you could direct them to us, we’d be most grateful.”

Before he could answer, the mercantile doors opened and a gentleman in his sixties came out, wearing an apron. His gray



eyebrows drew together as he studied them with inquisitive blue eyes, then turned to Willie. “Morning, Willie. Looks like you brought more than the mail today.”

“Sure did, Wilfred. These three gals are here to get hitched.”

The man’s eyes popped wide. “Married!” he said with a delighted smile.

“Married?” came a gruff voice as the door opened again and a portly woman appeared. She was about the same age as the gentleman wearing a matching apron. Husband and wife? “Who’s getting married?”

“These three, Mrs. Dunnigan,” Willie said. “Er, sorry – what were yer names again?”

Hunny looked at the shopkeepers. “We’re the Callahan sisters from Denver, here to marry the Comfort brothers. Who appear to be ...” She glanced at Georgie and rolled her eyes. “... sadly absent.”

Mrs. Dunnigan scrunched up her face and narrowed her eyes at them, causing Georgie to take a step back. “Who are you again?” she barked. “I haven’t heard of any brides coming to town. Have you, Wilfred?”

“Can’t say as I have, come to think.” He gave the sisters a kind look. “But you wouldn’t be the first to come to town and have your intended be delayed.”

“Nor the first to show up unannounced,” Mrs. Dunnigan added, her glare trained on the three.

Georgie took another step back. Hunny grabbed her arm and pulled her forward again. “Could you tell us where the Comfort brothers are?” she asked with as much calm as she could muster.

“Which of the Comfort brothers are you *supposedly* here to marry?” Mrs. Dunnigan snapped.

“Supposedly?” Georgie squeaked. “I knew it! Oh, Hunny, I *knew* it!”

“Here.” Hunny gently shoved Georgie at Rosie, who took her in her arms and held on. That done, Hunny took a few deep breaths. “We were sent here by Mrs. Adelia Pettigrew of the Pettigrew Mail-Order Bridal Agency to marry Michael, Darcy and Zachary Comfort. Now, if you could please point us in the right direction ...”

“Pettigrew!” Mrs. Dunnigan snarled.

Now Rosie was alarmed. “You ... know of her?”

“Of course we know of her! She sent the eldest Comfort boy a fake mail-order bride!”

Georgie wailed as her knees gave out.

“Jumpin’ Jehoshaphat!” Wilfred cried as he raced down the mercantile steps. Willie was already at her side, fanning her face with his hat, and Wilfred knelt beside him. “Quick, Irene, get some water!”

Irene Dunnigan glared at Hunny, as if Georgie’s faint was her fault, then stomped back into the mercantile. She reappeared a few moments later, glass in hand, as Georgie’s eyelids fluttered.

“Hand that glass to her sister, Irene,” Wilfred said, tossing his head at Hunny. “Better she get it from you than a stranger.”

“Agreed.” Hunny took the glass, knelt beside Georgie and helped Wilfred sit her up. “There, now. You’re fine.”

Georgie opened her eyes. “What happened?”

“Ya done fainted,” Willie explained. “Ya okay?”

Her lower lip trembled.

“Now, none of that.” Irene marched down the mercantile steps and glared at Hunny. “Well don’t just sit there, give her a drink.”

Hunny fought the urge to glare back. “Here, have some water.”

Georgie took two sips, then dabbed at her mouth with a gloved hand. “What are we to do?”

Irene, using Wilfred as a handhold, struggled to her knees beside them. “You’re going to come inside, have some tea and cookies and get this mess sorted out, that’s what you’re going to do. Now get up.”

Wilfred helped her to her feet. “She’s right. No sense standing out here in the street. Otherwise ...”

“What’s going on?” a man asked as he hurried over. The sisters turned to see the newcomer, a handsome man with light brown hair graying at the temples and brown eyes. “Wilfred?”

“She just fainted, Bowen,” Wilfred said. “She’s fine.”

“No, she’s not,” Irene snapped. “She fainted because her supposed groom isn’t here to meet her!”

“Groom?” Bowen stuck out his hand to Georgie. “Hello – Dr. Bowen Drake, at your service.”

Wilfred offered Hunny a hand. “They just came in on the afternoon stage. Apparently they’re here to marry three of the Comfort boys.”

The doctor’s eyebrows shot up. “The Comforts? Huh – I hadn’t heard.”

Georgie’s knees buckled, but Hunny righted her and passed her off to Dr. Drake, who guided Georgie up the porch steps and into the mercantile.

“Here now, what’s this?”

Hunny and Rosie turned to find an old woman making her way across the street. “Think she knows anything?” Rosie asked.

“I doubt it,” Hunny sighed.

“Howdy.” The woman pointed at the mercantile doors. “Is she okay?”

“She will be, thank you,” Hunny said.

“I’m Grandma Waller, the doc’s wife. And you are?”

Hunny and Rosie gaped at the elderly woman, then glanced at the mercantile doors and back.

The woman shook her head and laughed. “Oh no, not Doc Drake’s wife! My husband is Doc Drake’s boss. But folks around here call me Grandma.”

That made sense to Hunny – Mrs. Waller looked old enough to have parented the Dunnigans. But she was surprised a town this small had two doctors. “Our sister will be fine. She’s just ... upset.”

“And reasonably so,” Rosie added. “It’s obvious we weren’t expected.” She glanced at Hunny. “Due to some oversight, I’m sure.”

Hunny nodded. “Hopefully. We just need to get things straightened out.”

Grandma’s eyes danced between them. “Uh-oh, what is it? Wait, don’t tell me.” She held up a hand. “You’re here to get hitched, right? But your husbands-to-be aren’t here to fetch you.”

“So far, so good,” Rosie said.

Grandma smiled. “Well, child, we’ve been through this before. Don’t you worry none – we’re all here to help. Let’s go inside.”

They entered the mercantile to find Georgie seated at a table next to the display windows, a plate of cookies in front of her. “Are you all right?” Rosie asked.

“Yes. Would you like a cookie?” She held the plate up. “They’re delicious.”

Rosie took one as the Dunnigans emerged through a curtain that separated the front and back of the building. Mrs. Dunnigan carried a teapot while her husband toted a tray full of cups and saucers. “Now, some tea will set you right,” Mrs. Dunnigan said. “Then we’ll get to the bottom of things.”

“Bowen,” Grandma said. “She okay?”

The doctor stood to one side, studying Georgie with interest. “Yes, just scared.”

Grandma nodded knowingly, then looked at Wilfred and Irene. “One of you gonna explain to me what’s going on so I

know where to send the Turners?”

“I’d send him straight to the Triple-C,” Wilfred advised. “That’s where the Comfort boys usually are. And a few of them are building cabins nearby.”

“The Cookes will know where they are,” Dr. Drake agreed.

“Turners, Cookes – who are these people?” Hunny wondered.

Irene began pouring tea into cups. “The Cooke brothers – well, two of them – own the Triple-C cattle ranch outside town. One of their daughters married Major Comfort – who isn’t a major, that’s just his name – so he lives there. He has five brothers and a sister. The brothers often work at the ranch. The sister married Deputy Eli Turner, whose older brother Tom is the local sheriff and sort of the village storyteller. You should be writing this down, you know. Anyway, someone at the Triple-C should know what’s going on – Major is probably the one to ask, since he’s more or less the head of his family. Sugar?”

Georgie took the cup Irene offered. “Yes, please.”

Hunny and Rosie smiled. Maybe a motherly figure was what their little sister needed right now, albeit a cantankerous one.

“I’m sure there’s a logical explanation for all of this,” Dr. Drake turned to Grandma. “I’ll go down to the sheriff’s office and see if one of the Turners can ride out to the Triple-C and the brothers’ cabins. They’re probably working on them today.”

“Maybe they lost track of time,” Grandma suggested. “Though I can’t see that happening to all three.”

Georgie stopped munching her cookie and looked at Irene.

Irene almost smiled. “She’s right. Menfolk get caught up in their work and forget everything. Milk?”

“Oh no, thank you.” Georgie smiled weakly and picked up her teacup.

Wilfred, having disappeared behind the curtain, returned with two chairs. “Here, ladies, sit yourselves down and have some tea.” He placed the chairs near the table.

Hunny and Rosie sat, took the cups offered by his wife and did their best to relax. Had Mrs. Pettigrew forgotten to tell their grooms they were coming? No, how could she? They sent train and stage fare – they must know. Unwilling to fret further, they drank their tea and helped themselves to some cookies.

\* \* \*

SHERIFF TURNER TROTTED his horse up to Michael Comfort’s cabin, stopped, shaded his eyes and looked up. “Ho there – on the roof!”

Michael peeked over the chimney. “Good afternoon, Tom. I’ll be right down.” He made his way to the ladder, scrambled down and went around to the front of the house. “What can I do for you?”

Tom smiled. “More like what can I do for ya. Depends on how ya look at it, I guess.”

“What do you mean?” Michael asked, curious.

Tom dismounted. “Well, seems three lovely ladies came to town this mornin’ claimin’ to be yer, Darcy’s and Zachary’s brides.”

“WHAT?!”

Tom sighed. “Fraid this was gonna be yer reaction. Looks like we got another mess on our hands. Don’t know why folks ‘round here can’t seem to get this mail-order bride business right – ‘specially when they’ve had so much practice ...”

“Mail-order brides!” Michael said in shock. “None of us ordered any brides!”

“What about yer pa? Didn’t he order a bride for Major ... oh, wait, he didn’t.”

“I should say not. That farce was cooked up by the woman’s father.”

Tom smiled. “Yeah, I remember. Sorry – got outlaws on my mind. Mixed-up mail-order brides are usually someone else’s job.”

Michael turned a full circle. “What in the name of ... none of us ordered ... no. She wouldn’t. She *couldn’t!*”

“What’re ya talkin’ ‘bout?”

“Pleasant. She’s been suggesting that my brothers and I need wives.” His eyes narrowed. “Wait until I get my hands on her!”

“Pleasant?” Tom said in surprise. “Ya sure ya didn’t send for no brides?”

“I’m sure.” Michael stomped toward his cabin.

Tom followed. “None of ya did? ‘Cause one of the gals was so shocked you and yer brothers weren’t there to greet them, she done fainted.”

Michael spun on him. “She what?” He glanced around his unfinished cabin. Yes, he’d thought of a wife after Pleasant suggested it, and yes, he’d been pondering the possibilities. But he wasn’t near finished building his place, and neither were Darcy or Zach. “I’m going to ... to ... egads.”

“Well, ya better do somethin’. Those poor gals are fit to be tied.”

“I’m sure they’d like to tie a knot. But none of us are ready for that. Bad enough Quince suffered such a fiasco ...”

Tom looked around the cabin too. “Yeah, that was somethin’. But it worked out in the end, and now he’s a happily married man.”

“True, but it doesn’t give him or our sister the right to order brides for the rest of us.” He took off his sweat-drenched shirt and reached for another. He’d been working hard all morning, and if he was stepping into a mess once he got to town, he at least wanted to be presentable.

“Should I ride down the road and tell yer brothers?”

“No, I will. It’s best we come to town together and get this straightened out. I don’t know who these women are or what they’re doing here, but I want to make it perfectly clear *we* did not send for them.” He buttoned his shirt, tucked it into his trousers and reached for his hat. “I’ve got to saddle my horse.”

“Want some help?”

“No, thank you.” He marched out the door.

Tom trailed him. “What’re ya gonna do?”

“Tell my brothers, then go see our sister. If she’s responsible for this, we’re taking her to town with us.”

“Oh, I see.” Tom followed him to a small corral and watched as he caught his horse. “Doc Drake says they’re all real purty.”

Michael stopped and looked at him. “So was the woman that showed up in town claiming to be our brother’s mail-order bride. As far as I’m concerned, beauty is beside the point.”

Tom shrugged and watched him saddle his horse. “I’m just sayin’, if yer sister went through all the trouble, ya could at least get to know them.”

“Absolutely not. Whoever did this, it was wrong, dead wrong. And my brothers will agree. These women, whoever they are, can go right back where they came from.” He bridled his horse, re-checked the cinch and mounted. “Thank you, Sheriff, for riding out to tell me. I’ll take it from here.”

“Suit yerself, Michael. But if ya want my opinion, I don’t think yer sister had nothin’ to do with it. She ain’t the type.”

Michael stared at him. Tom was right – Pleasant might plant a few seeds, but wouldn’t really order them each a mail-order bride without telling them. Especially not after witnessing Quince’s trials in a similar situation. “We’ll see soon enough.” He kicked his horse into a trot and headed down the road. This time, Sheriff Turner didn’t follow. Just as well – Michael didn’t want his sister’s brother-in-law to witness the outrage if she was behind this.



He reached Darcy's house, dismounted and went inside, knowing his brother was installing a stove today. "Darcy!"

Darcy popped up from behind his new purchase. "Michael, what brings you by?"

Michael crossed the one-room cabin to his brother. "Sheriff Turner just paid me a visit."

"Oh? What did he want?"

"To inform me that our mail-order brides are in town, waiting to be picked up."

"They are?" Darcy suddenly popped up again. "Wait, what mail-order brides? I didn't order a bride."

"Neither did I. And neither did Zach, I'd imagine. Nonetheless, they await the three of us."

Darcy's eyes bulged "What?! Who ... you don't ... no. Pleasant wouldn't, no matter how much she's been nudging us to wed."

"My thought also. But if we didn't, and she didn't, who did? And more to the point at hand, what do we do about it?"

Darcy set the hammer on the stove and whistled. "We'll have to ask her, though. As far as what to do about it ... I haven't an inkling."

"I know the feeling," Michael said. "Saddle your horse – we need to fetch Zach."

Darcy nodded and reached for his hat. He put it on and they hurried out the door. Once his horse was ready, they headed down the road to their brother's place.

Luckily for them, Zachary was already saddling his horse. "Good afternoon, Zach," Michael called. "Did Tom come by here?"

"Tom Turner?" Zachary said in alarm. "No, is there something wrong?"

"There is," Darcy said. "Apparently some sneak ordered brides for us. They arrived in town this morning."

Zach stood stunned before replying, “You must be joking!”

“We’re not,” Michael stated. “But we do have to sort it out. Now.”

Zach finished what he was doing and mounted his horse. “So we’re heading to town?”

“First, we talk to Pleasant,” Darcy replied. “Just in case.”

Michael nodded. “And if she did this, she’s going to town with us.”

“I don’t believe she’d do this,” Zachary insisted. “Now Quince ... no, not after what he went through.”

“There’s no time to waste now,” Michael said. “Tom said these women are upset that we didn’t show up to meet them. Apparently one even fainted – or faked it.”

“Great Scott,” Zachary said. “Lucretia Lynch all over again.”

“Pleasant isn’t going to be happy to see us, whether she did it or not,” Darcy said. “Even if she did, we shouldn’t be too hard on her. She means well.”

“For whom, the three of us?” Michael argued. “Or her?”

The brothers glanced at one another, shrugged, then headed for their sister’s cabin. The sooner they got this straightened out, the better.

When they arrived at Eli and Pleasant’s place, Pleasant was outside feeding the chickens. She watched them ride into her yard and smiled. “What brings you all here?”

Michael was the first to reach her and dismount. “A visit from your brother-in-law,” he said sternly.

She frowned. “What’s the matter?”

“We have visitors in town,” Darcy informed her. “Three of them. Know anything about it?”

“No,” she said with raised eyebrows. “Who are they?”

“Our *mail-order brides*,” Zachary said as he dismounted. By now they were all lined up in front of her, arms crossed and

wearing expressions that demanded an answer.

She didn't have one. "Why are you all looking at me like that? Did you say 'brides'?"

"You heard correctly," Michael grumbled.

"Did you send away for brides for us?" Zach asked flatly.

Her eyes rounded and she spilled the chicken feed on the ground, bringing every hen running. She quickly snatched the bag up. "No! I did not and I would not! Quince and I talked about *helping* you get some, *next* year, once your cabins were ready. But I would never do that behind your back – and before you accuse him and start a big ruckus, neither would he, I guarantee you that!"

Michael sighed. "Well, then ... who did?"

Pleasant shook her head sadly. "I have no idea. I'm sorry, I wish I knew."

"Told you," Zach said to Michael.

Darcy nodded. "We believe you, sister. Could you come to town with us to help us straighten this out?"

"Of course. Oh my – three brides in town and we're not prepared for any of them. Poor girls." Pleasant rubbed her forehead. "Promise me you'll be kind to them, brothers. Who knows what they've been through, what they've suffered ... what dangers they've had to escape." She didn't say *Rupert Jerney*, but she didn't have to.

"We will, we promise," Michael assured her. "Apparently they're not made of the sturdiest stuff, either – one of them fainted, according to Tom. You can ride behind me."

"All right," she said, still in shock. "But I promise you, I didn't do this."

Michael helped her onto the saddle before mounting up himself. "Then the question is, who did? And why?"

"And," Darcy added, "what do we do with three women we weren't told were coming?"

## CHAPTER 7

**B**y the time Pleasant and her brothers reached Clear Creek, the men had cooled down, but she was more confused than ever. Surely Quince hadn't sent for brides and not told her? But from the looks of things, who else could it have been?

When they reached Dunnigan's, Michael jumped off his horse, then helped Pleasant down as their brothers dismounted. "Perhaps I should do the talking?" Pleasant suggested.

"No, I'll do it," Michael said. "You know as much about this as I do." He suddenly caught Pleasant looking sheepish, and cringed. "Is there something you haven't told us?"

"Only that I was wondering who the culprit is." She headed for the mercantile steps. "And despite my earlier protests, he's the only one it can be."

"Are you talking about Quince?" Darcy asked in shock. "He wouldn't – after what he went through?"

She turned to him. "But who else is there?" She continued up the steps and through the door. Inside she found three women sitting around Wilfred's checkers table, sipping tea and munching cookies. "Hello."

The three looked up, and one, a blonde, smiled. "Good afternoon. Are you here to fetch us?"

"That remains to be seen," she said without thinking.

The other women's eyes widened, and one put her hand to her chest. "Oh dear, not again." She turned to the blonde.

“Hunny, I can’t take much more of this.”

“It’s all right, Georgie, we’ll get this figured out,” the blonde assured.

“Indeed we will,” Michael and his brothers lined up to study the newcomers. Pleasant watched as their eyes widened at once. The newcomers were certainly comely, whoever they were.

The blonde stood. “And you are?”

“Michael Comfort, at your service,” he said.

Pleasant breathed a sigh of relief. At least her brothers hadn’t forgotten their manners.

Michael walked toward them. “May I introduce my brothers, Darcy and Zachary?”

The other women stood as the blonde gave them a curt nod. “I am Phryne Hunnicutt Callahan – Hunny for short – and these are my sisters Rosalind and Georgina. You sent us train and stage fare to come to Clear Creek to marry you.” Rosalind had dark hair with a hint of red in it, Georgina darker still. Georgina was small, almost childlike, while Rosalind carried a womanly figure, right down to the dimples on her cheeks.

Perhaps her statement wasn’t meant as a challenge, but it certainly sounded like one. Pleasant watched her brothers closely. She didn’t want them to be rude, not even given the unusual circumstances.

“You have our deepest apologies, Miss Callahan,” Michael said. “But it grieves me to inform you that you are mistaken. We did not send train or stage fare, nor, I’m afraid did we send for you.”

Georgina – Georgie? – gasped and gave Rosalind a pleading look. “It’ll be all right, Georgie,” the latter assured her, and Georgie gripped her hand like a lifeline.

Darcy stepped forward. “Miss Callahan, what my brother says is true. We never sent away for mail-order brides. We were considering doing so – perhaps next year, when we were better prepared.”

“We thought our sister might have,” Zachary added, nodding toward Pleasant. “But she insists she did not, and we believe her.”

“This of course puts us at a disadvantage,” Michael added. “We didn’t know anything about this until an hour or two ago, nor can we provide you with any sort of recompense.”

Hunny gasped. “What are you saying, sir?”

Michael looked at his brothers, closed his eyes and sighed. “What I’m saying, Miss Callahan, is that we haven’t the funds to send you back home.” He looked at her. “Nor to put you up at the hotel. Perhaps we can work something out with Mr. Van Cleet ...”

“Who is Mr. Van Cleet?” Rosalind asked.

Pleasant stepped forward. “Cyrus Van Cleet owns the hotel here in town. We do apologize for our lack of hospitality – this has come as a great surprise to us all. At worst, my husband and I can take one of you in, and I’m sure there are others in town that wouldn’t mind putting you up until you can make arrangements to return home –”

“No!” Georgie cried. “We can’t go back! We can’t!”

“Hush, Georgie.” Hunny looked at Pleasant and her brothers. “You are all related?”

“Yes,” Pleasant said. “I’m their younger sister. And there are three more brothers, our older brother Major and two younger ones, Benedict and Peaceful. Peaceful goes by Matthew, his middle name.” That made Hunny smile – with reason, since she did the same.

Rosalind, less amused, rubbed her forehead. “Would any of *them* have sent for us? Or are you three the ones we came for?”

“These must be the ones,” Georgie argued. “It’s their names on the marriage contracts.”

“Marriage *contracts*?” Michael glanced at his brothers. “You have these with you?”

“Of course.” Hunny picked up a satchel from the floor by the table, rummaging through it and extracted several folded pages, which she handed to Michael.

He unfolded them as Darcy and Zach gathered around him. The three began to read, their eyes widening now and then. Pleasant wanted to read them too, but didn’t want to make the boys more upset. The more they read, the more they fidgeted.

“Mrs. Pettigrew,” Michael finally said with a frown and looked at Pleasant. “Isn’t that the same woman that sent you to Eli?”

“Oh my heavens,” she said in shock. Quince *did* send for them! But why would he do that? She glanced between the women and her brothers, put her hands over her face and groaned.

“Pleasant,” Darcy drawled. “What now?”

“You’re acting almost ... guilty,” Zach added.

She groaned again before looking at her brothers, then their brides. “I do apologize, ladies. Apparently our eldest sibling took it upon himself to send for you on my brothers’ behalf. Why he did this without telling anyone, I have no idea.”

“But what does all this mean?” Rosalind asked. “We came here to get married, and ...” She looked at her sisters and back. “... and we really can’t go back. So marry we must.”

Zachary glanced at Michael. “I told you – Lucretia all over again.”

“No, no, calm down.” Michael folded the marriage contracts and handed them back to Hunny Callahan. “We’ve dealt with Mrs. Pettigrew before,” he told her. “Our sister Pleasant came here as a mail-order bride over a year ago.”

The three women looked at her questioningly. “So what you’re telling us,” Hunny mused, “is that you think your brother wrote to Mrs. Pettigrew requesting brides for your brothers, but didn’t tell them?”

“It would seem.” Pleasant turned her brothers. “I’m sorry, he talked about it, but I never dreamed he would actually do it this way.”

“Nor would I,” Michael said dourly. “But as you stated, who else could it be?”

Darcy and Zachary exchanged a quick look. “But he knows we’re not ready for brides,” Zachary said. “We’re not even close.”

“Zach’s right,” Darcy agreed. “Quince might want to see us married, but he would never send for brides when he knows we’re unable to care for them.”

“Quince?” Rosalind giggled. “Like the fruit?”

“Major *Quincy* Comfort,” Darcy explained. “Our mother ... was eccentric sometimes in naming us.”

“At least they didn’t name any of you after ancient Greek pr-ouch!” Rosalind stopped, and glared down at where Hunny had trod on her toes.

Georgie gasped, her hands to her mouth. “You don’t want us ... you’re not ready for us ... that means ...”

“Hush.” Hunny – who seemed to be the oldest sister, or at least the leader of the trio – walked over to the brothers. “All I know is that we sought Mrs. Pettigrew’s help, and later she said she had three applicants, and gave us train and stage fare. Time was of the essence, so we left immediately, and now here we are. Unfortunately, we also do not have the funds to return, and even if we did, the situation where we left is ... perilous. We have nothing to go back to. For us it was Clear Creek or ...” She swallowed hard.

“Or what?” Wilfred asked with concern after a long silence.

All heads turned toward the old man. Pleasant and her brothers had been so wrapped up in what was happening that they’d forgotten they were in the middle of a place of business. The Dunnigans and Grandma Waller stood by the counter, drinking lemonade. “Grandma,” Pleasant said. “Did Quincy say anything to you about this?”



“No, child, not a word.”

Hunny retook her seat, rubbing her temples with her fingers. “So Major Quincy Comfort, your older brother, also known as Quince, wrote Mrs. Pettigrew, sent train and stage fare *and told none of you?*” Her last words were terse, but who could blame her? Pleasant figured that if this were happening to her, she’d be grouchy too. Granted, Eli didn’t pick her up when she first arrived either, but at least he knew she was coming.

“That sums it up,” Michael said. “The question is, what do we do now?”

Georgie left her sister’s embrace and took several steps toward the brothers. “You mean you don’t want us?”

The men exchanged a quick look. “We only mean we knew nothing about this,” Darcy told her gently. “It’s not a question of wanting or not wanting, only of being unable to, um ... accommodate you at present.”

Georgie ran into Rosalind’s arms, eyes shut tight, and held on as she began to weep.

Pleasant thought her brothers might come undone. None of them could stand to see a woman in tears, and to know they were the cause of it only made things worse. But what could any of them do? At this point the only course of action was to find Quince, see if he was the one behind this fiasco, then ask him what in blazes he’d been thinking.

\* \* \*

“MAJOR,” Colin Cooke called from atop his horse.

Major turned, a branding iron in his hand, and looked at his wife’s uncle. “What is it?”

“Sheriff Turner’s here to see you,” he said in his crisp British accent. The Cookes hailed from Sussex, England, from a family even higher in status than the Comforts’ Georgia plantation gentry. “I think you should come straightaway.”

“The sheriff?” He stood, ignoring the cowhands struggling to hold the calf still. “What does he want?”

“For you to come straightaway,” Colin turned his horse and cantered off.

Major glanced at Logan Kincaid, the Triple-C Ranch’s foreman. “Do you know why he’d be here?”

“No idea. You don’t think one of your brothers got in trouble, do you?”

“That seems unlikely ... well, except for Matt.”

“Hand me the iron,” Logan instructed. “You go take care of business.”

“You can manage without me?”

“We’ll make do,” Logan promised. “Shoo.”

Major ran for his horse, mounted and was off like a shot. Thankfully they’d been working in the north pastures – not far from the main house, though still far enough for Colin to have to ride out to fetch him. It was a ten-minute ride at most.

When he reached the house, Tom Turner was in the parlor enjoying pie and coffee. *So much for an emergency*, he thought. “Good afternoon, Sheriff. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing that cain’t be fixed.” Tom took another bite, chewed thoughtfully and gave Belle, Colin’s wife, a nod of thanks. “Good as always, Mrs. Cooke.” He looked at Major as he wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Seems three women are in town claimin’ to be mail-order brides for some of yer brothers.”

Major fell into the nearest chair. “What?”

“Yep, came in on the mornin’ stage. Weren’t too happy no one showed up to meet ‘em – one of ‘em got so upset she fainted.”

“Fainted?” Belle said in surprise. She turned to Major. “This is the first I’ve heard of it. When did your brothers send away for mail-order brides?”

“I wasn’t aware they had. This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

Tom sighed. “That seems to be the case for everyone involved, ‘cept the brides. They at least knew who they came to marry, but no one else did.” He took a healthy sip of coffee and turned to Belle. “Mind if I have another piece of pie?”

“Certainly.” She reached for his plate. “But don’t say anything until I get back.” She left the parlor to fetch another piece.

As soon as she was gone, Major left his chair. “All right, Tom, what is going on? Is this another situation like Miss Lynch?”

Tom held up his hands. “Whoa, Major. I don’t know any more than what I done told ya.”

“And my brothers?”

“Unfortunately, they don’t know either. I told all three, and they went to fetch yer sister to see what she knew. After that I rode here, figgerin’ ya’d want to be apprised.”

Major rubbed his face a few times. “You figured right. Thank you.” He sighed. There could be only one explanation. “By Heaven, I think this is my fault.”

“What is?” Belle asked as she re-entered the room and handed Tom his plate. “I’m sorry, Major, would you like some pie and coffee?”

“No, thank you, Belle. I have a problem to fix and I’m not quite sure how to go about it.”

“Ya can start by headin’ down to the mercantile,” Tom suggested. “That’s probably where everyone is by now. Unless yer brothers took them gals to the hotel.” He took a bite of pie, closed his eyes in bliss and chewed. “Would ya mind giving my wife the recipe?”

“Not at all.” Belle turned to Major. “Do Harrison and Sadie know about this?”

“I’m afraid my in-laws are the last people I’d tell. You know how excitable Harrison can be.”

Belle tried to hide a smile and failed. “Don’t we all? But if things were done properly, he wouldn’t mind. Sadie didn’t

encourage you, did she?”

“To send away for mail-order brides?” Major sighed. “No, all I did was ... inquire. I wrote Mrs. Pettigrew saying that we would be sending for brides for Michael, Darcy and Zach sometime in the future. It appears she missed that last part.” He slumped in his chair in despair.

“So it *was* you,” Tom said with a grin.

“Quite by accident. I didn’t actually send for any.”

“But then how did they get here?” Belle asked. “Someone had to have sent train and stage fare.”

Major paced some more. “You’re right. Someone must have sent for them.” He headed for the front door.

“Where are you going?” Belle asked.

He opened the door and glanced over his shoulder. “To town, to sort this out. Who knows who’s involved at this point?” He left the house, mounted his horse and headed to town at a steady canter. He hoped his brothers were behaving themselves – Zachary would likely just be curious and amused, harmless enough.

But the frustration of not knowing what was going on would have Michael on edge. And Darcy ... Darcy would try to play the knight in shining armor. He was always the rescuer of the bunch. Hopefully he didn’t rescue one by marrying her at a moment’s notice. Darcy had a good head on his shoulders, but he didn’t always keep it. Not to mention the women – if one of them was so upset she fainted, he could only imagine the state they’d be in by now.

Major rode straight to the livery stable, dismounted and led his horse inside. “Chase!”

Chase Adams, the blacksmith, came out of a stall, took one look at his horse and shook his head in disgust. “What did you do, run the poor thing all the way?”

“I’m afraid I have a bit of an emergency. Could you cool him down a bit?”

Chase looked concerned. “Emergency?”

“I’ll explain later. Can you take care of him?”

“Certainly,” Chase took the reins from Major and patted the horse’s neck. “How you been, boy?” He looked at Major. “Want me to check his shoes while he’s here?”

“Might as well – thanks.” Major didn’t have time for chitchat. He hurried out the door and down the boardwalk, tipping his hat to people he passed on the way to the mercantile. He wondered how many people knew what had happened. Hopefully not many.

He reached the mercantile, went inside and stopped short. “What the ...?” The storefront was full of people! There were his brothers, his sister, three women at Wilfred’s checkers table (the brides-to-be, no doubt), the Dunnigans, the Wallers, the Drakes and – *dear God and all Your angels, help me!* – his in-laws.

“Major,” Harrison Cooke called over the conversation going on, “come here!”

Major took off his hat and headed for his father-in-law. Michael, Darcy and Zach were in a heated discussion with the three pretty young ladies, with Wilfred and Irene refereeing. The rest of the attendees were spectators. “What’s going on?” he asked Harrison when he reached him.

“That’s what we’d like to know,” he said. “Who are they?”

Major sighed and surveyed the scene. One of the women, a tall blonde, was practically nose to nose with Michael. Because all six were talking at once, he couldn’t understand a word being said. And he thought facing Sherman’s Army of the Tennessee was bad. “I suppose I’d better find out.” Leaving his father-in-law, he marched into the chaos, wishing he had his old Fayetteville rifle at hand.

The women were speaking so fast he couldn’t understand them. His brothers weren’t any better. Major spied Pleasant off to one side, looking horrified. The onlookers just stood dumbfounded. Well, there was no help for it. He took a deep breath and yelled, “QUIE-E-E-ET!”

Silence fell as all eyes fixed on him. He sighed, looked at his brothers, then the ladies. “Good afternoon.”

“Don’t tell me,” the tall blonde snapped. “Let me guess.”

“Miss Callahan,” Michael said, his jaw tight. “May I introduce Major Quincy Comfort, our eldest brother. Quince, Miss Hunny Callahan, the eldest of the three Callahan sisters.”

She looked him up and down, her expression as drawn as his brothers’. Just how long had they been arguing? “Miss Callahan,” Major said. “Ladies.”

Darcy filled in the blanks. “This is Miss Rosalind Callahan and Miss Georgina Callahan.”

Major looked them over. “Well, what do you know?” They were all very attractive. If not for the current circumstances, and if he were one of his brothers, he’d be pleased.

Unfortunately ... “We demand to know what is going on!” Rosalind said, eyes ablaze in challenge.

“Of course you do,” Major said. “As would I were I in your shoes.” He looked them over, noted the state of their clothes and hair and sighed. “I suggest we repair to the hotel. I’m sure you ladies are tired from your journey.”

“We’ve been informed by your brothers that they haven’t the means to accommodate us in such a fashion,” Hunny said.

Major sighed again, feeling his father-in-law’s penetrating gaze boring into the back of his head. He didn’t dare turn around. “Michael, Darcy, Zach – let’s show the ladies to the hotel.”

Michael took a deep breath, then nodded.

Hunny looked around nervously. “But I thought ...”

“I will take care of everything, Miss Callahan,” Major interjected. “As I believe this may be my fault.”

Sadie gasped as Harrison stomped across the wooden floor. “Major, you have some explaining to do.”

“Don’t I know it.” Major headed for the mercantile doors, not looking back.

Pleasant, closest to the exit, hurried after him. “What is going on?”

He spun to her. “Mrs. Pettigrew is going on, that’s what.”

“You sent for them?”

“No, I most certainly did not. But she sent them nevertheless.” He quickened his stride, trusting his brothers and the ladies to follow.

“But Major!”

He stopped, nostrils flared and glanced back at the mercantile. The others weren’t following yet. “I did not send for them. I inquired, nothing more. For Heaven’s sake, Pleasant, I didn’t even send train and stage fare.”

Her jaw dropped. “But ... if you didn’t, who did?”

He glanced at the sky and chuckled. “Mrs. Pettigrew, most likely” He looked at her. “And I didn’t tell a soul.”

“But why would she ...” Pleasant’s face suddenly fell. “... ohhh.”

“What?” he said cautiously.

Pleasant glanced between him and the mercantile, where the others were starting to file out. “Hunny said that where they left was ‘perilous’ – and they couldn’t go back. They must be in some sort of trouble. Maybe Mrs. Pettigrew sent them here for their safety?”

He watched his brothers, Southern gentlemen that they were, offer each sister an arm. He turned and walked on, Pleasant at his heels. “I’ll write her immediately. We’ll see what’s what.”

“I’m sure the Callahan sisters can explain.”

“What have they explained so far?” he shot over his shoulder.

“Well, what I just told you. They have marriage contracts with Michael’s, Darcy’s and Zach’s names, and they were given train and stage fare before they left ... wherever they left.”

“That’s better than nothing. But there’s surely more than that.”

As they passed Mulligan’s Saloon. Patrick Mulligan stepped onto the boardwalk, broom in hand. “Afternoon, Major, Pleasant,” he said in his Irish brogue.

“Good afternoon,” they replied and kept walking. Major didn’t have to imagine the look on the Irishman’s face when he saw who trailed after them. In an hour the whole town would know – less if Fanny Fig caught wind of it, as she spread news faster than the telegraph wires. They marched into the hotel, through the lobby and straight toward the dining room.

“Good afternoon to ye too, Major Comfort!” Lorcan Brody, the hotel manager, called after him.

Major stopped, turned and sighed. “Forgive me, Lorcan. Good afternoon.”

Lorcan stood and slowly turned his head toward him. “Ye’re upset.”

Major pinched the bridge of his nose. Lorcan might be blind, but he could sense things no one with two eyes could. “That’s putting it mildly. Others are coming – guests of the hotel. I’ll cover their bills.”

“Ah.” Lorcan opened the hotel ledger. “I’m ready.”

Major smiled. “They’ll be here any minute. I’ll tell Sally we have bellies to fill.”

“She’s in the kitchen,” Lorcan informed him as Michael entered, Rosalind on his arm.

Major didn’t stay to watch the usual surprise folks showed when they discovered Lorcan was sightless. He wanted the women taken care of, fed, rested and hopefully calmed. This would be hard enough to explain without risk of hysterics. Unfortunately, the one to worry about most along those lines was his father-in-law.

He glanced back just in time to see Harrison and Sadie enter, both looking displeased, then ducked into the dining



room. “Oh, Mrs. Pettigrew,” he groaned, “what have you gotten me into?”

## CHAPTER 8

Major informed Sally she had a large group coming, then joined the others in the dining room as they sat at the largest table. Harrison pulled him aside. “A word, if you please?”

Major followed his father-in-law to the other side of the room. “I know what you’re going to say.”

“Do you?” Harrison said sternly. “Well, perhaps you do.” He glanced at the women and back. “Did you send for them?”

“No. I wrote Mrs. Pettigrew that we *might* be sending for some brides, at a later date. And I sent no funds. The most logical explanation is that Mrs. Pettigrew sent them and paid for them, for reasons yet unknown.”

“Yes, that was the impression I gleaned while listening to them at the mercantile.”

Major nodded. “Join me and I’ll explain further. Then we’ll figure out what to do.”

Harrison’s look softened. “Jolly good. Lead on.”

Major went to the table and found a seat. Harrison and Sadie did the same. The table barely held the ten of them.

“Well?” Michael looked expectantly at his eldest brother. “Can you explain what’s happened?”

“I wrote Mrs. Pettigrew a few weeks ago, inquiring of her regarding you, Zach and Darcy. I wasn’t sure how often brides came to her seeking husbands, so I wanted to make her aware that *eventually* you would be in the market for wives. I didn’t

send her a cent for traveling expenses, as there was yet no reason to. Mrs. Pettigrew sent these women here on her own initiative. Perhaps one of you can explain why?" He looked at the Callahan sisters.

The sisters glanced at each other as they blushed. "We ... found ourselves needing to leave Denver quickly." Hunny began.

Rosalind rolled her eyes. "Specifically, we had to get out of town because our truly evil aunt, after years of using us as slave labor, tried to marry us off to three geriatric satyrs."

Georgie gasped. "Oh, Rosie, how could you?"

"How could I what – tell the truth?"

Major stared dumbfounded at them for a moment before putting it all together. "She sent you here for protection."

Darcy's eyes immediately darted between the sisters. "What happened?"

Hunny, who Major assumed was the oldest, took a deep breath to brace herself. "It's true. Our Aunt Henrietta, whom we lived with ever since our parents died, decided to arrange marriages for us."

"And there may have been some money in it for her," Rosie tacked on. "Aunt Henrietta is a skinflint, and the satyrs are wealthy men."

The expressions of the Comforts and Cookes changed to concern. "Why, you poor dears," Sadie said. "You must have left in a hurry."

Georgie nodded. "It was horrid. Our aunt kept guards posted – we thought they would catch us ..."

"Georgie, that's enough," Rosalind warned.

"Oh, now *I* can't tell them the truth?"

Darcy's brow creased. "Guards?" He looked at his brothers, then back at the girls. "*Guards?*"

Hunny took a shaky breath. "That also is true. She didn't ask us if we wanted those marriages, and didn't listen when

we objected. Instead she kept us in coventry so we couldn't avoid her arrangement."

Harrison shook his head. "So you went to Mrs. Pettigrew to see if you could escape by becoming mail-order brides, is that right?"

"We'd talked to her before, but she had no men available." Hunny took another deep breath and rubbed one eye with her hand. The poor woman looked exhausted. "Then at the eleventh hour, so to speak, she contacted us and sent us money and train tickets. We had to drug our guard and escape with only a bag apiece and the clothes on our backs."

"Perhaps we should discuss this more tomorrow after the three of you rest," Major suggested.

"I agree with Major," Sadie said. "You three don't need to worry over this right now. Concentrate on getting some food in you and getting into a nice warm bed."

"And a hot bath?" Georgie asked hopefully.

Darcy looked at her, his eyes full of concern. "Whatever you wish." He looked at his brothers. "Even if we have to carry the water up ourselves."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, Darcy." Sadie turned back to Georgie. "The people that work here can accommodate you, and we can pay for it. Don't worry."

Hunny nodded. "Thank you. I'm afraid I don't know who you are."

"Oh, do forgive us. I'm Sadie Cooke and this is my husband Harrison."

Harrison smiled. "We're Major's in-laws."

The sisters looked at Major. He wondered if they sensed the angst between himself and Harrison. Not that it was always there, but they did tend to drive each other batty, and Harrison was easily unnerved when it came to family troubles. If this situation had Major flustered, he could only imagine what Harrison felt. He and Sadie might have their work cut out for them when they returned home.

“Here we are,” Sally Upton said cheerily as she wheeled a cart from the kitchen into the dining room, loaded with platters of sandwiches and other goodies. Sally had been the hotel’s cook since it opened years ago. She loved to cook, loved to serve and moved at a good clip despite her age and plump figure. “How do you do, ladies? I couldn’t help but overhear some of the conversation, I’m afraid – do you think you’ll be staying in town?”

“We’ll have to see,” Hunny replied for all of them, while looking pointedly at Major.

“We’ll work something out,” Major assured her, though he had no idea what.

Sally smiled as she transferred platters to the table. “Welcome to Clear Creek regardless. I hope you like it here.”

“Thank you,” Georgie replied, though she looked ready to cry again. Rosie put a comforting arm around her.

“Sally could you bring us some iced tea?” Major asked.

“Coming right up, honey!” Sally trotted back to the kitchen.

Sadie stood and began to pass out plates. “Here, everyone take one and help yourself. I’ll go see if Sally needs any assistance.”

Major watched her leave. He knew well what she was doing – she’d give Sally the whole story so the Callahan sisters wouldn’t have to suffer through explaining it again. He should have thought of that. He watched the three sisters across the table. Georgie must be the youngest, seeing how the other two were protective of her. Hunny, the leader, was probably the oldest, and Rosalind the middle one.

He also studied his brothers as they reached for the sandwiches. Darcy’s eyes kept gravitating to the sisters, while Zach stared openly. Michael, on the other hand, didn’t so much as blink in their direction. He was clearly trying to stay calm amid the uncertainty of the situation.

As Sally and Sadie returned with pitchers of iced tea and set them on the table, Major reached for a sandwich and put it

on his plate. He tried to envision his brothers married to these women, children running to and fro through the hotel dining room, their mothers scolding them, their fathers chuckling. It was there for a flash and just as quickly gone. But it gave him an idea, one that might be the solution to this mess. Contingent, of course, on getting his brothers to listen.

\* \* \*

HUNNY, Rosie and Georgie sat around the large hotel room provided for them by Major Quincy Comfort. “Do you think he fought in the war?” Georgie asked.

“Of course he did, silly,” Rosie replied. “He’s a major ... no, wait. Mrs. Dunnigan said that was just his name.”

“But they are Southerners,” Hunny said. “If they didn’t fight in the war, their father most certainly did.”

“Oh dear,” Georgie said. “Do you think they’d refer to us as Yankees because we were born in Indiana?”

“Never mind that,” Hunny said. “The war’s been over a long time. I doubt they think anything of it – especially since they live in the North now.”

“I bet the one who’s missing a couple of fingers still thinks of it,” Rosie argued.

“But what do we do if they’re not going to marry us,” Georgie said, getting them back to the most urgent issue. “They’re probably plotting how to get rid of us at this moment.”

Hunny shook her head. “Don’t say such things. We don’t know how this will turn out.”

“Which is why we need to come up with a plan,” Rosie said.

Georgie sighed. “What plan can we make? We don’t have enough money to go back to Denver. Which is the last place we’d want to be anyway.”

“How far is Portland?” Hunny asked.

“Or Baker City, for that matter,” Rosie added. “Maybe we could go there, find jobs and a place to stay?”

Hunny left her chair and started to pace, a hand to her temple. “Let’s see ... what skills do we have?”

“We can embroider,” Georgie said with a shrug.

“Not fast enough to make a living at it,” Rosie said. “But I can cook. And we all can clean. We could work as maids if nothing else.”

“But you can do better than that,” Hunny stated. “You’re a very good cook.”

Rosie smiled smugly. “I know. Leave it to me to rescue us.”

“We don’t expect you to support the lot of us,” Georgie said. “What else can we do?”

“I can teach,” Hunny said, looking at the others. “Any of us can – we’re all educated enough.”

“I didn’t notice a schoolhouse in town,” Georgie said. “Did either of you?”

Hunny and Rosie exchanged a quick look. “There must be one around here somewhere,” Rosie finally said. “But is this where we want to stay?”

Hunny paced some more. “We must give ourselves options. After all, do either of you want to stay in a town that’s laughing at us?”

“Point of order – I haven’t seen anyone laughing at us,” Rosie argued. “Peeved, yes, but not laughing.”

Georgie got up, went to the window and stared at the street below. “It’s a rather charming little place, don’t you think?”

“Maybe so,” Hunny said. “But do the townspeople of Clear Creek see us that way?” She shrugged. “Well, we did what we had to, and we will again. I’m not sure the Comfort brothers want anything to do with us.”

“Yes,” Rosie said with a laugh. “And it’s obvious they aren’t ready for wives. What was Mrs. Pettigrew thinking?”

“She was thinking of saving us, what else?” Georgie replied. “She saw an opportunity and she took it. And I’m grateful she did.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Rosie said. “The last thing I’d want to do is marry Mr. Wills. But we still have no money, no place to work, no home of our own – and we’re depending on the largesse of people who didn’t know we existed before today.”

“And who might not want us around tomorrow,” Georgie groused.

Hunny stared out the window. “Then we’ll find work and do whatever we can to make a living. Maybe Mr. Van Cleet will let us stay here at the hotel – every hotel needs maids and clerks and cooks. Once we have enough money, we can move on to bigger and better things.”

“Like Portland?” Georgie asked.

“Like any place we want to go.” Hunny went to the larger of the room’s two beds and sat. Georgie was perched on the smaller bed, while Rosie rested on a settee. They’d already decided that Hunny and Georgie would share the larger bed and let Rosie, who tossed and turned, have the smaller one to herself.

“Whatever we decide,” Rosie went on, “we’d best work fast, before the Comforts take a notion to send us away.”

“But what if they don’t?” Georgie asked. “After all, we did come here to get married. And they did say they want to get married someday ... well, they didn’t object when their brother said it.”

Hunny closed her eyes. “Georgie darling, that doesn’t seem likely. I’m sure we’ll find husbands one day.” She glanced between her sisters. “But today’s not the day.”

“Nor tomorrow,” Rosie added.

Georgie looked at them and bit her lower lip. “How did we go from running from arranged marriages, to ones we wanted, to none at all?”



Hunny put an arm around her. “Things happen, dear. And when they do, we have to glide along as best we can.”

“Glide?” Rosie said with a laugh. “More like stumble.”

Hunny looked at her sisters and sighed. “All right, stumble, careen, plummet, it doesn’t matter ...”

“What if we can’t support ourselves?” Georgie asked, wide-eyed.

“Georgie,” Hunny said. “Of course we can support ourselves – that’s the least of our worries. Stop thinking the worst.”

“I can’t help it.” Georgie stood. “We have no home, no parents, not even horrible old Aunt Henrietta. We’re all alone.”

Rosie hopped to her feet. “For Heaven’s sake, get a hold of yourself, will you? Fretting isn’t going to do any good. Besides, most of the people in this town have been nice to us.”

“Except for the Comfort brothers. The ones we were supposed to marry?” Georgie returned to the bed and sat, arms crossed and pouting.

“There’s nothing we can do about that now,” Hunny said. “We’ll just have to make the best of it, make plans and put them into action - and see what the Comforts do as well. But we can’t control their actions, only ours.” She looked at Rosie. “Tomorrow see what work you can find as a cook. You’re our best hope to start. I’ll ask around about the schoolhouse, see if they have one.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Georgie asked.

“You did the most for Aunt Henrietta – you deserve to rest for a day or two.” She looked out the window again. “And maybe you can get a job as a maid here at the hotel, or at the Cookes’ house. A big ranch will have a big house.”

Georgie nodded soberly. “Whatever I need to do, I’ll do it.”

“Good, then we’re agreed that for now this is the best course of action?”

Rosie joined Georgie on the bed. “Agreed.”

Hunny sighed in relief. “Now let’s get some rest.”

\* \* \*

MAJOR PACED in front of his brothers in Michael’s cabin. Michael had built a fire for the occasion, and as a test for his new hearth. Everyone but Major watched the flames in the fireplace. “Where did you find such seasoned wood?” Zachary asked.

“A few hundred yards behind the house,” Michael replied. “There are some fallen logs back there, and I cut a few up. Burns well, doesn’t it?”

“Too well,” Darcy said. “It would be a shame to burn your house down when you haven’t even finished it.”

Michael studied the roaring fire. The cabin was heating up quickly. “You’re right – I won’t put any more wood on.”

“That’s not the only thing raging out of control,” Major said. He went to the fireplace, took a poker and re-arranged the logs to calm the flames. “You three have a problem.”

“No thanks to you,” Zach commented.

Major turned to face him. “All I did was ask Mrs. Pettigrew a few questions about how the process worked, no more. After you finished your cabins, I was going to speak to you about getting wives.”

Darcy stared at the fire. “Maybe you should’ve spoken up sooner. None of us were ready for this.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Major snapped. His patience was wearing thin. He sighed heavily and looked at his brothers. “We can’t send them back.”

“No one was suggesting it,” Zachary pointed out.

“No, but you’d be only human for thinking it.” Major poked the fire again, then turned to the nearest window. “Michael, have you ordered glass?”

“Not yet. I figured I could manage through the summer and order in autumn. I can afford it by then.”

Major nodded. “Darcy, how is your place coming?” His brothers’ cabins were in different stages of construction.

“I’m still working on my roof. Like Michael, I don’t have windows in yet, just hides. But as he said, they’ll get me through the summer.”

Zachary glanced between them. “I’m still cooking over a campfire. My stove should arrive in a week or two. It’s where all my money went. Now I have to save up more.”

Major nodded as he stared at the flames. “Good. From the sounds of it, you’ll all have your cabins ready by harvest time or shortly after.”

“Yes,” Michael agreed, “that was the original plan.” His eyebrows rose in suspicion. “Why are you asking?”

“Because by then you *will* be ready for wives. All we have to do in the meantime is see whether or not the Callahan sisters are willing to stay that long and marry your sorry hides.”

“Sorry hides?” Darcy said in shock. “Really, Major? There’s no call for insults.”

Major’s shoulders slumped. “You’re right, Darcy – I take it back. I’m the one that’s sorry – sorry I got you three into this with my ill-thought-out inquiry.”

“There’s no need to apologize, brother,” Zachary said. “It was not your fault. Mrs. Pettigrew took advantage of your good nature – with the best of intentions for the Callahans, admittedly.”

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” Michael groused. “Nonetheless, the situation is what it is.”

“So, Quince, are you suggesting we offer them protection until we’re able to wed?” Darcy asked.

“Something like that,” Major said. “You won’t be the first around here to do it. The Cookes told me of men from the men’s camp whose brides showed up and they weren’t ready.”

“Who besides us?” Zach wondered.

“A man named Amon Cotter – he married Cutty Holmes’s daughter Nettie.”

“Doesn’t he live in England with the Duke of Stantham, the eldest Cooke?” Darcy asked. “He was from the men’s camp?”

“Yes. Then there’s the Jones brothers, Seth and Ryder – neither of them had their places in order when their brides arrived.”

“Were they early?” Darcy asked. “Or like our situation, not even sent for?”

“The Duke sent them from England – he had cousins that needed husbands and there were plenty of men here who needed wives. There were a few bumps, but it all worked out. And this should too.” Major set his hands on his hips. “Provided you’re willing to see this through.”

“And if we aren’t?” Zachary asked.

Major shrugged. “Then I suppose there are three women with no protection and no one to provide for them here.” He calculated that saying that would at least win Darcy over.

But it did nothing for Michael. “You forget we didn’t ask for this.”

“No, I didn’t,” Major objected. “But now that they’re here, we need to do something to help them.”

“What about Benedict and Matt?” Zachary asked. “How come you’re not trying to coerce *them* into marrying these women?”

“You and I both know that they are nowhere near ready for wives. But the three of you are. Near, I mean.”

“I’m not so sure we are,” Michael argued.

“Well, how about this?” Major replied. “If by the time your cabins are ready you still have no interest in these women, I myself will give them the money to go wherever they wish.”

Darcy stepped forward. “But where would they go? They have no family except that aunt they mentioned who worked them like mules. They’ve never been on their own until now. What can they do?”

“That would be up to them,” Major said. “Again, that’s only if you conclude you *don’t* want them.”

His brothers glanced at one another in puzzlement. Michael sighed. “What makes you think this is going to work?”

Major turned to the fire to hide the grin on his face. “Because, dear brother, once you get your homes done, the one thing you’re going to discover that’s missing is a woman. And you have to admit the Callahan sisters are not hard on the eyes.” He faced him again. “Whatever they don’t know about homemaking – which, from what they said about their aunt’s expectations, may not be much – they can learn from any of a dozen women in Clear Creek. Many of whom came here as mail-order brides, and with no skills at all.”

“I think they’re ready now,” Darcy said. “But we’re not.” He looked at Michael and Zachary. “I’m willing to give it a try.”

Zachary scratched the back of his head. “I suppose. Nothing to lose except whoever’s paying for them to stay around.”

“I will, and I think Harrison,” Major assured them. “Probably others as well. But that’s not your concern. Are you in or not?”

“One question before I declare,” Michael said. “Who gets who?”

“Beg pardon?”

“I saw those papers they brought, just like you did. I didn’t see anything about which of us was supposed to marry which sister. If we agree to your proposal, how will we sort *that* out?”

“That’s a very good question,” Zachary agreed.

Major thought a moment, then smiled. “We can ask to see the marriage contracts again. And if they don’t specify ... well, then we’ll sit down with them and see who suits whom.”

Darcy nodded, but Michael and Zach looked around the room, at each other, at anything other than Major, before answering. Finally Michael said, “All right, I’m in.”

“Me too,” Zachary added. “But what makes you think they’ll agree to this?”

Major sighed. “They came all this way with almost nothing, and no way to return home. What choice do they have?”

## CHAPTER 9

Major crawled into bed that night with a headache. His brothers would be the death of him. They'd all been hesitant to agree to his plan – well, all except Darcy, ever-ready to rescue a damsel in distress – and that worried him. He wanted to see them wed, and as the Callahan sisters were already there, why send for anyone else when the time came? But what if over time, his brothers decided they didn't care for the Callahans? What then?

“What's wrong?” his wife Honoria sat on the edge of the bed, brushing out her long brown hair.

“I'm thinking too much. My head hurts.”

“Mama told me what happened. What will you do?”

“What will my brothers do, you mean? I'm not sure. I think they're still in shock.”

“I can't blame them. Remember Lucretia?”

“Must I?” He reached out, took the brush from her and took over. He liked brushing her hair for her at night – it brought him true pleasure. “Your father isn't too unhappy with me, though.”

She smiled. “Papa may get overwrought sometimes, but he is practical at heart. I'm going to pay the Callahan sisters a visit tomorrow. Mama is going with me. We can welcome them to Clear Creek, introduce them to a few people.”

“Like Penelope Bennett? I was thinking Penelope, Constance and Eloise could teach them a few things.”

“Why them?”

He tugged on a lock of her hair, then pulled her face to his, kissed her and smiled, speaking against her lips. “They’re English, refined, and didn’t know a thing when they first came to Clear Creek. These women remind me of them.”

She snuggled against him. “What do you really know about them?”

“Not a lot. That worries me too.”

“Don’t fret, I’ll find out. We’ll have lunch with them at the hotel. I’m sure they’ll feel better tomorrow after a good night’s rest.”

He kissed her hair. “I hope so. Because if they stay, they’ll have to decide how they’re going to live. My brothers are in no position to support wives at the moment – they can barely support themselves. And your father and I can’t support the poor ladies indefinitely.”

She drew circles on his chest with her finger. “So you want the Callahan sisters to learn a few things to prepare them for your brothers, is that it? And you want my distant English cousins to teach them?”

“Why not? I like your cousins.”

“Even the ones next door?” she said with a grin.

He laughed. “Even them. I’m surprised they didn’t join us for dinner tonight.”

She sighed. “They come often enough. It’s just as well – I’m not feeling myself either.”

He shifted so he could hold her. “You’re not feeling well? Should you see Doc Drake tomorrow?”

“No, I’m just tired. Mama and I did laundry yesterday – that always wears a body out.”

He nodded and kissed her again. “Can you introduce the Callahan sisters to Penelope or some of your other cousins



tomorrow? Should they be in town, of course.”

She giggled. “What’s your hurry? Besides, don’t you think you ought to ask them first? What if the Callahans decide they want to leave Clear Creek?”

“I hope not. They’ve already said they can’t afford it. And I think they’d do well with my brothers. Mrs. Pettigrew sent them here to escape a horrible situation, but she’s also a matchmaker. I’m hoping she knew what she was doing.”

“And if she didn’t?”

He sighed. “Then we’ll have to make sure we know what *we’re* doing.”

\* \* \*

THE NEXT MORNING HUNNY, Rosie and Georgie entered the hotel dining room with trepidation. They were pretty sure Major had said he’d cover their expenses for now, but they didn’t want to push their luck. And who knew who’d they run into today?

Hunny steered the others toward a table, and noticed several men were already there, eating breakfast. The women sat and waited.

Within moments, Sally Upton approached, a wide smile on her round face. “Good morning! Did you sleep well?”

“Very well, thank you,” Hunny said. “Do you have menus?”

“Shucks, no,” Sally said with a wave of her hand. “Around here I just make what I want. I’ve never had anyone argue. Can I bring you your plates now, or would you rather have some coffee first?”

“I’m hungry,” Rosie said. “I’ll take a plate now.”

“Yes,” Hunny agreed. “Bring everything now, please.”

“Coming right up, honey!” Sally headed for the kitchen as more people entered the dining room.

“I don’t remember seeing this many guests yesterday,” Georgie commented.

Hunny glanced at the men and women seating themselves. “I don’t think they’re guests. I think they’re locals.”

Rosie smiled. “Maybe Mrs. Upton needs help.”

Hunny looked at her. “You could ask. If she hires you, that takes care of the first part of our plan.”

“What’s the second part?” Georgie asked.

“You and I find work,” Hunny said. “If all of us are working, I’m sure we can afford to live here.”

“In just the one room?” Georgie said, glancing at the ceiling. “It’s small.”

“It’s shelter,” Rosie pointed out. “We can’t ask for much more.”

“Except maybe husbands,” Georgie tossed back.

“Well, we’ll see about those later,” Hunny said. “Let’s try to survive first.”

“Good morning.”

The sisters turned to see an older gentleman approach their table, a woman on his arm. They looked to be in their early eighties. “Good morning,” Hunny replied. Rosie and Georgie did the same.

“I’m Cyrus Van Cleet and this is my wife Polly. Welcome to Clear Creek.”

“Van Cleet?” Rosie said. “You own this hotel?”

“That I do, young lady. I hope your room is satisfactory.”

“Yes, of course.” Hunny swallowed hard and met the old man’s gaze. “In fact, if you have a moment, I’d like to speak with you about our room.”

“Of course, Miss ...?”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry,” she said. “I’m Hunny Callahan and these are my sisters Rosalind and Georgina.”

“How do you do?” Mr. Van Cleet said.

“We heard what happened yesterday,” Polly said. “We’re so sorry to hear about the confusion. Please let us know if we can help.”

“Yes, of course,” Hunny said with a relieved smile. She exchanged a quick look with her sisters. If all went well, they’d have a roof over their heads for quite some time.

“We must get back to our breakfast,” said Mr. Van Cleet. “I’ll be working at the hotel most of the day. We’ll talk later, hmm?”

“Of course,” Hunny said. “Thank you.”

He smiled, and he and his wife returned to their table.

“What a nice man,” Georgie commented.

“Let’s hope so,” Hunny muttered.

Sally approached, carrying a large tray.

“Here we are, dears!” She set plates of thickly sliced ham, scrambled eggs and fried potatoes in front of them, set the tray aside and poured them each a cup of coffee. “Anything else?”

“No, thank you,” Rosie said as the sisters stared at their plates. They looked and smelled wonderful.

“I’ll be in the kitchen if you want anything.” Coffee pot in hand, Sally went to check on her other customers.

The sisters watched her a moment before turning back to their food. Hunny said a quick blessing and they began to eat. “I guess we’d better enjoy this,” Georgie said between mouthfuls. “Who knows when we’ll eat like this again?”

“Stop it,” Rosie said. “Things aren’t as bad as all that.”

“Aren’t they?” she countered. “We don’t know what’s to become of us.”

Hunny and Rosie sighed in unison. “Look,” Rosie said. “I’ll speak to Mrs. Upton after we eat. Hunny will speak to Mr. Van Cleet.”

Georgie looked at her sisters as her brow creased with apprehension. "What can I do?"

Hunny and Rosie exchanged a quick look and said together, "Pray."

\* \* \*

AFTER BREAKFAST HUNNY sought out Mr. Van Cleet and was directed to his office by Mr. Brody, the blind hotel manager. Her hopes soared. If Mr. Van Cleet hired a blind man, then surely he could hire Rosie to cook and serve or Georgie and herself to clean rooms and do laundry. With luck, they could make a new home here and not have to worry about searching for work elsewhere. She knocked on the office door.

"Come in."

She entered. "Good morning, Mr. Van Cleet. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Not at all, Miss Callaway ... sorry, Callahan." He chuckled to himself. "I'm showing my age this morning. Please, have a seat." He motioned to a chair across his desk.

She sat, folded her hands in her lap and smiled. "Mr. Van Cleet, I'm going to come right out with it --"

"You need work," he stated.

She looked at him, dumbfounded. "Why ... yes."

"Of course. In your situation why else would you come see me?"

"Well," she began and licked her lips. "There is the matter of accommodations."

"Now, there's no need to worry about that. Major Comfort and Harrison Cooke informed me yesterday that they will cover your expenses here for the time being."

"They did?" Well, that was as close to a guarantee as one could hope for. And a good thing, as she and her sisters had almost no money left.

He leaned back in his chair and studied her a moment. “You came here to get married but aren’t sure that’s ever going to happen, right?”

“Er ... yes.”

He nodded. “You’re not the first. I’ve employed men in dire straits, and at least one woman – though Eloise Sayer later married my hotel manager at the time – another story for another day. But I appreciate your willingness to work rather than depend on charity.”

Hunny swallowed. “So you’ll give us jobs?”

“Certainly. I have a few projects I’d like to get done around here, and I suspect the three of you have the skills to handle them. But it won’t be easy.”

“It sounds ... temporary.”

“Oh, it is, but at least it will give you something. You’ll be able to save a little money, then decide what you wish to do.”

Hunny closed her eyes momentarily, unable to believe her luck. “Mr. Van Cleet, I can’t thank you enough.” She stared at her hands in her lap. “We don’t know what we’re going to do. Our priorities now are food and shelter.”

He nodded in understanding. “Those would be mine too if I were in your shoes. I’m sorry the three of you have suffered so.”

She swallowed again. “Suffered?”

He leaned forward. “I heard about why you’re here. Terrible business. And you’re not the first. I’ve known others in similar plights who made a run for it.”

“You ... you have?” she stammered.

He nodded. “So here’s my offer to you and your sisters: free room and board, plus \$1 a week apiece, in exchange for washing all the hotel windows, laundering the curtains, painting the porches, spindles and posts, and ... let me see ...” He tapped his fingers on the desktop a few times. “... mending the quilts and coverlets as needed. Some of them are overdue for repair.”

She smiled in relief. From the sounds of it, they'd have work for over a month – and at a generous rate. Aunt Henrietta paid Mrs. Bell, the laundress, 50 cents a week, and no room or board. “Thank you, Mr. Van Cleet – you won't regret this!”

“I'm sure I won't. And I don't think you will either.”

She froze. “What do you mean?”

He smiled. “Folks who come to Clear Creek tend to fall in love with the place. If you were planning on leaving, you might have a tough time of it.”

She scoffed. “Come now, Mr. Van Cleet – if we decide to save our money and leave, I'm sure we'll have no problem.”

He studied her. “Well, I wish you the best of luck in whatever you decide.”

She met his gaze. He reminded her of an old elf she'd seen in a drawing once: his eyes bright, his look knowing. It was almost unnerving. What did he think of her and her sisters? Was he appalled? Embarrassed for them? Did he pity them? Or were those her own thoughts and she'd yet to voice them? She shifted in her chair. “Thank you, Mr. Van Cleet. You're most kind.”

He stood, came around the desk and motioned to the door. “Tell your sisters, then come see me in the morning. I'm sure you're still tired and hungry from your journey – rest and eat today, and you can start work tomorrow.”

She stood. “Thank you again. Oh – Rosie is a very good cook, just so you know.”

“Is she? I'll inform Mrs. Upton. Though she's very particular about her kitchen.”

Hunny smile, left his office and ran upstairs to their room. “Rosie! Georgie!”

“What is it?” Georgie asked as she hopped off the bed.

Hunny grinned as she looked at them. “We're saved! We start work here at the hotel tomorrow!”

\* \* \*

MICHAEL, Darcy and Zach sat on the log outside Michael's cabin with long faces, elbows on their knees, hands clasped before them. Darcy sighed. "What a mess."

"You're not thinking of backing out, are you?" Zachary asked.

"I'm still trying to figure out what we've let Major talk us into."

"I thought he made it clear," Michael said. "We finish our cabins, then decide if we want to get married."

"Yes, but don't you think there will be complications – I mean, *more* complications?" Darcy asked. "After yesterday, what makes you think they'll want to marry us?"

"It's as Major said," Zach put in. "What choice do they have? They're helpless."

"I feel bad today," Darcy continued. "We didn't make a good impression on them."

"No, we didn't," Michael agreed.

"You think they'll hold it against us?"

"They might," Michael said. "In fact, they might want nothing more to do with us and wish to leave by any means necessary."

"Can't say as I blame them," Zach added. "Heavens, I made it sound as though their being here was their fault ... until they told us why they became mail-order brides."

"No sense crying over spilled milk," Michael said. "What's done is done. They're here, and so long as they can get by while we finish what we need to, then Major's right. There's no reason why we shouldn't marry them."

"But will they have us?" Darcy asked again.

Michael shrugged. "That's up to them."

Zach and Darcy nodded. "Well, what do we do now?"

Michael stood. "We work on our places as we've been doing."

"But what about the Callahan sisters?" Zach asked. "Shouldn't we call on them or something today?"

Michael looked at his unfinished roof, then the clouds moving in. "How's your roof, Zach?"

Zachary stood and sighed. "Not nearly finished."

Darcy studied the sky as well. "Mine still needs work as well."

"Then I suggest we do what we can on them before it rains," Michael suggested. "I'm sure the Callahan sisters will understand. After all, they might be living under these roofs someday."

"Someday," Darcy repeated. "But there's no guarantee."

Michael shook his head. "There never is. 'If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this or that'," he added, quoting James' epistle.

Zach sat back on the log. "Why do I feel like such a cad?"

"We all do." Darcy sat next to him and slapped him on the back. "We weren't prepared for something like this. It was quite a shock."

"I think I speak for all of us when I say we feel the same, Zach," Michael insisted. "Yesterday was a disaster, and there is a good chance they won't speak to us again. We can only do our best from here on out, and hope they're the forgiving type."

"Major thinks he can tell them what's going to happen," Darcy said.

Zachary and Michael smiled. When Major planned something, he did expect it to be executed and without question. But just because the Callahan sisters were in a tight spot didn't mean they'd go along with his idea.

"We'd best get to work," Michael said. "Get done what we can, then head to town today or tomorrow and pay the damsels



in distress a visit. Apologies at the ready.”

Darcy and Zach stood, exchanged a look and headed up the road. They’d walked to Michael’s in hopes of figuring out an alternate plan to Major’s. They felt bad about what happened, and that they hadn’t done enough to remedy it. But without money, their hands were tied. Major, of course, had some, but he was using it to keep a roof over the sisters’ heads and food in their bellies until his brothers caught up.

It was a sticky situation no matter how they looked at it. Three women in need of protection and provision, and here they were, lacking the means, reliant on their brother and his father-in-law to do it for them. Would it all work out? Only time would tell.

\* \* \*

### *THE NEXT DAY ...*

PLEASANT, with Sadie behind her, stared at the Callahan sisters in shock. “You did what?”

Hunny Callahan straightened in her chair in the hotel dining room. Pleasant had caught the sisters finishing their lunch. “We got jobs,” Hunny said. “We work here now.” On either side, her sisters smiled proudly.

Pleasant looked from one to the other. “And ... and Mr. Van Cleet is letting you stay here?”

“Of course he is,” Hunny said. “Room and board and a dollar a week.”

Pleasant and Sadie exchanged a look. “My, that was fast,” Sadie commented.

“Only because it had to be,” Rosie said. “What choice did we have? We can’t sit and do nothing.”

“Well, you could’ve,” Pleasant said with a shake of her head. “Quince and Harrison ...”

“Yes, but we want to make our own way if we can,” Hunny cut in. “Your other brothers – the ones we came here to marry – can’t help us.”

“They want nothing to do with us,” Georgie, the youngest, said. “We’ve been forced into this position through no fault of our own.”

Pleasant looked at Sadie again, then spotted Honoria entering the hotel lobby and waved her over. “Good morning,” Honoria said as she approached the table. “I’m sorry I didn’t arrive with Mother and Pleasant – I had business at the mercantile.”

Pleasant decided she’d better make the introductions. “This is Honoria Comfort, my brother Major’s wife.”

“And my daughter,” Sadie added with a smile.

The sisters smiled warily in return.

Honoria took a seat and jumped right in. “Let’s see – you must be Hunny.” She smiled at the appropriate sister.

“Yes, that’s right,” Hunny said. “And this is Rosalind ...”

“Rosie – call me Rosie,” her sister interrupted.

“And I’m Georgie,” said the third. “I hate Georgina.”

“Hunny, Rosie and Georgie,” Honoria said. “I’ve taken the liberty of setting you up an account at Dunnigan’s Mercantile. You have credit already. I thought you might need some necessities.”

The sisters gasped. “Th-thank you,” Hunny replied. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Your circumstances dictated that we did. That is, Major and I.”

“But you had nothing to do with it,” Rosie said. “Did you?”

“No, I didn’t. But we felt it was right.”

Georgie smiled. “That’s very kind.”

“You’ll find folks around here are like that,” Sadie said. “It’s one of the reasons we’re here – we thought you could do with a little support.”

“I can’t imagine what you must be feeling,” Honoria added.

“I can,” Pleasant said.

“So can I,” said Sadie with a faraway look.

Hunny looked at Pleasant. “Can you? I understand you were a mail-order bride, but were you abandoned by your future husband when you got here?”

Pleasant seemed to take umbrage. “My brothers have not abandoned you.”

“She’s right,” Georgie said. “How could they abandon us when they didn’t know about us?”

“Be that as it may, I ...” Hunny looked at Honoria and sighed. “I apologize.” She glanced at the others. “To all of you. You set us up with the mercantile, Mr. Van Cleet has hired us and the three of you have come to check on us.” She turned to Pleasant. “Forgive my outburst.”

“Think nothing of it,” Pleasant said. “You’re under great strain and have been very resourceful. I commend all three of you.”

Honoria took a deep breath and let it out. “Yes, it sounds like you’ve taken care of business and quickly.” She pointed at the plate of biscuits on the table. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Hunny slid the plate toward her.

“Do you want Sally to fix you something, dear?” Sadie asked.

“No, this will do.” Honoria took a biscuit. “I think I just need a snack.”

Sadie eyed her a moment, then turned back to the Callahans. “I’d like to invite you to a family barbecue at the Triple-C in three days. Does Mr. Van Cleet have you working every day?”

“He gave us a list of things he’d like to have done,” Hunny said, “but hasn’t specified when to finish them.”

“But we’ll do our best to get them done as quickly as possible,” Georgie added.

Pleasant glanced at Sadie and back. “Events at the Triple-C are always nice. My husband Eli and I could pick you up and drive you out.”

“You’re going too?” Hunny asked.

“Oh, of course. Sadie and I thought it would be nice for you to have a few familiar faces around.”

“And I’ve invited several other families, so you’ll get a chance to make new acquaintances too,” Sadie said.

“I see.” Hunny looked at Honoria. “And will you be there?”

Honoria smiled. “Of course, I live there.”

The sisters glanced at one another. “This Major will be there as well?” Rosie said with a hint of annoyance.

Pleasant fought the urge to sigh. “Yes, as my brother lives there too.”

Georgie swallowed hard. “He’s not going to be angry we’ve been invited?”

Everyone looked at her. “Whatever gave you that idea?” Honoria asked.

Georgie shrugged. “Because we’ve been so much trouble ...”

Hunny put an arm around her sister. “Nonsense. He’ll think no such thing. He’s not Aunt Henrietta.” Georgie cringed at that name.

Pleasant glanced at Sadie and Honoria. They all seemed to be thinking the same thing: *how terrible had their aunt been?!*

Sadie pulled paper and a pencil out of her reticule. “Have you met Ada Brody yet?”

“The blind man’s wife?” Georgie asked.

“Yes,” Sadie scribbled something down. “I’m inviting them too, but I didn’t see either in the lobby when we came in.” She craned her neck and peered at the front counter, which was still unmanned. “I’ll leave them a note. But if you’re working here, you’ll likely see her quite a bit.”

“You’ll like Ada,” Honoria said. “And their daughter Aideen.”

“A child?” Georgie said with a smile. “I adore children.”

“She’s seven going on law school,” Sadie said dryly. “But she’s sweet.”

Pleasant knew she had to say the obvious. “My other brothers will also be in attendance at the barbecue,” she announced.

The sisters froze. So Michael, Darcy and Zach *were* a sore spot. But who could blame them?

“As will our English cousins,” Honoria said. “Most of them, at least.”

Hunny straightened in her chair. “We’ll try to get our work done, but if not, I don’t see how ...”

“I’ll speak to Mr. Van Cleet myself,” Sadie said. “I’ve invited him and Polly as well. I’m sure he’ll see to it that you’re not overburdened with work that day.”

The sisters looked at each other, and Pleasant could see their individual minds at work. They didn’t want to see her brothers. Maybe her brothers didn’t want to see them either. But she sensed this would be for the best. Who knew how long the Callahans would be in Clear Creek? They’d all have to learn to get along sometime. Besides, after Honoria and Sadie stopped by her place, explained Major’s plan and brought her to town, she’d had time to think about things.

Maybe the best thing to do was just let nature take its course. But to do that, they had to bring the Callahan sisters and her brothers together as often as they could. And the possibility loomed that the Callahan sisters wanted nothing to do with Michael, Darcy and Zach.

## CHAPTER 10

Hunny watched Pleasant Turner and the other women leave the hotel from the window of their room. “Why would they think we’re going to have anything to do with those men now?”

Rosie sat in a chair mending a quilt. “They mean well, but if those men don’t want wives ...”

“They probably want us on the next stage out of town,” Georgie commented. “Are we going to their barbecue?”

“Why would we?” Hunny replied.

Georgie sighed. “You’re right, it’s probably for the best.”

“But Mr. Van Cleet and his wife are going,” Rosie said. “Won’t he expect us to go?”

Hunny went to the bed and sat. “Blast. I forgot about that.”

Georgie gasped. “Hunny, such language.”

Hunny rolled her eyes. “I don’t care. I’m angry we’re in this fix.”

“We all are, but look what we’ve accomplished,” Rosie argued. “We set out to do something and did it. We got away from Aunt Henrietta and those horrid old men. We have food, shelter and employment. In time, we’ll have money to do what we want, go where we want.” She looked at her sisters and sighed. “You can’t say this isn’t better than being in Denver, having to share beds with those lecherous fossils.”

Hunny couldn't argue with that. "But we still have to decide what to do next."

Georgie went to the window and looked out. "Clear Creek is a nice little town. I think I'd like to stay."

"Here? With *them*?" Hunny said, aghast.

"The Comfort men?" Georgie said with a glance at her sister. "Who says we have to see them every day? They live outside town, remember?"

"Maybe they won't want to see us," Rosie offered.

"Or maybe they will." Georgie motioned for the other two to come to the window. "There they are!"

Hunny and Rosie rushed to her side to look at the street below. "They're coming to the hotel?!" Hunny cried.

"What do we do?" Georgie asked in fright.

"What are you two worried about?" Rosie asked, hands on hips. "So what if they're coming in? There's a public dining room downstairs. Maybe they're here for ... for ..."

"Tea?" Georgie asked, hopeful.

"Yes, that's it. Why would they come see us?" Hunny asked.

Georgie glanced at the window and back. "Maybe to say that they're sorry."

Hunny and Rosie stared at her a moment. "What if she's right?" Rosie asked.

Hunny wrapped her arms around herself and crossed the room. "Then ... they apologize. We accept and we all move on. And we get back to making a life for ourselves."

"Here?" Georgie asked.

Hunny smiled. "Wherever we want."

Georgie returned to the bed. "Without husbands?" she added dourly.

"We can't worry about that now," Hunny said. "We have to make sure we can make it on our own. Who knows what the

future will bring?”

Rosie retrieved the quilt she was mending and sat. “I’d like to get married one day – we all would. But it’s also wise to know how to take care of ourselves, just in case.”

Georgie nodded. “Except it’s easier to want to take care of ourselves when ...” She bowed her head and picked at her skirt. “... we’re all mad at men.”

And there it was. All three knew it. So long as they could hold onto their anger, their determination to survive was fueled. Bring a gallant man into the picture, one that could sweep a woman off her feet, protect and provide for her, and that steeliness would wane. None of them had voiced it yet, but all feared the same thing.

What if Hunny, their leader, found a man, married and left? The other two would be alone. What if two of them married and only one was left? Would a new husband want a wife and her sisters living with them? Clear Creek was a small town – were there other men besides the Comfort brothers to marry? Their so-called intendeds made it perfectly clear they weren’t looking for wives yet, and couldn’t take care of one even if they were. What other prospects did they have? None as far as they could tell.

They were on their own, with too many questions and not enough answers. But it still beat living with Aunt Henrietta ...

A knock at the door made the sisters jump. Hunny, her hand to her chest, looked at the others before answering it.

A pretty blonde stood there, all smiles. “Good afternoon – I’m Ada Brody. I’m sorry I haven’t had a chance to properly introduce myself – I’ve been visiting the Joneses the last day or so. They have a ranch a few hours out of town, and I spent the night. Mr. Van Cleet said he’d hired you on, so ... I guess I’ll be your boss.” She shrugged and giggled, seemingly at the idea of being the boss of anyone.

“Pleased to meet you,” Hunny said. “Won’t you come in?”

“No, thank you. I just came up to tell you that you have visitors downstairs.”



Three sets of eyes widened. Hunny stiffened. “These visitors wouldn’t happen to be the Comfort brothers, would they?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. They’re in the lobby.”

Hunny bit her lip and looked at her sisters. Neither Rosie nor Georgie looked too eager to see them.

Ada watched them and nodded. “What shall I tell them?”

Hunny turned back to Ada. “What do you mean?”

“I heard what happened,” she confessed. “I understand if you’re not ready to see them. It must have been quite a shock to come all this way only to find out your grooms had no idea you were coming. Believe me, I know.”

Hunny gasped, grabbed Ada’s arm and pulled her into the room. “You too?”

Ada shrugged and nodded. “In my case, Lorcan’s mother sent for me. He was mad as a hornet when I first arrived and wanted nothing to do with me.”

“But ... you’re married,” Georgie got off the bed. “What happened – did he change his mind?”

Ada smiled. “A lot of things happened, some of which I won’t go into. But we fell in love, over time.”

Hunny and her sisters stared at her a moment.

“Well?” Ada prompted.

Hunny sighed. “Tell them we’ll be down in a moment.” Georgie covered her mouth as Rosie set down her mending and took a deep breath.

Ada saw their faces. “Don’t be too hard on them – they honestly didn’t know. If they were upset and flustered when you arrived, can you blame them?”

“We can’t,” Hunny confessed. “But we ...” She looked at her sisters. “... we have nowhere else to go. It’s a miracle Mr. Van Cleet hired us on.”

“I understand you’re angry, but you can’t stay angry forever. If I had, I never would have married Lorcan.”

“Does that mean we could end up married to the Comforts?” Georgie asked.

“That’s up to you,” Ada said. “I don’t know how they feel about what happened, but I do know how I felt when I went through it, and how Lorcan felt. We were both furious.”

“Time seems to be the factor, isn’t it?” Rosie said. “In time they’ll forget about us and we them.” She looked at her sisters. “Might as well let them apologize.”

“And apologize to them?” Ada asked.

“To them?” Hunny said. “Whatever for?”

“As I understand it, things got ... heated in the mercantile the other day.”

Hunny frowned. “Is it any wonder?”

“I would suggest letting bygones be bygones and get down to the business of living.”

“She’s right,” Rosie said. “They have their lives to get back to also. Let’s get this over with.” She headed for the door.

Georgie followed. “Thank you,” she told Ada. “We’re glad you understand how we feel.”

Ada smiled. “You have no idea.”

The sisters filed out the door. Ada closed it behind them and led them to the staircase. When they reached the bottom she went behind the front counter and took her post. “They’re waiting in the dining room. Remember, don’t be too hard on them.”

“What’s to keep them from being hard on us?” Georgie asked.

Ada smiled. “My husband. He’s been in there speaking with them since they arrived.”

“What has he been saying?” Rosie asked quietly.

“The same thing I told you. Remember, we went through this. You don’t have to marry them, nor they you, but if you’re staying in town, better to do it with a clean slate.”

The sisters glanced at the dining room, from which murmuring male voices could be heard. “You’re right,” Hunny said. “We’ll do as you say. We were going to anyway.”

“From the look on your face upstairs, I’d swear you were going to close the door in the woman’s face,” Rosie harrumphed.

“Rosie!” Georgie gasped, then noticed Hunny blushing. “You mean you were?”

“I ... thought about it.”

“Enough, you three,” Ada scolded. “Take care of it. That’s an order.” She giggled again.

Hunny took a deep breath. “All right. Let’s do this. It’s not like we’ll ever have to speak to them again.”

Georgie looked at the floor. “No, we don’t.”

Rosie sighed. “Why would we?”

Hunny nodded, smiled at Ada and headed into the dining room.

\* \* \*

MICHAEL, Darcy and Zachary stood as the Callahan sisters entered. “Good afternoon,” Michael said.

The sisters approached stiffly as each brother hurried to pull a chair out for them and get them settled before retaking their own seats. “Thank you for seeing us,” Darcy said.

“Yes, we weren’t sure you would,” Zachary added sheepishly.

The women didn’t say a word, so Michael, after tapping the table a few times, broke the ice. “It seems we owe you an apology.”

Hunny sighed. "And we you." She looked at her sisters and back. "The day we arrived was ... less than ideal for us."

"Indeed," Zachary said. "And we hope you won't hold it against us."

"As Southern gentleman, my brothers and I are deeply appalled at our behavior," Darcy added.

"As any gentlemen would be," Rosie quipped, then flinched.

Michael wondered if one of her sisters had just kicked her under the table. "Be that as it may, we apologize for our behavior. We should have been more sympathetic to your plight. Even when we came here to the hotel to discuss it, we could have been more congenial."

"We were in considerable shock," Zachary said, "but that's still no excuse."

"And your brother?" Hunny asked.

"If you're referring to Major, he is truly sorry for fostering the misinterpretation."

"Apologies accepted," Hunny said. "Let's put this behind us. I think we've all fretted over it long enough."

The brothers smiled back.

Georgie looked around the table, "What about our apologies? Won't you accept them?"

"You don't need to apologize," Darcy assured her. "You three were the victims of unfortunate circumstances, and no more need be said about it."

"Thank Heaven for that," said Rosie.

Hunny smiled. "We hear the hotel serves afternoon tea."

"Yes," Michael said, somewhat relieved. At least the worst was over. He looked at the Callahan sisters a moment and felt his spine tingle. They really were pretty. "Every day except Sunday. It's a tradition around here."

“Due to the heavy British influence in the area,” Zachary added. “I’m sure in time you’ll hear stories.”

“And there are a lot of stories,” Darcy said. “Half of which you won’t believe, but we’re told they’re all true.”

Michael stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll let Mrs. Upton know we’re ready to be served. It’s early yet, but I’m sure she won’t mind.” He turned and went into the kitchen.

Mrs. Upton jumped at the sound of the door. “Land sakes, honey, you scared me to death!” She looked him over as he leaned against the worktable. “What’s the matter with you?”

He held up a hand. “Give me a moment, will you?”

“You don’t look so good.”

He straightened, his hand on his stomach, and forced a smile. “I’m fine. I realize it’s early, but do you think you could manage tea for six, please?”

“Say no more, honey. Are you sure you don’t need to lie down or something?”

“I’ll be fine.” He turned toward the door. Would he? Or would he be kicking himself for the next few days? Sure, at first sight he’d thought they were pretty, but today something had changed and he couldn’t figure out what. Maybe Major’s idea wasn’t so bad after all. The question was, were they interested? They seemed tense and perhaps still angry over what happened. But how could they not be? He had to admit, he was still upset, as were Darcy and Zachary.

Maybe he and his brothers should help the women to relax. The poor things were probably still frightened, perhaps still in shock over their situation. But how could he and his brothers aid them? They’d had to pool their money just to have enough for afternoon tea, and even that was no great sum – they usually subsisted on corn meal, beans and whatever Pleasant hadn’t burnt.

But he didn’t mind. They’d needed to apologize and he felt better for doing it over tea. At least they were giving them *something*. He was sure Darcy and Zachary felt the same.

Michael returned to the dining room and his seat. “She’ll bring it right out.”

“Your brothers were just telling us about Savannah,” Georgie said.

“It sounds hot,” Rosie added defiantly.

Michael studied the women. Hunny was the oldest and obviously in charge. Plump Rosie was feisty, the family outlaw. Georgie was delicate, fragile, her heart very much on her sleeve. “Yes, it is,” he agreed. “But we liked it.”

Georgie smiled. “Our father was in Savannah once –” She stopped, gasped and looked at her sisters. Hunny covered her eyes and shook her head. Rosie gritted her teeth and rolled her eyes to the ceiling.

And Michael did his best not to laugh. “He ... visited the city one Christmas, I would wager?” General Sherman had famously wired Abraham Lincoln on Christmas Day 1864 that he’d just captured Savannah as a present for the Commander-in-Chief.

Rosie was either the first to realize he wasn’t offended, or just didn’t care. “Father was a captain. 70th Indiana Infantry.”

“Was he, now?” Michael said. “Forgive me for asking, but I hope that wasn’t when you lost him?”

“No,” Georgie said. “He passed away several years later.”

“Oh, good. I’d hate to think I might have shot him. One of his brothers in blue did manage to catch me ...” He held up his injured hand, what was left of it. “But another of them was a doctor and did a very nice job stitching me up, so don’t worry that I’ll hold a grudge.”

Now it looked like Hunny was suppressing a laugh. “Thank you for taking it so ... philosophically.”

“It was war. Things do happen. But the war’s over, and we Comforts are doing our best to let it stay that way.”

“Our father’s still living,” Darcy offered. “He’s stayed with our aunt in Denver these past two years.”

“He has?” Hunny said with interest. She looked at her sisters. “Did Aunt Henrietta know any Comforts?”

Rosie rolled her eyes. “Hardly.”

Hunny realized her unintended pun. “You know what I mean.”

Michael glanced at his brothers as Sally pushed a tea cart toward their table. Every time the aunt was brought up, they reacted as if they’d survived a prison camp and he’d mentioned the warden. “You’ve mentioned some troubles with your aunt. Did she have children of her own?”

Rosie looked ready to explode. Georgie began unfolding and refolding her napkin. It was left to Hunny to explain. “No, she never had children – and wasn’t very good with them, alas.”

Rosie choked.

“Are you all right?” Mrs. Upton asked as she approached.

Hunny patted Rosie on the back. “She’ll be fine. Won’t you, Rosie?”

Rosie coughed a few times and rasped, “Of course ... sorry ...”

“Are you feeling ill?” Zachary asked, honestly concerned.

“Only when I think of Aunt Henrietta,” Rosie replied. “I was caught off-guard by Hunny’s understatement.”

“Oh my,” Darcy said sadly.

Georgie also gave her sister a few pats. “Maybe a drink would help.”

Mrs. Upton poured a cup of tea and set it on a saucer in front of Rosie. “Here you go, honey.” She served tea to the others and set a plate of cookies on the table. “Will there be anything else?”

“Yes, Mrs. Upton,” Darcy said. “Do you have any sandwiches?”

“Why, of course, honey. You know I always do.” She turned and headed back to the kitchen.

Zachary licked his lips and watched her until she disappeared. When he looked back, he realized the sisters were staring at him. “Mrs. Upton makes wonderful sandwiches,” he explained nervously.

Michael knew why – none of them wanted the sisters to know their current state of finances. It was embarrassing enough as it was, especially given their privileged pre-Civil War upbringing. The Comforts had been respected, were regulars at parties and balls. If not for the war – well, if not for losing the war in spectacular fashion – they would’ve been Savannah’s most eligible bachelors. Now they were off in the northwest hinterlands, pouring almost every spare cent into building their tiny cabins. *Sic transit gloria.*

He shifted in his seat and reached for his teacup. “Rather unconventional to toast with tea, I suppose, but we honestly do wish the three of you well.”

“We do indeed,” Darcy picked up his cup.

The sisters picked up theirs and stared at them, reminding Michael of three frightened does. Well, two; Rosie looked more like a ten-point buck ready to charge them. He lifted his cup. “To your well-being in a new place.”

They drank, set the cups down and all six reached for the cookie plate. Hunny’s hand hit Darcy’s, Georgie’s Michael’s, and Rosie’s Zachary’s. There was no help for it – all of them pulled away and laughed. “This is so much better than arguing, isn’t it?” Darcy commented, then waved at the plate. “Ladies?”

The sisters each took a cookie and put them on their saucers. Once they finished, Michael and his brothers did the same, and soon they were happily eating and drinking, abetted by Mrs. Upton bringing a plate full of the promised sandwiches. None of them would go hungry this evening. Little was said for a while – everyone was too involved with the food.



Michael had no idea the women would be so hungry. When had they eaten last? Surely Mr. Van Cleet wasn't making them pay for their meals – wasn't Major taking care of that? Or were they afraid to take advantage of his brother's offer? He glanced at his brothers, who were too engrossed at the moment to pay attention to him. No matter – he'd speak with them on the ride home. There were still loose ends to be tied up, and he wanted to make sure the Callahan sisters were comfortable.

When the meal was over, Hunny smiled as Mrs. Upton cleared the dishes away. "My, but that was a lovely tea."

Georgie sighed in contentment. "It's been so long ..."

Michael's gut twisted. How terrible had their lives with their aunt been? He wanted to ask more questions, but he and his brothers needed to get home, and Rosie's reaction hinted that more inquiries might just dredge up unpleasant memories. Besides, people were beginning to file into the dining room, as it was now officially teatime. "Perhaps we'll do this again?"

The sisters froze. *Great*, he thought, *so much for that*. From the looks on their faces, the women were done with them. "If you wish it," he added. "If not ... we understand."

Hunny's eyes met her sisters' before his. "I'm afraid Mr. Van Cleet will have us very busy. I don't see when we'll have time for such a luxury again. Speaking of which ... our meals and board here are covered as part of our arrangement with Mr. Van Cleet. So your brother Quince, Major, whatever you wish us to call him, need not worry."

"Only family calls him Quince, and my brothers and I are taking care of this one," Darcy, ever gallant, added.

"But ..."

He held up a hand. "It's all right. Think nothing of it."

Hunny nodded and pushed her chair from the table. The brothers immediately went to help them up. They might be destitute, but they still had their manners. The sisters stared at them for a moment or two, then with parting smiles headed for the hotel lobby.

The men watched them ascend the stairs and disappear from sight. Darcy crossed his arms. "That went ... well?"

"As well as could be, I suppose," Michael said.

Zachary cocked his head to one side. "Something's not right with them."

Michael nodded – they'd noticed too. "No doubt involving their aunt and their intended suitors back in Denver."

"Yes," Zachary drawled. "We know it was bad enough for them to run. You don't think ..."

Michael recalled parts of their previous conversations with the sisters. "That's exactly what I think. If their aunt posted guards ... and don't forget, we followed Pleasant here, remember?"

"Yes," Darcy agreed. "Because we were trying to protect her from Rupert."

"And to keep Rupert from hiring other men to accompany him," Michael added. "Can you imagine what would've happened if he came to Clear Creek with hired guns? He might have gotten his hands on her."

Darcy nodded "Georgie said their aunt wanted to marry them off to three old codgers."

"I thought it was Rosie that said that," Zachary argued.

"It hardly matters which," Michael pointed out. "These women are, or at least were, terrified. Whether or not men show up to claim them remains to be seen. The important thing is that we're ready if it happens."

"Then we'd best pay a visit to Tom and Eli, hadn't we?" Darcy suggested.

"My thoughts exactly," Michael said.

"But what do we do in the meantime?" Zachary asked.

Darcy raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"The women. If we've thought of this, then surely they have too."

Darcy looked at Michael, his hand automatically going to a gun that wasn't there. He gave his brother a look of frustration. "He's right. They'll need protection."

Michael nodded. "Very well – we can at least give them that. *If* they wish it," he added hastily.

Darcy and Zachary became somber. "Yes," Darcy said softly. "If they wish it." They all hoped the sisters did. Because at present, there was nothing else the three Comfort brothers could afford to offer.

## CHAPTER 11

“A barbecue?” Michael said in surprise.

“Yes.” Pleasant took a sandwich from her basket and handed it to him. “We’ve all been invited. I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of accepting for you and the others.”

Michael took the sandwich, sat on a log and chewed and swallowed for a bit. “Well, you know us. Never ones to turn down food.”

“Yes, I know,” she said with a smile. “Zachary will be overjoyed.”

“I’m sure he will be. Has anyone let Benedict and Matt know?”

“Major said he’d ride out to the men’s camp and tell them.” She set the basket down. “He was also going to tell them about what’s been going on, so nothing comes as a surprise at the barbecue.”

Michael was about to take another bite but stopped. “Oh yes, that.”

“I heard you had tea with them yesterday.”

He watched her. “Yes. You’ll be glad to know we did the gentlemanly thing and apologized.”

“Well, that’s the least you could do.”

He took another bite, eyeing the basket. “Any more?”

She reached in and gave him another sandwich, which he started on as soon as he wolfed down the first. “You’re going to choke eating like that. One would think you haven’t eaten in days.”

He half-smiled. “I just have to get back to work. Make sure Zachary doesn’t eat Darcy’s. I imagine they’re just as hungry.”

“What have you three been doing, working all night?”

He stood and brushed crumbs from his shirt and trousers. “No, just ... some work makes you hungrier than others.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Dare I ask?”

“No. Best be on your way. I’m sure our brothers will be pleased to hear about the barbecue.” She watched him turn toward the house, then stop. “Is there anything else?”

“Only than you forgot to thank me for the sandwiches.”

“Oh, I am sorry. Thank you, sister, from the bottom of my heart.” He bowed and smiled.

She stood, swinging the basket. “Tell me, Michael. Did the Callahan sisters mention the barbecue during your tea?”

He straightened. “No, why?”

“They’ve been invited too.”

He stiffened. “Have they?”

“Yes. Which makes me wonder why they didn’t say anything to you about it.”

He shrugged. “I have no idea. Perhaps they forgot.”

“You didn’t say anything to upset them, did you?”

“Of course not,” he said, aghast. Great Scott, had he? Not that he recalled. Did Darcy or Zachary? He shook his head.

“What’s the matter?”

“You got me thinking, that’s all.” He sighed. “Perhaps they’re not coming.”

“Why wouldn’t they? Just what did you talk about during tea?”

He sat again. “Nothing exceptional. We apologized first thing. The war came up, but even then things stayed cordial. Their father was in Sherman’s army, though he came through unscathed – he passed away years later.”

“The poor things. And their mother?”

“They didn’t say.” He patted her shoulder. “Thank you again for the food. It was most appreciated.”

“You’re welcome. I’d best go feed Darcy and Zach. I’ll see you at the barbecue?”

“Of course.” He watched her leave. Maybe he should have told her he was rationing his food to make his money stretch and thus speed up work on his cabin, but she’d only worry. He could get by until payday at the Triple-C. All of them could. At least Benedict and Matt weren’t involved in this. Especially Matt – he was still too immature to handle such a mess.

He turned back to the house. He had a lot of work to do. Thankfully it hadn’t rained recently, but even in late May it was still a distinct possibility. Late spring storms brought high winds too, and could do some serious damage to his roof if he didn’t get it finished.

He went behind the house and climbed the ladder. Maybe by the end of the week he’d be done with the roof, so he could tackle projects on the inside. And he still had a root cellar to finish and a smokehouse to build, not to mention making enough money to order some furniture and other necessities. He pulled some shingles out of a bucket, picked up his hammer and a few nails and got to work.

Between shingles, he’d look out at the road in front of the house. He pictured a garden to one side, a fence with sunflowers lining the other. Children were playing in the yard and a woman – his wife – hanging laundry on a line. He’d come out of the barn (which he also still needed to build), and she’d run to him, throw her arms around his neck and ...

“Hey, Michael!”

He looked up and searched for the source of the voice as he grabbed another shingle. “Benedict – what are you doing

here?” He turned to the ladder. “Wait there – I’ll be right down.” He returned the shingle to the bucket and pushed his daydream aside as he descended. He knew he’d like those things one day, but given all the work he had to do to get there, that particular vision would have to wait.

“Well, well, look at this place!” Benedict slapped him on the back and turned to admire the cabin. “Wow, I hope mine looks as good when I build one.”

“It will,” Michael assured. “But it’s a lot of work. Have you seen the others yet?”

“Zach and Darcy? No, I just came from the Triple-C and thought I’d stop by on my way back to the camp.”

“What were you doing out at the Triple-C?”

“Colin and Harrison wanted some help setting things up for that big barbecue in a couple of days, so they had Matt, Hugh and I ride out early this morning.”

“I hadn’t heard they needed help.” Too bad, too – he could’ve used the extra money.

“They know you’re trying to get your places done,” Benedict looked around. “Do *you* need any help?”

“Do I? Let me get you another hammer.” He turned toward the house.

“I talked to Quince.”

Michael stopped and sighed. “Yes, I was about to ask if you did. But it’s all settled.”

“Sounded to me like nothing’s settled. What are you going to do?”

He turned and held his hands up helplessly. “There’s not much any of us can do. But the women are already settling in, and we’re working on our houses.” He didn’t dare tell Benedict or Matt that as soon as their tea with the Callahan sisters was done, they’d gone to the sheriff’s office and told Tom and Eli what they’d pieced together. They agreed to keep an eye out, just to be safe. “Did he mention if the Callahan

women were going to attend? I'm sure you and Matt are curious about them."

"To tell you the truth, we are. But no, he didn't say if they were coming, only that they'd been invited."

Michael was afraid of that. What if trouble came to town while everyone was at the barbecue? "Were Tom and Eli invited too?"

"I don't know – why?"

Michael thought a moment, then said, "Never mind. Let me find that extra hammer." He headed for the house again. He'd have to speak to Major if Tom or Eli didn't beat him to it. The last thing he wanted was for any trouble to follow the Callahan sisters. They'd been through enough of Lord only knew what already. He didn't want them to go through any more if he could help it.

\* \* \*

"DID YOU NOTICE THOSE MISSING FINGERS?" Rosie asked.

Georgie put her hand to her chest. "I saw – the poor man. To think that maybe Father –"

"After you're done with the dishes, ladies," Sally interrupted as she brought another batch into the kitchen, "you can help me start on the scones for tomorrow." Hunny, Rosie and Georgie were lined up in front of the hotel kitchen's sink. Mr. Van Cleet had put them at Sally's disposal for the afternoon.

"Do most of the townspeople show up for tea every day?" Hunny stared at the new stack, amazed at the quantity of dirty tableware.

"Not every day. Mostly it's folks that live and work in town. A couple of days a week we're full up, though. It gives folks outside town an excuse to come and visit." She went to a large cupboard, opened it and began to gather what she needed for the scones.



Hunny looked at Rosie and tossed her head in Sally's direction. Rosie nodded. "Er, Sally? I can help you with the scones. I'm a fair cook."

Hunny smiled at the older woman. "Unfortunately, Georgie and I are not. Rosie was the cook at home and she's being modest – she's really very fine at it."

"Is she?" Sally said, hand on hip. She went to another cupboard, pulled out a large jar and set it on the worktable too. "Well, then, I should show you where everything is. The Almighty knows that I'm not getting any younger. It might be nice to let someone else do some work for a change."

Rosie smiled. "You don't mind?"

"Mind?" She gathered a few more items and put them with the rest. "Why would I mind, honey?"

"Ada told us that you and Irene Dunnigan are the best cooks in town," Georgie said. "And ... rivals."

"And she'd be right. But Irene and I have mended fences – we're not as competitive with each other as we used to be. Frankly, we've gotten too old for it."

Rosie smiled, relieved. "I'm glad to hear it, Sally. I wouldn't want you to think of me as competition."

"Competition?" She took a bowl of eggs to the table. "Honey, the only competition I worry about at this stage in my life is if a handsome older man came to town."

The girls laughed. "I think that's the last thing we'd be interested in," Hunny replied.

"Don't you want to get married?" Sally asked, curious.

"Someday," Hunny said. "But I doubt it will be anytime soon. I think the whole town knows that by now."

Sally nodded sagely. "I'm afraid you're right there. You aren't embarrassed by all of it, are you?"

"I guess it depends on who asks," Georgie said.

"Yes," Rosie said. "But at this point if anyone else asks, we won't know them anyway. So what does it matter?"

Sally studied them and shook her head. “Don’t talk like that. You don’t know what the future holds. You might spend the rest your lives here.”

“Somehow I don’t see that happening.” Hunny turned back to the sink, reached a hand into the dishwater and pulled out a plate. She rinsed it in another pan and handed it to Georgie to dry.

“Maybe you’ll change your minds once you spend more time here,” Sally continued. “The Cookes barbecue will be a nice place to meet new folks.”

Hunny glanced over her shoulder. “I’m not sure we’re going.”

“What? But you have to go. It’s one of the finest events of the year next to the town picnic. This is smaller, but just as nice.”

Hunny sighed, handed another plate to Georgie and headed for the kitchen door. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go check if the sheets I hung on the line earlier are dry. Back in a moment.” She left without looking back, went into the lobby and down a back hall to the door to the hotel’s backyard, where they’d spent the entire morning washing sheets. She ran her hand over a few, found them still damp and stepped away.

Absently she walked to the end of the building, rounded the corner and leaned against the wall. She could see the livery stable from here, and beyond that the road out of town. She walked further, to near the front of the hotel, and stopped. Now she could see the church, about a hundred yards outside the rest of the town.

She wondered what the pastor was like, what sort of services they had ... and if she and her sisters would be struck dead if they set foot inside the place. They hadn’t had very charitable thoughts concerning their aunt and her choice of husbands for them during their journey. But as Rosie had pointed out, things could have been a lot worse.

“Miss Callahan?”

Hunny spun at the voice. “Mr. Comfort.” She noticed he’d come from the back of the building – had he been looking for her? “Michael, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He approached slowly, as if she were a frightened deer that would run away. What could he be thinking?

“What do you want?”

“I came to personally invite you to the barbecue at the Triple-C tomorrow.”

She took a step back. The last thing she expected was this. “Barbecue?”

He nodded and slowly moved in her direction. She noticed he was clean-shaven, his hair combed. His scent reached her before he did – soap, newly cut wood and fresh air. “Yes. My brothers are inviting your sisters as we speak. It’s quite the social affair. I know our sister already invited you, but we wanted to make sure it wasn’t forgotten.”

She’d never been this close to one of the Comfort brothers without anyone else around before, and fought the urge to look at his right hand. “Mrs. Upton mentioned it too.”

“Then you’ll come?”

“I ... I’m not sure.”

He stopped. “Because of my brothers and me?”

“N ... no, of course not. It’s just ...” Her shoulders slumped. The horror of her aunt’s betrayal was still fresh: Mr. Boone, the threats, the lecherous old men, the hopelessness that nearly swallowed all of them whole. And then coming all this way only to find out no one was prepared for their arrival. She just couldn’t deal with any more stresses. “... yes.”

His green eyes fixed on her. “Miss Callahan. Hunny ...”

To hear him speak her name felt odd. “Do you often exercise such manners, Mr. Comfort?”

“Clear Creek is a small place. People will be calling you and your sisters by your Christian names by the end of the

barbecue.”

She turned to face him. “And you’re getting a head start, I suppose?”

He smiled. “And I was hoping that even if I’m not yet ready to be a husband, I can still be your friend.”

She froze. He was adorable, in a way ... and perhaps more. He was clearly trying to make amends from the horrible start they’d had. When one got down to it, she wasn’t angry at Michael Comfort and his brothers. Perhaps none of them were, though she couldn’t speak for Rosie. She was angry at Aunt Henrietta, furious for trying to toss her and her sisters’ lives away like so much chaff. They meant nothing to her. They never had.

And she could use a friend. Even one who’d made a really bad first impression. It didn’t hurt that he was being gallant.

Hunny swallowed and allowed herself to smile. “Very well, Mr. Com ... *Michael*. We’ll come to the barbecue.”

\* \* \*

“WHAT SHOULD I WEAR?” Georgie asked as they retired for the evening. Sure enough, she and Rosie had agreed to go as well.

“We only escaped with so much,” Rosie said. “You’ll just have to make do.”

“Can I borrow your green dress?”

Rosie looked at her, aghast. “No. *I* have to wear something decent too. Besides, all my clothes would fit you like a tent.”

Hunny took her spare dress out of the armoire, a lovely green frock trimmed in lace with pearl buttons, and brushed at it with one hand. “Pity we were only able to get away with a few things.”

“At least we got away,” Rosie point out. “Just think where we’d be if we hadn’t.”

Georgie shuddered. “I don’t *want* to think about it. Ever again.” She looked at her blue day dress, hanging on the back

of the door to their room. “I should iron this.”

“I can do it for you,” Rosie offered.

“Really?”

Rosie shrugged. “I’m bored.”

Hunny stared at her in shock at first, then smiled. “Thank the Lord.”

“What?” Rosie said. “You like that I’m bored?”

“No, but I like the fact that you’re not fretting so much you can’t do anything else. Maybe this barbecue is just what we need. We’ll meet new people and who knows, maybe find more permanent work for ourselves.”

“Not laundry,” Georgie said. “Please, no more laundry. I thought it was bad having to watch you take it out.”

Rosie laughed. “I’m afraid those days are over.”

“Far behind us now,” Hunny said with a sigh. She looked at Georgie’s blue dress. It was already showing signs of wear, and they’d only left Denver a couple of weeks ago. “I’m afraid we’ll all have to learn to sew better.” She looked at Rosie. “I think you’re the best with a needle and thread.”

“For mending. Georgie’s the one with the knack for actual sewing – she’d do much better than I.”

“But I’m not good enough to sew us new dresses,” Georgie protested. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Don’t worry – by the time we really need some, you’ll have learned,” Hunny said. “We just need to find someone to teach us.” She thought of her brief meeting with Michael Comfort. Was his sister a good seamstress? “Perhaps we can ask around at the barbecue.” Rumor had it half the town would be there. Did that mean the Cookes’ relatives were that numerous, or had they invited more guests? Just how many people were there in and around Clear Creek?

“Well, there’s no help for it – we shall have to wear what we have.” Georgie let herself fall onto the big bed. “How I miss having lots of clothes.”

“Trust me,” Hunny said. “You’d miss your freedom more.”

“You’re right.” She sat up and smiled at Rosie. “Are you looking forward to the barbecue?”

Rosie made a face. “I’m not sure. Darcy Comfort seems nice, but ...”

“Zachary talked to me quite a bit,” Georgie said. “But I get tongue-tied and don’t know what to say. I can’t ask him if he’s been to the latest opera or ballet, can I?”

“What does it matter?” Rosie said with a laugh. “We never got to attend anything in Denver.”

“I know, but asking is how I found out about things.”

Hunny examined the hem of her day dress. “Georgie, can you mend this for me?”

“But I have my own dress to work on.”

“I think we’ll need a few things for tomorrow. If we can’t have new dresses, then maybe we can find some new ribbons to wear?”

“A trip to the mercantile?” Georgie asked, then flopped back on the bed. “What am I saying? We have no money – we haven’t even been working here a week.”

“I still have a little, and as much as I hate to use it, we have the store credit that was given to us.” She sighed and looked at Georgie. “I’ll iron your dress if you hem mine – you’re much faster.” And after Hunny did that, she’d find something else to do, because if she didn’t she’d keep seeing Michael Comfort’s face pop into her head. It kept happening and she couldn’t understand why. The brothers had apologized. They were still trying to make amends by escorting them to the barbecue. And he wanted to be her friend. So why did he keep invading her thoughts?

Finally they grabbed their reticules and shawls and left the hotel. Maybe a visit with the cantankerous Irene Dunnigan would clear her head. The woman could certainly clear anything she wanted. Too bad she hadn’t been in Denver when they needed someone to rescue them. Aunt Henrietta wouldn’t

have stood a chance against Irene, her voice and her legendary ladle – Sally had told her some stories.

Hunny smiled as she and her sisters walked down the boardwalk to the mercantile. One way or another, she'd get through this.

## CHAPTER 12

The next day the sisters dressed, fixed their hair with the new ribbons they bought the day before and had a light breakfast. Lorcan Brody had already left for the Triple-C with the Van Cleets to help with some of the pre-barbecue chores, and Sally had gotten a ride from the Dunningans so she could assist with the food. With Ada keeping an eye on the hotel in everyone else's absence – someone had to – the girls were left to themselves until their escorts, the Comforts, showed up.

“When do you think they’ll arrive?” Georgie asked.

“Soon, I would think,” Rosie replied. “The barbecue starts at noon, from what I understand.”

“Why don’t we go downstairs and wait there?” Hunny suggested.

Georgie headed for the door. “That’s a fine idea. I can’t stand to be in this room another minute – it reminds me of the days before we left Denver.”

Hunny shuddered. “Try not to think about that.” She followed her out the door. Downstairs the sisters waved goodbye to Ada, left the hotel and settled on the porch.

A group of men approached, and the women stiffened. They didn’t know these men and were unsure of what to do. “Howdy, ladies,” one of them said with a smile.

Hunny noticed the deputy’s badge he wore, and her shoulders sagged in relief. “Good morning, sir.” She glanced at the other men. “Have you come to the hotel to dine?”



“No, ma’am. I’m just instructin’ these gentlemen how to patrol the town durin’ the barbecue.”

The sisters looked at one another in confusion. “Patrol the town?” Rosie asked. “You mean almost *everyone’s* going to the barbecue?”

“Purty much – most folks are makin’ a day of it.” He glanced at the others and smiled. “I’m sorry, I ain’t introduced myself. My name’s Eli Turner, Pleasant’s husband. She told me the three of ya are right nice.”

Hunny was flabbergasted. It was hard to picture Pleasant, an obvious Southern belle and to the manor (well, the plantation) born, married to this ... hayseed. But he seemed nice enough, and she was quickly learning, as were her sisters, that when it came to men some traits were more valuable than others. Pleasant Turner didn’t look miserable in the least – on the contrary, she seemed quite happy. And on the other hand, sleazy Mr. Spicer had probably never said “ain’t” in his life.

She looked at the rest of the gentlemen. “And your friends?”

Deputy Turner waved the men over, pointing to them as they joined him. “Chase Adams, he’s our blacksmith. August Bennett’s one of our local ranchers – he’s originally from Buffalo. And Levi Stone here works at the bank and is one of the honest-to-goodness children of Israel – though he goes to church with the rest of us Gentiles.”

The sisters smiled in greeting. Hunny looked them over again. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, gentlemen. Will your wives be at the barbecue?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Levi replied. He had dark hair and just a hint of a Jewish accent. “They dropped us off in town and rode out together.”

“You’re sure to meet them,” Chase offered. “You are going, aren’t you?”

“Yes, we’re just waiting for our ...” Hunny looked at her sisters and back. “... ride.” For some reason she couldn’t bring

herself to say “escorts.” She didn’t know why – pride, probably.

“Oh yeah, the Comfort boys,” Deputy Turner said, thankfully leaving it at that.

“Eli,” August interjected. “We’d best get on with it.”

“Right. Ladies, we’ll see ya this afternoon when we switch with Tom and some of the other men. Whenever we have one of these big to-dos, everyone wants to go, so we take turns guardin’ the town.”

The sisters exchanged a look of astonishment. “You do?” Georgie said in surprise. “Voluntarily?”

“Well, it’s my job,” Eli said, tapping his badge. “But the law ‘round here’s just my brother and I ‘cept when a U.S. marshal drops in, so some of the menfolk chip in. It’s how we do things ‘round here.” He tipped his hat, as did the others, and they moved along.

“Well, can you imagine that?” Georgie said.

“The town’s small enough,” Hunny pointed out. “Still, it’s nice to see the townspeople work together.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Rosie commented.

The sisters didn’t have to wait much longer. A wagon soon appeared with Darcy and Michael on the seat and Zachary riding in the back. “Is there going to be enough room?” Georgie asked quietly.

“Hush,” Rosie warned. “Be glad they have a wagon and we don’t have to ride horseback.”

Hunny had a sudden vision of hanging onto Michael Comfort, the wind in her hair as they galloped across the prairie. She shook herself to dislodge it. “She’s right, let’s not complain.”

“Do you think the wagon belongs to one of them – ow!” Georgie frowned at Rosie.

“Hello, ladies,” Darcy called as the wagon approached.

Michael brought the team to a stop, wrapped the lines around the brake, climbed down and went straight to Hunny. “You look as if you’re ready to be off.”

Hunny glanced at her sisters and back, her stomach fluttering. “Yes, we are.” She looked at the wagon. “Is there enough room for all of us?”

“Of course, if you don’t mind riding in the wagon back with me,” Zachary said.

“We don’t mind,” Rosie told him. “Should I run upstairs and get a blanket for us to sit on?”

“Of course not,” Darcy joined them. “We took care of that.”

The women exchanged another look and approached the wagon. Sure enough, he was true to his word. “What are those blankets covering?” Hunny asked.

Zachary pulled back a blanket to reveal sacks of who-knew-what stacked beneath. “Oh, a little of this and a little of that. Shall I help you up?” Before Georgie could open her mouth, he put his hands on her waist and lifted her into the back of the wagon.

“Oh my!” she exclaimed.

“Scoot to the front, Miss Callahan,” he instructed.

Darcy moved toward Rosie, who backed up a step, a flash of warning in her eyes. He sighed. “I can lift you into the wagon or you can climb up yourself. Whichever you prefer.”

Hunny shook her head in dismay. “Oh for Heaven’s sake, Rosie, let the man help you.”

Rosie snorted. “Fine.” She walked over to the wagon and held her arms out. “You may lift away, Mr. Comfort.”

Darcy looked at her position, glanced at his brothers, shrugged and tried to lift her into the wagon, but only got halfway and had to set her down again. “Sorry.” He put her hands on his shoulders, bent his knees and hoisted her in, letting out a squeak as he did.

Once she settled herself, she smirked at him. “Not used to a girl my size, are you?”

He smiled back. “I will endeavor to adjust, ma’am.” Then he bowed, leaving her gaping in surprise.

Zachary scrambled back up, and Darcy had returned to the driver’s seat. Hunny realized that meant Michael would help her up. She looked at him expectantly, then remembered his damaged hand. Would he be able to ...?

“Are you ready, Miss Callahan?”

“Well, yes, but ... oh!” He’d put his hands on her waist and lifted her in as if she weighed no more than a feather, his hands lingering a moment before he let go. “Get settled on one of those sacks of grain.”

She got to her feet and found a place to sit. She and Georgie sat on one side of the wagon bed, with Rosie and Zachary on the other.

“Everyone ready?” Michael asked as he took his place on the seat.

“Let’s go,” Zachary slapped the side of the wagon a few times, then smiled at the sisters. “This is going to be fun.”

“This is going to be something,” Hunny muttered under her breath. Georgie glanced her way with a tiny smile. She’d heard, but Hunny didn’t care. Her goal today was to find more work. Though they’d only been in town a few days, Clear Creek was beginning to grow on them. But if they were going to stay, they’d have to make a living at something. There was no help for it.

Hunny watched Michael drive, and part of her wished the original plan had worked out. After the initial shock at their situation calmed, she was beginning to see things differently. Only time would tell if she or her sisters married. The Comfort brothers were available but presently unable to do the job. Still, she was beginning to like Michael Comfort. Maybe down the road ...

The ride to the Triple-C wasn’t as long as she’d expected, just a few miles. So she was curious when Michael brought the

wagon to a halt as they approached the top of a rise. “Why are we stopping?”

He looked over his shoulder. “Are you ready for this?”

“For what?” Rosie asked.

Georgie sat up straight and craned her neck to see. “Where are we?”

“We’re here,” Darcy said with a smile. “The Triple-C’s just over this hill.”

“The first time we rode this way and saw it, we were very impressed,” Michael said. “It’s quite a sight at first – we just want you to enjoy it.”

Hunny looked at Rosie and Georgie and shrugged. “All right. Drive on.”

Michael and Darcy got the horses moving, glanced at the sisters and grinned ear to ear.

“My goodness, one would think we were approaching a royal palace,” Rosie commented.

“That’s not an inapt comparison,” Zachary said.

The wagon crested the hill. “Oh my goodness, look at that!” Georgie gasped. Hunny and Rosie leaned forward as they saw the ranch below. Once again Michael brought the wagon to a stop so they could view it a moment.

“My heavens,” Hunny whispered. “It’s beautiful.”

And indeed it was. There was a large two-story ranch house with a porch running the length of the front. A large barn sat to one side with what looked like a bunkhouse next to it. There was another house on the other side, not as large but still impressive. Halfway up the hill they were about to descend was a charming cabin, also with a full porch. And here and there were smaller buildings (probably to store equipment) and several large corrals.

Most of all, the ranch was full of people. Wagons were lined up on one side of the barnyard and the barbecue looked as if it was in full swing. “Are we late?” Hunny asked.

“No, right on time,” Michael said confidently.

“Look at all the people,” Georgie observed. “I think the whole town really is here.”

“Everyone who isn’t required to be elsewhere.” Darcy turned to face them. “We’ll introduce you around. Clear Creek has some very interesting people.”

“Are you referring to the stories you spoke of?” Rosie asked, then screwed up her face. “Or did someone else tell us that?”

Zachary’s face fell. “We told you. Don’t you remember?”

Rosie nodded. “Must have slipped my mind. Too many people, too short a time.”

Zachary, Hunny noticed, simply nodded understandingly. Give the Comfort brothers credit – they weren’t easily insulted.

Michael gave the horses a slap of leather and they began their descent. There were few trees, Hunny noted – just a large oak on the hill and a few smaller ones of various kinds here and there. She wondered what it would be like to live in a place like this, strolling through the rolling hills in the evening, picking wildflowers. Was that what Honoria and Major did after supper, or were their days full of hard work? Did the Cookes keep servants or just cowhands? She would soon find out.

She again thought of the brothers’ situation. They were once rich like the Cookes, owned a huge plantation near Savannah and were the cream of the city. Darcy and Zachary didn’t go into detail as to how they lost everything. Did she dare ask?

Michael parked the wagon next to the others, brought the team to a stop and climbed down. Several cowhands headed toward them to take the horses to one of the large corrals. “Darcy, Zach, help me unhitch the team.” Michael looked at Hunny. “After we help the women down, of course.” He smiled, went to the rear of the wagon and held up his hands. “Miss Callahan?”

Hunny glanced at Rosie and Georgie, but he wasn't looking at them, just her. She half-smiled, took a small breath and stood. She then approached the rear of the wagon and let him grasp her waist. Before she knew it she was on the ground.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Thank you." She noticed his hands were still on her waist.

"You're welcome."

She heard Georgie giggle behind her. "Mr. Comfort."

"Yes?"

"You can release me now."

He looked at his hands. "Oh! Yes, sorry." He let go and took a step back.

She moved away from the wagon as Darcy and Zachary helped Rosie and Georgie down. Soon her sisters were by her side, staring at the crowd gathered in the yard and near the large fire pit off to one side. The air was filled with the smell of food, the sounds of laughter and an air of good cheer.

"Welcome!" A handsome older man with dark blonde hair and hazel eyes approached. *He must be one of the Cookes*, Hunny thought.

She was right. "Colin Cooke, may I introduce the Callahan sisters?" Michael motioned to her. "Miss Hunny Callahan." Then he turned to the others. "And these are her sisters, Rosie and Georgie."

"Welcome to the Triple-C, ladies," he said in a crisp British accent. Hunny remembered Major Comfort's father-in-law Harrison's accent. She'd enjoyed listening to him at tea. "How do you do, Mr. Cooke?" she replied.

"Your ranch is lovely," Georgie gushed.

"It took a lot of work to get it this way," Colin said. "Before we became cattle ranchers, we were pig farmers, if you can believe that. I dare say, our woodshed's bigger than the house we lived in back then." The sisters followed his gaze

and marveled. The woodshed in question was about twenty feet long and twelve wide.

Hunny looked at the huge two-story ranch house. “Your home is lovely.”

Mr. Cooke glanced at it and back. “Yes, and noisy. Actually, my family and I live in the one next door. Harrison and his family – and these gentlemen’s brother – live in the main house. We’re just one big happy family.”

Georgie pointed. “And the cabin on the hill?”

“That belongs to our stepfather Jefferson and his wife Edith. They’re around here somewhere – you’ll meet them, I’m sure.” He bowed slightly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I must leave you in these gentlemen’s capable hands.” He turned, then snapped his fingers. “Oh – there’s lemonade on the porch along with treats the ladies have prepared. Help yourselves.” With that he was off to who knew what responsibilities.

“My goodness,” Georgie said. “Are the rest of the Cookes like that?”

Zachary smiled. “Oh yes. Very nice people, the Cookes.”

“They’ve helped us more than we can repay,” Darcy admitted with a thin smile. *Was he embarrassed?* Hunny thought. Perhaps, but at least he was open about it. Most men would prefer to pay their own way, and hated when they had to depend on others to do so. They had their pride too.

She looked over her surroundings, and remembered that for all the size and grandeur of the Triple-C, it would probably pale in comparison to the brothers’ precious Comfort Fields in its antebellum heyday. Her heart went out to them, and she began to see them in a new light. They had lost everything, but hadn’t let it break them. “My goodness,” she whispered.

“Did you say something?” Michael asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing important.” She swallowed and looked around. “Well, are you going to introduce us to people?”



“Of course – that’s one of the reasons we’re here.” Michael offered her his arm. She watched as Darcy and Zachary did the same for her sisters.

“There you are,” Grandma Waller said, a glass of lemonade in her hand. She took a quick sip. “Land sakes, it’s hot. I wish I’d brought my fan.”

A child of eleven or twelve tugged on her skirt. “I have a fan upstairs you can use, Grandma.”

“Why thank you, Parthena,” Grandma said. “That’s very kind of you. Could you fetch it right away?”

“Sure thing!” The child ran for the smaller ranch house.

“That’s one of Colin and Belle’s younguns,” Grandma informed them. “I’m sure you’ll meet the whole bunch by day’s end. Lord knows there’s a lot of them.”

Georgie giggled. “How many?”

“Oh, child, I’m so old I can’t keep count. Really, I get tired from that much counting.” Everyone laughed at her joke.

Hunny studied the crowd and noticed there were children everywhere, though not a lot of little ones that she could see and no babies. Parthena must be one of the youngest. Hmmm, babies ... what would it be like to have children of her own? Would she ever know? Her eyes flicked to Michael and back.

“Look, there’s Doc,” Grandma waved at her husband. “If you’ll excuse me, I’d better go see what trouble he’s causing.”

Darcy laughed and offered her his free arm. “Then let me escort you. I’m sure Miss Callahan doesn’t mind, do you?” He smiled at Rosie.

“Of course not,” Rosie said – and without a hint of sarcasm.

Hunny watched as Grandma Waller wrapped an arm through Darcy’s and allowed him and Rosie to help her to her husband. Considering the woman was old enough to be their grandmother, she got around very well. “She’s amazing.”

“Yes, she is,” Michael concurred. “As is her husband.”

“Michael! Zachary!” They all turned to see two men approaching them – actually, two more Comfort brothers. The resemblance was clear. “And these are?” Hunny asked as she leaned toward Michael.

He smiled. “Benedict on the left, Pleasant’s twin Matthew – Matt for short – on the right. Our youngest brothers – they live at the men’s camp.”

“Men’s camp?”

“Mrs. Upton told us about it, remember?” Georgie reminded her.

Hunny nodded. In a short time, Sally had informed them of quite a few things about Clear Creek. Apparently Mr. Van Cleet thought that once his hotel was finished, those men wanting to stay in Clear Creek could bunk together outside town, work odd jobs for people and save enough money to either establish themselves or move on. He was doing something similar for Hunny and her sisters, come to think of it – for which they were most grateful.

Introductions were quickly made and soon the little party made its way to the front porch and helped themselves to lemonade. They moved on to a table laden with cookies, pastries and other snacks. “Look at all this!” Zachary said with glee. He looked at Georgie. “Would you like me to fix you a plate?”

“But if we eat now we won’t have room for later,” she pointed out.

“He will,” Matt said archly.

“Matt, keep it to yourself,” Michael scolded.

Hunny giggled. “I take it Zachary likes his food?”

“I do!” Zachary said unashamedly. He grabbed a plate and began to load it. “Are you sure you don’t want any?” he asked Georgie again.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind a cookie or two –”

“Splendid.” He handed her a plate. “Anyone else?”

Benedict and Matt each took a plate and helped themselves.

“Would you like something to eat?” Michael asked Hunny.

For some reason, she blushed. She shook it off and looked at the table. “I agree with Georgie – a little taste would be nice.”

He slipped her arm from his, took a plate and handed it to her. “I’m not that hungry myself – do you mind if we share a plate?”

“That’s fine.” She watched him choose a few baked goods, and he motioned her to do the same. By the time they had what they wanted, the others had disappeared. “Where did they go?” Hunny scanned the growing crowd.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure they’re close by.” He looked at her and smiled. “Are you the mother hen?”

“Not usually,” she said, then stopped. “No, I suppose I am. Someone has to be.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Because of us?”

She tried not to roll her eyes. “No, because of ...” She frowned and sighed. “Because of everything, really.”

“Being the eldest. The responsible one.”

“Both.” She nodded sadly, but found herself smiling too. Michael was the second of seven children himself, and had probably led men in the war – he would understand, at least a little.

“Follow me. We’ll find a place to sit and talk.”

She followed him off the porch and into the yard. Chairs and benches had been set up in shady areas and blankets spread elsewhere. People socialized and munched. By the time they found a couple of chairs unoccupied, Hunny realized this was the first large social gathering she’d attended in a long time. She was hit with a sense of freedom she hadn’t experienced before, and realized that Aunt Henrietta had kept them prisoner long before she ever arranged marriages for them.

She stumbled, and Michael caught her, though a jam pastry fell off the plate. “There, now, are you all right?”

She looked at him, saw the concern in his eyes and nodded. “I’m sorry, I must have stepped on something.” She looked at the tart on the grass. “Oh dear.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked again, ignoring the sweet on the ground.

Her eyes met his. “Yes,” she whispered.

Michael smiled. “I’m glad.” He bent to clean up the spill, and Hunny almost had to pick up her heart. Oh my ...

## CHAPTER 13

*H*unny watched the Cookes' guests as they smiled, laughed and shared a camaraderie she hadn't witnessed before. She thought of her reaction to Michael's concern as he kept her from falling. No man had ever looked at her that way except maybe her father. She tried not to think about her parents as Michael settled beside her and smiled, almost dropping the plate.

Wait – when had she begun thinking of him by his Christian name? She closed her eyes. *No, don't go there, you can't. What if you find work elsewhere? What if you leave Clear Creek?*

She opened her eyes and found him studying her. “You seem to be having some deep thoughts,” he commented.

“Not at all.” She brushed at her dress.

He chuckled. “You're not getting off that easy. What were you thinking about?”

She plucked a blade of grass. They'd opted for the lawn instead of the chairs. “Well, if you must know, I was thinking about my father.”

“Oh?” He offered her the plate.

She took a sugar cookie. “Yes, I miss him.” She watched the goings-on around them and smiled. “He would have loved this.”

Michael lay on his side, leaning on one elbow, and picked at the grass with his other hand. “Who wouldn't? Colin wasn't

kidding when he said this is one big happy family. I think half the town's related to the Cookes. After we eat I'll introduce you to some of them."

"I look forward to it." She took a bite.

They munched in silence for a few minutes, watching the people around them. She wanted him to talk to her because she liked his accent. In fact, she was beginning to like *him*. He was so irritating when they'd first met, but then she'd been angry at the time. Was she still? It seemed it didn't take much to get her riled these days, and the same was true for Rosie and Georgie. "Where do you suppose the others have gotten to?"

He sighed in contentment and looked at the blue sky. "They'll find us, don't worry." He looked at her and smiled. "At least you'll always know where to find Zachary and Georgie."

She glanced at the food tables on the porch. Sure enough, there was Zachary, refilling his plate with Georgie in tow. She laughed. "Goodness, you're right."

"Of course I am." He clasped his hands behind his head as he laid back. "What a beautiful day."

She suddenly felt nervous. "It is. The best I've seen in a long time."

He glanced her way. "Is it?"

She nodded, unsure of what to say. The tone in his voice was different, but she couldn't pinpoint how.

He sat up. "Hunny ... I mean, Miss Callahan ..." He rubbed his chin. "Forgive me if I'm being too forward, but exactly what was it like living with your aunt?"

She took a breath, eyes wide then took another bite of cookie to cover it. But it was too late – he'd seen her reaction. "Please, let's not spoil a lovely day by discussing Aunt Henrietta."

He nodded solemnly. "I understand." His eyes returned to the porch and she let hers follow, watching Zachary with

Georgie. He scanned the crowds and found Darcy and Rosie as well.

“Let me ask you this: how would your sisters react if I asked them the same question?”

“Please don’t.” She hated the pleading sound in her voice – but not as much as she’d hate Rosie’s fulminations or Georgie’s weeping if he went through with his threat.

He faced her, his eyes again full of concern. “I know it was bad – you’ve made that clear. And my brothers and I want to help if we can.”

“With what?” Her heart beat faster. What was he talking about? Unless...

“With your protection.”

Hunny gasped again. She’d avoided contemplating what would happen if their aunt sent men after them, but the scenario had visited her in her nightmares: men bursting into their room at the hotel, binding and gagging them and carrying them off. Aunt Henrietta’s men would steal them away and they’d never be seen or heard from again. No one would follow because no one would know. It sent a shiver up her spine and she squeezed her eyes shut, as if that would help. She didn’t want to have to face that.

She felt a warm hand on her arm. “Hunny, let us help you,” Michael said gently.

Her throat constricted as fear took hold. “Please,” she said softly. “Don’t ...”

His hand fell away. “Very well, I won’t bring it up again.” He took a deep breath. “When you’re ready to tell me, you will.”

Warmth and anger hit her at once. How dare he presume what she’d do? But she could see his concern was genuine. He was being protective, and she liked it. But could she afford to? For all she knew, she or one of her sisters could meet someone today that could give them a job in Portland or Seattle or even California. It wouldn’t do to get attached to Clear Creek ...

“Would you like to take a stroll?”

Hunny started. “What?”

Once again, he put his hand on her arm. “Would you like to walk around, meet some people?”

There was that look of concern again. Her heart warmed. *Oh my goodness*, she thought. *What is this man doing to me?* Was he still trying to make up for what happened? Maybe if she apologized again he’d stop. But he’d said she had nothing to apologize for ... oh, she was in a muddle! “Yes, fine,” she finally said.

He got to his feet, scooped up the mostly-empty plate and helped her up. “Let’s see if we can’t find August Bennett and his wife Penelope. They must be here by now.”

“August and Penelope?” Finally, something else to talk about. “I’ve heard those names before.”

“Of course, probably at the hotel. They live a couple of miles out of town. Penelope is a cousin of the Cookes. She and her sisters Eloise and Constance came here from England to marry locals.”

“Oh yes, Sally mentioned them ... oh! I met him in town before we came here.”

“Ah, yes, he probably has the first round of guard duty. But you can at least meet his wife. Another couple I think you’d like is Cutty and Imogene Holmes. Now they have a story to tell.”

“I’m not sure I can take any more stories,” she admitted. “I’m going to have a hard enough time remembering everyone’s names.”

He chuckled, searched the crowd, spotted someone he knew and waved. He took her by the hand and led her toward them.

“Who do you see?” She could barely keep up and thought of pulling her hand away. She hoped Rosie or Georgie didn’t see her like this.



“Ryder Jones and his wife Constance. Am I going too fast?”

“A little ...” *Constance, a cousin to the Cookes*, she thought. How was she ever to keep them straight?

“Oh, terribly sorry. Ryder!” Michael slowed to a walk as he called to what looked like a ranch hand.

“Well, if it ain’t Mike Comfort.” Ryder glanced around. “Where are yer brothers? I ain’t used to seein’ ya without a crowd of ‘em ‘round ya.”

Michael tugged on Hunny’s hand, pulling her closer. “They’re around. I’d like you to meet Miss Hunny Callahan.”

Ryder Jones looked at her and smiled. He was handsome in a rough sort of way, lean and muscular. He looked the same age as the Cooke brothers, maybe younger. “Howdy – glad to meet ya,” he said. He turned and searched a group of women nearby. “Constance? C’mere, sugar.”

A woman stepped out of the crowd. She had russet brown hair and was wearing a simple calico dress. “What is it?” she replied in a cultured British accent that couldn’t have been more different from her husband’s.

“I want ya to meet Michael’s new friend,” he called back, waving her over.

She stepped away from the women, smoothed her skirt and headed their way with a big smile.

Michael leaned toward Hunny. “Ryder and Constance live more than a two-hour ride from Clear Creek. He’s got a huge spread he runs with his brother Seth and his wife Eloise. The Holmeses live there too.”

“I’m starting to think I need to write all this down,” she whispered back, and he chuckled.

“How do you do?” Constance said as she reached them. “Welcome to the Triple-C.”

Hunny shook her hand. She was suddenly hit with how much the Jones’ had, whereas the man standing next to her had nothing as far as she knew. And there it was – no matter

how Michael Comfort made her feel, it was ludicrous to think he or his brothers could provide for her, Rosie and Georgie.

Her reaction was probably just relief, not infatuation. The farce that had accompanied their arrival was behind them now. She was free to enjoy this man's company. After the unfriendliness of Aunt Henrietta, no wonder she was having reactions to being treated with care and respect. She wondered if Rosie and Georgie were feeling the same with their escorts.

"I dare say, you're brave," Constance said. "I congratulate you on making it this far."

Hunny pulled her hand from Michael's. "What do you mean?"

Constance smiled. "Oh, don't get me wrong, I know you had a long journey and got off to a rough start with Mr. Comfort." She winked at him. "And speaking from experience, likely frightened to death."

The woman wasn't wrong. Hunny smiled back and nodded.

"Let me introduce you to my sisters, shall I?" Constance glanced around. "I do believe they're in the kitchen."

"Why don't ya do that, sugar?" Ryder said. "There's some things I'd like to talk to Mike 'bout."

Constance wrapped her arm around Hunny's and steered her toward the house. "I do hope you and your sisters join the ladies' sewing circle. Eloise and I don't always get into town for it, but when we do we have a lovely time."

Hunny smiled weakly. Sally had told them about the sewing circle as well. She wasn't sure if she was ready for that, but was intrigued. "I hear it can be quite boisterous."

"You heard right," Constance said with a laugh. "Especially when Irene Dunnigan and Grandma Waller cross each other. If you do come, whatever you do, don't bring up the war – Irene has the urge to fight it over again." She laughed again and continued to the kitchen.

They opened the back door to a sea of activity. It took Hunny a moment to get past the sheer size of the kitchen, not to mention that of the cookstove against the wall. It was twice the size of the hotel's – Rosie would either be ecstatic or green with jealousy.

“Yes, I know.” Sadie said from next to the monstrous stove. “The first time folks lay eyes on this cast-iron beast, they want to turn and run. That or marry it.”

Constance laughed. “I ran,” she confessed. “Cooking scared me to death at first. I was horrible at it and burned everything. Poor Ryder.”

Hunny glanced between them, smiled, then studied the huge room. It was orderly, smelled wonderful and was filled with women's chatter and laughter. She noticed Irene mixing something in a bowl at the kitchen table. “What are you preparing?”

Sadie tapped her spoon on the pot she'd been stirring. “This is gravy. Irene is whipping up a batch of biscuits. And Belle ...” She looked around. “Where's Belle?”

“She went to her house to fetch more sugar,” Honoria said as she entered the kitchen from a hallway. “Miss Callahan, how lovely to see you. I'm so glad you came.”

She forced a smile. “Thank you. I hope your husband feels the same.” She bit her tongue. She shouldn't have said that.

Honoria exchanged a glance with Constance and sighed. “It's all right, Major is fine. He still wants to help in any way he can.”

“I can assure you, Mrs. Cooke, there's no need. My sisters and I can manage. We do thank you for the line of credit at Dunnigan's.”

Irene looked up, cracked a hint of a smile and got back to mixing.

“I hope you enjoy the barbecue today,” Honoria said. “I know I'm going to ... urgh.” One hand went to her belly, the other to her chest.

“Honoriam,” Constance said with concern, “are you feeling all right?”

“Just a bit of indigestion. I think I taste-tested the barbecue sauce too much.”

“I’ll test it from now on.” Sadie gave the pot another stir. “I think you’ve eaten a whole bowl of it. Wait until it’s on the meat, will you?”

“Yes, Mama.” Honoriam rolled her eyes and went out the back door.

“Sadie, have you seen Eloise or Penelope?” Constance asked.

“Yes, they’re in the parlor taking a break for a few minutes.” Sadie turned to them. “You might want to as well before anyone finds you.”

Constance smiled, took Hunny’s hand and led her down the hall to the front parlor. “Ah, there you are.”

A blonde and an auburn-haired woman looked up from the book they were examining. They sat on a lovely settee and wore simple calico dresses like their sister. Maybe they didn’t have as much money as Hunny first thought, but if they made up for it in land, that meant they were successful.

“Oh, this must be one of the Callahans,” said the redhead.

“Yes,” Constance said. “Penelope, Eloise,” she said and motioned to each in turn, “this is Hunny.”

“How do you do?” Hunny said as her eyes roamed the room. The parlor was richly appointed, a symbol of the Cookes’ wealth, but she’d seen grander. Maybe the Cooke family didn’t like showing off their money. Aunt Henrietta would have tried to find out how rich they were. She smiled away the thought. “So when do I get to hear your stories?”

Penelope smiled as she stood. “Sit down and we’ll tell you some.” She crossed the room and gave her a hug. Hunny tried not to flinch but found it hard. Strange – why would she have such a reaction? True, they were strangers, but ...

“I’m so glad to meet you at last,” Penelope continued.  
“I’m sure you could use a few friends,”

She stared at the women. They understood how she and her sisters felt. The thought helped her relax and smile.

Penelope smiled back. “Now, do sit down and pick one of us. We don’t mind telling you everything.”

And so Hunny sat and listened.

\* \* \*

ROSIE EYED Darcy as he filled her plate with food. She didn’t know which she was more curious about, the man or the barbecued beef ribs her mouth was watering over. The sauce smelled delightful and she wondered about the recipe.

“Is this enough? Or would you like more?”

She peered at the pile of food. “Good heavens, do you think I’m a squirrel storing up for the winter?” She cringed at the words but didn’t regret them. She was in an exceptionally feisty mood. But then, she always did like presenting a challenge. She was curious as to how much he could take.

He arched an eyebrow and began filling his own plate.

Georgie stood on the other side of her, eyes wide. Zachary was being more careful about the portions he was giving her. “It’s not too much, is it?” Funny - Rosie thought that given Zachary’s reputation for putting away meals (Sally had described him as “having a hollow leg”), he would be the one piling it on instead of Darcy.

As it was, Georgie swallowed hard, shook her head and said nothing. “Oh, go on, Georgie, enjoy yourself,” Rosie urged. “Since when do you eat like a bird?”

Zachary turned to her. “She enjoys eating?”

Rosie shrugged. “Don’t we all?”

Zachary looked between the two sisters, glanced at his brother who was still busy serving himself, then looked at the plate in his hand. “She’s right, Miss Callahan, you should eat a

little more.” He spooned on more mashed potatoes and smiled. “Here you go.”

Georgie took the plate, glared at Rosie and hurried off. “Now where’s she going?” Rosie said to herself.

Darcy watched her retreat with concern. “Seems to me she’s embarrassed about something. Am I wrong?”

Rosie took the plate he offered. “She doesn’t know what to make of all this. Everything is so new. You understand.”

“We all do,” Zachary said. “We went through it when we first arrived. Only our circumstances were different, not to mention more ... violent. An outlaw gang attacked the town shortly after we showed up.”

“What?” Rosie said in shock. “And this is the first time you’ve mentioned it?”

Darcy motioned her away from the tables. “It’s old news. So much has happened since then. But it was exciting at the time.”

“Do tell? Sounds like the three of you have been holding out on us.”

Zachary and Darcy exchanged a look, and Rosie did her best not to smile. She knew they were trying to decide what to make of her. This was the most fun she’d had since their arrival in Clear Creek.

“Your sister appears to have found a spot in the shade,” Darcy finally commented. “Why don’t we join her?”

“Yes, let’s.” Zachary headed that way.

Rosie watched Darcy watch his brother and sighed. She was still having fun, but her concern for Georgie was greater.

“Are you all right?” Darcy asked.

“I’m fine. It’s my sister I worry about.”

“Georgie? Why?”

“She’s ... sensitive.”

His eyes flicked from her to Georgie and back. “How so?”

Rosie shrugged. She wasn't sure how much to tell him. "Our aunt wasn't a very nice woman, in case you hadn't figured that out yet."

"I gathered."

"She was always hardest on Georgie. She blamed her for ..." She shook her head. "... anything and everything."

Darcy – *egads, she was thinking of the brothers by their Christian names? At least she hadn't spoken them* – glanced at Georgie again as Zachary sat next to her. "And what about you? Are you as delicate as your sister?"

Rosie smiled. "No, and neither is Hunny. Shall we sit?" She left, not waiting for him and headed straight for Georgie. The closer she got, the more she realized her sister was upset. She sat next to her and whispered, "Are you all right?"

Georgie nodded weakly.

Rosie knew she wasn't. "Do you want to go somewhere and tell me?"

"No," she whispered back. "I don't want to make a scene or start crying or..."

Before Rosie could say anything, Darcy planted himself front of them and looked at Georgie. "Miss Callahan, how's your lunch?" he asked gently. Rosie smiled at his consideration.

Georgie stared at him. "I... I don't know."

"You haven't taken a single bite," Zachary said as he wolfed down his food. "It's very good. Try some."

Darcy stabbed at some vegetables. "I tend to eat one thing at a time, unlike Zachary. Who eats everything at all times."

Zachary stopped, fork halfway to his mouth. He looked at Darcy, shrugged, then continued eating.

Georgie gave Darcy a tiny smile. "I eat the same way you do. Rosie eats like your brother."

Rosie rolled her eyes. "Only when I'm very hungry. Sometimes I eat one thing, sometimes I mix them up." To

prove her point she scooped her vegetables onto her mashed potatoes and stirred them together.

Zachary watched her with interest. “That’s how I eat all the time!”

Georgie giggled.

Darcy watched her a moment then leaned toward her. “And what do you do with dessert – nibble or devour?”

Georgie blushed. “Do you mean do I savor it or do I ...?”

“Inhale it,” Zachary finished as he continued to eat.

“For Heaven’s sake, man,” Darcy said. “There are ladies present.”

Zachary arched an eyebrow and shrugged helplessly. “I’m hungry.”

Darcy shook his head in dismay. “You’ll have to excuse my brother, ladies. Food is the all-important factor in Zach’s life.”

Zachary didn’t reply, just bit into a biscuit.

“But enough of that,” Darcy went on. “Tell me, Georgie, what do you think of the Triple-C?”

She blinked at him a few times.

“I’m sorry, would you prefer I continue to call you Miss Callahan?”

She glanced at Rosie, who took the cue. “I don’t see why we should stand on convention. Besides, there are too many of us.”

“True,” Darcy agreed, and looked at Georgie again. “Well?”

She set her fork on her plate and looked at the ranch house. “I think it’s beautiful. It’s not like living in the city in a townhouse, but I could live here.”

He smiled at her. “I wish I could show you Comfort Fields, but that’s in the past.” He glanced around. “And I agree with you – this is a beautiful place. I could live here too.”



“I could eat this cooking every day,” Zachary commented.

Rosie laughed. “You really enjoy your food, don’t you?”

He looked at her, his mouth full, nodded and smiled.

“Don’t get him started,” Darcy warned. “He’ll begin with his favorite recipes. He can’t cook, but he tries.”

“Oh?” Rosie said with interest. “Such as?”

Zachary waved his fork in the air as he chewed. Once he swallowed, he said, “This sauce on the ribs for instance. I’d love to have the recipe. I’ve tried a vinegar-based barbecue sauce but I just can’t get it right. Now, mustard-based, I can do.”

“The secrets always in the seasonings,” she commented.

He stared at her. “Really? So what do you know about steaks?”

Rosie glanced at Darcy, who was shaking his head in despair. Good. “Personally, I adore them. What would you like to know?”

## CHAPTER 14

Darcy and Zachary watched from a distance as the Callahan sisters spoke with Belle and Sadie. Intrigued by the barbecue sauce, Rosie had sought the women out to obtain the recipe. “They’re quite pretty, don’t you think?” Zachary asked.

Darcy slowly nodded. “On that I agree. It seems the more I see them the prettier they become. And I’m not just talking about Rosie.”

“Nor I Georgie. Their older sister is lovely too.”

“I’m sure Michael thinks so as well. Speaking of which, where is he?”

Zachary looked around. “I don’t see him or Hunny anywhere.”

“They might be in the house,” Darcy said. “I’ve seen Hunny go in and out a few times today.”

“They have nice names too,” Zachary commented and sighed.

Darcy glanced at him. “If I didn’t know better, brother, I’d say you were setting your cap for one of them.”

“What? Out of the question. None of us are ready, you know that.”

“Nonetheless,” Darcy replied with a smirk. “Perhaps you’d better remind yourself. You could no more take care of Georgie Callahan than you could a pet rabbit right now.”

Zachary made a face. “Who keeps a rabbit as a pet? I’d much rather have one as stew.”

“Exactly,” Darcy crossed his arms. “We can barely feed ourselves at times, let alone a woman.” He studied Rosie a moment. “And if that one is as passionate about food as you are – and I believe she is – I would fall woefully short in caring for her. I won’t see my wife starve.”

Zachary studied Rosie as well. She had that buxom figure, those ample hips, and she was wonderfully feisty, something he appreciated. He glanced around. “Where is the rest of our family? I’ve hardly spoken to Quince all day.”

“I have, when he wasn’t slaving at the barbecue. He is one of our hosts, after all.”

“Oh yes, how could I forget? It must be nice to not to have to worry about going hungry, not with Sadie and Belle cooking delicious meals for him – to say nothing of his own wife.”

“Not to mention Edith,” Darcy added.

Zach sighed again. “What bliss. I admit it. I’m jealous.” He glanced at the Callahan sisters again. “Do you think Georgie can cook?”

“I have no idea,” Darcy said. “It’s obvious Rosie can. Lucky me.”

Zachary’s head snapped around to him. “What? I thought you said you weren’t ready for a wife, but now you’ve chosen one? Have you changed your mind?”

“Mind about what? You know Major’s plan. I’m merely making my choice. Just because we can’t marry them now, doesn’t mean we can’t choose which one we want.”

Zachary gaped at him. “But ... when did you make up your mind about this?”

Darcy shrugged. “Somewhere between the ribs and the apple pie.” He took a few steps away. “We should take time to get to know them, be friends. And if we become particular friends with one more than the others, then ...”

“If you’re speaking of Rosie, then I’d say it’s more than friendship you have in mind,” Zachary pointed out as he closed the distance.

“Who knows what the future will bring, brother? For all we know strangers will come to town, sweep the Callahan sisters off their feet, and we’re out three brides.”

“We could just order more.”

Darcy looked at the group of women still chatting. “I, for one, still feel responsible for them. Even though we had nothing to do with them showing up unannounced.”

Zachary nodded. “You’re right. I feel the same way. What do you think Michael feels?”

“You need to ask?” Darcy said, looking toward the house. “It was his suggestion that if we’re going to protect them, spending time with them is the best way to do it.”

Zachary nodded. “You’re right, he did. But how will we do it?” He glanced at the ranch house and back. “Speaking of which, I wonder if Hunny told Michael any more about the circumstances that brought them here.”

“Other than Mrs. Pettigrew?” Darcy said with a chuckle. “I don’t know. All I do know is the Callahans are sensitive about the topic. Rosie told me their aunt treated Georgie much worse than the other two.”

“She did?” Zachary glanced at the sisters across the lawn. “How so?”

“She wouldn’t say, and I wasn’t going to press it. In time, they’ll tell us. I did mention the time we had when we first arrived in town.”

“Did you also happen to mention that Quince got shot?”

“No, I figured I’d leave that out for now. I don’t want to scare them.”

“Wise. Well, shall we mingle?”

Darcy smiled. “Let’s.” They crossed the lawn to where the women gathered.

Most of the group seemed to be attendees of the ladies' sewing circle. "And for those that can't come every week," Mrs. Dunnigan was saying, "we'll send quilt squares home with some of the other members to pass along. Since the two of you and your sister are staying at the hotel, that shouldn't be a problem."

"How wonderful," Georgie said. "And do a lot of ladies come?"

"Depends on the weather, mostly," Grandma Waller put in. "Some weeks we have so many, we have to hold it at the church instead of Irene's store."

"Right," Irene agreed, then glared at Darcy and Zachary. "What do you boys want?"

Darcy gave her the warmest smile he could muster. "Good to see you, Mrs. Dunnigan. I trust you're well?"

She glared at him, but he was used to that now. "What do you care?"

Georgie gasped.

Mrs. Dunnigan looked at her. "Oh, never mind me, I'm tired. I know he cares." She turned and headed straight for her husband Wilfred, who was speaking with Colin and Harrison near the fire pit.

"You don't think anything's wrong with her, do you?" Zachary asked Grandma.

"No, son, it's just none of us are getting any younger. Thank Heaven we have strapping young men like you around to help us."

Georgie blushed head to toe and looked at the brothers. Darcy smiled back. "You'll let us know if you need help with anything?" Zachary asked.

"Of course," Grandma said. "In fact, Doc's got some wood needs chopping this week if you're interested."

"I have time," Zachary said. He looked Darcy. "You?"

"Is it a two-man job? If so, when?"

Grandma thought a moment. “How about Monday? I’ll feed you lunch to boot.”

“I’ll be there!” Zachary said with a smile.

Georgie looked at him and smiled as well.

Darcy looked at Rosie, but she was staring at the barn. He went to stand beside her. “See something interesting?”

“Who’s that man and woman talking over there? And why are all those children surrounding them?”

“Oh, that’s Cutty and Imogene Holmes. They’re probably telling one of their stories. They tell very good ones, full of pirates, adventure and derring-do – that sort of thing.”

She clasped her hands in front of her and smiled. “Storytellers, you say? That’s interesting. Is that why he’s wearing an eye patch?”

Darcy cleared his throat, smiled and nodded. Best not get into Cutty’s story either.

She glanced around then pointed at Doc Drake and his wife Elsie. “And what about them? What’s their story?”

“He came here one winter when she was staying with her distant cousin and his wife, the Wallers, and they hit it off.” He looked away, knowing that was the one story about Doc Drake that Rosie and her sisters were likely to believe.

“And what about that man over there?”

He followed her gaze, spied Preacher Jo and his wife Annie, and smiled. “Now there’s someone I’d like you to meet. Follow me.”

“Follow you where?” Georgie asked as she joined them, Zachary right behind.

“You’ll see.” Darcy kept moving.

The little group approached the preacher and waited quietly for him to finish speaking with Harvey and Mary Brown. Once they were done, Preacher Jo turned to them. “Well, if it isn’t Darcy and Zach Comfort. And whom do we have here?”

“Preacher Jo,” Darcy said, “may I introduce the Callahan sisters?”

“Ah yes, the Callahans. I’ve heard about you.”

Rosie and Georgie exchanged a quick look. “Have you?” Rosie said. “But then, who hasn’t?”

Annie stepped forward. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Annie King, Josiah’s wife.”

Preacher Jo waved. “That would be me.”

The sisters smiled at his joke. “I’m Rosie and this is Georgie. Pleased to meet you.”

“Will we see you in church on Sunday?” Preacher Jo asked.

Georgie nodded. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Rosie smiled weakly. “Yes, I suppose we’ll be there.”

“You suppose?” Darcy said. “Mr. Van Cleet can’t be working you that hard.”

“One never knows,” she said.

Darcy glanced at his brother. Time to get things moving. If they were going to protect these women, they had to start sometime. “We could escort you.”

Georgie looked at him, a smile on her face. “You could?”

“Of course,” he said. “What kind of gentlemen would we be if we didn’t?”

Rosie, on the other hand, seemed uninterested. “The church can’t be more than a hundred yards from the hotel.”

He shrugged. “Don’t you want to be escorted?”

“Oh, she didn’t say that,” Georgie put in. “Of course we would.”

Darcy smiled gently. “Good.”

“And speaking of escorts ...” Zachary offered Georgie his arm. “... why don’t we go see if there’s any more pie?”

Rosie's eyes gravitated to the food tables on the other side of the yard. "Oh look, there's Hunny. And she's bringing out more desserts." She looked at Zachary. "Lucky for you and me, eh?"

He grinned. "Shall we see who gets there first?"

Darcy watched his brother set off at a fast pace with poor Georgie on his arm. He hoped she could keep up.

"That brother of yours is something," Rosie said.

"Do you mean that in a good way or a bad way?"

"Considering he reminds me of me, that's questionable. For now, I'll say it's good."

"I'm relieved." He offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

She took it and together they headed for the food tables.

\* \* \*

HUNNY RETURNED TO THE KITCHEN, wiped her brow with her sleeve and brushed a wisp of hair out of her face. How she'd managed to end up helping with the food, she didn't know, but she was glad for it. It gave her something to do other than imagine a future that could never be.

"Are the biscuits all gone?" Belle asked, her hands on her hips as she surveyed the kitchen. "I thought I had another pan of them to take out."

Hunny studied what food remained. There were several more racks of ribs to be barbecued, a bowl of sauce to go with them, a few bowls of vegetables and a large one of potatoes. "I think Michael took the last batch out."

"I'm just too tired to handle another pan." She looked at Hunny. "You don't think we'll need them, do you?"

"I don't think so, Mrs. Cooke. I believe the guests are more interested in dessert at this point."

"True, but at least half the men out there will get their second wind and want more. They always do. By the way, call me Belle."



She nodded. “And you can call me Hunny.” She smiled. “Michael said by the end of the barbecue everyone would be calling us by our first names.” A tingle went up her spine at the sound of his name. Good grief – perhaps she was more intrigued by him than she first thought.

“Michael Comfort?” Belle clarified. “Well, he’d be right. You might as well get used to it.” She studied Hunny a moment. “I see the two of you are already on a first-name basis.”

“Mr. Comfort and me? Well,” she hedged. “I suppose.”

“You suppose?”

Hunny shrugged and offered nothing more. She didn’t want the woman to think she and Michael had an eye for each other. He didn’t, of course, but she was definitely fighting to keep her eyes off him – and was losing the battle.

Sadie entered the kitchen through the back door. “My goodness, what a hungry bunch of people this year. Are there any more biscuits?”

Belle pinched the bridge of her nose. “I knew I’d have to make another batch. I wonder where Aunt Irene is?”

Sadie laughed. “I don’t think you made a single panful. She did them all.”

Belle grinned sheepishly. “I know. But her biscuits are so much better than mine.”

Hunny listened with fascination to their banter. It was nothing important, but it was peaceful, their voices void of angst or nerves. There was no Aunt Henrietta hovering, criticizing, belittling and making their lives miserable.

She headed for the back door, Georgie and Rosie suddenly on her mind. Were they still with Darcy and Zachary?

“Where are you going?” Sadie asked as she reached for a pan. “You wouldn’t happen to know how to whip up biscuits, would you?” She gave Belle a pointed look. Belle rolled her eyes in response.

“I’m not very good at it. Rosie’s the cook in our family, and a good one too.”

Belle’s eyes lit up. “Is she?”

Sadie put her hand on her hip. “Maybe I should have Honoria tackle another batch while we keep an eye on the desserts.” She tapped her chin with a finger. “Let’s see, where did I see her last?”

“I saw her heading up to her room,” an old woman said as she entered the kitchen from the hall. She looked at Hunny and smiled. “Hello, we haven’t been introduced.” She glanced at Sadie.

Sadie wiped her hands on her apron. “Edith, this is Hunny Callahan. Hunny, Edith Cooke is married to our husbands’ stepfather, Jefferson.”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Callahan,” the woman said. “Honorias told us quite a bit about the three of you.”

Hunny’s eyebrows shot up, but she quickly composed herself. “Really? I can’t imagine what you’ve heard.”

Edith waved dismissively. “Oh, nothing bad. I know you girls got off to a rough start when you first arrived, but things are fine now, aren’t they?”

*That remains to be seen,* she thought. “Yes, they are. Couldn’t be better.” Hunny turned to Belle. “Would you like me to fetch my sister? I’m sure she’d be more than happy to help.”

Belle glanced at the hall. “Thank you for your offer, but I’ll have Honoria help me. I wonder what she’s doing up there?”

Edith looked in the same direction. “She’s probably tuckered out after helping you get ready for this shindig.”

Sadie nodded. “True – I’ve been working that poor girl to death. Why not leave her alone, Belle, and take Hunny up on her offer?” She turned to her. “Go ahead and find your sisters and bring both up to the kitchen. You’ll at least get some time to yourselves. I could do with a cup of coffee myself.”

“Me too,” Belle said with a sigh.

Hunny nodded and headed for the back door. Outside the crowd had quieted somewhat, a sure sign everyone had a full belly. She found Rosie and Georgie with a group of children, listening to an old couple tell a story about pirates or some such. She caught sight of Michael and went around the children to join him.

He smiled as she approached. “Where have you been?”

“You know perfectly well where I’ve been. In the kitchen.”

“A good place to be. Lots of food, laughter and women’s talk.”

She playfully shoved him. Perhaps she shouldn’t have – she didn’t want him to start thinking she liked him. Of course, she did, but she didn’t want *him* to know. It would just complicate things.

“You’re a little late,” he said. “Cutty already told the best parts of the story.”

Hunny watched Cutty and, presumably, his wife, but said nothing. Both were British, as were more than half the guests it seemed. The Cooke family was indeed large. “I’ve come for my sisters. Sadie and Belle need help in the kitchen.”

“Don’t let me stop you. Can I be of service?”

“Not unless you know how to make biscuits.”

He chuckled low in his throat. “I’m afraid not. Oh, and do yourself a favor.” He glanced around. “Don’t take this wrong, but whatever you do, don’t ask my sister to help in the kitchen. It could be disastrous.”

Her eyes widened. “Why, Michael, are you telling me that Pleasant can’t cook?”

His expression was dead serious. “Yes, I am.”

She giggled. “Very well, then, I’ll keep that in mind should I see her.”

“The entire party thanks you,” he said with a smile. “But don’t tell Pleasant, or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Feeling bold, she replied, “My, my. I think you’ve just given me some ammunition. You really ought to watch what you tell a person.”

His jaw dropped in horror. “Please, I beg of you.”

“It’s all right – I’ll keep it in confidence.” Hunny tapped her sisters on the shoulders, motioned them to follow her and they headed back to the house. Neither Rosie nor Georgie saw the smirk of triumph on her face. Had she been flirting? Yes. Was she going to regret it? Possibly. But the moment was too fun to pass up.

“What are we doing?” Rosie asked as they entered the house.

“Biscuits,” Hunny said, her mind still on Michael. She brought Rosie and Georgie to Belle. “Here they are.”

Belle smiled at Rosie. “I understand you make an incredible batch of biscuits.”

Rosie clasped her hands behind her back. She was a good cook and she knew it. “That’s right. Are you in need of assistance?”

Belle collapsed into a chair. “I hate to pull you away from the other guests, but would you mind?”

Rosie grinned. “Of course not.” Besides, this was a good chance to impress the Cookes with her culinary talents. Maybe they’d hire her on for future parties.

“Is there anything I can do?” Georgie asked quietly.

“Can you make coffee?” Sadie suggested. Her eyes flicked to the ceiling and back. “I want to go upstairs and check on my daughter.”

“I can do coffee.” Georgie turned and gasped at the sight of the stove, then approached it with caution.

Hunny walked over to Belle’s chair as Sadie left. “Is something wrong with Honoria?”

Belle rubbed her temples. “She’s just tired like the rest of us. Preparing for the annual barbecue is a lot of work, and

we're all worn out. If we'd known the three of you could cook, we'd have had you help us."

"Maybe next year," Georgie said as she carefully fiddled with the coffee pot.

Hunny and Rosie exchanged a glance. Was Georgie serious? Had she been enjoying her time with Zachary more than they thought? None of them knew if they were staying or not. What if they couldn't find work in Clear Creek after their term at the hotel was done? The logical thing, of course, was to find work elsewhere. Be it Oregon City, Baker City, Portland ...

An older woman suddenly burst through the back door. "Belle, have ye seen Doc Drake?" Hunny noticed her Irish accent – it must be Mary Mulligan, the saloonkeeper's wife.

"No, why?"

"That stubborn fool husband of mine and Doc Waller got to arm-wrestling and Paddy got hurt."

Belle stood in shock. "*Paddy* got hurt?" She laughed. "I don't want to diminish that, but did Doc win?"

"No, no – Paddy won. But when he pinned Doc's arm, his own came down on a fork."

"Oh dear." Belle turned to Hunny. "Help me find Doc Drake, will you? Doc Waller must feel terribly guilty not being able to treat him. His eyesight isn't what it used to be and I noticed he wasn't wearing his new spectacles."

Hunny had to get the image of Mr. Mulligan with a fork stuck his arm out of her head. "Not a problem."

Belle took her hand. "Let's go."

They left the house and split up - Belle searching the front yard, Hunny the back. Hunny swore there were more people than before. Doc Drake might not be as easy to find as she thought. But as luck would have it, she rounded the corner of the house and ran into him. "Oh, there you are. I'm afraid you're needed."

Michael suddenly appeared at her side. "What's wrong?"

“I was about to ask the same thing,” said the doctor.

“It’s Mr. Mulligan,” Hunny said. “He accidentally stabbed himself with a fork arm-wrestling Doc Waller.”

“He did *what?*” Doc Drake shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “What next?” he sighed. “All right, where’s the patient?”

Michael stared slack-jawed at Hunny, then snorted. “What next, indeed.” He offered her his arm. “Let’s go see what we can do, shall we?”

Hunny smiled shyly and wrapped her arm through his. If this kept up, she’d have to find a way to stay in town – or go mad.

## CHAPTER 15

That night Hunny couldn't sleep. She tossed, turned and drove Georgie crazy. At one point her sister hit her and said, "If you're going to flop around like a fish, then at least do it quietly."

For the life of her, she couldn't get Michael out of her head. On the wagon ride back to the hotel, she'd stared at the back of his head practically the whole time. When he helped her down from the wagon, she felt her stomach do somersaults. And when her feet touched the ground, she wanted his hands to linger for just a second or two longer. And they did. He looked at her. She looked at him.

Then Rosie tugged on her arm, said, "Let's go, I'm tired. Thank you for a lovely time!" and pulled her toward the hotel doors, Georgie on her heels as the Comfort brothers watched. The sisters had gone upstairs, shared their individual adventures from the barbecue and gone to bed.

But there was one adventure she didn't share: that somewhere that day, Hunny's heart had given in a little more to Michael. And that was something she couldn't allow. There was no way she could leave Georgie and Rosie – they'd agreed to stick together and that's what they were going to do. Especially fragile Georgie – she needed a protector, someone to guide her. Aunt Henrietta had wounded her so deeply that she would be vulnerable to any man that wanted to take advantage of her. She'd suffered enough.

Hunny turned onto her back, put her hands behind her head and stared at the ceiling. She might be up all night. Maybe she

should get something to eat? Yes, that's what she'd do. She climbed out of bed, tiptoed to the door, donned her shawl and slipped out.

Downstairs in the kitchen, she found some molasses cookies and milk. A full moon shone through the high windows. There was something peaceful about sitting in the dark munching a cookie.

Once again Michael invaded her thoughts. "Oh why can't you go away?" she muttered. But he wouldn't. She heard his voice, his laughter, the funny scoffing noise he made in his throat when amused. If she were lucky, she wouldn't see him for a time. Maybe then she could force him from her mind. The cookies certainly weren't doing the job.

She finished one last cookie, drank her milk and put the glass in the dry sink, evidence of her midnight snack. But Sally wouldn't mind – she'd told her the first day that she and her sisters were welcome in her kitchen anytime. She left the kitchen, cut through the dining room to lobby and stood in front of the doors a moment. The street was brightly lit by the moonlight, and she was tempted to go outside. Instead she stood and pondered what it would be like to walk in the moonlight with Michael.

"Why am I torturing myself like this?" she muttered, turning to the staircase. She sighed – would she just have to ignore the man from now on? If she let her feelings grow, she'd do something she'd regret and she didn't want that. Her sisters needed her. But could she even avoid him? Her heart certainly had its own views.

She went upstairs to her room and crawled back into bed. She wasn't sure if she could stay away from Michael. He spoke of the town picnic on the ride back, the next big event in Clear Creek. Then the brothers talked about the Christmas play and other activities around town. Sometimes dances were held and when there was a wedding the entire town turned out. In short, all the things the six of them could do together, starting with church on Sunday.



She turned to her side with a groan. She'd forgotten all about church! The brothers wanted to escort them, and Georgie had wholeheartedly agreed on the sisters' behalf. Hunny wasn't there when the local preacher extended the invitation, but according to Rosie, Darcy and Zachary were quick to offer their company.

It was only natural Georgie had jumped at it. She wanted to believe there was good in people, especially after Aunt Henrietta had so amply demonstrated the opposite. Perhaps she was beginning to view the brothers as knights in shining armor. But they weren't equipped for much rescuing and couldn't afford the armor, at least not yet. They weren't ready to take care of wives, and by their own admission it would be some time before they were.

"Can't you sleep?" Georgie asked.

Hunny fought another groan. "No. You?"

"How can I, with you flopping around like a trout?"

"Will you two stop?" Rosie poked her head out from beneath her blankets and blinked a few times. "What's the matter, anyway?"

"Hunny can't sleep." Georgie whined. "Which means neither can I. Where did you go anyway?"

Hunny sighed. "I had some cookies and milk in the kitchen."

Georgie sat up. "That sounds good."

Rosie smiled. "It does, doesn't it?"

"If you're going to the kitchen," Hunny said, "be sure to clean up when you leave."

Rosie and Georgie hurried out of bed, grabbed their shawls and went out the door.

Hunny rolled her eyes and tossed back the blankets to join them. She wasn't going to sleep anyway, so she might as well have a few more cookies. Snacks always seemed to help when something was bothering them. Her sisters must have something on their minds as well.

Once the milk was poured and the cookies on a plate, Hunny broke the ice. “All right, what is it?”

Georgie glanced between them. “What do you mean?” She took a generous bite and chewed.

“Why are we *all* here eating?” Hunny asked. “You know we only do this when something’s wrong.”

Rosie stopped chewing, took a sip of milk and wiped her mouth with her hand. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m just hungry.”

“Yes, me too.” Georgie took another cookie.

Hunny crossed her arms and eyed them suspiciously. “After that feast today? No,” she said with a little shake of her head. “Something’s up.”

Georgie and Rosie looked at each other, the cookies, then Hunny. “Well, I do feel kind of funny,” Georgie commented. “Different. Better, I think.”

Rosie studied her. “Do you mean you don’t feel as scared?”

Georgie smiled. “Yes, that’s it. I’m not as frightened. I don’t know why – maybe I’ve accepted everything.” She took another bite.

Rosie sighed heavily. “Well, what do you know? I feel the same. And Belle Cooke asked me to help with the town picnic. She even said she’d pay me. That’s something.”

“Yes, it is,” Hunny agreed. “I wonder if Mr. Mulligan will need any help?”

“The saloon owner?” Georgie said. “Is he the one that got stabbed with a fork today?”

Hunny laughed. “Yes, arm-wrestling the old doctor. I wish I could have seen that.”

“Everyone was talking about it when we left,” Georgie said with a smile. “He didn’t get hurt badly, did he?”

“No, unfortunately,” Rosie quipped, then saw the horrified looks on their faces. “Well, then he’d need help in his saloon.”

“What a craven thought, Rosie,” Hunny replied in shock.

“Look, I’d work for him if it meant good money for us. Well ... depending on what work he’d want me to do. It is a saloon, after all ...”

“From what I’ve heard, his saloon serves more tea and pie than whisky. And he doesn’t seem the type to employ dancing girls, or ...” Georgie let the sentence drop and took the last cookie. “But everything will be fine, you’ll see. So long as we stick together, we can survive.”

Hunny’s heart sank. “My thoughts exactly,” she said. She looked at the empty cookie jar. “I hope Sally won’t mind that we ate her entire supply.”

“We could always make more,” Georgie said.

“A splendid idea.” Hunny went to the stove. “Sally banked this before she went to bed – it wouldn’t take much to get it going.”

Rosie headed for the hutch where Sally kept her baking pans. “We just had molasses. Shall we make sugar?”

The sisters smiled at each other, nodded and went to work.

\* \* \*

MICHAEL ATE some leftover barbecue for breakfast, put the rest away and went to work. His roof was almost done, but the chimney still needed a few stones and some shingles weren’t quite right. He gathered his tools and supplies and climbed up the ladder.

As he worked he let his mind drift, and unfortunately it went right where he didn’t want it to go: Hunny Callahan. Thoughts of her made him hit a nail harder than he needed, and a shingle cracked. “Tarnation!” He pulled the shingle and the nail up and tossed it to the ground below, then put down another and hammered it in place.

In no time the shingle work was done. He was just about to start finishing his chimney when he heard his brother Quince calling. “Michael? Are you up there?”

Michael turned from the chimney. “Yes, I’ll come down.” He scrambled down the ladder with the bucket, seeing as he needed a few more items. Once on the ground he watched Quince dismount his horse. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s what *I* can do for you. The Cookes need help this coming week. You interested?”

“Of course – you know I need the money.”

Quince nodded. “You looked like you were having a good time yesterday with the eldest Callahan.”

Michael put his bucket on the ground and chuckled. “She was very pleasant company.”

“Good, because Darcy told me you’re planning on spending more time with them, like we talked about.”

Michael wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “Yes, we discussed it on the ride home after we dropped the sisters off. But we’re still trying to figure out how.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard, with all the happenings in town this time of year. Maybe we can organize a dance of some sort? It’s not like dances haven’t been held at the ranch before.”

“So I’ve heard,” Michael said. “But there’s the picnic in a few weeks. Isn’t that enough?”

“No,” Quince insisted. “I’m not just talking about getting to know them better. I’m talking about the issue of their protection. The Turners can only keep an eye on them so much – they need us to do some of the work.”

Michael blanched. “Oh yes, forgive me.” He sighed and kicked at the grass. How could he forget the potential danger? Hunny really did have him addled. He scratched his head and thought a moment. If men were coming for the Callahan sisters, had they even a clue where they were? That was the big question.

“You boys had better organize something,” Quince said. “At least one of you should be in town with them part of the day. Between all of us and the Turners, we can keep a good

eye out. Of course they'll be a lot safer after they're married," he added pointedly.

Michael scratched his jaw. "Is that a hint, brother?"

"That's reality," he said. "Plain and simple. I know we can't be with them all the time – all of us have to work. But I'd feel a lot better if we gave it our best effort."

"Agreed." Michael looked at his cabin. The inside would stay dry now, but he was sleeping on a hard wooden floor – he couldn't very well ask a woman to do that. There were nights there was little food because there hadn't been much work. He didn't mind going hungry, but what sort of man didn't feed his wife? He and his brothers couldn't marry the Callahan sisters only to protect them. Rotating and looking after them in shifts was their best option. "I'll speak with Darcy and Zach and figure something out."

Quince tipped his hat, remounted and turned his horse toward the road. "Do that. And talk to a few others while you're at it. If my guess is right, we'll need all the help we can get."

"If men are coming for the women, how long would it take them?" Michael mused. "The Callahans have been here over a week." Both remembered the time it took to catch up to Pleasant. But then, they'd found out where Pleasant was going. Whatever men might be after the sisters had no idea of their destination, as far as they knew. Hopefully they had time to prepare for trouble.

"I'll ask around too. We'll be ready for whatever happens. Did you find anything more about the Callahans at the barbecue?"

"Only that their aunt was hardest on Georgie. And that Rosie can cook."

Quince smiled. "So I've heard." He turned his horse toward Michael. "Darcy and Zach had a good time?"

"I believe so."

"And?"

Michael shrugged and shook his head. “No ‘and,’ Quince. It was one outing. Let’s stick to our plan and not rush things.”

“Very well, just thought I’d check.” He steered his horse away. “See you in church!”

Michael watched him trot away – no doubt heading straight for Darcy’s house to ask him how the barbecue went. He’d talk to each of them, gauge their reactions and go from there. He didn’t know which was worse, Pleasant’s hinting for weeks that he and his brothers marry, or Quince’s planning they did.

Yet, the more he thought about the prospect, the more something deep inside him stirred. A restless itch, almost a warning, that if he didn’t take a wife now, he might not get another chance. But why would that be? He puzzled over it as he gathered what he needed and went up the ladder to get back to work. What was his gut trying to tell him? It’s not like he or his brothers couldn’t order a mail-order bride should something happen to ...

“Ohhh.” His eyes drifted to the road, and for a split second he saw the image he’d had before: the yard below, flowerbeds along the road, laundry on the line drying in a warm breeze. But where were the children? The woman? He was hit with a sudden loneliness and loss. He rubbed his face to erase it, but the feeling wouldn’t go away. Was it a premonition?

After an hour he finished the chimney, scrambled down the ladder and put his tools away. Should he talk with Darcy and Zachary? Were they having strange feelings as well? He was certainly having more than he was used to, and he knew the cause. Hunny Callahan was pretty, smart, resourceful, hard-working, protective of her sisters, kind and ... what else? He smiled at the list so far, then went into his cabin and surveyed his hard work. He needed to order a bed, yes ...

“Michael?”

He turned to find Darcy standing in his doorway. He studied his brother a moment before his eyebrows rose. “Quince paid you a visit already?”

“Yes. He said the Cookes have work.”

“And?”

Darcy entered. “And he asked about Rosie.”

Michael sighed. “What did you tell him?”

Darcy went to the fireplace and examined it. “I had a good time yesterday, but I’m not going to marry the girl after one outing.” Darcy looked up. “I don’t even have my roof finished. Though I did tease Zach yesterday about choosing a sister.”

“You didn’t?” Michael scolded.

“I’m afraid I did.”

“And you picked?”

“Rosie. That’s who I was with all day.”

Michael sighed. “Zachary might not have known you were teasing.”

Darcy shrugged. “It was all in good fun. Besides, I like Rosie. Though in fact, I like all three.”

Michael smiled. “So do I.” He crossed the cabin and picked up his rifle from where it leaned against a wall. He really needed to put in some hooks to hang it up. “All the more reason we need to protect them. Did Quince talk about watching over them in shifts?”

“He mentioned it – that’s another reason I’m here. What’s your plan?”

“I don’t have one yet. Maybe one of us stays in town while the other two work at the Triple-C?”

“Then we switch?”

“Correct.”

“Fine, when do we start?”

“Let’s go to Zach’s place and draw straws to see who’ll guard them first.”

“I could just volunteer,” Darcy said, turning to the door.

Michael nodded. “Noble of you, brother, but I say we draw straws.” He didn’t say he’d be more than happy to volunteer as well, and imagined Zachary would be just as willing to take this first round.

He didn’t bother to saddle his horse, instead mounting up behind Darcy. They rode to their brother’s house in relative silence. Several times he wondered what was going through Darcy’s head. Was there more to yesterday’s teasing than he let on? He had to look at his own feelings regarding Hunny. If he didn’t get them in check, he might be arguing with his brothers over who would guard the sisters tomorrow.

“What about tonight?” Darcy suddenly blurted.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Tonight. Who’s going to watch over them?”

Michael hadn’t thought of that. Were his feelings toward Hunny fogging his mind that badly?

“Think about it,” Darcy continued. “If I were some blackguard come to steal women away, I wouldn’t do it in broad daylight. Of course, that’s assuming I already knew where they were staying and had mapped out where their room was.”

“Then attempt to take three women at once?”

Darcy glanced over his shoulder at him. “I’d have accomplices – at least half a dozen. Two to a woman, plus someone to watch our horses. We’d snatch them up in short order.”

Darcy was making sense. This would be harder than they thought – no wonder Quince asked him to get extra men.

Darcy turned his head toward him again. “We might need help.”

“You’re right. Didn’t Quince tell you he was already working on it?”

“Oddly, he left out that part. But that’s wise of him.”



“Strangers,” Michael mused. “We need to be watching for strangers.”

Darcy steered his horse into Zachary’s yard. “Agreed.” They dismounted, found their brother behind the house and sat him down to find out how much Quince had told him.

As it turned out, not much. “What’s this all about?”

Michael took a deep breath. “Do you remember when we joined Rupert to come after Pleasant?”

“Joined him?” Zachary said. “I thought it was more the other way around. Father sent us after Pleasant.”

“Nonetheless, do you remember the way he talked during the journey?”

“I remember how angry he was,” Darcy replied. “And I’m beginning to see where you’re going with this.”

“This could be much more serious than any of us thought,” Michael said. “I also think we need to find out specifically what happened in Denver. If the spurned grooms are as angry as Rupert was when it came to Pleasant running away, they might show up with more in mind than taking the sisters back. They might seek to do harm, to them or anyone helping them.”

Zach’s eyes widened. “The fiends.”

Darcy made a fist, hit his palm with it and began pacing. “What are we going to do? We can’t watch over them twenty-four hours a day.”

Michael sighed. “We can if marry them.”

“We all know that won’t work.” Darcy paced some more. “We don’t have our houses done, we don’t have the money ...”

Zachary sat on a stump. “I don’t think I could live with myself if something happened to ... any of them. But I also couldn’t live with myself if I pledged to take care of one of them – love, honor, cherish and all that – and then couldn’t put food on the table.”

Michael nodded. “That is the dilemma, gentlemen. We have a problem, and we’ll need some help to solve it.”

“But what are we to do?” Darcy asked. “Put the whole town on alert?”

Michael looked at his brothers, his eyes piercing with determination. “Yes. That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

## CHAPTER 16

Some Sunday, the Comfort brothers escorted the Callahan sisters to church, planted themselves in the third pew from the front and tried to keep conversations light. They didn't want the women to worry – or know – about what they were planning. They'd have to escort them back to the hotel afterward, then make excuses and come back. Sunday after church was the best time to round up men who could help, but they wanted to be discreet.

“Would you like to have lunch with us at the hotel?” Hunny asked Michael after the closing hymn.

He leaned toward her. “I'm afraid my brothers and I have some business to take care of. We'll see you home, but then we must leave.”

“Oh, that's too bad.”

His heart warmed at the disappointment in her voice. “Don't worry, I'm sure we'll have plenty of other chances to eat together after church.”

She smiled and blushed, which only made his heart beat faster.

Michael leaned back to look past her and saw his brothers' somber looks. Well, this was serious business. They'd debated the day before whether to let the sisters know what they were doing, and decided not to. What Pleasant went through when Rupert came after her would horrify any woman. They didn't want the Callahans burdened with that, or the knowledge they were being looked after. But this was Clear Creek – they knew

the townspeople wouldn't mind keeping an eye out for strangers.

He leaned toward Hunny again. "Also, I need to speak with Preacher Jo about something. Do you mind?"

"No, go ahead."

He smiled, left the pew and joined the usual post-sermon crowd gathered around the preacher. When it came his turn he motioned Preacher Jo away from the few folks remaining. "What can I do for you, Mr. Comfort?"

"My brothers and I are gathering some men for a discussion today. Could we meet here?"

"Sure. Is it something I can help with?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I'll explain once we've gathered the men."

Preacher Jo nodded. "Is this about the Callahans?"

"It is."

"Very well. Count me in, whatever it is."

Michael patted his shoulder. "Thanks." He returned to Hunny.

She was clearly curious. "What was that all about?"

"My brothers and I need to discuss some work that needs doing."

She looked at Preacher Jo and back. "With the clergyman?"

He shrugged. "Certainly." He wouldn't lie, but didn't want to tell her everything either.

The brothers spoke to different men as they left the church, telling them quietly there was to be a meeting and that they'd join them shortly. They escorted the women to the hotel, bid them goodbye and hurried back to the church. Patrick Mulligan, rubbing the bandage on his arm, was the first to speak. "What's this all about, lads?"

“We need your help,” Michael said, addressing the group of about twenty men. “You remember what happened when our sister came to town?”

“Aye,” Mr. Mulligan said. “And then ye and yer brothers showed up!” The men laughed.

Michael fought the urge to roll his eyes. The arrival of the Comfort men and Rupert had been a fiasco. Everyone chuckled about it now, but it wasn’t funny at the time. “Then of course you remember Mr. Jerney and his threats?”

The men exchanged glances. Sheriff Turner nodded. “What he’s gettin’ at, gentlemen, is that the Callahan sisters need protection, at least for a time. Story is they’re runnin’ from arranged marriages.”

Doc Drake’s eyes narrowed. “And you think these men might come after them?”

“It’s a distinct possibility,” Darcy said. “Problem is, we don’t know what they’ll do. But better safe than sorry – right, Doc?”

Doc Drake nodded, took one look at Eli Turner and smiled. “You should know what this is like.”

Eli rose and faced Michael. “Them gals were betrothed to some rich old men, right?”

Michael nodded. “One of the sisters mentioned they were.”

Eli turned to the others. “I cain’t see three old goats comin’ after ‘em. But I can see ‘em hirin’ some real nasty folks to do it for ‘em. That makes it worse.”

Darcy nodded. “They might be wealthy enough to hire a large number of them.”

Tom Turner grumbled low. “That ain’t good news, folks.” He looked at Michael and his brothers. “People could get hurt.”

Michael sighed. “Yes, they could. Which is why we’re asking for volunteers.”

“We don’t believe these men will just storm into town and take the women,” Darcy added. “Still, a group of men is what we’d need to watch for.”

“Strangers, gentlemen,” Zachary said. “Not that they’d be hard to spot around here.” A few men chuckled.

“It’s not a problem to watch for anything unusual in or around town,” Preacher Jo said. “Speaking for everyone here, I think any of us would be happy to volunteer.”

The men glanced at one another and nodded in agreement.

Michael sighed in relief. “Thank you, gentlemen. My brothers and I, and Sheriff and Deputy Turner, will each watch over the sisters in shifts. For now, we’re not going to tell them about it – they’ve been through enough already that we don’t want them to have to worry about this. Again, this isn’t forever.”

“Of course it isn’t,” Paddy said with a chuckle. “Not after the way ye three lads were laughing and flirting with the lasses at the barbecue.”

Michael felt his cheeks grow hot. He glanced at his brothers and saw the tips of their ears turn pink. Good grief, were they that obvious? He cleared his throat. “Everyone had a good time, Paddy. By the way, how’s your arm?” he added, hoping to get him off the subject.

Paddy looked at his bandage and grinned. “Ah, it’s fine. But next time I think I’d best not wrestle with Doc Waller.”

“Or at least clear off the table first,” Bowen Drake commented dryly.

They worked out the details. Darcy would spend the remainder of the afternoon in town and return home that evening. Deputy Bran O’Hare would pay special attention to the hotel as he made his rounds before calling it a day, since he had the late shift at the sheriff’s office. Mr. Van Cleet even offered the brothers a room to use at the hotel, so one of them could stay nearby.

“That’s very generous of you,” Michael told him. “We’ll take you up on that if we feel we must. But if we do, the

women will likely know what we're up to, and we don't want them frightened."

Mr. Van Cleet sighed and put on his hat. "I want to do my part, but I'm no longer a young man. Offering a bed's the best I can do. And I'll inform Lorcan – he'll want to protect his family if there's trouble."

Michael exchanged a look with his brothers. "We hope there won't be. But yes, do speak with him."

They thanked those that came, shook their hands and sent them on their way. Once everyone was gone, Preacher Jo closed the church doors and faced them. "There is another solution, gentlemen."

Michael glanced at his brothers and back. "We're not ready to marry them, Preacher Jo. We can't provide for them yet."

The clergyman sighed. "Too bad. That would solve a lot of problems."

"And cause many more," Darcy replied. "Besides, they'd never agree. They don't know us well enough."

"That didn't stop them from becoming mail-order brides," Preacher Jo pointed out.

"No," Zachary agreed. "But after what happened when they first arrived, I'm not sure they'd entertain the idea just now. In time, perhaps."

"Yes, time heals all wounds," Preacher Jo added. "You let me know if you change your minds?"

"Of course."

The brothers left the church and went to a nearby hitching post where their horses were tethered. "That went well, don't you think?" Zachary said.

"Yes," Michael turned to Darcy. "You know what to do?"

"I'll go to the hotel, check on a few things, speak to Lorcan then search the perimeter around town."

"Without letting them know what you're doing," Zachary added. "In case they see you."

Darcy mounted. “They don’t need to see me.”

Michael smiled. “But if they do?”

“I’ll tell them I like riding around on Sundays,” Darcy said with a smile.

Michael and Zachary mounted up as well. “Just so they don’t know what we’re doing,” Michael said. “Hopefully we won’t have to do this for long.”

“I don’t mind,” Darcy said.

“No, but the rest of the men in town won’t want to keep the secret,” Michael said. “And I don’t blame them. We will have to tell the ladies eventually.”

“You know, we didn’t specify the men shouldn’t tell their wives,” Zachary noted.

“We shouldn’t have to. They’ll keep it to themselves, I’m sure.”

“Even Wilfred?” Darcy asked with a chuckle. “Or Henry Fig?”

“You’ll notice neither of them were at our meeting,” Michael pointed out.

“True enough,” Zachary said with a smile. “None of us asked them.”

“*Because* of Irene and Fanny,” Darcy commented. “If either of them got a whiff of it, it would be all over town by nightfall – we don’t want that.”

“No, we don’t,” his brothers said at once. They laughed and parted ways, each with a particular task in mind. Darcy most of all.

\* \* \*

“OH, LOOK,” Georgie said as she stood at the window. “It’s Darcy ... I mean, Mr. Comfort.”

Hunny and Rosie joined her. “Don’t be so formal,” Rosie said. “Besides, I don’t think it matters at this point. We can



call them what we want.”

“True,” Hunny agreed. “I wonder what he’s doing? Michael told me they had business to take care of.”

“Maybe they’re done.” Georgie glanced at the door and back. “I’m hungry. I’m going downstairs for a sandwich.”

Rosie smiled. “Me too.”

Hunny sighed. “Well, if you’re heading downstairs, make me one too.”

“Why not join us?” Georgie asked.

“Because *I’m* not going downstairs to see what Darcy Comfort is up to,” she said with a smile. “But you two go ahead.”

Rosie sighed. “Really, Hunny. We’re hungry, that’s all.”

“Oh, there’s no shame in asking him,” Hunny insisted. “After all, we all had a lovely time at the barbecue.”

Georgie smiled. “We did.” She looked at Rosie. “Maybe you ought to be the one to go downstairs and make sandwiches. You could always offer him one.”

Rosie made a face. “Come with me. Who knows, Zachary might be with him.”

Georgie looked at Hunny as if asking permission.

Hunny rolled her eyes. “You two do what you want. But don’t linger – I’d like to eat.”

Georgie smiled and grabbed her shawl off the bed. Rosie followed suit and off they went.

Downstairs they stopped in the lobby just as Darcy entered. “Why, hello, ladies.”

“Hello,” Georgie said shyly. “What brings you here?”

“I, uh ... have some business with Mr. Brody. Is he in?”

“Yes, I think so. Do you know where their rooms are?”

“Yes, I’ll just see myself there. Good afternoon.” He headed for the hall that led to the employee rooms, smiling at

them as he passed. He turned, walking backwards as Rosie and Georgie smiled back, tipped his hat, spun around and almost ran into a wall.

Georgie giggled. Rosie snorted and jabbed her in the ribs with her elbow. Darcy, red-faced, continued down the hall. As soon as he rounded the corner, the sisters laughed. “We shouldn’t find that so amusing,” Georgie said.

“No, we shouldn’t, But it *was* funny.”

Georgie smiled as she stared down the short hall. “He’s nice, don’t you think?”

Rosie put an arm around her. “Yes. I’m beginning to think that they’re all nice. But nice doesn’t feed you.” She took Georgie by the shoulders and faced her. “We have to survive. It’s just the three of us now.”

Georgie’s face fell. “Yes, I know.”

“They don’t want to marry us,” she added. “They never did. We have to remember that.”

Georgie looked at her. “You sound like you’re trying to convince yourself.”

“I’m doing nothing of the kind. I’m being practical.” Rosie took Georgie’s hand. “Come on, let’s make some sandwiches.”

They went into the kitchen, prepared their food and Hunny’s, put it on a tray and carried it upstairs. Back in their room, the three sisters ate quietly.

“I’m thirsty,” Georgie said. “I’m going back downstairs for some tea. Anyone else want some?”

“Yes,” Rosie said. “And don’t forget the sugar.”

“I’ll have a cup,” Hunny added. “See if there are any cookies left.”

“I will.” Georgie took the tray and headed for the door. When she reached the bottom of the stairs she slowed and glanced around. No sign of Darcy Comfort anywhere. She sighed and headed for the dining room, glad Rosie was still

upstairs. This way she wouldn't be disappointed at not seeing him –

“Miss Callahan?”

Georgie spun around. “Mr. Comfort!”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you.”

Georgie glanced at the stairs. Poor Rosie. She'd miss seeing him after all. “I was just going to, um, prepare some tea.”

He smiled. “Your sisters are upstairs?”

“Yes.” She wondered if she should fetch Rosie.

He nodded, twisting his hat in his hands, looking at her as if seeing her for the first time.

Georgie took a step toward the kitchen. Should she be alone with him like this? “Is there something I can help you with?”

“No, no,” he said with a small shake of his head. “I've finished my business here – I should be going.”

She glanced at the kitchen and back, her cheeks growing hot. Would Rosie mind? After all, she seemed to like the gentleman. “Would you like some tea?”

“That would be wonderful.” He took a step toward her, and she instinctively took a step back. “Miss Callahan,” he said gently, “what's the matter?”

“N-n-nothing.” He had the most wonderful bluish-gray eyes. Had Rosie noticed? If she did, she hadn't said anything to her about them.

He cocked his head as if to clear it. “May I be of assistance with the tea?”

Georgie smiled without thinking. She'd never been alone with a man before. This was new for her. “I don't know. I mean, it's not very proper, is it?”

He twisted his hat a few more times. “Perhaps not. But my offer stands.”

She wasn't sure what to do. Hunny wouldn't approve, would she? If only Rosie had come downstairs. Which made her think ... "Are your brothers with you?"

He glanced to either side and smiled. "I don't see them."

She blushed a deep red. "No, I'm sorry, of course they're not."

He blinked a few times. "Well ... I should be on my way. It was nice to run into you. I hope you and your sisters enjoy the rest of your afternoon."

She nodded. Had Rosie noticed how dark and thick his hair was? Or that cowlick on the left side of his forehead? She curtsied. "Mr. Comfort."

He took a step closer. "Darcy. You can call me Darcy."

He was so close she could smell him. The scent was intoxicating. She swallowed hard. "All right ... D-Darcy."

He took a step back and bowed. "Georgie."

She looked up at him. He was quite tall and had broad shoulders. Did his brothers? She'd never noticed ...

"I'll see you again," he said softly.

Georgie gulped as her heart beat faster. What was happening? She nodded, turned on her heel and fled to the kitchen. Inside she put her hand to her chest and leaned against the wall by the door. "My goodness!"

"What is it, honey?"

Georgie jumped. "Oh, Sally," she whispered. "I came in to ... to ..."

"To faint, it looks like." Sally, coffee pot in hand, studied her closely. "What's the matter?"

Georgie shook her head. "I don't know." But, she realized, she was lying to Sally – and to herself.

\* \* \*

DARCY LEFT the hotel and walked to where he'd left his horse at the nearby hitching post. What just happened? One moment he was fine, doing what needed to be done; the next, he couldn't speak, couldn't breathe and couldn't take his eyes off pretty little Georgie Callahan.

He closed his eyes and blew out a long breath. "How in Heaven's name ... no. It couldn't be." But by Heaven, it was – he was attracted to her. But he couldn't let that happen. Hadn't Zachary set his cap for her? He thought so, watching him at the barbecue. Especially after he'd made those remarks about choosing a sister.

Darcy let his head fall. Maybe he should pound it against the side of the building where no one could see him. The thought had merit. But so did ignoring his reaction to Georgie and focusing on the task at hand; patrolling the area and keeping an eye on things. It was his job, after all, and he'd best take it seriously.

He gazed at the hotel doors and felt his heart pounding. This would never do. But then, when had he been alone with a woman? Never, he realized – not in Savannah and not here. "Huh. Perhaps I'm more in need of a wife than I thought." Indeed, loneliness was a poor bedfellow. Problem was, he still didn't have a bed.

He sighed, put his hat on and untied his horse. Maybe if he made a wide circle around town he'd find some signs of a campsite. Hopefully he wouldn't – that would mean strangers had been in the area, or still were. But if he didn't get his mind off of what had just occurred, he wasn't sure he could stand it. He'd heard of men who got poleaxed by a woman's beauty, though it had never happened to him ... until now.

But Georgie wasn't any prettier than her sisters, though they were all lovely. What was it about her that had struck him like a lightning bolt? He wouldn't have expected it – she seemed so small and fragile, so ...

... oh. The thought slapped him across the face. She was *vulnerable*. And he had no defense against that. "Oh dear Lord." He ran his hand down his face, took one last look at the

hotel, then mounted up. He pulled his hat low and headed out of town. He needed to get away, fast. He didn't dare look back, didn't want to feel his heart come to life at the thought of the woman he realized needed saving.

Saving ... Darcy had an instinct when it came to such things. He could sense a damsel in distress at a mile's distance. Why he hadn't picked up on Georgie's distress until now, he didn't know. Maybe it was because his head had been in charge of things, not his heart. Maybe it had been because he'd been spending time with Rosie while Georgie was with Zach. But now that he knew, his heart wouldn't stop pounding loud enough to make his ears ring.

He reached the edge of town and kicked his horse into a gallop. The further he got away from Georgie Callahan, the better – for Zach's sake as well as his own. Thank Heaven he caught it early and not months down the road, once their cabins were done and they were ready to marry. What a disaster that would be!

But was it any less of one now?

Darcy slowed his horse to a trot and turned in the saddle to stare at the town behind him, unable to help himself. "Zach is more important," he said aloud. He faced forward, took a deep breath and kicked his horse back into a trot, hoping to outrace thoughts of the woman running around his mind.

## CHAPTER 17

Zachary wiped his brow with a handkerchief, then stuffed it back in his pocket. He'd been working hard to beat the rain he knew was coming. The clouds had been rolling in ever since he got home from the meeting at church. He glanced at the darkening sky and hoped Darcy wouldn't get caught in the storm when it broke.

He climbed down the ladder and went inside his half-finished cabin. At least he was partly done with the roof, but it wouldn't be finished for at least a week. Possibly longer, now that he and his brothers planned to keep watch over Hunny, Rosie and Georgie. What would Georgie think of his humble abode? Would she laugh at it? Think less of him? No, he didn't think so. She was sweetness itself – anyone with half a brain could see it.

He returned to his work and straightened a few things up. He knew just where he wanted the stove and dry sink, the corner where he'd put the bed, what furniture he wanted around the hearth. He stepped back and tried to picture Georgie sitting in one chair, he in another. They'd read stories to each other and eat pie. Or maybe cake. Who knew what the woman could whip up?

He sighed as Darcy's quip about Rosie's cooking taunted him. He sure hoped Georgie was as good a cook as her sister. If not, he'd have to have Rosie give her sister a few lessons. He had no idea if Hunny could cook, but that was Michael's problem. Rosie obviously could – anyone within earshot of her at the barbecue could tell she knew her way around a kitchen.

His mouth watered thinking about her description of the barbecue sauce.

He went outside, his stomach growling, and froze. His yard was so ... empty. He went to the road, turned and stared at his half-finished cabin, and shook his head. What had he been thinking? Even after he finished his house he still wouldn't be able to provide for a wife, not on a regular basis. What good would it do to marry fragile, sensitive Georgie? "She'd never want to live here," he sighed. "My best isn't good enough for me, let alone her."

He swallowed hard and stuck his hands in his pockets. How could Quince think he and his brothers would be ready for wives in just a few months? There were no guarantees they could make ends meet that soon.

Zachary left the road and went behind the house. He had room for a nice garden, and he'd already built a root cellar and smokehouse, as his brothers were doing. If he purchased some cattle from the Cookes, they could get by. But Georgie would have to work very hard and he wasn't sure she could. She was such a delicate-looking thing, and he wasn't sure he was capable of taking her under his wing and protecting her. Michael or Darcy could, he was sure – himself, less so.

Frustrated with himself, he saddled his horse and headed into town. He needed a few pounds of nails anyway, and had just enough money to get some, so long as he didn't eat too much for the next few days. He really ought to build a chicken coop soon, but as long as Levi Stone's wife Fina was willing to give him and his brothers free eggs now and then, he wasn't going to argue.

When he arrived at the mercantile to get the nails, he found Wilfred sitting on a stool behind the counter, puffing on his pipe, a book in his hand. "Reading something interesting?"

Wilfred glanced over the tome. "Oh, it's you, Zach." He set the book on the counter. "What can I do for ya?"

"I need some nails. I'll help myself."

Wilfred pulled a sack from under the counter. "Poetry."



“What’s that?”

“You asked what I was reading. It’s poetry.”

Zachary smiled. “You’re reading poetry?”

Wilfred nodded. “I like to now and then. It’s been a long time.”

Zachary approached the counter and picked up the book. “Oh, Robert Burns.”

“Fine fellow. Here – for your nails.” Wilfred handed him the sack.

Zachary took it and set the book down. A part of him wanted to tell him about what he and some of the other men in town were doing, but no one wanted to upset Irene – and if he told Wilfred, Irene would find out.

He’d just finished scooping the sack full of nails when the door opened and Rosie and Georgie entered. He smiled at them. “Well, fancy meeting you here.”

Georgie smiled shyly as she usually did, while Rosie grinned. “Hello. Georgie ran into your brother Darcy not long ago.”

“Is that so?” It must have been – Georgie’s cheeks were red as beets. “Did you speak with him?”

“Um, well, in passing.”

Zachary almost dropped his bag of nails. “In passing?” Darcy didn’t say anything to them, did he? No, why would he?

“She means she spoke with him briefly,” Rosie explained. “We both did. He dropped by the hotel.”

“Oh, of course. Yes, he, uh, mentioned he had business there. So what brings you ladies in?”

“Tooth powder,” Rosie said.

Zachary smiled. “Ah, I see. I trust you’re having a pleasant afternoon?” Georgie managed a tiny smile in return. Ah, the girl was adorable. He turned back to Rosie. “Don’t let me keep you.”

Rosie grinned again as she took Georgie's hand. "We won't." She steered around him and went to the back of the store.

He watched them go as his heart sank. Would these women ever consent to marry him and his brothers? Would they even stay in Clear Creek? His eyes widened at the thought. What if they decided they'd rather be someplace else? But then, it would solve some things ... Zachary shook his head. What was wrong with him? They couldn't go anywhere else for a while – they had no more money than he did. And even if they did, they'd be in just as much danger there as here.

Without realizing it, he followed them to the back of the store to the small display of tooth powders and other toiletries. Rosie turned to him. "Yes?"

"I ... um ..."

"Mr. Comfort?" she prompted, then smiled. "What do you want?"

His eyes locked on hers. "To help," came out before he could stop it.

Georgie looked at him looking at her sister. "With what?"

He swallowed and let his eyes drift to hers. "Anything ... that is ..."

He spotted the tooth powder in Rosie's hand. "... allow me." He took it from her, went to the counter and set it down.

"What are you doing?" Rosie asked. "You don't need to ..."

"I insist," he said. "Wilfred, I'm ready."

Wilfred took one look at him and chuckled knowingly. "Are you now?" He gazed past him. "What about your nails?"

Zachary closed his eyes a moment. He'd forgotten about the nails. "Never mind about them. Let me get this for the ladies."

"All right, but ..."

Zach slapped his money on the counter. “Here. I’ll see to my things in a moment.”

Rosie and Georgie joined him at the counter. “Thank you, Zachary,” Georgie said, stunned. “That was very kind of you.”

He smiled at her and tipped his hat. “You’re most welcome.” He smiled at Rosie, who merely raised an eyebrow.

Georgie took the toothpowder from Wilfred and put it in her reticule. “We should be going. Hunny will wonder what’s taking so long.”

His eyes darted to the doors. “Why didn’t she come with you?”

“She planned to,” Rosie said. “But Aideen Brody stopped her in the lobby and talked her into playing dolls.”

Zachary smiled. “That sounds like Aideen. Clever child.”

“Too clever,” Wilfred commented from behind the counter. “I’m going upstairs to check on Irene – she came home from church with a headache. Nerves, she says.”

“Nerves?” Zach said with interest.

“She gets them now and then. I don’t have the heart to tell her it’s probably old age.” He chuckled. “You need anything else? Nails, perhaps?”

“No, thank you – perhaps later.” Zachary turned to the women. “Can I escort you back to the hotel?”

“Sure,” Rosie said as she grabbed Georgie’s hand again and headed for the doors.

Zach followed. He could always come back later and get a penny or two worth of nails. He hoped.

“So, the barbecue sauce,” Rosie said as they walked.

That got his attention. “What about it?”

“I’ve been thinking. A touch more brown sugar ought to do it.”

“Brown sugar? Oh no, not more sugar. I like mine with a little more bite.”

“Really?” She thought a moment. “What about a pinch of salt thrown in with the sugar for balance?”

Zachary’s mouth watered. “Depends on the meat – I’d have to try it. I was thinking maybe use apple cider vinegar instead of distilled.”

“Or red wine vinegar,” Rosie replied.

“Yes! That would be perfect.”

Georgie, walking between them, glanced from one to the other. “What’s the difference?”

Zach and Rosie gasped. “Everything!” they said at once.

Georgie giggled, then came to an abrupt stop.

“What’s wrong?” Rosie followed her sister’s gaze and watched as Darcy Comfort slowly rode toward them. “Oh, look. It’s your brother again.”

Zachary noted the determined look on Darcy’s face and stiffened. Had he found something?

Darcy brought his horse to a stop, dismounted and tied him to a hitching post. “Hello again ...” He paused, then looked at Zach. “Brother.”

“Darcy.”

“Hello again, Mr. Comfort.” Georgie said, staring at him like a lost doe.

Zachary filed that away for later. “Shall we continue on our way?”

“Where might that be?” Darcy asked.

“I was just escorting the ladies home.”

“Ah, good. Then you won’t mind if I join you.” Darcy’s eyes lingered on Georgie for a moment before he looked at Rosie and offered his arm. “Shall we?”

She smiled, let go of Georgie’s hand and wrapped her arm through his.

Zach’s shoulders slumped, and only then realized they’d tensed. He offered his arm to Georgie. “Miss Callahan?”

“Georgie,” she corrected. “Everyone thinks there’s no need to be formal at this point. I just do it from habit.”

He smiled and studied her a moment. “Me too. But friends don’t have to be formal, do they?”

She looked over at her sister. “No, I suppose not ...” She faced him again and smiled. “... Zachary.”

He smiled back. “Let’s be off, then. I need to get home, and you should get back to your afternoon’s activities.”

She sighed, as if she bore the weight of the world on her shoulders. Had Darcy said something? He didn’t upset her, did he? But he knew better. No, this had to be something else. But what?

They strolled behind Darcy and Rosie and soon reached the hotel. “Good day, Rosie,” Darcy said with a bow. “I hope you have a pleasant evening.”

“Thank you.” She looked at Zachary. “Red wine vinegar. I’ll remember that.”

He laughed. “I will too. I can’t wait to try it myself.”

“Really?” She licked her bottom lip. “If Sally would let us use her kitchen ...”

“Oh, but we couldn’t,” Georgie protested. “Besides, where would we get everything?”

“Let me worry about that,” Rosie interjected. She stepped away from Darcy. “Pork simmered in barbecue sauce, with a lovely coleslaw and potatoes ...”

Zachary’s arm went slack at his side. “A little crumbled bacon in the slaw for extra body.”

Georgie must have felt the dead weight. She let her own arm fall away, took a sheepish step back and turned to her sister. “Ice cream with chocolate sauce and raspberries?”

Rosie’s eyes lit up. She swallowed and licked her lower lip again. “Scones with blueberries and cream sauce.”

Zachary pushed his hat up. Good grief, was he starting to sweat? But this was a language he understood. “Chicken in

white wine sauce. And our cook made the most wonderful combination of asparagus and ...”

“What are you doing?” Georgie asked, perplexed. She glanced at Darcy, who stood wide-eyed.

Zachary glanced at his brother. One would think he’d just kissed Rosie. “Forgive me ... I get carried away when it comes to discussing food.”

Rosie laughed. “I just wanted to mention my idea about the sauce again. Combining the right ingredients is a wonderful challenge. I love doing it. Even just talking about it ...” She shrugged. “... makes me smile.”

He grinned. “The same.”

Darcy looked at Georgie. “Like we told you at the barbecue – Zach does love his food.”

Georgie nodded at Zachary, smiling stiffly. He hoped she wasn’t embarrassed by his conversation with her sister. After all, it was obvious Rosie was the better cook. Had their banter made her feel left out? “You’ll have to tell me what it is you like.”

She smiled again. “I will. One day.” She glanced at the hotel. “Rosie and I had better go.”

“We look forward to seeing you again,” Darcy said.

She looked at him, her eyes lingering a moment. “Until then.”

Darcy nodded.

Zach watched with interest, then turned back to Rosie. “Goodbye for now.”

She grinned. “For now. Beef brisket with honey barbecue sauce.”

Zach grinned back. “Just a little red pepper in the sauce.”

“Here they go again,” Darcy muttered. He put a hand on Georgie’s back. “Come, let’s leave them to it. You don’t want to worry your sister.”

“I’m coming,” Rosie said with a laugh. “Besides, Hunny can look out our window and see us – she knows we’re back.”

Zachary and Darcy glanced at the hotel. Indeed, their room was at the front of the building. It would be much harder for someone to sneak through their window that way. They walked the sisters to the hotel doors, said goodbye and watched them disappear inside.

“Did Mr. Van Cleet speak with Lorcan?” Zachary asked.

“Yes, I checked.”

He looked at Darcy, whose eyes were still on the hotel doors. “Did you find anything?”

“What?”

Zachary waved a hand in front of his brother’s face. “Darcy?”

His brother blinked a few times. “No, nothing. No tracks, no sign of a campfire ...”

“How far out did you go?”

“About a mile, then I circled back. We should go wider.”

“I agree. I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“I can do it.”

Zachary eyed him. “You just did. Michael or I should go.”

Darcy sighed as he returned his attention to the doors. “You’re right, we need to take turns.” He stepped back, off the boardwalk, and walked down the street toward his horse.

Zach had left his own mount tied up in front of the mercantile. He caught up to Darcy and sighed. “About the banter with Rosie ...”

“What about it?”

“I meant nothing by it. She simply got me started. You know how I am about food.”

Darcy smirked. “Don’t we all?”

Zach punched him in the arm. “We, ah ... should probably keep our feelings in check, don’t you think?”

His brother stopped. “Feelings?”

Zachary’s eyebrows shot up. “Come now, I saw the way you were looking at her.”

Darcy’s hands went to his hips. “Which one?”

Zach rolled his eyes. “Rosie, of course. I’m just saying I meant nothing by it. I wasn’t flirting – it was just talk.”

“Was it?”

“Come now, brother.”

Darcy’s face relaxed, and he gave Zach’s shoulder a gentle shove. “I know.” He untied his horse and mounted up. “I’ll go out a little farther this time. I can make another check before it gets dark.”

Zachary watched him go, concerned. Darcy was wound tighter than a piano string. Had his friendly conversation about food with Rosie gotten to him more than he thought?

He started walking. He’d have to be more careful from now on. He didn’t want to upset his brother when it came to the women. When Darcy mentioned at the barbecue that he’d already chosen Rosie, he clearly wasn’t kidding. Best steer clear of her and concentrate on Georgie. It wasn’t like they were courting, at least not yet. Still, they’d be interacting throughout the week while watching over them, or just running into them at random.

Zachary set his resolve. He was bound to run into the sisters often – but when he did, he needed to concentrate his attention on Georgie.

\* \* \*

“WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT?” Georgie asked when they reached their room.

“Nothing, I was just ... talking,” Rosie insisted.



“That was a lot of talk,” Georgie said. “And now I’m hungry.”

Rosie opened the door. “Do you think I was being forward?”

“Forward?” Hunny stood from the bed. “Who was being forward?”

“Rosie was with Zachary,” Georgie teased.

“I was, wasn’t I? Oh dear ...”

Hunny eyed them. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Georgie replied. “I was only teasing.”

“Zachary and I got to talking about recipes,” Rosie explained.

“Ah.” Hunny understood instantly. Given Rosie’s love of cooking – and Rosie and Zachary’s mutual love of eating – it was a natural topic for them. She looked out the window. “There goes Zachary now.”

Georgie and Rosie hurried to the window and looked out. Hunny watched with interest – Rosie was almost pressed against the glass. “Zachary is a handsome man,” Georgie commented.

Rosie stepped away, shaking herself. “They’re all rather handsome in their own way.”

“Where do you suppose they live?” Georgie asked.

“I don’t know,” Hunny looked at her. “Did you speak with him?”

“We spoke with him and Darcy.” Rosie picked up the window curtain she was hemming for one of the hotel rooms.

“Both of them?” Hunny glanced at the window. “Was Michael in town too?”

“Not that we saw,” Rosie said. “Zachary was in the mercantile when we arrived. Darcy was riding down the street when we left.”

Hunny left the window and sat on the bed. “Darcy was still in town?” She glanced at Georgie, still glued to the window. “What’s he been doing all this time?”

Rosie shrugged. “Who knows?”

Georgie turned away from the window, her face downcast. “What’s the matter?” Hunny asked, patting the space next to her. “Come, sit. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Georgie joined her on the bed. “Are we ever going to find love?”

Rosie gasped. “What kind of a question is that?”

Georgie stared at the coverlet. “I mean, what man will want us? We have no dowries, nothing to offer.”

Hunny sighed and put an arm around her. “Where’s this coming from? We’re going to be fine. We don’t need men to survive. We’ll get along on our own, you’ll see.” Her eyes drifted to the windows. “I promise.”

Georgie looked at her sisters. “But ... what if one day I want one?”

Rosie set her mending aside and joined them on the bed. “That’s fine too. For now, like Hunny said, we can get along on our own. Once we’ve established ourselves somewhere, we can worry about that.”

“And I think we’d all like to get married one day,” Hunny added. “But we have to be prepared to have only each other.” She looked at the window. “Perhaps for a long time.”

Georgie leaned her head on Hunny’s shoulder. “Spinsters we three ...”

Hunny closed her eyes and took a shaky breath. “If we must.”

Rosie, on the other side of their older sister, nodded. “We can do this, I know it.” But her voice was weaker than normal, and they all heard it, as if some of the fight had gone out of her.

Georgie looked past Hunny at Rosie, who was looking at Hunny. Tears welled in all their eyes. “What is wrong with us?” Rosie asked.

Hunny wiped away a tear. “I think the barbecue took more out of us than we thought. We should rest, then eat some dinner and go to bed.”

Rosie stood and returned to her mending. Georgie went to the dresser and picked up a book Sally had loaned her, took it to the settee and sat to read.

Hunny went to the window. The street below was empty of horses or people. She folded her arms and leaned against the wall as she studied the buildings around them. The hotel faced a short side street, but she could see the main street well enough, with the livery stable and the sheriff’s office. A man stepped off the boardwalk in front of Mulligan’s Saloon and her heart leaped. But it was someone she didn’t know.

She pondered her reaction. He wasn’t Michael, didn’t have the same proud carriage, the set to his shoulders, wasn’t as tall. But as the other two Comfort brothers had been in town, she was hoping ... She wiped another tear and shut her eyes against more. “Spinsters we three,” she whispered and swallowed hard. “And so shall it be.” They could do it ... but she couldn’t seem to make herself *like* it.

Hunny opened her eyes, left the window and went to make herself useful.

## CHAPTER 18

*A*fter another week, the sisters had settled into a routine. They got up early, had breakfast and began whatever tasks Mr. Van Cleet, Ada and Sally had laid out for them. One or more of the Comfort brothers would stop by to chat or check on their welfare. The day would end with dinner, followed by relaxing in their shared room.

Rosie, being the most adept in the kitchen, was spending – and enjoying – most of her time with Sally. They exchanged recipes, swapped tips and reveled in each other’s company. Hotel guests began to notice the difference in the baked goods and meals served and asked after the new recipes. Sally wanted to give some out, but Rosie disagreed. “If the townspeople have our recipes, then why would they come to the hotel?”

“Don’t you worry, honey,” Sally told her, blue eyes twinkling. “Folks around here love to socialize. Of course they’ll still come in. Besides, it’s you and me doing the cooking – what woman doesn’t want someone else to do the work for a change?”

Rosie had to agree.

Hunny and Ada were busy re-wallpapering some of the rooms. Aideen made several attempts to help, much to her mother’s dismay. It was even worse when Lorcan tried to pitch in – he was of much greater service keeping Aideen out of their hair. But all in all, Hunny was having a good time and enjoying the Brodys’ company.

Georgie did laundry, made beds, dusted, polished silver ... really, all the same things she did for Aunt Henrietta, only now she was praised and appreciated for her work, not belittled and nagged. Still, she usually worked alone.

The sisters' favorite time of the day, by far, was teatime. They not only prepared and served, but when the serving was done could sit and enjoy a cup with Sally while keeping a sharp eye out in case customers needed anything. Sally became more adamant they take all their meals together, just like a big happy family, and Hunny and Rosie liked the idea. But Georgie preferred to eat alone.

Finally, her sisters could stand her isolation no longer. "We want to talk to you," Rosie said one morning.

Georgie glanced her way as she put one last pin in her hair, anchoring her chignon in place. "About what?"

"About your moping. What's the matter with you?"

Georgie looked blank. "I don't know what you mean."

"What she means," Hunny said, "is that ever since the barbecue you haven't been yourself. You've hidden away like a rabbit in a burrow, only leaving our room to work, barely talking to anyone but us."

Georgie cringed. "Oh, that."

"Yes, that," Rosie grumbled. "Now do you mind telling us why?"

Georgie offered her a shrug. "I don't know. Maybe ..." She glanced between them. "Please don't think wrong of me, but I think I'm homesick."

"For *Aunt Henrietta*?" her sisters said.

"No, not her," Georgie quickly interjected. "For our house. Our room. A place of our own."

"Oh, I see," Hunny said. "I'm afraid you'll have to be patient. Maybe one day we'll have our own house, but that'll take a while. And if we do, it probably won't be here in Clear Creek."

Rosie's eyes widened. "Why not?"

"Because there are no houses to rent or purchase, and we don't have the skills to build one. The only roof over our heads is here." She pointed up for emphasis. "Now we knew this wasn't going to be easy. But we're making the best of it. We're in this together, remember?"

Rosie nodded. Georgie didn't.

"Georgie?" Hunny prompted.

"Yes, I'm with you. I just wish ..."

"Wishing won't put food in your mouth or clothes on your back," Hunny pointed out.

Georgie nodded but said nothing.

"We should go down to breakfast," Rosie said.

"You're right," Hunny agreed. "Mr. Van Cleet gave us a long list of chores yesterday. The sooner we get back into it, the better."

Georgie looked at them. "What's the next item?"

"There are several large areas of peeling paint on the back of the building." Hunny reached for her shawl. "We're going to scrape it off and repaint."

"I'll do it," Georgie said.

"*We'll* do it. And we'll get the tools right after breakfast." Hunny patted her hair and checked her appearance in a small mirror, fretting that it would be ruined by the day's work. Painting was always messy.

"I can start now," Georgie insisted.

"But what about breakfast?" Rosie asked.

"I'm not hungry," Georgie said. "I'll get something later."

"Are you sure there's nothing else wrong?" Hunny asked.

"I'm sure." Georgie brushed at her skirt and headed for the door. "I'll ask Mr. Van Cleet if he has something to scrape paint with."

Rosie looked at Hunny and they both shrugged. If their sister was homesick there wasn't much they could do about it. She'd have to deal with it on her own.

Downstairs Georgie found Mr. Van Cleet, got the tools she needed and went to work. Someone had already leaned a ladder against the back of the building. She examined the area and decided to start at the top and work her way down.

She had just started scraping when ... "Need any help?"

Georgie, startled, nearly fell off the ladder. Darcy rushed to her aid and kept it steady as she righted herself. "What are you doing up there?" he asked with concern. "This is a man's job."

She stared down at him, her heart in her throat. "I ... well, I..." She swallowed hard. "My sisters and I are capable. Mr. Van Cleet thinks so too. Besides, either we do the work or no one does."

"Nonsense. Now come down," he said as if begging for her life.

A little annoyed, she did as he asked.

"Have you another scraper?"

She went to the box of tools Mr. Van Cleet had supplied and pulled one out. "Yes, but it's smaller than the one I've got."

"It'll do. If you insist on doing this, please let me help you. But I'll get on the ladder and scrape while you tend what's below. I don't want you risking your neck."

She shaded her eyes against the morning sun, wanting to thank him for his concern – especially since she'd always been afraid of heights. But after a moment of looking at him, it was hard to think at all. He was so handsome, tall and strong, like the heroes she'd been reading about in the novels Sally loaned her. And that Southern accent almost made her swoon ...

A warm hand covered hers. "Are you all right?" he asked in that deep, gentle voice.

Georgie's legs turned to jelly. Oh no, was she going to faint?

“Georgie?”

The tenderness in his voice wrapped around her as sure as his arms. She opened her eyes and took a deep breath. “Darcy,” she squeaked.

He smiled down at her. “That’s me.”

She smiled shyly back. She had to stay distracted before she made a bigger fool of herself. “What are you doing in town? Don’t you have work today?”

“I’m afraid not. I can’t sit idle, so thought I’d come to town and see if I could be of assistance to anyone.” He looked her over. “And you, my dear, obviously need me.”

Her legs went weak again as the rest of her warmed. She swallowed hard – what would Rosie say? But did it matter? According to her sisters, none of them were going to marry – they were going to stick together, live out their days and probably die together as well.

Something deep inside her said, *forget that!*

His hand moved to her shoulder. “Georgie, what’s the matter?”

She looked into his bluish-gray eyes and shook her head, unable to answer. The sound of his voice was Heaven. His touch sent tingles up her spine. His concern for her made her worries vanish. She stood frozen, staring at him like an idiot – but at least she stayed standing.

He studied her a moment, then slowly closed the distance between them. “Georgie ...,” he whispered, his face approaching hers.

“Have you started yet?” Rosie called around the corner of the building.

Darcy took two steps back, just in time. He looked at Rosie as she appeared and smiled. “We were about to.”

Rosie stopped and put her hands on her hips. “Darcy, what are you doing here?”



“I was about to help your sister scrape paint,” he said with a nervous grin.

Rosie glanced between them. “I see.” She took the scraper from Georgie. “Hunny needs your help in the dining room – poor Sally hurt her back and can’t do her chores today.” She turned back to Darcy and smiled. “All right, let’s get to work.”

The news startled Georgie out of her stupor. “What?”

“Sally tried lifting that sack of flour we told her we’d move for her ... oh wait, you weren’t at breakfast. Anyway, she went to do it herself and strained something.”

“Oh my goodness, that’s awful.” Georgie took one last look at Darcy, nodded goodbye and hurried off. Once she rounded the corner of the hotel she stopped and took several deep breaths. If she didn’t know any better, she’d say Darcy had been about to kiss her! But that was absurd – he clearly held some affection toward Rosie. He’d even shown up a few times to see her in the last week ... or at least they’d crossed paths.

Come to think of it, they’d seen Zachary and Michael periodically too. She had no idea the brothers had so much business in town.

But that wasn’t what bothered her. Ever since the barbecue the six of them had fallen into a natural pairing: Hunny with Michael (though there had been signs of that even before), Rosie with Darcy, and her with Zachary. Zachary was handsome, polite, funny and sharp-witted. He was a man that would keep you on your toes. But he didn’t prompt the feelings in her that Darcy did simply by speaking. Zachary, simply put, didn’t make her swoon.

But Zachary loved to talk about food and cooking – and every time he did, Rosie was there and stole his attention away. This left Georgie feeling like a spare part – a very unnecessary one. Rosie seemed to like Darcy well enough, but she was sure that if she went back around the corner, she’d find the two of them scraping paint, probably showing no passion except Rosie’s retorts if he dropped paint chips on her by accident.

Oh, what was she going to do? She didn't *want* to be a spinster – she wanted to be a married woman, happily cleaning up after her husband and children. But her sisters were outvoting her, and she couldn't bring herself to abandon them. The men they were supposed to marry weren't ready to carry that responsibility. And now this sudden attraction to Darcy, whom her sister had earmarked as her own. She shook her head at the mess her life had become.

She sighed as she entered the hotel to find Hunny and poor Sally. This was their life now and she might as well get used to it. But she couldn't pretend that she felt nothing for Darcy – not when her legs turned to jelly every time she was with him. God only knew what she'd do if they went back to the original plan and he married Rosie.

The thought made Georgie's lower lip tremble. She bit it, willed the tears behind her eyes to stay put and entered the dining room. Time to work.

\* \* \*

DARCY HALF-LISTENED to Rosie chatter about a new recipe she and Mrs. Upton were trying to perfect before the town picnic in a couple of weeks. Each year the townsfolk tried to come up with different games to play, leading up to the tug-of-war at the end of the day. He hoped the creek wasn't as cold as last year, when he, Benedict, Michael and Harvey Brown had been pulled in. According to Wilfred, Harvey always seemed to land on the losing team. Darcy was resolved to be on the other end of the rope this year.

Everyone in town contributed to the picnic, with food, prizes, even livestock. This year the brothers wanted to give something – they'd even discussed it at their Thursday night dinner with Pleasant and Eli – but hadn't come up with any ideas. Their pockets were empty, their minds were on the Callahan sisters and time was running out. Maybe they'd have to wait until next year.

Darcy's own heart and mind was puzzling over Georgie, and had been since last Sunday. Today that spark had flared

again, that unexplainable pull toward her. He couldn't fight it, didn't know how. He just knew she needed him, and God help any man that tried to harm her. But Zachary liked Georgie too, and he couldn't stand in the way of Zach's happiness.

The brothers talked about the sisters more each day. It was obvious Michael was interested in Hunny, and they seemed a good match. When things got better for him, they'd probably be the first to marry. But where did that leave Zachary and himself? If his traitorous heart kept after Georgie, Zachary wouldn't take kindly to the interference.

“And then I think I'll use some chocolate sauce on it...”

Darcy blinked. Chocolate sauce? What the devil was she talking about? This was bad – he should be paying attention to her, not thinking about Georgie. He smiled at Rosie and licked his lips. “Sounds wonderful. When can I try some?” *Whatever it is*, he thought.

“I can't bring such a dish to the picnic. I could prepare it for afternoon tea one day, but I want to perfect the recipe first. Perhaps I should try it out on your brother.”

“Zachary?”

She laughed. “Who else?”

Of course – Zachary. Her eyes were bright, her smile wide and she was in a good mood. She didn't get like that when talking about him or Michael. “Rosie? What do you and your sisters think of Clear Creek now that you've been here for a couple of weeks?”

“Oh, we like it.” She scraped paint off a board. “Myself, I like it a lot. Sally and her kitchen are wonderful!”

“Yes, it is quite something. But seriously, do you think you'll stay?”

She stopped scraping and looked at him. “Why wouldn't we?”

“I think Hunny mentioned your temporary work for Mr. Van Cleet. What happens when he runs out of things for you to do? I know the man's generous, but ...”

“Well, I’m already working in the kitchen with Sally, and she’s not getting any younger – she needs the extra pair of hands. Besides, I can do the work twice as fast and I’m just as good a cook ... though don’t tell her I said that.”

“My lips are sealed,” he drawled. “But I’m inclined to agree, though Irene Dunnigan could give you a run.”

“So I’ve heard. I haven’t made her pot roast recipe yet, but everyone that comes into the hotel has seen fit to tell me about it. After they tell me how much they liked *my* chicken and dumplings.”

He nodded. “Yes, I heard about those. Rotten luck I missed them.”

Rosie smiled. “Then the next time I make it, I’ll save you some.”

As if on cue, his stomach growled. He laughed and put a hand over his belly. “I couldn’t have said it better.”

“No,” she said between giggles, “I doubt you could.”

They finished scraping the areas Mr. Van Cleet assigned and went to fetch the paint. Darcy didn’t see Georgie anywhere – she must still be helping her sister and Sally. “Should we check on things in the dining room?”

“You mean Sally?” Rosie said as they returned to the work area. She pulled a paintbrush out of the toolbox. “I’m sure she’s getting along. Hunny and I got her to a chair and sat her down, and Ada went to fetch Doc Drake. We needed Georgie to finish the breakfast dishes and bake cookies for tea.”

“I see.” He glanced at the corner where he’d last seen Georgie. When Rosie came earlier, she’d interrupted ... something. He’d almost kissed her, he was sure of that. He drew in a sharp breath and let it out slowly.

“Something wrong?” Rosie asked.

Darcy felt a chill go up his spine. He’d have to keep himself in better check from now on, for all their sakes. He didn’t want to cause a rift between himself and Zachary, didn’t want Rosie to feel rejected. She was having a good time with

him. But then, Rosie seemed to have a good time no matter where she went. There was a brightness and toughness about her that he admired. She had spunk but was also very kind and gentle. And protective, especially of Georgie. Hunny was too. And so was he ...

Darcy scanned the ground. “Is there only the one bucket of paint?”

“That’s all we need, isn’t it?”

He studied the wall. “Yes, for this. But quite a few other spots need work. I don’t think one bucket will be enough.”

“Oh dear. I’ll have to tell Mr. Van Cleet. I don’t know where he got the paint – maybe Dunnigan’s.”

“It matches the building, so he might have special ordered it. Either that or it’s what’s left over from when he built the place.”

“But that was what, twenty years ago?” she pointed out. “Paint doesn’t keep that long, does it?”

“I don’t know.” Or care – Darcy was just trying to get his mind off of Georgie. He smiled at Rosie. “This will have to do.”

“Twenty years ago,” she mused, eyes wide. “No wonder this place needs a few repairs.”

“Nothing that can’t be remedied in short order,” he said. “Between us we’ll get the job done.”

She grinned, her eyes bright. “That we will, Mr. Comfort. I can’t promise Mr. Van Cleet will pay you. But I can at least give you a hot meal.” She reached for the bucket of paint.

He reached for it as well, and their hands bumped. “Allow me, Miss Callahan,” he drawled.

“Be my guest,” she replied with an exaggerated shrug.

Rosie certainly was fun to be with. You’d think he would be enjoying himself more, but he wasn’t. The touch of Rosie’s hand had triggered nothing in him, but he was haunted by the helpless look on Georgie’s face earlier. The tug of her big

brown eyes pulled at his heartstrings. It was all he could do not to take her in his arms, mount his horse with her and ride off who knew where. All that mattered was that she was safe from all harm. And he'd keep her that way.

The problem was, she wasn't really his to protect. He and his brothers were protecting all the Callahan sisters. Zach and he had shown more partiality of late – he with Rosie, Zach with Georgie – but nothing was official. And yet when he was alone with Georgie, something came over him that was powerful, profound and totally alien. To be honest, it scared him to death.

Darcy cleared his throat, smiled at Rosie and looked in the toolbox for something to stir the paint. Time to work.

## CHAPTER 19

The Callahan sisters were sitting with Sally in her private parlor a few nights later, her feet resting on a stool. “I can’t thank you girls enough for taking care of me,” she gushed. “Land sakes, at this rate you’ll be replacing me.” She shot Rosie a worried look. “Cyrus hasn’t said anything, has he?”

Rosie massaged the woman’s left foot and smiled. “I don’t think anyone could ever replace you,” she said.

“She’s right,” Georgie added. “You can run circles around us. I don’t know how you do it.”

Sally clapped her hands. “You girls sure do know how to make a body feel good. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Hunny brought a pillow from the older woman’s bed and placed it behind her. “It’s our pleasure, believe me. We can’t thank you enough for all you’ve taught us these last few weeks. Not to mention how you made us feel welcome.”

“Did Ada say she felt any better?” Sally asked.

The girls exchanged a look. Ada Brody had been under the weather of late, and it seemed to be contagious – Honoria was down with it too. “I’m sure she’ll recover in no time,” Georgie said, then sneezed.

“Oh dear me, you too?” Sally said. “You poor dear.”

Georgie waved it off. “It’s nothing, just a silly cold. At least I don’t have what some of the others do.”

“Tummy trouble is never fun,” Rosie said. “I don’t want to catch what anyone has.” She gave Georgie a pointed look. “Including you.”

“Can I help it if I’ve caught cold?”

Sally laughed. “Never mind. Around here lots of folks can whip up something to help what ails you. Myself included – what would you like?”

“We’ll have none of that,” Rosie said. “Not in your condition.”

“Oh, girls, my back is much better ...”

“Yes, but remember what Doc Drake said – you should rest more, not work so hard,” Hunny reminded her. “We’re more than happy to take on the load. Between the three of us we can cover yours and Ada’s regular chores.”

Sally took her hand. “I know you can, you sweet girl. Thank you.” She yawned and stretched. “Land sakes, but I could do with a nap. Do you mind?”

Rosie got to her feet, tugged on Georgie’s sleeve and headed for the door. “We’ll go start supper.”

“You do that.” Sally settled into her chair.

Hunny kissed Sally on the cheek then joined her sisters at the door. “Would you like to have supper in your room tonight?”

“Heaven’s sake, no, I’ll join you in the dining room later.”

The sisters left Sally to her nap and went to the kitchen. “Georgie, can you peel potatoes while I get the chicken started?” Rosie asked.

“Sure.” She went to a bowl of potatoes on the worktable. She’d brought them out earlier, figuring she’d wind up with the job.

“I’ll run down to Dunnigan’s and buy some vegetables,” Hunny said. “With all the extra work, I forgot this morning.”

Rosie waved a cleaver at her. “Get what you can. See you later.”



Hunny left the hotel. She had money in her apron pocket so didn't bother to take it off. Besides, folks in Clear Creek were getting used to seeing the Callahan sisters dressed for work.

"Afternoon, Hunny," Levi Stone said as he locked the door of the bank.

"Good afternoon, Levi. How are you?"

"Just fine. By the way, my wife wanted me to invite you and your sisters for supper some evening. What date would be best for you?"

"That's very kind. But I should speak with Rosie and Georgie first – Georgie has a cold you see and we've been taking turns filling in for poor Sally."

"Yes, I heard about her back."

"So did I," Michael said as he rode up. He brought his horse to a halt and smiled. "How is dear Sally?"

Hunny's heart beat faster and she had to take a moment to remember how to talk. "Oh, um ... she's better. Her back doesn't hurt nearly as much."

"Good. Doc Drake does work wonders."

Levi smiled knowingly but said nothing.

Michael dismounted, wrapped his horse's reins around the hitching post and leaned against it. "And what might you be up to this evening, Miss Callahan?"

Her eyebrows rose slightly. Was he calling her that for Levi's benefit? She didn't see why – everyone in town seemed to be on a first-name basis. "I was just on my way to the mercantile for vegetables."

"Were you, now? Would you mind if I come along?"

If she could will her heart to stop hammering in her chest, she might. But she covered it with her hand and said. "Not at all."

Levi glanced between them and smiled. "Have a pleasant evening." He put his keys in his pocket, tipped his hat and

strolled down the boardwalk.

Hunny watched him go. She'd learned Levi's routine over the last week – he kept his horse at the livery stable, ate lunch at the saloon on Wednesdays and had tea on Tuesdays and Thursdays with Mr. Van Cleet at the hotel. Like clockwork – exactly what one would wish from one's banker.

“I hear the Dunnigans got a big order of goods in,” Michael said. “Darcy helped Wilfred and Willie unload this morning.”

“Oh? Your brother was in town today?”

“Oh yes. Though that doesn't mean you'll see him.” He walked around the hitching post, hopped onto the boardwalk and offered her his arm. “Shall we?”

She smiled, her cheeks hot, and took it. They strolled slowly and she wondered if he was trying to make their time together stretch. After all, once they reached the mercantile he'd have to release her or people might think they were courting. She'd best enjoy it while she could. “I'm afraid Georgie's caught cold. So it's just as well we didn't run into your brother today.”

“Is she going to be all right?” he asked with a hint of concern.

“Of course – it's only a cold. At least she doesn't have the stomach trouble Ada Brody and Honoria Cooke do. I hear it's going around.”

“Yes, we've been steering clear of the ranch house at the Triple-C. I don't know who else is sick, but I don't want to catch it.”

“More than likely the children. Poor Belle – I'm sure she's been busy tending to her little ones.”

“Except Belle and Collin's children aren't so little. Parthena is the youngest and she's got to be eleven now.”

“I've never asked their ages,” she admitted. “The only time I've been to the Triple-C was the barbecue.”

He smiled. “Perhaps we should remedy that?”

She looked at him, brow creased in curiosity. “How so?”

“The Cookes’ ranch is very big. The town picnic has been held on their property ever since it began back in ’58, in the gorge by Clear Creek. There’s the most beautiful meadow.”

“Yes, Sally told us about it. And something about a tree?”

Michael laughed. “His Majesty. A giant oak the likes of which my brothers and I had never seen before. It’s magnificent.”

“But why do you call it His Majesty?”

He patted her hand and a jolt of heat shot through her. *Oh dear.* “The Cooke brothers’ mother named it that when the first settlers arrive thirty years ago. She was from some highborn family in England, and I suppose it reminded her of one of the Georgian kings or something.”

She giggled as they crossed the street to Dunnigan’s Mercantile. He led her up the porch and opened the door for her, releasing her arm to wave her inside. “After you.”

“Why, if it isn’t Hunny and Michael come to grace my establishment,” Wilfred said with a grin. “Could I interest either of you in a licorice whip?”

Michael’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re being generous today.” He went to the counter and smiled as Hunny joined him. “Licorice whip?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” she said.

Wilfred took a jar off the shelf, pulled out two and handed one to each of them. “On the house.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“Oh, I got some new candies in and I need to get rid of the old stuff.”

Michael chuckled. “Don’t let my brothers find out. They’ll take it all.”

Wilfred waved a hand at him. “I don’t mind giving away a few pieces. Besides, Darcy was a big help this morning. I appreciate it.”

“Did you pay him in licorice?” Hunny teased.

“No, I paid him with a free blanket, a new work shirt and a couple pounds of nails.”

Michael made that adorable scoffing sound she liked. “That was mighty generous of you, Wilfred.” He glanced around, then leaned over the counter. “Does your wife know?”

Wilfred winked. “I won’t tell if you don’t. So what can I do for you?” he asked Hunny.

“I need some produce.” She pointed to the back of the store, then looked at Michael. “I won’t be a moment.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he assured her.

She took a deep breath as if about to jump into deep water, and headed for the corner of the mercantile where the fresh produce was kept. Only when she reached the crates of vegetables did she breathe again. For Heaven’s sake, what was wrong with her? It wasn’t like he’d disappear in a puff of smoke. If this kept up, she’d have to avoid him ... no, that had been her plan a week ago, and had never worked. She glanced over her shoulder and watched him talking with Wilfred. They laughed, and she wondered what was so funny.

Best she get on with her business. She selected several carrots, two bunches of celery – celery never kept, so get it while she could – and about a dozen onions, carrying them in her apron. When she returned to the men she carefully placed everything on the counter and pulled her money from her pocket. “I believe I have enough,” she told Wilfred as she looked at the coins in her hand before setting them on the counter.

But Michael waved them off. “Her vegetables are on me, Wilfred.”

“Well, isn’t that gentlemanly?” Wilfred said with a big smile. He looked at Hunny, then Michael, and grinned some more.

“You don’t have to,” she said.

“I know.” He pulled some money out of his pocket and slid hers toward her with his other hand. “I’m sure you’ll return the favor someday. Bake me some cookies, maybe?”

She narrowed her eyes at him and did her best not to smile. “Oh, so that’s it.”

He chuckled low in his throat. “Can you blame me? Word around town is you’re a pretty good cook.”

“Nothing like my Irene,” Wilfred chimed in.

“Oh, of course not,” Hunny said. “I can’t begin to compete with your wife.” She glanced at the ceiling. “Is she feeling all right?”

Wilfred shrugged. “She gets a summer cold every year.”

“Hunny tells me Georgie isn’t feeling well either,” Michael volunteered.

“Is that so?” Wilfred said. “Well, then I’ll be right back. Don’t go away, you two.” He scurried through the curtain behind the counter. Hunny heard feet going up stairs. She knew the Dunnigans lived over the mercantile and wondered if she’d ever know what it was like to have her own home again. No wonder Georgie was bothered by the notion – it was beginning to wear on her too.

Michael’s hand was suddenly on her shoulder. “Why so sad?”

She took a breath and looked at him. “You can see it?” Obviously – otherwise he wouldn’t have asked.

“Can I help?”

*You could marry me ...* she gasped at the unbidden thought. “No ... it’s nothing, really. I’m just worried about Georgie and Sally.” There was an awkward silence after that, the kind that made a person feel unsure. Should she say some more? She got tongue-tied around him lately, and didn’t like it.

He took a step toward her as his eyes flicked to the curtain and back. “Hunny, may I escort you to the picnic next week?”

She smiled and blushed. “Yes. I’d like that.”

He gave her shoulder a squeeze, and only then did she realize he'd never removed his hand. When he did, a shiver went up her spine, and her mouth went dry as he took another step closer.

He gazed into her eyes, and hers widened as her mind screamed *No, you can't do this! If you spend the whole day with him, what sort of traitor would you be? Your sisters would never forgive you. If he can read you so well, what about other people? They'll be able to see how you feel about him and ...*

"Here you go!" Wilfred said as he brushed through the curtain. He set a small bundle on the counter. "English tea. The kind Honoria Cooke – Harrison and Colin's mama – used to have me order for her years ago. Sadie ordered some as a special gift for Harrison, and I was left with some extra."

"Gift – is it his birthday?" Hunny asked. She had to distract herself from the effect Michael was having on her.

"No, his birthday isn't until Christmas. Just a nice thing to do for the man. But this is sometimes hard to get. They don't even serve this at the hotel."

"Thank you, Mr. Dunnigan, that's most kind."

"I'm sure it'll make Georgie feel better." He had the same silly grin on his face as earlier, like he knew something they didn't. "Well, if you two are done, I have some work to do in the back."

"Thanks for the licorice, Wilfred." Michael tipped his hat.

"Yes, it was delicious." Hunny reached into her pocket and realized she'd only taken one bite of hers. She pulled it out and took a generous one, chewed and smiled.

When Wilfred was gone, Michael offered his arm again. "May I escort you home?"

She swallowed hard. The more time she spent with him, the worse things were going to be. She couldn't leave her sisters – it just wasn't right. Neither was asking this man to take them on. They had to figure something else out ...

“Hunny?” He rested his hands on her upper arms.

She looked into his eyes and stopped breathing. “Yes?”

He licked his lips as his eyes roamed her face.

“Michael?” He lowered his face to hers, and Hunny’s heart stopped. Oh dear! He was going to kiss her! He came closer, and she gulped. “Michael?”

They were practically touching when he whispered, “You forgot your vegetables.”

\* \* \*

ZACHARY ENTERED the hotel and went straight to the counter. “Good afternoon, Lorcan.”

Lorcan’s head came up – he often bent his head close when reading something in Braille. People who didn’t know he was blind thought he was reading like anyone else. “Zachary. What are ye doing here – come to see Georgie?”

“Georgie? What makes you say that?”

Lorcan smiled. “Come, now.”

Zachary was glad Lorcan couldn’t see the look on his face. He wasn’t ready for anyone to think that. Michael and Darcy weren’t keen on folks noticing them with Hunny and Rosie either – at least he didn’t think so.

The brothers patrolled the town in shifts, just as they’d agreed, and checked in with the other men to see if they’d seen or heard of any strangers in the area. So far everything was peaceful and there’d been nothing to report, thank Heaven. But it had been two weeks since the vigil started and they’d each been seen around town with the Callahan sisters more than once. Obviously people were starting to talk.

Maybe it was time he and his brothers did. Zachary and Darcy knew Michael’s affection for Hunny was growing, but they’d thought their actions over the last week proved their neutrality with the sisters. Apparently that wasn’t the case. And there was still the unspoken issue of which sister he needed to be neutral toward ...

“Come to ask her to the picnic?” Lorcan teased.

Zachary rolled his eyes. “No, I brought some sort of tea from Grandma for Mrs. Upton. She said it would ease the pain in her back if it’s still troubling her.”

“Leave it on the counter if you like. I’ll see that she gets it.” He smiled and raised his face to the ceiling. “I hear little Georgie has a cold. She was sniffing all morning.”

“You make her sound like a child,” Zachary commented.

“She’s hardly that, I know, but there is something about her. I sense the poor thing’s been through a lot.”

“My brothers and I came to that same conclusion. You’ll let us know if any strangers check into the hotel?”

“Of course. And don’t worry, they haven’t a clue we’re watching them. Not even my wife knows. All is well.”

“Good,” Zach said with a sigh. “We wouldn’t want to upset them.”

“Ye don’t think men will come after them at this point, do ye?”

Zachary shrugged. “It’s hard to say. It took my brothers and me a couple of weeks to catch up to Pleasant, and we knew where to look.”

“Let us hope not, my friend.” Lorcan smiled. “Shall I tell Georgie ye were here?”

Zachary’s smile was lopsided. “If you want. I won’t bother her if she’s not well.”

“Are ye sure? Maybe the sight of ye will make her feel better.”

“Lorcan,” Zachary said with a roll of his eyes. The tone of his voice said it all.

Lorcan just laughed. “I’ll give Sally the tea in a few moments.”

“I hear Ada hasn’t been feeling well either,” Zachary said as he turned from the counter. He looked over his shoulder. “I



hope she feels better – give her my best.”

“I will,” Lorcan called.

Outside, Zachary paused on the porch. He should have had Lorcan fetch Georgie down to him, visited with her for a few moments and inquired after her health. But would she come at all? Maybe she felt too poorly. He stepped off the porch, went to his horse and mounted.

Rosie was probably in the kitchen cooking something wonderful. It would be a shame to be here and not say hello to at least one sister. After all, he was supposed to be guarding them, and as it was his shift, he was duty-bound to check on things, make sure the women were all right. After all, what if some scoundrel slipped into the hotel unnoticed and tried to steal one away? Shouldn't he check the hotel grounds too?

Before he knew it, he'd dismounted and headed for the rear of the building. He checked the perimeter and the storage sheds, checked them again, then went to the front of the building.

When he entered the lobby Lorcan smiled. “Back so soon?”

Zachary stopped short of the counter. “You knew it was me?”

“Ye smell like fresh-sawn wood, you and yer brothers. Also, ye were just here.”

Zachary sighed and shook his head. “One of these days I'm going to smear myself with strawberries or something and see if you can still guess who it is.”

Lorcan smiled. “Ah, but that's cheating.”

Zachary laughed and headed for the dining room.

“It's not tea time,” Lorcan called after him.

“I'm just checking things out.”

Lorcan laughed. “Ye'll find Rosie in the kitchen.”

Zachary stopped and looked at the blind man. Why would he tell him that? “I'll just see if everything's okay.”

Lorcan grinned. “Ye do that, Mr. Comfort.” He chuckled and returned to his Braille.

## CHAPTER 20

*R*osie took her biscuits out of the oven, turned and yelped. “Zachary Comfort! You scared me to death!”

“Sorry,” he said with a sheepish grin. He crossed the kitchen to the worktable. “Those smell good.”

“Yes, and they’ll taste good too.” She eyed him as she set the pan down. “What are you doing here?”

“I came by to say hello. I heard your sister isn’t feeling well.”

“Georgie? She caught a cold, poor thing.” She smiled. “I don’t suppose you’d like a biscuit?”

He grinned. “Need you ask? Have any jam?”

“Of course.” She went to a cupboard, took out jam and butter and brought them to the worktable. “I’ll have you know I made chicken and dumplings ...” The look of wonderment on his face was adorable, and she laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“You. The look on your face.”

He shrugged. “Can I help it if I think you’re a marvel?”

She smiled as her heart warmed. “Me?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “Of course. Anyone who can cook like you is a goddess in my book.”

“Why, Mr. Comfort, you flatter me. And all for a plate of chicken and dumplings.”

“What, me?” he pointed to himself. “Do you suggest my flattery is nothing but a ploy for food?”

She crossed her arms, her smile tight-lipped.

“I see. Well, just to prove you wrong, I’m leaving.” He headed for the door. “And that goes for your dumplings too!”

Rosie gasped. “Wait!” She hurried after him and through the door. He was nowhere in sight. “Oh no, what have I done?”

He jumped out from behind her. “Ha! Got you!”

“Oh!” Rosie cried, nearly jumping out of her skin. She smacked him on the arm. “Zachary, you’ll be the death of me!”

“Let’s hope not.” He stepped away from the wall. “Darcy will never forgive me.”

She stared at him. “Oh yes, I suppose not.”

He sobered. “No, he ... well ... never mind.” He glanced at the kitchen door. “About those dumplings?”

She sighed and smiled. “Would you like some? I have plenty.”

“How can I turn down such an offer?”

She smiled again and led him back into the kitchen. After serving him, they sat at the kitchen table, he with his plate and a couple of biscuits, she with a cup of coffee – she didn’t want to eat without her sisters. “They’ll be down soon,” she said. “Along with Sally.”

“Do you think Sally will mind me in her kitchen?”

“I doubt it. But my sisters wouldn’t approve of you and me being alone together. It’s hardly proper.”

He chewed, swallowed and grinned. “Being the rake that I am. Your poor reputation.”

She rolled her eyes. “This isn’t Denver, I’ve learned that. And it isn’t as if you’re ravishing me over the dumplings.”

“Hardly. The dumplings have my heart, I’m afraid.”

Rosie smiled but felt her own heart sink. She licked her lips and looked at the door. “I should set the table.” She got up, went to a hutch and took out some plates.

“I’ll leave ...”

“No, stay, really.”

Zachary stood. “I don’t want to get you in trouble, Rosie.”

She stared at him. She hadn’t heard him use her Christian name before, certainly not with so much concern in his voice. She liked it. “Sit. Eat. No one will mind. I’m sure once they get over the fact we *have* been alone for a time, they’ll want to visit. Especially Sally, who’s feeling much better and is eager to get back at it.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said, eyes locked on hers. He slowly sat and picked up his fork.

“Besides,” she said. “You’re not done.”

He looked at his plate. “You’re right – what was I thinking? It appears your reputation isn’t as safe around me as I said. Where there are dumplings, so shall I be.” He winked.

She rolled her eyes and groaned. “Hardly poetic.” She took the lid off the pot on the stove and gave the contents a stir. “How do you like them?”

“They’re heavenly,” he said around a bite. “I’ll have to stop by more often.”

She smiled, then spooned more chicken and dumplings into a tureen and brought it to the table.

“Rosie, have you seen my ...?” Hunny said as she came through the door. She stopped short. “Oh, Zachary. What are you doing here?”

“Eating,” he said as if that was enough.

Hunny smiled. “I can see that.” She looked at her sister and back. “How long have you been here?”

He shrugged. “Long enough to get seconds.”

Hunny laughed. “Not that long, then.”

He grinned. “You know me too well.”

“Georgie’s coming down.” She joined him at the table. “But she’s caught a cold.”

“So I heard.”

Hunny glanced at Rosie and back. “I spoke with Michael earlier.”

He looked at her and Rosie noticed his earlier amusement had vanished. “Have you? Was he looking for me?”

“No, he didn’t say anything.” Hunny lifted the lid from the tureen. “These look wonderful, Rosie.”

“They’re beyond wonderful,” Zachary argued. “They’re like a savory ambrosia fit only for the gods.”

Hunny laughed. “My, that’s quite the compliment.”

“Earlier he compared *me* to a goddess,” Rosie said. The thought made her heart warm. But with Zachary it was all about the food – it wasn’t like he’d set his cap for her. He was much more interested in Georgie. But she did like to cook and he was the kind of man a woman loved to cook for. No matter what she prepared, he was happy. She sighed and turned back to the stove. Best she bring the rest of the food to the table.

She’d just set the bowl of mashed potatoes down when Georgie and Sally entered. Georgie stopped short and swallowed, glanced at her sisters apprehensively, then smiled at Zachary. Was she not up to company?

As much as she hated to do it, Rosie thought it best if Zachary left. “Mr. Comfort, are you through?”

He looked at his empty plate. “Er ... do I have to answer that?”

“Zachary, what a pleasant surprise,” Sally said as she sat. “How are you and your brothers doing?”

“We’re fine.” His eyes drifted to Georgie. “Hello. Are you feeling better?”

She nodded and took a seat.

“Are you sure?” Rosie asked.

Georgie nodded again.

Rosie sighed. “Georgie, if I remember right, you *can* speak.”

Georgie frowned. “Yes, I can,” she said nasally.

Zachary smiled but stayed quiet. Hunny didn’t. “Oh, you sound terrible – you should have stayed in bed.” She glanced at Rosie. “She hadn’t said a word since helping you in the kitchen earlier. Now I know why.”

Georgie sniffed, then placed her hand over her mouth and coughed.

Zachary stood and went around the table, pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and offered it to her. “Here, you poor thing. Why did you come downstairs?”

She took the handkerchief and blew her nose. “Thank you. And I wasn’t going to, but I smelled Rosie’s chicken and dumplings and thought it would be nice to get out of our room for a while.”

“Can’t say I blame you,” he said. “Staring at the same four walls can get tiresome.”

Rosie saw the concern on his face and fought against a sigh. She sat at the table, took Georgie’s plate and served her a portion. “Here, this should make you feel better.”

“And after you eat,” Hunny added, “I’ll fix you some tea Wilfred gave me earlier.”

Georgie swallowed hard, looked at the food and the concerned faces around the table. “Thank you, everyone. You’re all very kind.” She looked at the handkerchief in her hand and offered it back to Zachary.

“Keep it. You need it more than I do.” He glanced around the table. “I should be going.”

“So soon?” Sally said. “Why not have another helping?”

He glanced at Rosie and smiled, and her heart flipped. Did she like his compliments that much? Well, she knew a true food lover when she saw one, and Zachary Comfort was definitely a kindred spirit on that score.

“Well, if you don’t mind ...” He retook his seat.

Rosie’s shoulders slumped as she pushed the tureen toward him. Once everyone had food on their plates, Sally said a quick blessing and they began to eat.

\* \* \*

THE NEXT DAY Irene was in the kitchen with Sally when the sisters came down to breakfast. “... And we’ll have to figure out what to do about the roast pig. I know we put Logan Kincaid in charge of it last year, but I think someone else should have a turn. Maybe several turns – the poor man didn’t get to play any of the games.”

“You’re right,” Sally replied. “If we split the job up between four or five men, everyone can still enjoy the festivities.”

“Are you talking about the picnic?” Hunny asked as she went to the hutch.

“Yes,” Irene faced them. “How are you girls gonna help?”

“Pies?” Rosie suggested.

“Cookies?” Georgie tried, her voice still nasal.

“What do you need?” Hunny asked.

“There’s lots of work to do at these things,” Sally said. “Every year Irene and I plan the menu, then ask women what dish on the list they’d like to bring. It works well this way.”

“How nice,” Hunny said. “Let us know how we can help.”



“I know how Rosie can,” Sally said with a smile. She turned to Irene. “She’s quite the cook. Besides, Sadie already volunteered her.”

Rosie blushed. “Thank you. She did mention I help with the food for the picnic when we attended her barbeque.”

Irene made an odd noise, like a predator sensing competition. “Are those Comfort men escorting you?”

The sisters exchanged several looks. “Um ... Michael asked to escort me,” Hunny said.

Rosie and Georgie looked at her. “He did?” Rosie said. “I wonder why Zachary didn’t ask Georgie last night?” Georgie just shrugged.

Hunny brought cups and saucers to the table and poured them all some coffee. “I’m sure he’ll get around to it.”

“And what about Darcy?” Georgie said. “Has he asked you, Rosie?”

“Not yet.”

“It doesn’t matter who asks who,” Irene huffed. “I just want to know if you’re going to have men accompanying you. If so, you can haul a few things to the picnic for us.”

Hunny exchanged a *so that’s why* look with her sisters. “I’ll ask Michael if it’s all right we use his wagon. That is, if he brings one.”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Irene barked. “He can’t expect you to ride on horseback!”

Rosie did her best to hide a smile. “No, none of them would do that. When we went to the Cookes’ barbecue, they had a wagon.”

“Probably borrowed,” Irene said. “Still doesn’t matter. So long as we get chairs and tables hauled down to the canyon.”

“I’m sure the Comfort men would be happy to help,” Hunny said.

“Good,” Irene said. “At least you can get a wagon down there now. Used to be you had to park one up top and carry

everything down.”

“Oh, that was a bother,” Sally said with a far-off look. “We’ll figure out what you can do for the picnic a little later. Right now let’s concentrate on breakfast, then the morning chores.”

Irene left as the sisters began eating. As soon as she was gone Georgie smiled. “I like her.”

Sally laughed. “We all do. Underneath that rough exterior lies a heart of gold.”

Rosie smiled. “I hope the men like my version of her pot roast recipe.”

“Men?” Hunny said.

Rosie blushed. “Uh ... Michael, Darcy and Zachary.”

Sally smiled. “Oh, *those* men. Come now, girls, it’s all over town how the three of you are paired up. Dare I say we can look forward to weddings come harvest time?”

The sisters blanched. “Weddings?” Georgie squeaked. She looked at her sisters. “Weddings!”

“Georgie, calm down,” Hunny said. “Sally, there’s no understanding between my sisters and Darcy and Zachary.” She sighed. “Nor even Michael and myself. Other than that they’re not ready to take on wives.”

“But I see you’re already paired up,” Sally said. “Why fight it? It’s only a matter of time.”

“But ... they don’t want us, do they?” Georgie said.

“Oh, child,” Sally said with a grin. “How little you know. Why else would the three of them spend so much time in town these last weeks?”

The sisters exchanged another look. “What do you mean?” Rosie asked.

“They never came to town this often before. But since you three arrived, one or more of them have been seen in Clear Creek every day. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

“Of course we’ve noticed,” Hunny said. “But we didn’t know their habits before we arrived.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Sally agreed. “But mark my words, those three gents have set their caps for you ladies. I wouldn’t be surprised if one of them proposes at the town picnic.”

Georgie’s eyes rounded to saucers. “Proposes?! But ...”

Hunny took a breath and looked at Sally. “Are you sure about this?”

“As sure as I can be. Why else would they be doing what they’re doing?”

Hunny took a sip of coffee, her heart in her throat. Rosie stared at the plate of toast already on the table, took a slice and buttered it, a blank look on her face. Georgie just sat there in shock.

Sally watched them. “What’s the matter with you? Aren’t you happy about it? After all, it’s what you came to Clear Creek for in the first place.”

Rosie glanced at her sisters. “She’s right. But ...”

“But what?” Sally cut in. “You should be ecstatic!”

Hunny left the table and went to the stove, pulled a plate of pancakes out of the warming oven and brought it to the table. “Yes, you’re right, we should be. It’s just that ... we have plans. We’re living them now. We thought that would be that. Are we going to have to change them again?” She shook her head. “It’s tiring.”

“You’d just be going back to your original plan,” Sally argued, then laughed. “Land sakes, you’d think I was telling you you were being ridden out of town on a rail!”

The sisters sighed as one. Rosie looked at Hunny. “So now what do we do?”

She shrugged. “Well, we wait and see. Sally’s right – getting married is why we came here in the first place. If that happens, we do that. If not, we just keep doing what we’re doing ... Georgie?”

Georgie had just burst into tears.

\* \* \*

UPSTAIRS IN THEIR ROOM, Hunny sat Georgie on the bed. “Wipe your eyes and tell me what’s wrong.”

Georgie blew her nose with Zachary’s handkerchief. It didn’t help much. “Noffing, really. I’b juft not myfelf.” She blew it again.

Hunny sat next to her. “I know we’ve talked about making it on our own ...”

“We *did* talk about making it on our own,” she said with a clearer tone. “And I agreed to it. But really, I want to get married. I just didn’t want to marry some dirty old man picked out by Aunt Henrietta!” Georgie blew her nose again. “It’s like we were making a secret pact of some kind, and I was angry and scared and went along with it.”

“I didn’t realize,” Hunny said. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, now you know. I don’t want to leave you – but I do want a husband and children someday.”

Hunny gave her a hug. “Well, no one’s getting married just yet. But when you want to, we’ll support you all the way.”

Georgie sighed. “But Sally said...”

“I know what she said. We still don’t know when, or even if, that will happen. How could the Comforts ask us to marry them when we all know they aren’t ready?”

Georgie looked away. “I know, I know.” She smiled. “But they could still propose like Sally thinks.”

Hunny cringed.

Georgie studied her. “What is it? It would just be a long engagement – or three.”

Hunny shook her head, got up and went to the window. “But for now, it looks like we’re right back where we started. Well, not really – we’re out from under Aunt Henrietta’s

thumb. And the Comforts aren't doddering satyrs. But we're all still worried about leaving the others behind."

Georgie nodded. "Yes, that's true."

"Well, that will *not* happen. We'll always be together in some way, even if one of us marries and the other two don't. Even if two of us marry and one doesn't."

"But that's not what we agreed ..."

"Yes, but now it's clear we didn't take your feelings into account enough. Maybe we didn't take *our* feelings into account enough either ... which means we need to really talk about this again and decide what to do. I had no idea that ..."

Hunny left the window and sat on the bed.

"That what?" Georgie asked her brow creased with worry.

"That we could actually get what we came for. I thought the whole idea was lost, that we'd have to live as spinsters the rest of our lives."

"We all thought that," Georgie agreed. "I think it made things easier. Especially after we stopped being angry at them." She paused. "But I can't say I ever liked it."

Hunny nodded and stood. "We'll speak with Rosie later and come up with a new plan."

"Like what?"

"Don't worry, we'll figure something out." Hunny hugged Georgie one last time, then left the room, leaned against the wall in the hall and blew out a shaky breath. Did Michael really want to marry her? Is that what happened yesterday in the mercantile? She knew good and well he was about to kiss her, and she'd wanted him to. But she didn't dare, knowing she'd fall for him and fall hard. It was all she could do not to stare at him calf-eyed as it was. When she thought of her sisters, she was able to reign herself in.

But after what Sally said, maybe falling for him was an option ... especially if they and Michael's younger brothers wanted each other too. Georgie seemed keen on the prospect. Yes, they'd definitely have to talk to Rosie and sort this out.

For now, she needed to go downstairs, set the tables and do dishes. The hotel didn't get too many people for breakfast, but there were enough.

She cleared dirty dishes off the tables, changed tablecloths and reset everything, then carried all the old stuff into the kitchen to wash. Rosie was at the stove, stirring a pot. "What's that?" Hunny asked.

"Bean soup. Mrs. Upton wants to serve it with sandwiches for lunch today."

Hunny smiled. The hotel didn't have a menu – patrons ate whatever Sally had a mind to make. Rosie liked the system, since she could make whatever she wanted on the days Sally was unable to cook and the customers loved everything set before them. "Your recipe or Sally's?"

"Sally's. It's a great way to use up the leftover ham from the other day." She put the spoon on the worktable and wiped her hands on her apron. "Is Georgie all right?"

"Not really." Hunny looked at her. "We need to talk."

Rosie sighed. "About the Comfort brothers?"

"Yes. If what Sally says is true ..."

"I have a confession to make," Rosie interjected.

Hunny's eyebrows shot up. "Oh?"

Rosie licked her lips and paced a few times. "I ... uh ..."  
She turned to face her. "I'm not ready to get married."

Hunny's mouth dropped open. "What?"

Rosie shrugged sheepishly. "I'm just not."

Hunny nodded. "All right, then."

"Oh, there's nothing to stop you from ... wait. It's all right?"

"Of course it is. We're not going to leave each other regardless. If one or two of us get married, we'll still be nearby. Georgie really wants to get married – not this minute,

but at some point – but if you’d rather wait, or never marry at all, that’s okay too.”

Rosie looked like the weight of the world had been lifted off her shoulders. “Oh. That’s a relief. I guess I just wanted to know you two won’t run off and leave me.”

“I promise we won’t ... you *two*?”

“Look,” Rosie said. “I’ve seen the way you stare at Michael. He looks at you the same way. It’s obvious, Hunny, to anyone who cares to see it.”

Hunny closed her eyes and sat in the nearest chair, her heart pounding now. Dare she tell her sister she was already falling in love with the man? That her feelings toward Michael went far beyond simple friendship? That she wanted so much more? For that matter, did she even need to say it? Rosie seemed to have puzzled it out, even when she was doing her best to suppress it. She looked at Rosie, tears in her eyes.

Rosie sighed. “I thought so. How long has he had your heart?”

“He doesn’t have it yet.”

“Liar.”

Hunny wiped at her eyes. “You’re right. I don’t know how long – it just hit. But I won’t leave you and Georgie. That’s a promise.”

“If you marry Michael, you won’t have to – you’ll be right outside town.” Rosie came to the table and sat. “Georgie and I talked about getting you married first, remember? How if there was a way for you to get out from under Aunt Henrietta’s roof, you should take it? Well, we’re not under her roof anymore, but we still want you to go first. I mean ...” She waved her hand around. “... do you really want to stay here?”

“Not really, nice as it is. But are you sure?”

Rosie took Hunny’s hand and patted it. “I can look after Georgie. I have work here I love, and I’m sure Mr. Van Cleet can be talked into keeping Georgie on as well if she wants.

From the sound of it she'd rather not, but she'll have a choice."

Hunny stared, unable to believe her ears. "We should speak with Georgie."

"Of course," Rosie agreed.

Hunny smiled. "We still don't know what the men will do. Not really."

"No, but at least we'll have a new plan."

"To marry me off?"

Rosie gave her hand a squeeze. "To see you happy."

Hunny let her tears free, smiled and hugged her sister with all her might.



## CHAPTER 21

“**S**o it’s all right, you see?” Hunny told Georgie in their room after lunch.

Georgie stared at her a moment. She’d still didn’t feel well, and had stayed upstairs to rest and do some mending for Mr. Van Cleet. “Well, I ... yes. It’s what we talked about before this horrible mess started.”

“I know, but I still want to make sure it’s fine with you. We might not be here at the hotel together anymore, but we’ll still see each other. We’ll still be close.”

Georgie held up her hand. “It’s all right, Hunny. And I still agree with Rosie that you should marry first. If you have a chance, then take it. You ... love him?”

Hunny went to the window and nodded. “I do, Georgie.” She shook her head and wiped at one eye. “I could fall so easily and so hard.”

Georgie joined her. “Looks like you’ll get a chance. There he is.”

Hunny looked at the street below. Michael was just dismounting in front of the hotel. “Oh my goodness!” She pinched her cheeks. “How do I look?”

Georgie laughed. “Beautiful as always.”

Hunny hurried to the mirror, smoothed her hair, gulped and spun to her sister. She had the freedom to feel now but wasn’t sure what to do about it. “Do you think he’ll ask me at the picnic?”

“I couldn’t say,” Georgie said softly.

Rosie entered the room. “Hunny, you have a visitor.”

“Oh dear,” she said. Good heavens, she actually felt faint. “I don’t know what to do!”

Rosie laughed. “How about going downstairs? But ... be careful. We don’t know if Sally’s right about this.”

Hunny nodded. “Yes, of course.” She looked at her sisters. “Thank you both so much.”

They smiled and shooed her out the door.

Hunny took a deep breath, then another, before hurrying to the stairs. She stopped when she reached them, smoothed her dress, pinched her cheeks and started down.

Michael was at the front counter speaking with Lorcan. He smiled as she approached. “There you are. How are you today?”

“Very well, thank you. And you?”

“Never better. I came to speak with Sally about what she needs delivered to the picnic.”

Her heart sank. He hadn’t come to see her? “Oh ... yes, of course. Follow me.” She headed for the dining room and kitchen, her heart in her throat. Rosie was right – she shouldn’t let herself get too carried away. What if Sally had missed the mark and none of the Comfort men were interested in marriage? Did the way Michael looked at her say what he was feeling? She glanced at him as they entered the kitchen, but he only smiled at her and made a beeline for Sally at the stove.

“Well, if it isn’t my good friend Michael Comfort,” Sally cried. “Irene was just here – she has a list of things for you to do.”

“Good, I was hoping she did.”

Hunny’s heart sank another notch.

“We have several tables and some chairs to be hauled out, then there’s the pies and such,” Sally explained. “That will be a separate load, I imagine.”

Hunny sat and listened to them. So he was here about work, nothing more. She felt the sting of embarrassment, but thankfully she and Michael hadn't had time to interact much, especially not alone. Maybe he had plans for them for the future, but there was no sign of it right now.

"I'll bring the wagon around the day before the picnic," Michael said. "It's best we get the heavy stuff set up then. I heard Wilfred is taking a load out too."

"Irene mentioned that, yes." Sally looked at Hunny. "Oh, there you are. Do you have anything for Michael to take to the picnic? Or can you think of what else we might need?"

Hunny mustered a smile. "No. I haven't seen where the picnic's held, so I'm not sure what's needed."

"The Cookes will dig the barbecue pit today," Michael told her. "My brothers are helping with that while I'm at Irene and Sally's disposal." He came closer. "We're borrowing some wagons the day of the picnic. You and I can use one while your sisters and my brothers ride out in the other."

"You and me?" she said. "By ourselves?"

He smiled. "Yes. And probably Irene, if my guess is right." He turned back to Sally. "Wilfred is taking another load out the morning of the picnic. I told him I'd be happy to deliver his wife to him."

Hunny whimpered involuntarily.

He turned to her. "Come now, I know Irene can be grouchy, but she's not that bad. Well, most of the time. Maybe we'll get lucky and she'll be having a good day."

Hunny closed her eyes and turned away. It wasn't Irene Dunnigan – it was her own foolishness. If Sally hadn't been in the kitchen, she might have done something stupid like throw her arms around his neck and tell him how she felt. How embarrassing would that be, when he was only concerned with the picnic?

He put a hand on her shoulder. "Really, she's not that bad."

“I know,” she said, her voice coming out softer than she wanted. But his hand felt good, and he wasn’t taking it away.

He looked into her eyes. “It’s best we have a chaperone.”

That got her attention. “What do you mean?”

“Trust me,” he said quietly. “It will be a good thing.”

Her eyes widened. She glanced at Sally, who winked. Oh dear, maybe it was true! She turned back to Michael and stood. “Why ... would we need a chaperone?”

He took a deep breath, then smiled. “Nothing to worry about. Everyone in town knows your reputation is safe with me. But Clear Creek has its gossips.”

Hunny’s heart sank again. She couldn’t take much more of this. “I see. Well, we’d best not give them anything to twist around.”

“No, we shouldn’t.” His eyes roamed her face, settling on her lips for a moment before he looked away. “Anything else, Sally?”

Sally watched them, a smile on her face. “No, I’d say that covers it. I know we’ll have a splendid time at the picnic this year! I can’t wait.”

He turned back to Hunny. “Neither can I.” He swallowed, his eyes on her lips again.

Having him look at her like that was pure torture. If Sally wasn’t there, would he kiss her? Would she kiss *him*? Her heart ached for resolution, and instead it was like one hairpin turn after another, all in the span of a few minutes!

“I should go,” he said, his voice low and rasping.

Sally giggled and turned back to the stove.

Hunny, her cheeks hot, stared up at him. “Yes, I ... I understand.” She hoped she did.

He glanced at Sally as she stirred the soup, looked at Hunny again and leaned close to her. “I’m looking forward to the picnic too. Are you?” His voice was still low, soft, like a gentle caress on her nerves.

Hunny closed her eyes, unsure what to do. When she opened them, his face was inches from hers, and she licked her lips. "Should I?"

"Yes, Hunny, I think you should." Ever so gently, he brushed his lips across hers. "I'll see you after a bit," he spoke against them, his breath hot and moist as a Savannah summer. She shuddered as he slowly drew back, eyes locked on hers. "Sally?" he called when he was upright.

Sally turned around, a huge smile on her face. "What do you need, honey?"

He ran his tongue over his lower lip, then smiled. "Just a list of what you need. I'll get it done."

Her smile broadened. "Oh, I have no doubt about that. No doubt at all."

He took a deep breath, his eyes on Hunny's as he backed to the door. "I'll be nearby. I'm helping Doc Drake repair his woodshed and the fence behind his house."

"All right," Sally said. "I'll send Hunny to you if I need anything. Also, Mr. Van Cleet has a cracked window in one of the guest rooms he wants replaced. If the glass came in, you can do that for him."

"No problem," he said, his eyes not wavering.

Hunny stood transfixed, as if under a magic spell. That was her first kiss, no matter how small, and she wasn't likely to forget it. Shouldn't she be breathing by now? Was she? She was so engulfed in new sensations she didn't know.

Michael smiled, waved at Sally and disappeared through the kitchen door.

"Told you," Sally said.

Hunny almost fell out of her chair. "Oh my."

"'Oh my' is right." Sally hurried to the table. "Well, what was it like?"

Hunny gaped at her. "You saw?"

“I didn’t have to *see* anything, I just knew. A man doesn’t use that tone of voice with just anyone. And the way he was looking at you ...”

Hunny’s jaw went slack. “Oh *my* ...”

Sally laughed and slapped her leg. “I haven’t been around this much romance since Honoria Cooke’s wedding.” She sighed. “I do enjoy watching young folks fall in love.”

Hunny shook herself. “In love? But it was just a kiss!”

“Don’t matter, I saw the way you looked at him. Did this make up your mind?”

“What?”

Sally laughed again. “Look, I’ve been in love before – I was married to the most wonderful man. He’s in glory now, but truth is I’ve often dreamed of falling in love again. I think I’ve imagined every look a man can give a woman he wants to marry.” She sighed. “But remember, those Comfort men still have work to do to get ready for having wives and such.”

Hunny rubbed her eyes. She still felt muddled, like her brain had left and only her heart remained to run things. “It was just a kiss ...”

“Was it?”

Hunny stood. “I need to get my chores done.”

“Don’t dismiss it, child,” Sally advised. “Was that your first?”

She closed her eyes and nodded.

“Well, then, you can’t say the man can’t kiss. You’re barely able to stand!”

Hunny opened her eyes and noted she was in fact listing to starboard. She straightened herself and patted her cheeks a few times. “I think I need coffee.”

“You probably need something stronger, but we don’t serve that here – try Mulligan’s. Are you going to tell your sisters?”

Hunny let her hands drop. “Sally, please ...”

“All right, don’t mind me. I’m just saying that he’s more than interested. Why, in some places you’d have to get married for that.”

She looked at her, aghast.

“It’s true. Wasn’t twenty years ago we had ourselves a shotgun wedding in this town over not much more – though there were some political complications. And when Honoria and Major got married, we almost had another. Ask your Michael about that.” Sally nodded and returned to the stove.

Hunny watched her a moment before leaving the kitchen. She stood in the quiet of the dining room and stared at the tables with their lovely place settings, then walked to the windows, looked at the street and hugged herself. Michael’s kiss had been gentle, as if born of kindness, and she wasn’t sure what she was supposed to feel. Her chest was blissfully warm, her heart peaceful and content.

Yet something didn’t feel right, and she wondered if a part of her still couldn’t stand the thought of leaving her sisters behind. Though she wouldn’t really be gone. But why did she have a nagging feeling of unease? Was it that Rosie didn’t want to marry yet? Or that Georgie was all too ready to? Who knew?

She paced in front of the window. “This shouldn’t be this complicated.” But for some reason it was. Things didn’t feel as they should, as if something was out of joint. Did she dare give her heart the freedom to soar? Even if she and Michael didn’t marry until next year, couldn’t she enjoy her new-found happiness? Even if her sisters trudged through the upcoming months not knowing what their future would bring, they wouldn’t want her to be downcast about her own.

She sat at the nearest table, still overwhelmed – Michael’s kiss hadn’t left her yet. She drew in a shuddering breath and put her hands on the table. She should be ecstatic, not ... what? “Afraid,” she whispered. Yes, afraid. What if this wasn’t real? It was just a kiss, after all. When a man kissed a woman,

did it cover her like a heavy blanket? Despite her feelings about her sisters, something else had happened.

Hunny tried to figure out what it was. Then it hit her – Michael’s gentle kiss made her feel as if she’d just been ... completed. “My goodness.”

\* \* \*

MICHAEL STEPPED onto the boardwalk in front of the sheriff’s office, went to Tom Turner’s favorite chair and sat. “What have I done?” he said, eyes on the street. He should never have kissed Hunny. Now it would be hard not to kiss her again, and again, and again. He might as well boil himself in oil – the torture would be comparable.

“Oh Lord, I want to marry her.” He glanced up and down the street. No one was around to hear him say it, but the words were loud and clear. They weren’t bad, simply the truth. But it was too soon. He wasn’t ready, and the wait ... he didn’t want to think about it. Yet there was no way around it.

He took off his hat and ran his hand through his hair, unable to shake the look on Hunny’s face after he’d kissed her. He’d exercised as much restraint as possible, but he knew he’d conveyed a clear message: *you’re mine, and I’m yours*. From her expression, he knew she’d heard him loud and clear. Now there was no turning back ... and no way forward.

He stood and headed for the mercantile. He still had to help Wilfred, then back across the street to fix Doc Drake’s fence and woodshed. He’d be in town most of the day. Thankfully it was his day to watch over the women – getting paid while he was doing it was an added bonus.

“Wilfred?” he called as he entered the mercantile.

“He’s in the back,” Irene said as she filled a jar with licorice whips. She eyed Michael as he headed for the curtain, her face scrunched up. Did she know Wilfred had been giving out free candy? From the way she was looking at him, he’d say she did. Poor Wilfred.



Michael found the guilty party in the back storeroom. “What did you need?”

“Mind helping me move these barrels to that corner? If we stack them, that’ll give me more room in here.”

“Sure thing.” Michael studied a barrel. “What’s in this?”

“Beans. Careful, it’s heavy.”

Michael tilted the barrel, rolled it to the desired place and set it on end, then fetched a smaller one and put it on top.

Wilfred watched. “You sure you don’t mind taking Irene out with you and Hunny on picnic day?”

“Not at all.” He rolled another large barrel into the corner.

“How’s your cabin coming along?”

“I haven’t had much time to tend to it lately, but it’s progressing.”

Wilfred chuckled. “Too much time in town?”

Michael stopped and set the barrel up. “Yes.”

“Not that I blame you.”

Michael nodded. He knew he was talking about Hunny. “No, I can’t blame me either.” Of course, he didn’t want Wilfred to know the real reason he and his brothers had been around so much. Protecting the women had taken up a lot of time and slowed the progress on all three cabins. Still, better safe than sorry. And now, he wanted to be near Hunny for reasons having nothing to do with security. His heart had made up its mind days, maybe weeks ago. Why fight it? Now it came down to logistics.

“So you gonna ask her to marry you?”

Michael smiled. “Wilfred, don’t rush me.”

“I ain’t rushing nobody. But you’d best hurry before some other fella comes along and sweeps that pretty gal off her feet.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen.” He fetched another of the smaller barrels.

“Don’t be too sure. Harvey Brown was in here the other day and said a group of men spent a couple of nights at the Whites’ stage stop.”

Michael froze. “Really?”

“Yeah, five or six of them. He didn’t know where they were headed, but if they come through here, you never know.”

Michael stared at him. “When did Harvey tell you this?”

Wilfred shrugged. “Let’s see, this is Wednesday. Harvey comes to the mercantile three times a week, so ... probably Monday.”

Michael groaned. “How did he come by this information?”

“Probably from either Willie or Anson. Willie drives the stage through there, and Anson went to visit his ma and brothers a little over a week ago. Got home Monday, I believe. He and his wife don’t live far from Harvey ...”

Michael did the math. It took days to get to the Whites’. If men had camped outside of town somewhere, either he or his brothers or the volunteers watching over the women would have noticed. He sighed in relief. “Sorry, Wilfred. I didn’t mean to be nosy.”

Wilfred shook his head. “You got it bad, son. Seems to me you’d best marry that gal quick, whether your place is done or not.”

Michael nodded. “At this point, I’m inclined to agree.”

\* \* \*

GEORGIE SCRUBBED the window and dipped her rag into the bucket of soapy water again. The chore was tedious, but peaceful. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts, her disappointment. Hunny would marry Michael, she had no doubt. Rosie would happily continue on as cook in the hotel and – she closed her eyes – eventually marry Darcy. And she, the one who wanted to wed the most ... what was she to do?

She couldn’t marry Zachary, a man she wasn’t in love with. She might be in love with Darcy, but that wasn’t fair to

Rosie. How did this happen? The situation was right out of a novel – a bad one. She supposed she should be thankful they hadn't married as soon as they arrived. At least this way she had a choice.

Well, at least she could continue on at the hotel, so long as Mr. Van Cleet would have her. And while she refused to be a spinster the rest of her life, surely another man would come along. It wasn't like Darcy was the only gentleman she could fall for. There were worse fates, weren't there?

She scrubbed the next window. At least Hunny would be happy and Rosie would have someone she loved and enjoyed cooking for. But what about her? Would she regret telling Zachary "no" should he ask? Or should she go ahead, marry him anyway and hope that love developed in time? She didn't know. All she knew was that she wasn't sure she could stand to see Rosie blissfully married to Darcy. Would it gnaw at her day in and day out? Would the guilt drive her mad?

If it came to that, perhaps she should leave Clear Creek and settle elsewhere. At least she'd know her sisters were happy and well cared for. She could get a job as a maid or housekeeper anywhere. She was good at it – Heaven knew she'd been doing it long enough for Aunt Henrietta.

She went to the next window. The pain of their aunt's betrayal was still fresh. She wasn't sure how long it would take to fade, or if it would, but they were safe now. Those awful men hadn't followed. How could they? The old goats hadn't a clue where they went. Thank Heaven for Mrs. Pettigrew.

She continued down the hall, washing windows in each room, her thoughts trailing behind her. She supposed if she did marry Zachary, it wouldn't be so bad, but seeing Darcy ... no, she couldn't do it. The problem was how to break it to Hunny and Rosie if she decided to leave Clear Creek. No, Hunny and Rosie wouldn't hear of it – they'd never let her go.

Georgie stared out the window she'd just cleaned. "I'd have to run away." The truth made her weak – she'd never been alone before. But could her heart stand the pain of seeing

Darcy married to her sister? She didn't want to hurt Rosie or dampen her happiness. Would it be worse for Rosie if she stayed or if she went?

She wiped away a few tears, dipped the rag in the bucket again and wrung it out along with her heart. If Michael and Darcy proposed to her sisters, she'd plan how she could leave Clear Creek and where she'd go. They'd be furious with her, but she didn't have a better solution. She'd settle someplace, then write them when she thought her heart could take it. That would be the best for everyone.

Georgie continued to wash the windows, silently praying that it didn't come to that.

## CHAPTER 22

The day of the picnic, Michael arrived at the hotel bright and early. When he came the day before, he had little time to speak with Hunny or her sisters. Chase and Levi helped him load the wagon with everything Sally thought they needed, including two long tables, some chairs, a few cast-iron implements, blankets, quilts, and boxes of secret prizes for the winners of the various games.

The Callahans watched the men work. “Are you going to enter any of the contests?” Georgie asked her sisters.

Rosie smiled. “I am. I wonder if they’ll have a three-legged race.”

“Who knows?” Hunny said. “Me, I’ll probably be helping out with the food again, like at the barbecue.”

“Why do you say that?” Georgie asked.

Hunny watched as Sally directed the men to some crates near the kitchen door. “Sally seems to have commandeered Michael, and she’ll have him working all day.”

“You can’t leave him to such a fate, now can you?” Rosie argued.

Hunny giggled. “No, I can’t.” She gave Georgie an expectant look, but she didn’t reply. In fact she only shrugged and left the kitchen. “Rosie, have you noticed our sister is acting a little strange lately?”

Rosie glanced at the door and back. “She’s been sullen, but she explained why – she’s homesick. Well, she wants a home.”

Hunny watched the door a moment more, shrugged and joined Michael. “Need any help?”

“No – I’ll get these loaded, then we’ll be on our way. Tell your sisters that Darcy and Zachary should be here any moment.”

She told Rosie, returned to the kitchen, delivered the message to Georgie – another silent shrug – then waited in the lobby for Michael to finish up with Sally. She saw Irene step into the hotel, a sour look on her face. *Oh dear*, Hunny thought, *I hope she doesn’t gripe all the way to the picnic.*

“Why isn’t that Michael ready? I’m not one to stand around and wait.”

She smiled, hoping it would soften the blow. “We’ll be leaving in a few moments. Sally just wants to make sure she’s sending along everything you need.”

“I need? I don’t need anything. I sent what I need out with Wilfred yesterday.”

“Organized as always.” Hunny smiled, went to the door and saw Michael coming toward the hotel porch. “I think he’s ready.”

“About time,” Irene grumbled.

Hunny smiled and shook her head. This would be an interesting ride.

Michael guided the women to the wagon and helped Irene up first, then Hunny. He sat next to Irene and looked at Hunny. “I’m sorry you have to sit in the back, but I thought you’d be more comfortable.”

She smiled wryly. The thought of Irene squished between them didn’t appeal much to her either. “I’ll be fine – thank you for thinking of me.”

“And me!” Irene looked at him and, miracle of miracles cracked a smile. “Let’s go.”

Hunny put a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. The woman was full of surprises. One never knew moment to moment what you were going to get.

They'd just passed the church when Irene asked, "How's that cabin of yours coming along?"

"Very well, thank you for asking," he said as if she'd been inquiring after his health. "It should be done by harvest time."

"You going have a stove in it by then?"

"I should – why?"

She glanced over her shoulder and back. "Just wondering. What about furniture?"

"Unfortunately I'll have to take it one piece at a time on that score. Funds are limited."

"You're going get a bed, though, aren't you?" Irene asked, eyes narrowed at him. Was she challenging him in some way? Maybe she wanted him to order it through her store. Hunny, sitting on a pile of blankets behind Irene, could see Michael's face and wondered if he was thinking the same thing.

"Well, I *am* getting tired of sleeping on the hard floor," he confessed.

"Best take care of that right away." Irene faced forward. "Can't get things in order without a bed."

Michael turned his head enough to look at Hunny, his eyebrows aloft in confusion. She shrugged in return.

"What about a kitchen table?" Irene blurted, making Hunny jump. "Can't eat your meals without a kitchen table. And while you're at it, be sure you get a stove."

"Mrs. Dunnigan," he said with a hint of exasperation. "I do plan on getting all of those things."

"Well, you'd better hurry up."

Hunny's mouth fell open in shock. She wasn't scolding the man exactly, but ... what *was* she doing? Michael glanced at Hunny with the same look as before, and she made a face that clearly said, *I have no idea ...*

“Just make sure you don’t put the cart before the horse, young man,” Irene said. She turned slightly and glanced over her shoulder again. Portly as she was, she couldn’t quite look Hunny in the eye, but that didn’t matter. Now her intent was clear – she was making sure Michael was ready for a wife. Hunny blushed from head to toe.

“What kind of floor you got in that place?”

“A wood floor, Mrs. Dunnigan, of course. Good solid pine.”

“Ryder Jones had a *dirt* floor in his place for the longest time before he built a new one. Thank Heaven he did, or poor Constance would’ve had to deal with all that dust.”

Hunny covered her mouth again to keep her giggles at bay.

“Rest assured, Mrs. Dunnigan, that when I marry my wife will have a fully-equipped cabin at her disposal.”

Irene squinted at him again, but now she was almost smiling as she faced forward. Hunny could see Michael’s shoulders shake from silent laughter. And she was left to wonder ... if Irene Dunnigan assumed Michael and she would marry, how many more people in Clear Creek did?

Michael steered onto a side road and smiled. “Mrs. Dunnigan, you remember what it was like to have to hike down the trail to this canyon. I’m sure you’re happy there’s a road now.”

“You call that a road? Why, it’s barely wide enough for this wagon!”

“Come, now – it’s not that narrow.”

“Narrow enough I have to grip the seat so I don’t plunge to my death!”

He looked at her, then Hunny and chuckled. “Is that why you didn’t want to ride out with Wilfred?”

“The man doesn’t see as well as he use to,” she said without hesitation. “He’s liable to drive over the cliff.”



Hunny giggled. “Isn’t it more of a steep hill? That’s what I heard.”

“You’re right,” Michael agreed. “But the lane *is* narrow. Plenty of room for one wagon, but not two.”

“Don’t worry, Irene,” Hunny said. “You won’t tumble over the side.”

To their utter amazement, Irene laughed. “I’m just teasing him. But I wasn’t kidding about Wilfred.”

Hunny considered the older woman’s concern. The couple was getting on in years, to be sure, yet it gave her a warm feeling to know there were so many kind people in Clear Creek to watch after them. The Dunnigans weren’t the only ones with gray hair – most of the town’s original settlers from thirty years before were still alive and still there, including the Wallers, Van Cleets, Mulligans and most of the Cookes. She’d heard they’d all traveled the Oregon Trail together, settling here rather than going on to Oregon City.

Could she have done such a thing? The Oregon Trail was over 2000 miles from its launch points in Missouri. She looked at Irene with new respect.

“All right, ladies, here we go,” Michael said as he steered the team around a bend and began their decent into the canyon. A wheel hit an unexpected rut, causing Hunny to grab the side of the wagon bed. “You all right back there?”

“I’m fine. Irene?”

Irene didn’t answer. Michael looked at her and did a double take. “You can open your eyes, Mrs. Dunnigan. We’re okay.”

Hunny turned to see Irene’s petrified expression. “Are you all right?”

Irene opened one eye and looked around, then the other. “Fine, fine, let’s just get to the bottom and get this wagon unloaded, dear Lord, I should have walked.”

Hunny shook her head. The poor thing really was afraid of the trail – or falling down it. But Michael was right – there

was plenty of room on either side of the wagon.

When they reached the bottom Hunny looked in awe at the beautiful meadow, the varieties of trees, the creek, and near the creek the most magnificent oak she had ever seen. Some of its branches hung over a wide pool of water, and she wondered if it was deep enough to be a swimming hole. “Is that him?”

“That’s him,” Michael said with pride and brought the wagon to a stop. “His Majesty.”

“Don’t just sit there, help me down,” Irene snapped.

Michael set the brake, climbed down and assisted his passenger. As soon as Irene was on the ground she brushed off her skirt, squared her shoulders and looked around. “All right, let’s get this picnic started.” She stomped off, heading straight for His Majesty.

Hunny laughed as Michael went to the back of the wagon. He looked at her and smiled. “She’s quite the character, isn’t she?”

Hunny let him help her down. “My goodness, has she always been like this?”

“Oh no – usually she’s grouchy all the time. I’ve seen her smile more in the last few weeks than I have since I arrived in Clear Creek.”

“What do you think has gotten into her?”

He shrugged. “I have no idea but I hope it continues. Maybe she’s old enough to realize she hasn’t anything to be crabby about.”

Hunny looked around the meadow again. A few other families had arrived, and children played upstream from the pool. “Michael, this place is beautiful.”

“Indeed it is. I love it here.” He smiled at her. “I’ve always thought it a splendid place to hold a wedding.”

She smiled shyly. “You do?”

He gazed into her eyes, and she realized he hadn’t removed his hands from her waist. “Yes. A small, intimate

affair, not the grand spectacle my father would have insisted on back in Georgia.”

She swallowed hard. He was so close she could feel his warm breath on her face. He smelled wonderful, like a fresh new day. She, meanwhile, was panting like a racehorse. “Michael ...”

“Hunny,” he whispered against her lips, then kissed her.

She moaned, then took a shaky breath when he pulled away. “Michael, someone will see.”

He pulled her close. “Let them.”

“But ...”

He kissed her again and her knees gave out. Michael wrapped his arms around her to keep her upright without breaking the kiss. Several children ran by, giggling but not paying them any attention.

Michael broke the kiss, his breathing ragged, and looked into her eyes. “Hunny Callahan, I know I’m not ready. The Lord knows how much I have left to do. But despite that, you’d make me the happiest man in the world if you’d do it with me.”

She squeaked, then laughed. “Are you asking me to order a bed for you?”

He smiled. “A bed and so much more, my darling. Please say you’ll marry me come harvest time, when my cabin’s done. I can’t give you much, but all I have, all I am is yours.”

She covered her mouth to stifle a sob. She wasn’t sure how she’d feel when he asked, if he asked. Now here it was, and she was torn. “But ... Michael, my sisters ...”

“Your sisters will be fine.”

“But what if they don’t marry?”

He laughed. “You’ve nothing to worry about on that score, my dear – I have no doubt that they’ll find worthy husbands when they want to. The only marriage you need to concern yourself with is ours.”

Hunny breathed a sigh of relief, smiled and let him kiss her again.

\* \* \*

“WELL, WILL YOU LOOK AT THAT,” Zachary drawled as they reached the canyon’s meadow. It was the most beautiful sight Rosie or Georgie had ever seen.

But that’s not all they saw. “Hunny!” Georgie cried and turned to Rosie behind her. “She’s kissing Michael!”

“I do believe it’s the other way around,” Darcy drawled.

“I knew he had it bad,” Zachary commented, “but I thought he’d at least last until the end of the day.”

The four watched Michael end the kiss. The couple then stepped apart, red-faced – Hunny, anyway – and started unloading the wagon.

“Do you think anyone else saw?” Georgie asked, glancing around.

“Probably,” Zachary said. “But there are other people who can handle the gossip – we’re here to help set up.”

“Looks like a few things are all ready,” Rosie commented, still watching their sister. She looked at Georgie. “What now?”

“We help plan a wedding?”

“No, no,” Rosie said. “I meant what do we have to set up? For the picnic?”

“What are you asking me for?” Georgie retorted.

“Don’t get upset – I was simply asking.”

Darcy sighed. “Ladies, there’s no need to squabble.” He glanced at Michael’s wagon and back. “We understand how your sister’s behavior could come as a shock.”

“Oh, it’s no shock,” Rosie said as she stood. “It was bound to happen.”

Darcy nodded, hopped out of the wagon bed and helped Rosie down as Zachary did the same for Georgie. “Why don’t

you ladies join your sister while we unload?" Zachary suggested.

Rosie smiled and nodded, grabbed Georgie's hand and headed in Hunny's direction. "Let's go!" Georgie tried to pull her hand away, and Rosie stopped. "What has gotten into you today? Let's go see if Hunny's all right."

Georgie crossed her arms. "She looks all right to me."

Rosie giggled. "And who wouldn't be after getting kissed? I wonder if it's her first?" She winked, turned and took off again.

Georgie watched her go, sighed and followed.

"Hunny!" Rosie said as she joined her. "Did you have a nice ride out?"

Hunny glanced at Michael, who was hauling something out of the wagon. "It was ... fine," she said quietly, turning red as a beet. She looked at Georgie, who'd just caught up. "Are you all right?"

Her younger sister clasped her hands in front of her, then behind her back. "I'm fine."

Rosie gave Hunny a look that said, *she's not*.

Hunny nodded and left it at that.

Several men came over to help unload as the women went to inspect His Majesty. Blankets had been spread beneath the wide expanse of branches. Off to one side were several sets of tables and chairs. Grandma Waller and Irene sat at one, drinking tea. Rosie smiled. "Look at them. What does that remind you of?"

Hunny studied the older women and shook her head. "I couldn't say."

"I know," Georgie said. "The garden parties Mother and Father had when we were little."

"Oh yes," Hunny said as her eyes pooled with recognition. She looked at their surroundings. "This is a beautiful place."

Rosie leaned toward her. “Made more so by a wonderful kiss?”

Hunny elbowed her in the side. Rosie laughed and went to speak with Grandma and Irene.

Georgie, meanwhile, wandered to the edge of the deep pool. “How cold do you think this is?”

Hunny joined her. “Very. It’s only June. Sally told me the water doesn’t really warm up until August.”

“True, but it’s going to be hot today.”

Hunny went to the water, bent down and splashed her hand in it. “It feels nice!”

“It does?” Georgie kneeled on the grassy bank next to her and did the same. “That does feel nice. Would it be scandalous to wade? Our ankles will be showing.”

“Georgie, this is Clear Creek, not Denver. There’s no Aunt Henrietta here to scold us for what we do or don’t do.”

Georgie stared at her a moment, then looked away.

Hunny got to her feet. “Try to enjoy yourself today, all right?”

Georgie looked up with a determined smile and nodded.

“The wagon’s unloaded,” Michael announced as he came alongside Hunny. “Now comes Zachary’s favorite part – Sally wants to put out some of the food. We’ll cover them with cloths until more people arrive. The main food tables are set up on the other side of His Majesty.”

Georgie got to her feet. “I didn’t see those, only the ones where Irene and Grandma are sitting.”

“Those are for the older citizens,” he said. “It’s easier for them to sit at a table than on the ground.”

Georgie nodded, smiled and walked away.

“Is something wrong with your sister?” Michael asked quietly.

Hunny shrugged. “I don’t know. I think she feels all right – I haven’t heard a sniffle out of her for the last couple of days.”

Michael watched her a moment. “No, that’s not what I meant. There’s a sadness about her now that wasn’t there before.”

Hunny sighed in resignation. “Yes, I’ve noticed that. She misses having a home of our own. I think she was looking forward to marriage more than any of us.”

He took her hand. “Is that what you want too – a place to call home?” He glanced at Georgie and back. “Everyone wants someplace where they belong. I can’t blame your sister for being melancholy.”

“I don’t blame her either,” she said. “But I don’t like to see her so low.”

He gave her hand a squeeze. “Do you want to wait to tell them about us?”

She rolled her eyes. “I think they already know.”

He chuckled. “Probably. By the end of the day the whole town will.” He took her other hand and pulled her close. “And I want them to. Then maybe I’ll get extra help finishing my house.”

She laughed and noticed more wagons coming down the narrow road. “Well, as Irene said earlier, let’s get this picnic started.”

“Right you are.” He kissed her on the forehead.

Sheriff Turner and his family arrived next, closely followed by Colin, Belle and their children. More wagons came down the lane, filling the meadow with them.

“Used to be we all had to park up on top,” Wilfred commented to Hunny as he joined them. Not that she didn’t already know. “Now we need half the meadow for the wagons and horses. Ain’t sure if that’s good or bad, but I don’t miss hiking down into this gorge at my age. And we’ve still got room for all the food and the games.”

“And at the end of the day,” Michael added, “there’s a big tug-of-war held up the creek.”

“Oh, I’ve heard about that,” she said with a grin. “I’ll have you know the water isn’t that cold today.”

“Really?” Wilfred said. “Rats. Nothing like watching your opponents shiver and shake when they get dunked.” With a cackle he left to join his wife.

“He’s in an exceptionally good mood today, isn’t he?” Hunny said.

“You’ll notice everyone is. People look forward to this all year long.” Michael glanced around, then gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Let’s go help with the food tables.” They left as more wagons arrived.

Neither of them noticed Georgie on the other side of His Majesty. The tree was huge, big enough that no one saw her tears, or her heartbroken expression as she watched Rosie and Darcy laugh and tease each other from afar. Hunny and Michael were going to get married, no doubt – the only question was when. And from the looks of Rosie and Darcy, they’d soon follow. She was the one who wanted the most to wed ... and she was the one getting left behind.

She walked around the tree, wiped her eyes and spied Zachary helping Sally set pies and other goodies on the tables. She liked Zachary well enough, but she didn’t love him and didn’t want to marry him. Granted, she might grow to love him over time, but she doubted she’d ever be *in* love with him. She *was* in love with Darcy, but Darcy was with Rosie.

The dilemma had eaten at her for days, her heart aching to the point of weariness. Should she tell Hunny? But then Hunny might tell Rosie, and Rosie’s feelings would be hurt. She couldn’t stand the thought of that – and couldn’t stand the thought of seeing her sister day in and day out with the man she’d given her heart to.

Georgie felt trapped. And not one person knew about it but her.



## CHAPTER 23

**B**y late afternoon Rosie thought she'd bust a gut. Or rather, that Darcy's would. "Darcy Comfort, if you eat one more slice of pie you're going to be sick!"

He laughed and took another bite. "Why are you scolding *me*? Zachary's on his second whole pie!"

"A man after my own heart," she sighed.

Zachary, said second pie (blueberry; the first was apple) in front of him, smiled at Rosie. "Though I'm sure it's unladylike and improper, have you ever been in a pie-eating contest?"

"I'm positive there are women that have, but alas, I'm not one," she said with another sigh.

He laughed and shoved the pie toward her. "Perhaps we should start a new tradition?"

Darcy laughed. "You take things too far, brother. Rosie can't eat an entire pie. She's had two pieces already."

She looked at him and laughed. "Don't tempt me, I might."

He laughed again and scanned the area for Georgie. He'd barely seen her the entire day. "Zach, you've lost her again."

"No, I haven't." He reached for a knife. "She's over talking with Honoria."

Darcy followed his gaze and, as Honoria moved, caught a glimpse of Georgie. He sighed in relief and took another bite of his pie. But something was bothering her, he could tell, which in turn bothered him. "Your sister seems sullen today."

“Yes, but that’s her choice to be gloomy on such a beautiful day,” Rosie said.

“Quite, though I can understand how she feels,” Darcy replied. “We were homeless when we first arrived, but for us there was the men’s camp. It was our temporary home for many months. And we could visit with Pleasant and Eli.”

“We’re lucky Mr. Van Cleet is so generous and not only hired us on but gave us a place to live,” Rosie said. “She should be grateful. I know I am.”

“Don’t be so hard on her, Rosie,” Darcy said. “She’s having a hard time adjusting to your situation, that’s all.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you for being understanding. You too, Zachary.”

“Think nothing of it,” Zachary said. “We understand more than you know. She’ll come around.”

Rosie smiled at him. “I hope so.”

Darcy was about to take another bite and stopped. “What do you mean by that?”

She shrugged and smiled. “Just that time will tell, gentlemen.”

The brothers exchanged the same look of curiosity then got back to eating. They had to enjoy the food while they could.

They watched Michael and Sheriff Turner win the men’s three-legged race. Rosie jumped up from the table and waved at Hunny. “You and me!” She turned to the brothers. “I have a race to win, gentlemen. Save me some pie!” She ran off, grabbed her sister and began to drag her to the starting line. Hunny tried to pull away but to no avail. Rosie was determined.

Zachary laughed. “By Heaven, she’s a spitfire.” He swallowed another bite. “You’re a very lucky man, Darcy.”

“What’s that?” Darcy said as he tore his gaze from Georgie.

Zachary chewed and swallowed. "I said you are a very lucky man. Rosie's so full of vigor."

He watched Mary Mulligan tie Rosie and Hunny's legs together. "Yes, she certainly is."

"Georgie is much gentler and quieter," Zachary continued. "A refined and delicate lady."

Darcy found Georgie again, now speaking with Ada Brody. She reminded him of a porcelain doll – delicate, as Zachary said, and fragile. He wished he could whisk her away to some private place and comfort her. But his brother would probably shoot him.

"By Heaven, I think I'm full," Zachary said in surprise.

Darcy's eyebrows shot up. "You're kidding? You?"

Zachary nodded. "It's a miracle!"

Darcy laughed and stood. "I think I'll get in on the fun." His gaze drifted to Georgie again. "You don't mind if I ask Georgie to join me in a game, do you?"

"Not at all. I hope she doesn't think I've been ignoring her, but she's been well-occupied."

"So have you. Can you even stand?"

Zachary pushed himself away from the table. "It's debatable."

"Then I shall entertain Georgie while you recuperate from your appetite."

Zach smiled. "I'm naught but a helpless victim of my own animal desires."

Darcy laughed. "Well put, brother." He left the table and made his way to Georgie. She caught sight of him, took a breath and his heart leaped in his chest in response. "Georgie," he said with a gentle nod. "Would you like to watch some of the games with me?"

She smoothed her skirt with nervous hands. "I don't mind watching, but don't ask me to participate. I'm not good at that sort of thing – never have been."

“Don’t feel bad,” Honoria said. “I’m not participating much this year. I feel like I’m still worn out from the barbecue and that was weeks ago.”

“You and me both,” Ada said. “And I barely helped. But yes, I haven’t been feeling well either.”

“I’m sorry you two still suffer what ails you,” Georgie said. “I’m much better now.”

“And we’re all better for it,” Darcy said with a smile. He offered her his arm. “Shall we watch your sisters race?”

All four turned to see Hunny and Rosie clumsily make their way to the starting line. They were the only two adults in the race – the rest were children. “This should be interesting,” Honoria giggled.

“Yes,” said Ada. “Especially since Aideen and Parthena have paired up. You know how competitive *they* are.”

“Oh dear, yes,” Honoria said. “I hope things don’t get brutal.”

“Brutal?” Georgie said with concern.

“Don’t worry,” Darcy said. “I’m sure they don’t mean bloodshed. Your sisters can handle a seven and eleven year old. Though they are formidable opponents. They’ve perfected their technique I hear.”

She smiled and blushed. “Oh goodness.” She hesitated, then wrapped her arm through his. Darcy wondered if she feared Zach wouldn’t approve. But Zach was in no shape to protest. In fact, he wondered if his brother wasn’t behind some bushes at this very moment, getting sick.

The race started just as Darcy and Georgie found a place to watch. Aideen and Parthena, experts at this sort of thing, took off at a syncopated pace that none of the other contestants could match. Including Rosie and Hunny, who fell flat on their faces after ten feet. “Oh dear!” Georgie cried.

Darcy released her arm and was about to rush to their aid, but Michael beat him to it. “Don’t worry, my brother is rescuing them.”

Michael helped them to their feet and sent them on their way, but by then Parthena and Aideen had almost reached the finish line, accompanied by hoots, hollers and applause. “You can do it, Rosie!” Darcy shouted anyway. He looked at Georgie, a wide smile on his face, then continued to cheer her sisters. Georgie hardly made a sound. He glanced at her again but her face was turned away.

A cheer rose up, diverting his attention, and he clapped with everyone else as Rosie and Hunny limped over the finish line, dead last. “Shall we go congratulate them?”

She smiled and nodded, making her way to the finish line.

Darcy followed, concern in his eyes. There was feeling displaced, but she looked heartsick, and he didn’t think it was from having to come west for safety’s sake. This was something else. What could have possibly happened? They reached the others and, unable to help himself, Darcy put a hand on the small of her back. “Your sisters don’t look any worse for wear, do they?” he said softly.

He removed his hand as Rosie approached. “Did you see that?” she said proudly. “We only fell down once!”

“Indeed,” he said. “The two of you were magnificent.”

“Magnificently bad,” Hunny added, brushing grass from her skirt.

“You didn’t hurt yourself, did you?” Michael asked.

“I think I’m all right.” She looked at Rosie. “I broke Rosie’s fall splendidly.”

“And I thank you,” Rosie quipped and laughed.

Michael wrapped Hunny’s arm through his. “Hungry?”

“Famished.” She looked at the food tables.

“Come along, then – I’ll fix you a plate.”

Rosie watched them go, then wrapped an arm around Darcy’s. “I know you’re not hungry.” She looked at Georgie. “Are you?”

Georgie was busy watching their arms. She shook her head, closed her eyes and turned away. "I think I'll just have some tea with Grandma." Head down, she walked away.

Darcy's fist clenched as he watched her go. The pain around her was tangible. "Are you sure your sister's all right?"

"She's just having a bad day. Don't worry, Hunny and I will speak with her later. If there's anything else bothering her, she'll tell us."

He took a deep breath, let it out and nodded. "Very well. Let's see how Zachary is faring."

Rosie glanced around. "I don't see him anywhere, do you?"

Darcy smiled wryly. "If my guess is right, he's somewhere losing his battle with the second pie."

Rosie gasped even as she made a face. "Oh dear! Shouldn't you help him?"

"With *that*? Heavens, woman, I'm no miracle worker. He'll pay the price for his folly alone. I'll have nothing to do with it."

She laughed and pulled him in the direction they'd last seen Zachary.

Darcy laughed too, then looked over his shoulder and tried to catch sight of Georgie. She was nowhere to be seen.

\* \* \*

GEORGIE LEANED against a wagon and watched as boys and girls gathered for the egg race, plus a few adults, including Zachary. She smiled to herself, then felt the smile vanish as Rosie and Darcy laughed together and walked off who knows where. She turned from the sight and stared at the wagon instead.

"Miss Callahan?"

Georgie jumped and spun around. "Oh, hello, Mr. Cooke."

Harrison smiled. "Hello. What are you doing over here? The fun is over there." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "Don't you like games?"

She smiled weakly. "Not today, I'm afraid."

He walked over to the wagon and leaned against it. "Something troubling you?"

She sighed as her shoulders slumped. But then, how could he not notice? Her heart was breaking and that was that. "I'm ... confused."

"Can I help?"

She shook her head. "I don't see how, Mr. Cooke."

He shifted to face the picnic area, arms crossed. "Sometimes a different perspective can be useful."

She shrugged. "I'm not sure it will be in this case."

He smiled. "Try me."

She looked at him, her throat thick. But she needed to tell someone, and better it not be her sisters this time. Maybe she'd feel better. "I ... I'm falling in love."

"Well, I dare say that's jolly good."

"No, it's not."

He cocked his head to one side. "No? But why not? Isn't that what you came for?"

"We came to Clear Creek to ... well, that's another story. The problem is, I'm in love with the wrong person."

His eyebrows shot up. "I beg your pardon?"

She nodded. "My sister Rosie's in love with Darcy Comfort, and ..." She hung her head. "... so am I." Unable to help it, she covered her face with her hands and started to cry.

"Oh dear, let's have none of that. It can't be that bad ..."

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. "All right, perhaps it can ..."

She sniffed back her tears and looked at him. "Oh, Mr. Cooke, it's awful! What am I going to do?"

He handed her the handkerchief. “There now, Miss Callahan, dry your eyes.”

She took it from him, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “I don’t know what to do ...”

Harrison glanced at the laughter and shouts of the townsfolk as the egg race began. “Have you spoken with your sister?”

“How can I? I don’t want to hurt her feelings or make her think she can’t be with Darcy.” She twisted the handkerchief in her hand. “Besides, I ... I think I know what to do. It’s just that I’m afraid to.”

“Which is?”

She looked at him. “I can’t stay here, I know that. I just can’t.”

“Oh dear.” He rubbed his chin. “You do have a situation. But why do you have to leave?”

“Don’t you see, Mr. Cooke – how can I stay? It ... it would hurt too much.”

He took a deep breath, let it out, then leaned against the wagon again. “My dear Miss Callahan ...” He studied her a moment. “... will holding this in your heart for years to come do you one bit of good?”

She blew her nose again. “Probably not. But at least Rosie and Darcy will be happy. I won’t get between them. I can’t.”

Harrison smiled. “Very noble of you, dear, but you can’t simply harbor the pain. You have to let it go somehow.”

“That’s just it – how can I do that if I see them all the time? I have to leave.”

He sighed. “I see your point. I confess I’m not sure what I’d do in your shoes. It’s a bloody business.”

“You said it.”

Harrison laughed. “Tell you what. Why don’t you come visit the ranch and speak with my wife? She’s very good at



this sort of thing and might be able to offer you some sound advice.”

“But what about my work at the hotel?”

“I could talk with Cyrus and tell him we’d like to borrow you for some tasks.”

“But ...”

“Don’t worry, I won’t lie. You can help us clean up after the picnic and set things in order at the ranch. The women could always use an extra hand. Especially as Honoria is still a bit under the weather.”

Georgie smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Cooke. I’ll help any way I can.” She wiped her eyes one last time and handed him back his handkerchief.

Harrison took it, stuffed it back in his pocket and smiled warmly. “I’m sure you will. And my wife will be happy to have you. Now let’s join the others, shall we?”

Georgie nodded. It felt good to speak to someone about her dilemma. She didn’t think she could take much more. Just knowing she could be around people who understood made all the difference in the world.

She followed Harrison back to the picnic area and straight to his wife. “Georgie,” Sadie said. “Are you having a nice time?”

“I’m beginning to.”

Sadie exchanged a look with Harrison. “As opposed to before? What’s the matter?”

“Miss Callahan has a little problem I thought you could help with.” Harrison looked at Georgie. “Why don’t you tell Sadie what you told me? I’ll go speak to Cyrus.”

Georgie nodded, watched him kiss his wife on the cheek and leave.

“So,” Sadie said. “What’s this all about?”

After she told Sadie everything she’d just told Harrison, Sadie scanned the area for Rosie and Darcy. “Oh my, that is a

problem. One that can only be helped with time, I'm afraid."

Georgie sighed. "That's what your husband said." She followed her gaze. "It hurts, Mrs. Cooke."

Sadie pulled her into her arms. "Oh, you poor sweet dear, I know. There's nothing worse than unrequited love. But to watch the man you love marry your own sister, whom you also love dearly ... well, that's a double blow." She looked at her. "But you wouldn't be the first this has happened to, nor the last, I'm afraid."

Georgie wrapped her arms around the woman and sobbed into her chest. "I ... know ..."

Another arm came around Georgie and she looked up to find Honoria. "Can I help?"

"In time." Sadie let go. "We'll talk about this further. For now, why don't you enjoy the rest of the picnic?"

Georgie wiped her eyes and nodded. "Thank you."

Honoria hugged her too. "I don't know what the problem is, but I'll help any way I can."

Georgie hugged her back. "Thank you so much."

Honoria studied her. "You look like I feel."

Georgie laughed once. "That bad?"

Honoria put a hand to her belly. "I've felt better."

"You've been sick a long time."

Honoria shrugged. "It comes and goes. Just when I think I'm over it, I get sick again."

Georgie's eyes widened.

"Oh, don't worry. No one else has caught what I have. My cousins all have colds – no upset tummies."

Sadie eyed her daughter. "Yes, dearest, which makes me wonder."

"About what?" Honoria asked.

Sadie arched an eyebrow. “We’ll talk later. Perhaps with Doc Drake.”

Honorina looked confused, just before her eyes widened. “Mother! No, it couldn’t be ... oh heavens, could it?”

“I’m beginning to think so,” Sadie said. “And whatever you do, do *not* tell your father.”

“What about Major?”

“Him either. Your father will be bad enough to deal with.”

Honorina looked at Georgie then put her hand over her belly again. “Oh. My. Gosh.” She swallowed hard and glanced around.

“Who are you looking for?” Georgie asked.

“Ada Brody.”

“Why?” Sadie asked.

Honorina blinked a few times, then faced her mother. “Because she’s got what I’ve got! Or so I thought ... I have to find out!”

“Ada?” Sadie said with a smile. “Oh my. But please stop – you’re acting like your father.”

“Like father, like daughter,” Honorina took Georgie’s arm. “Come on, let’s find Ada.”

Georgie put her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle and let Honorina pull her away. The young woman’s happy news lifted her spirits. If Ada Brody suffered the same condition, Georgie would share in their happiness – while hoping their happy discovery didn’t send her into the depths of despair. If she never married, how could she look forward to having children of her own?

They found Ada speaking with Grandma at a table under His Majesty. Lorcan stood stock still to one side, reminding Georgie of a statue. “Is he all right?” she asked softly.

Ada turned in her chair. “He does that sometimes,” she said with a blush. “Lorcan is ...”

“... Special,” Grandma finished. “It’s on account of his blindness. His other senses are sharper.”

Georgie stared at him. She had to fight the temptation to stand in front of him and see the look on his face. “What can he sense?”

Ada smiled and exchanged a glance with Grandma. “Things.”

“He’s so still.” Georgie looked at Ada again, then Honoria. Lorcan was making her apprehensive. What was going on? She followed his sightless gaze down the canyon, but saw nothing but trees, brush and of course the creek.

“Did you need something?” Grandma asked.

Honoria smiled at Ada. “Remember when we talked earlier about how best to get over this thing we’ve caught?”

“Yes. Grandma suggested chamomile tea.”

Honoria looked at Grandma and back. “Um ... I don’t think that’s going to work.”

Ada’s brow creased. “Why not?”

“Yes, why not?” Grandma asked. “Chamomile does wonders for an upset belly. So does ginger.”

“Grandma,” Honoria said. “I think Ada and I have something that will have to run its course. Over about nine months.”

Ada stared at her. “What? But it’s just a ...” Her eyes rounded. “Oh!” She glanced at Lorcan and back, then clamped her hand over her mouth.

Grandma burst into laughter. “Land sakes, how did I miss it?”

Ada removed her hand, started counting on her fingers and groaned. “You? How did *I* miss it?”

Georgie, unable to help it, laughed. “Congratulations.”

“Oh my word.” Ada’s eyes were still huge. She looked at Lorcan and smiled. “Lorcan?” He didn’t answer, so she got up

and went to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Lorcan?”

His head turned slightly in her direction. “Ada.” He put a hand over hers.

She picked up on his mood. “Lorcan, what is it?”

He turned to face Georgie, who gasped when he looked right at her, as if he could see her as plain as day. “Men are coming.”

“Men?” Georgie repeated. “What does he mean?”

Ada swallowed hard and exchanged a quick look with Grandma. “Not sure. Think nothing of it.” She took her husband’s hand and guided him to the table.

Grandma slowly stood. “Honorina, fetch Doc Drake and bring him here.”

Honorina looked at Grandma, took one last look at Lorcan and was off like a shot.

Georgie could sense the tension in the air and sat at the table across from Lorcan. “What’s the matter?”

He looked right at her. It was unnerving, since she knew he couldn’t see a thing.

“Nothing,” Ada insisted. “Please, go enjoy yourself. Where are your sisters?”

She glanced behind her. “I don’t know.”

“Find them, eat, have a good time.”

“Everything’s fine, child,” Grandma said. “Do as she says.”

Georgie nodded. Everything was clearly *not* fine, but it was also clear no one was going to tell her what was up. “All right.” She stood and left the table.

She found Hunny sitting on a log by the creek with Michael. They didn’t notice her, being too busy looking into each other’s eyes. Georgie could sense the love growing between them. Maybe Lorcan’s senses weren’t the only ones

heightened at the moment. It seemed to Georgie everyone around her had someone to love but her. “Ahem ...”

Hunny tore her gaze from Michael’s. “Georgie, there you are. Where have you been?”

“Here and there.” She glanced over her shoulder. Doc Drake had arrived at the Brodys’ table and was speaking with them.

“Where on Earth is Zachary?” Hunny asked.

Georgie shrugged. “I lost track of him after the last race.”

“That’s because the prize was a chocolate cake,” Michael said.

Hunny gasped. “He can’t possibly be eating it!”

Georgie nodded. “He might be.”

“Oh, that man,” Hunny said. “You’re going to have to get some recipes from Rosie and Sally.”

Georgie gritted her teeth.

Hunny and Michael looked at her. “I mean, it’s best to be prepared,” Hunny added. “Zachary has quite the appetite.”

Georgie forced a smile. So they assumed she would marry Zachary too. She turned away.

“Where are you going?” Hunny asked.

“To find Rosie.”

“All right. We’ll see you later.”

“I saw Darcy a few moments ago,” Michael added helpfully. “They were speaking with Preacher Jo.”

“All right, I’ll find them.” She started off, her heart clenching. Now she didn’t really want to find Rosie, didn’t think she could stand being near Darcy at the moment. After speaking with Harrison she felt raw, exposed, if a little lighter.

She caught sight of them near the food tables speaking with Zachary. If they saw her, she’d be obliged to join them, so she took a different route, heading for the wagons. It was silly, she knew, and she’d have to get over this somehow. Maybe

spending a few days with the Cookes would help. Hiding among the wagons certainly wouldn't. But for now, she needed to be alone.

She cut through the wagons, heading for the makeshift corral at the other end of the meadow, where the horses could graze while the picnic was going on. The horses would be nice to watch for a time.

“You really shouldn't be here by yourself,” a man said.

Georgie stopped. Would she never be alone? Who was it this time? Not one of the Cookes – the man didn't have an accent. With a sigh she turned around.

Mr. Boone smiled, and lunged.

## CHAPTER 24

“*Y*ou won a whole cake?” Rosie said. “And you haven’t had a slice yet?”

“Good heavens, no,” Zachary said. “I’m taking it home. *If* I can, that is.”

“You don’t have to ride a horse. Just be careful with it.”

“And if my prize should meet with some horrible accident?” he teased.

“I’ll bake you another one,” she said with a shrug.

She thought he couldn’t become more excited, but he did. “*You baked this?*”

She blushed. “As a matter of fact, I did, yesterday. I thought the cakes I baked were for everyone.”

“And so they were,” Darcy said. “Except for the nicest, which Sally and Irene set aside as prizes. I saw them do it after we arrived.”

Rosie smiled at Zachary. “Then I’m glad you won.”

He smiled back. “So am I.” He watched her a moment, then turned away. “I should share a slice with Georgie. Unfortunately, I haven’t a clue where she’s gotten to.” He turned around and searched the area. “But I’m sure she’ll turn up.”

“She was with Grandma and Ada earlier,” Rosie said. “Before your race started.”



“I want to show her my cake before something happens to it and you have to bake me another,” Zachary said with a grin. He turned the cake plate, admiring his prize. “I do love chocolate.”

Rosie smiled and leaned toward him. “Good.”

The brothers laughed. “Where do you suppose Georgie is?” Darcy asked. He turned a full circle. “I’ll ask Ada.”

“Good idea,” Rosie said. “I’m sure she’d love some of Zachary’s cake.”

Zach’s eyes bulged. “Hey, let’s not be giving away the spoils so readily.”

“You didn’t plunder anything to get it,” she pointed out.

“No, but I might as well have. Did you see the way Parthena Cooke shoved me out of the way? I almost dropped my egg.”

Darcy snorted. “No chance of that, brother. Not when you can save it for breakfast.” Zachary and Rosie laughed as he went in search of Georgie.

But he couldn’t find her anywhere. Where could she be? He noticed several men speaking with Lorcan, then looked around again. Ada had been there a moment ago. Now was she gone too? No – he spied her near one of the food tables and headed over, his long legs carrying him fast.

“Hello, Darcy,” Ada said when he arrived. “You must be hungry, the way you were trotting to get here. Have a plate.”

He glanced around. “No thank you. Where is Georgie?”

She blinked a few times. “Why, I don’t know. She went to find her sisters. Did she?”

“I don’t think so – I was with Rosie and Zach, and I didn’t see her.” He glanced around again. “How long ago did she leave you?”

She shook her head. “I couldn’t really say. Maybe twenty, thirty minutes ...”

He put his hands on his hips and huffed. “All right, thank you.”

“Why don’t you check up the creek? Folks are staring to gather for the tug-of-war.”

He sighed against the odd feeling in his gut. “Yes, you’re right.” He looked at the creek and noticed most of the townspeople were heading up the trail that led to where the contest would be held. “I’ll find her.” He grabbed a chicken leg off a platter and waved it at her. “Thank you again.”

She smiled. “Don’t mention it.”

Darcy munched on the chicken as he headed back the way he’d come, forcing himself to relax. Neither Zach or Rosie weren’t at the spot he’d last seen them. But then, everyone was heading to the tug-of-war at this point – they and Georgie would undoubtedly be there too. Cyrus would already be there waiting for men interested in participating. If he and his brothers wanted to be on a team, he’d have to hurry.

By the time he reached the smaller swimming hole, he had to push his way through the crowd to get to Cyrus. The old man was already calling names of those wanting to get in on the fun.

“Harrison Cooke!”

Harrison stepped forward to whistles and applause. He went to stand where Cyrus pointed, then waited for the rest of his team to be chosen.

“Wilfred Dunnigan!”

Wilfred hurried forward. “I’m here!”

“You two are team captains,” Cyrus said.

Wilfred looked at Harrison and growled. The townspeople laughed as Harrison raised an eyebrow at him.

“Harvey Brown, you’re on Harrison’s team.”

“Oh boy!” Harvey said as he rubbed his hands together. He joined Harrison and slapped him on the back. “I won’t let ya down, Harrison!” Everyone laughed again.

And so it went. Cyrus called out names, placed each man on the teams until both consisted of twelve men. Darcy wound up on Wilfred's team, while Michael and Zachary were on Harrison's. This meant either one or two of them would get wet. He smiled at his brothers, then glanced at Harvey and back.

Michael and Zachary glared at him in return. They knew they'd been stuck with the bad-luck charm.

Darcy chuckled as Harrison's team went downstream about fifteen yards to a shallow ford, waded to the other side, then hurried to where the tug-of-war would commence. He scanned the crowd looking for Georgie, but didn't see her anywhere. He spotted Hunny at the edge of the crowd near where the men had crossed – she must have been speaking to Michael before he went over.

Darcy took up his position on the rope, first in line, closest to the creek, a knot in his stomach. He didn't like the feeling and glanced around several more times before Cyrus called out, "Gentlemen, pick up the rope!"

They did. Cyrus smiled and scanned the crowd. "Positions!"

Darcy and the other men gripped the rope, dug their heels into the grass and leaned back, knees bent, bracing themselves.

Cyrus took out a gun, pointed it in the air and fired. The tug-of-war had begun. But that wasn't the only tug Darcy felt.

\* \* \*

"LET ME GO!" Georgie screamed as Mr. Boone's hand slipped from her mouth.

He quickly replaced it and crushed her against him. "Tie her up, hurry. She's biting me."

The two men with him bound her ankles and secured her wrists behind her back. The shorter one stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth as soon as Mr. Boone removed his hand, and anchored it in place by tying another over it. She'd been trussed and gagged in short order and there wasn't a single

person around to stop it. Everyone had gone up the creek for the tug-of-war. The scoundrels had timed things perfectly.

“Now what, Mr. Boone – we get the other two?” the short man asked.

“No, we get out of here while we can. Besides, this is the one Mrs. Longbottom wants. We’re to deliver the girl to her as soon as possible.”

Georgie’s eyes were wild. Aunt Henrietta? Why wasn’t she being given to that awful Mr. Dodge? And why only her, not her sisters?

“Mount your horse, Boone, I’ll hand her up,” the taller said.

Neither spoke like locals – they had probably been hired in Denver. Who knew how long the trio had been lurking around?

The picnic area deserted, her captors headed out of the canyon unnoticed. Georgie struggled against Mr. Boone to no avail. He was huge, and determined – if he came this far he’d see the job done, whatever it was. She hoped she didn’t find out.

They rode hard once they reached the top and didn’t stop until they came to the tree line miles west of town, skirting around Clear Creek itself. Georgie wondered if those assigned guard duty had seen them – that might be her only hope. But would they alert anyone? Strangers giving the town a wide berth might not be cause for alarm.

She did her best not to cry, but it was hard. The ride was rough, Mr. Boone rougher as he crushed her against him. She faced left and wished they hadn’t tied her ankles. Did they honestly think she could outrun them? Maybe they did. The thought bolstered her courage when they stopped to rest.

“Stiles, water the horses,” Mr. Boone ordered the shorter man.

Stiles dismounted as his taller counterpart leered at Georgie. “So what sort of condition is she to be returned in?”

Mr. Boone glared at him. “Don’t even think about it, Hanks.”

Georgie cringed as Hanks dismounted and waited for Mr. Boone to hand her down. He did it in such a way she landed on Hanks’ shoulder. Hanks carried her to a nearby tree, sat her against it, stood and studied her. She wanted to squirm under his stare but didn’t want him to know how frightened she was. “Seems a shame to let such nice goods go to waste,” he commented. “Especially since the old lady’s going to get rid of her anyway.”

Georgie’s eyes popped. *Get rid of her? Didn’t he mean give her to Mr. Dodge?*

“Killing her is the old lady’s business,” Mr. Boone said. “We just deliver.”

Georgie fell against the tree in a half-faint. Kill her?! Did Aunt Henrietta hate her that much?

“What about the other two?” Hanks asked.

“What about them?” Mr. Boone said as he checked his saddle.

Stiles waited for him to finish, then took his horse by the reins and led it away along with the other two. Soon all three disappeared into the trees. There must be a stream nearby.

“Aren’t we going after them?” Hanks finally asked.

“No. This one’s all she wants.”

“But why? I thought we were getting all three.”

“Mrs. Longbottom changed her mind at the last minute. She wants this one.” He wiped his nose and glared at Georgie. “Seems the three gents her nieces were supposed to marry backed out of their deal after the girls ran off. She lost money and that made her mad. So she’s decided to take it out on this one’s scrawny hide and let the other two blame themselves for it.”

“But that don’t make sense. The law will just catch up to the old lady and arrest her for murder.”

Mr. Boone smiled. “You don’t know Henrietta Longbottom. She’s the craftiest witch this side of *Macbeth*. If she says she’ll get away with it, she’ll get away with it.”

Hanks sighed and went back to leering at Georgie. “I still don’t see why we can’t have her beforehand. Who’d know?”

Mr. Boone got in his face. “I would.”

Hanks backed away. “I, uh, think I’ll go help Stiles with the horses.”

“You do that,” Mr. Boone snarled.

Georgie sat against the tree, the rough bark digging into her back. Their words whirled around in her mind like some terrible tornado, none settling for her to get a clear grasp on any of them. Except one: *murder*.

If she couldn’t get away, she was going to die.

\* \* \*

DARCY PULLED with all his might as his team gained another foot. They were going to win! Good thing he didn’t land on the same team as Harvey! The thought was amusing, until his heart screamed, *Georgie*. His concentration broken, he relaxed his hold and stumbled forward.

“What’s the matter, Darcy?” Eli grunted behind him. “Pull!”

Darcy tried to dig his feet in again, but it was too late. He’d lost his footing, causing Eli to lose his, then Chase, then Deputy Bran ...

*SPLASH!* Darcy went underwater, heard Eli hit next to him, followed by several others. The cheers of the other team reached him before he surfaced, sputtering and coughing.

“Dagnabit,” Eli said, then laughed. “Tarnation, this is cold!”

Cackles rained down on them from the other side of the creek. “That’ll teach ya!” Harvey cried. “Golly, I really thought they had us there for a minute!”

Darcy wiped his hair out of his face and swam for shore – not hard, as the water was barely chest deep. He climbed onto the grassy bank, stood and called, “Georgie!” But he couldn’t hear her – the townsfolk were laughing, clapping, congratulating the winners, heckling the losers and discussing the end of Harvey’s losing streak.

Darcy grabbed the arm of the nearest man. “Seth, have you seen Georgie Callahan?”

Seth Jones scratched his head. “No, can’t say as I have. I only met her the once, at the barbecue. She’s the youngest, right?”

“Right,” Darcy said as he scanned the crowd.

Seth watched him a moment. “Is something wrong?”

“Maybe.” Darcy turned to the creek and watched the winners making their way back, carrying Harvey on their shoulders. “Is your brother nearby?”

“Yes,” Seth said. “I can find him easily enough.”

Darcy’s gut tightened with each passing moment. “Please do.”

“Darcy, what is it?”

Darcy swallowed hard. “I’m not sure yet, but I have a suspicion. Hurry while I get my brothers.”

Seth nodded and went in search of his brother. Darcy knew that Seth and Ryder Jones were the best trackers in town, even better than Sheriff Turner. He hoped he was wrong, but he hadn’t seen Georgie anywhere for a while now, and why else would he feel such dread?

“Darcy!” Zach said with a laugh as he waded across the creek. “You look a little wet.”

“Never mind that. Where are the women?”

Michael joined them, already looking concerned. “Why?” He immediately glanced around, searching. “Hunny?!”

She turned, smiled and waved. She was speaking to Mary Mulligan and Elsie Drake the doctor’s wife. Michael waved

her over.

“What’s going on, Darcy?” Zachary asked.

“I can’t find Georgie,” he said, still searching. He met his brother’s eyes. “She’s gone missing.”

Zachary’s eyes bulged. “Rosie!” He was off like a shot, pushing his way past people.

Hunny approached. “What’s wrong with him?”

Michael took her by the arms. “Where are your sisters?”

“I ... well, I don’t know,” she stammered as he released her. “I just saw Rosie a few moments ago, talking with Irene about fried chicken ...”

“Darcy!” Seth called as he emerged from the milling crowd with his brother. “We’re here. Now what can we do?”

“Do?” Hunny said as she turned to Michael. “What’s going on?”

Darcy frowned. “I believe Georgie is missing.”

She blanched. “What?”

Michael drew her into his arms. “Don’t worry, we’ll find her.” He kissed her then let her go. “Sheriff Turner!”

Tom turned as he slapped his soaking wet brother on the back. “Yeah?”

Darcy waved him over just as Zachary returned, an arm around Rosie like she would fly away if he let go. “Thank Heaven, there’s the other one,” Darcy said under his breath.

“There a problem, gentlemen?” Tom asked, a dripping-wet Eli behind him.

“Georgie Callahan is missing,” Darcy said. “I don’t see her anywhere and haven’t for at least an hour.”

Tom blew out a breath. “All right, let’s spread out, see if she’s ‘round here first.” He turned to Eli. “Fetch Bran and search up and down the creek. Maybe she went wadin’ and twisted her ankle or somethin’. Seth, Ryder, you two go with Darcy here. I’ll go with Michael. Meet us at His Majesty in



fifteen minutes. If we cain't find her close by, we gather a bigger search party."

Darcy closed his eyes, opened them and nodded. "Ryder, Seth, you know what to look for."

"Right." Ryder noticed Zachary still had a tight hold on Rosie. "Best ya stay here and protect the womenfolk. No tellin' what we'll find or if'n there's still trouble sneakin' 'round."

Zachary nodded, met Darcy's eyes, then looked at Michael. Both brothers stared at him, as did Hunny. Rosie just stood there, eyebrows raised in surprise until Zachary sheepishly let her go.

"What's going on?" Harrison asked as he headed their way. "You all look as if you've seen a ghost."

Tom closed his eyes in resignation, then looked at Harrison. They hadn't involved the Cookes in their watch duties, since they lived so far from town. "Georgie Callahan is missing."

Harrison's face fell. "What? For how long?" To everyone's surprise, he remained calm.

Tom sighed. "We were gonna tell ya eventually, but ..."

"Bowen!" Harrison called, interrupting him.

Bowen turned from his wife, took one look at Harrison and hurried over. "What is it? Is someone hurt?"

"Not that we know of, but we'll probably need you. Georgie Callahan is missing."

Bowen stared at Harrison, then glanced at the others. "Lorcan was right," he whispered. "Well, I'll be ..."

Harrison gave him an odd look, then turned back to Tom. "What were you saying earlier?"

"I'll explain later. Right now we got ourselves a woman to find." He waved the men off to start the search.

Harrison turned to Doc Drake. "Bowen, is there something you haven't told me?"

Bowen glanced at the others and watched them depart. "There was no need to – you don't live close enough to town."

"My brothers and me had some of the men in town help us keep an eye on the Callahan sisters," Zachary explained. He looked at Rosie. "There was concern that the men they were betrothed to might come and take them. Like our sister Pleasant, remember?" Rosie gasped. He took her by the hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"How can I forget?" Harrison said dryly, then turned to Rosie. "Is that what this is?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea. I didn't even know anyone was watching over us." She looked at Zachary and smiled. "But I'm glad you were."

He gazed into her eyes. "Why do you think we've been in town so often?"

Harrison sighed. "Right, then. Time to fetch my brother and a few others and get this sorted." He looked at Bowen. "What's this about Lorcan?"

Bowen blew out a breath. "He ... uh, I'll tell you later." He looked at Rosie. "Don't worry, we'll find your sister." He hurried off to speak to his wife.

"Michael's helping Ryder gather some horses," Hunny said.

"Where have you been?" Rosie asked.

"Saying goodbye to Michael. The Jones brothers are already having men saddle up."

"Aren't they still looking in the area?" Rosie asked. "Shouldn't we be helping?"

Hunny wrapped her arms around herself. "Where would she go? It's not like Georgie to wander off."

"She has been despondent lately," Rosie pointed out. "Maybe she just went to find a quiet place to sit."

"I hope you're right," Hunny said as she scanned their surroundings. "But I have a terrible feeling that's not the

case.”

## CHAPTER 25

“*L*orcan did what?” Colin asked as he and Harrison headed for the corral.

“Bowen thought I wouldn’t believe him,” Harrison said. “But for Heaven’s sake, it’s Lorcan – what wouldn’t I believe, exactly?”

“Right,” Colin said as they cut through the wagons. “We’ll have to ride bareback.”

“As will everyone else. Let’s get them ready.” They caught Colin’s horses, bridled them and mounted.

“But he ‘saw’ men?” Colin said, not ready to drop it. “The man is blind. How can a blind man ‘see’ anything?”

“You know how Lorcan’s senses are, well, odd. He’s no ordinary blind man, that’s for sure. If he ... *sensed* men approaching, that’s good enough for me. I’m not going to quibble over terms.”

Colin shrugged in agreement as Ryder and Seth approached. Like the Cookes, most of the men had to bridle their horses from the corral and ride without saddles. “Looks like a struggle happened amidst the wagons,” Seth said.

“Two, maybe three men,” Ryder added. “They hightailed it up the hill, sure enough. Judgin’ from the tracks, one of the horses was carryin’ two riders.”

Harrison closed his eyes and cringed. “What a bloody business.” He opened them. “Are we ready to go?”

Ryder nodded. “Folks are gonna start headin’ back to town. Word’s out there’s trouble, so no one wants to stick ‘round.”

“Right, who would?” Colin glanced at Harrison. “I’ll tell Logan and Major to stay and protect the families.”

Harrison nodded. “Go.”

Colin took off to find their foreman and Harrison’s son-in-law. Major wasn’t going to be happy being told to stay, but if it involved protecting Honoria and Sadie, he wouldn’t argue. Unfortunately, when he gave them the news, Sadie was also there. “You two are going to what?”

“Go look for Georgie Callahan.”

“I know that, I’ve already heard she’s missing, but why are *you* going?”

“She’s right – I should be,” Major said. “This is all my fault to begin with.”

“I’m not saying that,” Sadie remarked. “Besides, I thought you said it was Mrs. Pettigrew’s.”

“Doesn’t matter now,” Colin said. “The girl is missing and we have to find her. What I can’t figure out is why take only one?”

“Probably because she was the only one they could get their hands on,” Logan said. “Colin’s right. We need to stay and protect our families.”

Major sighed heavily. “Very well. Are all of my brothers going?”

“Only Michael and Darcy,” Colin said. “Zachary is staying behind to protect Hunny and Rosie. Harrison and I sent Benedict and Peaceful ... I mean, Matt, to guard the town in case there’s trouble.”

“Don’t worry about names right now,” Major said. “My brother doesn’t care what he’s called at a time like this.” He turned to Sadie. “I’ll find Zachary and have him bring Hunny and Rosie to the Triple-C. I’ll feel better if they’re with us.”

“Do that.”

Belle came running from the creekside, Ada and Honoria on her heels. “Colin Cooke, what are you doing?”

“What needs to be done, my darling.”

She reached his horse. “But ...”

“No buts. Harrison and I are both going.”

She put a hand on his leg. “You fool,” she said with a smile and a few tears.

“Quite.” Colin dismounted, wrapped his arms around his wife and kissed her. “Belle,” he whispered, “pray for us. Pray we find her.” She nodded as he released her and turned to Major and Logan. “Guard them with your lives.” He grabbed a handful of his horse’s mane, swung back onto the animal, turned it toward the men gathering at the base of the road and took off.

“Our husbands,” Belle said as she looked at Sadie. “Why do they always have to be heroes?”

Logan smiled. “Because it’s who they are.”

Major put an arm around Honoria. “Thank Heaven for that.” He glanced at Ada. “Best we go round up the others. You and Lorcan going to be okay?”

Ada blanched. “I ... well, I’m not sure.”

“Why not?” Sadie asked.

“Because Bowen is going. And he insists on taking Lorcan with him.”

\* \* \*

HARRISON AND COLIN watched in quiet awe as Lorcan Brody closed his eyes and concentrated. Bowen had ordered them to stop as soon as they left the canyon. He sat quietly, Lorcan mounted behind him and waited.

“What’s he doin’?” Eli asked, wide-eyed. He swallowed hard. “This is ... new.”

“Right you are,” Colin agreed. “Bowen?”

Bowen’s eyes flicked over each man. “Let him ... sense, feel ... whatever. I’m telling you he knew three strange men were there earlier, before anything happened.” The Turners, Cookes, Comforts, Deputy Bran O’Hare and several others watched as Lorcan sat, eyes closed. He looked as if he’d stopped breathing.

“Tree line,” he finally whispered. “They’re at the tree line.”

“Are you sure?” Bowen asked.

Lorcan nodded. “Georgie, she’s ... frightened.”

Darcy nudged his horse forward. “What is this? How’s he able to do that?”

Paddy Mulligan sighed. “Ye’ve heard enough of the stories since ye’ve been here, haven’t ye, lad?”

“I’ve heard stories about dukes and prince consorts and queens and ...” He looked at Bowen. “... you.”

Bowen caught the challenge in his eyes. “They’re all true.”

Darcy swallowed hard. “I don’t care if they’re true or not, unless they can help us find Georgie.”

“Seems Lorcan already has,” Paddy said. “Question is, do we put our faith in what he senses, or let Ryder and Seth ...” He glanced around. “Where did the Joneses go?”

“Over there,” Bowen said as Seth and Ryder galloped toward them. “They were scouting ahead.”

Ryder reached them first. “Followed their tracks – still three horses as far as I can tell. But there are others. Not sure if’n they’re with who we’re after or not. One set’s headin’ straight for the tree line, the other toward town.”

Everyone exchanged the same look, then stared at Lorcan. He sat quietly, eyes open, as Bowen’s horse pawed at the ground.

“Right then,” Colin said. “The tree line – let’s go.”

No one said a word except Patrick Mulligan, who looked at Darcy, winked and whispered, “Let me tell ye something, lad. Every town has its treasures. Doc Drake is one of ours. As is Lorcan. Ye can either protect them along with the rest of us and let the good Lord use them as He wills, or ignore them and see what it gets ye. But it doesn’t make them go away or change who they are. Just like yer lass we’re off to rescue - ye can’t help how ya feel about her, now can ye?”

Darcy could only stare as Patrick rode off with the rest of the search party. It was his gut (or something) that told him she was in trouble in the first place. What if he hadn’t felt anything at all? What if he’d ignored it?

He spurred his horse to catch up with the others. Odd things happened in Clear Creek – he’d known it since they’d arrived looking for Pleasant almost two years ago. The people here were different, some quirky, some difficult. But they were also kind, friendly and generous. It was why he and his brothers all wanted to stay and begin a new life there.

But none of them acknowledged certain things – not aloud, anyway. Major’s miraculous recovery after being shot by outlaws when they first came to town. Stories about the Bergs, a couple that visited Clear Creek when Major was sent that false mail-order bride last year. Some said Grandma Waller had a heart attack many years ago and that Bowen Drake brought her back ... by praying.

Darcy gripped his reins and looked at the men galloping in front of him. What was this place he and his brothers had settled in? And why was he fighting against what he knew deep in his heart to be true? *Oh Lord*, he prayed as he rode. *I’m sorry I’ve drifted so far from you. Help us find Georgie by whatever means You choose. Be it through a blind man, the Joneses’ tracking skills, a star in the east, anything. Just so we find her...*

He wiped away a tear, having just realized it escaped. But what caught his attention was that he didn’t care who saw it. And if he didn’t care about that, proud as he was, then he needed to lay his cards on the table and tell Zachary he was in love with Georgie. He couldn’t let her go, not now, not ever.



Besides, if his guess was right, Zachary was more interested in Rosie than he was. Look at how he took off in search of her when he found out Georgie was missing ...

Tears or no tears, it almost made him laugh. The four of them had paired up exactly wrong – and they'd all been either too proud or too worried to say anything! And wasn't that reminiscent of Sheriff Turner's story about how he met his wife – that she'd been a mail-order bride for someone who had his cap set for his childhood sweetheart and ... well, he didn't remember all the details. But it appeared his and Zach's was a very Clear Creek sort of situation. And once they got Georgie home safe, they'd need to sort it out.

They approached the tree line, and Darcy wondered what they'd do next. Lorcan may have confirmed what Ryder and Seth found, but that didn't mean he knew exactly where Georgie and her captors were. He did have to admit that heading straight for the tree line and not splitting up and chasing after the other set of tracks, they'd saved time and given themselves more manpower should the need arise.

Tom pulled them up at the edge of the trees, their horses winded. "We hafta give our mounts a rest," he announced. "In case things come down to a chase."

Eli studied the area. "There's a stream not far from here. We can water them there." He led them along the tree line for a quarter mile then veered off onto a trail that led to the stream in the woods, where they dismounted.

"Any sign of them?" Darcy asked Ryder.

Ryder studied the ground. "Not here. But I'll go upstream for a spell while Seth goes down. If they rode as hard as we did, they'd have had to water their horses too. Don't worry, they can't be much more'n an hour or so ahead of us. We'll catch 'em."

Darcy sighed. "Yes, but what will they have done to her by then?"

Ryder shook his head. "Best not to think the worst, Darcy. Instead think of the happy look on that little gal's face when

she sees ya comin'."

Darcy nodded. He also pictured the look of profound horror on the faces of the men that took her, because when he got his hands on them, he'd ...

"Darcy." Michael slapped him on the back. "How are you holding up?"

He almost said, "fine," but decided not to lie. "A bit shaken, but I'm managing."

Michael nodded. "I, uh ... noticed Zachary didn't volunteer to come."

"No, he stayed behind to help protect the women."

"You mean Rosie?"

Darcy sighed, his hands on his hips. "Yes, I mean Rosie."

"How long have you known?"

"About them?" He shook his head. "Well, I've suspected for a while. But then, I imagine he's suspected my feelings for Georgie. Neither of us have said anything ... until now." It felt good to say it, to finally acknowledge the truth he – and at least three others – had been denying.

"Don't worry," his brother said, as if he'd known it all along. "We'll get things straightened out when we bring Georgie back." He put his hand on Darcy's shoulder. "And we *will* bring her back, Darcy."

He nodded, unable to shake the feeling that something very bad would happen if they didn't. It wasn't a matter of if, but when. But he sensed it wouldn't come down to tracking the scum that took Georgie all the way back to Denver. No, this was something else ...

"As soon as the horses have rested a bit, we'll head out," Harrison said as he joined them. He looked at Darcy. "Are you all right?"

"Given the circumstances." He gave the ground a cold stare.

Harrison nodded to himself before he touched Darcy's arm to get his attention. "She loves you, you know."

Darcy froze. "I beg your pardon?"

Harrison nodded again, knowingly this time. "She told me earlier this afternoon. I found her weeping amongst the wagons."

"You did?"

Michael glanced between them. "You did?" he repeated.

Harrison smiled. "She felt horrible about it too – I've never seen such sadness. She didn't want to stand in the way of you and her sister."

"Rosie," Darcy whispered.

"Let the horses rest," Harrison suggested. "We might have a hard ride ahead. You do want to be able to catch them, don't you?"

"Of course."

Harrison patted him on the back. "Good man. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd best speak to my brother."

They watched him go. As soon as he found Colin at the creek, Michael whistled. "Fancy that. All this time Georgie was sweet on you."

"Yes, but poor Zachary ..."

"Is sweet on Rosie – or at a minimum, Rosie's cooking. Again, we'll work that out when we return. Right now let's concentrate on finding your lady."

That was just the word Darcy needed to hear. He could get through this if he remembered he was the knight and Georgie the damsel in distress. He took a deep breath. "Agreed."

Once the horses were rested, the search party set off again. The Jones brothers picked up the trail, and the group rode along the tree line for nearly an hour before Seth brought his horse to a stop. He and Ryder dismounted and studied the ground. "Well, dagnabit," Ryder said.

Darcy steered his horse over to the brothers, who now were kneeling on the ground, examining it. “Have you found something?”

“That’s just it – we ain’t,” Ryder looked at him. “It’s like they plumb disappeared.” He scratched his head. “Ain’t never seen anythin’ like it.”

“They could have covered their tracks at this point, and gone into the trees,” Seth suggested. He scanned the nearby woods.

“Maybe,” Ryder drawled. “But ya can usually see signs of that. I don’t see a trace.”

Seth sighed and nodded. “We should check the woods just the same.”

“I agree. Let’s go.” But Ryder didn’t sound confident.

Seth stood and looked at Darcy. “We’ll be right back. If they did enter the woods, it won’t take long to find signs of it.”

“All right, we’ll wait.” He was tempted to suggest consulting with Lorcan, then decided that he shouldn’t be telling the experts their business.

The Jones brothers left their horses with the others and disappeared into the copse of spruce, pine and the occasional fir. The underbrush was thick, the ground covered with pine needles and other forest debris. Darcy listened, expecting to hear them crashing through the wood, but instead it was silent. His respect for them went up a notch. What was their story? He hadn’t heard it yet. Where they’d come from was obvious – their Texas accents were as thick as cattle hide, especially Ryder’s – but why had they come here?

He glanced at Doc Drake, who was speaking quietly to Lorcan. Lorcan was staring at the exact spot the Jones brothers had entered the trees. What other strange things would he sense before the day was out? Darcy shrugged – the only thing he wanted to sense was Georgie, alive and in his arms.

\* \* \*

HARRISON WENT TO THE STREAM, got a drink, then stood beside his brother. “Colin, do you know where we are?”

Colin glanced around. “I’m afraid I haven’t the foggiest.”

“That’s just it – I haven’t either. Yet by rights, we should be near those cursed caves.”

“Caves? Oh me! I’d forgotten about the bloody things.”

“Caves?” Michael asked.

Tom led his horse away from the water. “We all did. Of course!”

“What caves?” Michael repeated.

“Are they nearby?” Darcy asked.

Harrison shrugged. “I couldn’t say.” He looked at Colin. “That was a long time ago, not to mention something I’d rather forget.”

“That makes two of us,” Colin said. “But you’re right, nothing looks the same. Of course, after twenty years, how could it?”

“Twenty years?” Darcy said. “What are you two talking about?”

“There was an incident that took place somewhere around here,” Tom said. “I was too young back then to get in on the fun.”

“Fun?” Colin quipped. “Is that what you call it? Tied up and made to hang over a bottomless black pit, *fun*?”

“About to plunge to one’s death,” Harrison added. “Let’s not forget that part.”

Darcy stared opened-mouthed at them. He really did need to find out more about the people of Clear Creek. “Do you think the men that took Georgie ...?”

“Worth a look.” Tom drew his gun, checked it and reholstered it.

“It would explain how none of us saw anyone lurkin’ in the area when we did our rounds,” Eli said.

Darcy closed his eyes and bit his bottom lip. “You’re just now telling us about this?”

Tom shrugged. “Sorry, Darcy, but we plumb forgot ‘bout them caves. No one’s been out here for years. Besides, they’re hours from town.”

“He’s right, Darcy,” Michael said. “Logically someone wouldn’t camp that far out if they were watching us. Still, I think we should check there.” He studied the steep hillside that loomed in the same direction the Jones brothers were heading. “Will Seth or Ryder know these caves?”

“No, only Harrison and myself,” Colin said. “And Patrick – he was there when ... we were.” The men turned and looked at Paddy Mulligan watering his horse up the stream. The stout Irishman had to be in his sixties, but he’d been one of the first men to volunteer today. What was his story, Darcy wondered.

Harrison surveyed their surroundings. “Nothing’s familiar, yet I know they must be nearby. As I recall, we had a bloody hard time finding them then.” He glanced at Bowen. “I wonder ...”

Colin followed his gaze. “It’s worth a try. Isn’t that why Bowen brought him along?”

“I believe you’re right, brother.” Harrison looked at Colin and smiled. “Under different circumstances I’d say poor Duncan is missing all the fun.”

“Except this isn’t what I’d consider fun.” Colin nodded toward Lorcan. “Come, let’s ask him if he can find the caves.”

\* \* \*

GEORGIE WAS GOING to be sick. They’d yanked her off the ground, sat her on Mr. Boone’s horse again and started off – no water, no relief from her bonds, nothing. As far as abductors go, these were the worst. Not that she had any to compare them with, but one would think they’d want to deliver her to her aunt in decent condition. Then again, if Aunt Henrietta had it in mind to – she gulped – kill her, why bother?

They rode along the tree line for quite a while before veering off into the woods again, the horses picking through the brush, scrub and trees. Soon they began to climb, following a path that was barely visible if there at all. Several times she thought Mr. Boone's mount would go down, break a leg, something. But the horse managed to stay upright and only stumbled here and there.

They zigzagged up and over a steep hill, part of which seemed to consist of sheer cliffs. They rode along the top of the ridge for a while until a wall of rock blocked their way, then veered off again and began to descend. Going down the other side was just as frightening as coming up, and it seemed to take forever.

Finally they reached the bottom and Georgie noticed the forest wasn't as dense here as on the other side. At least they hadn't gone over the nearby mountain. But then Mr. Boone steered his horse into a clearing and looked at yet another hill. Where in Heaven's name were they going? She wished she could ask – not that they'd tell her ...

Mr. Boone smiled. "Won't be long now, love."

Her heart jumped into her throat. *Until what?* She hadn't the slightest idea what he was talking about.

They started up the next hill, the horses slipping and sliding as before. But this time the going was a little easier, the path wider. For a moment she felt sorry for Mr. Boone's horse, then decided she'd better concentrate on using the animal to escape if she could, or die trying.

Georgie never saw herself as noble or sacrificial, but she supposed she was. She'd been fully prepared to live a life without Darcy, to let Rosie marry him and have her happiness. She, of course, couldn't marry Zachary when she didn't love him. How fair would that be to him?

After another eternity they reached the top. There wasn't a lot of room there, and she realized they'd topped the same ridge as before. They must be on the other side of the wall of rock, and had to go down and around to get here. They'd traversed what had to be the easiest if longest way up. Could

she run all the way back down without breaking her neck? First she'd have to get them to untie her, and she wasn't sure if that would happen anytime soon. Perhaps if she had to use the privy? She wouldn't be lying.

"Here we are – end of the line," Mr. Boone said with a raspy chuckle. As before, Hanks dismounted, took her from Mr. Boone and carried her off. Only this time he didn't set her down next to a tree, but lugged her along the rock wall, around a corner and into a cave. She couldn't see for a moment in the dim light. But as they went deeper, torches illuminated the walls, making the shadows around them dance.

Hanks leaned down and let her slide off his shoulder. As soon as she touched the ground, she groaned into the gag – both feet were asleep.

"Come now, my dear, don't tell me you didn't have a pleasant trip?"

Georgie froze. Oh. Good. *Lord*. Eyes wide, she turned her head toward the voice. Hanks spun her toward it, gripping her shoulders to keep her upright.

The voice's owner stood up from an old crate she'd been sitting on. "Hello, Georgie," she said as if she'd just arrived for tea. "I do hope you're not afraid of the dark." She waved her hand at something.

Georgie looked in that direction and saw a hole at least ten feet across and probably just as deep. A pit? Her blood went cold.

Aunt Henrietta saw her reaction and smiled wickedly. "I see you are. Good."



## CHAPTER 26

Ryder and Seth emerged from the trees, their faces determined yet confused.

“What did you find?” Darcy asked.

Ryder shook his head. “On the one hand, not much.”

“But on the other,” Seth added, “plenty.”

“What does that mean?” Michael asked.

“We found a false trail,” Ryder explained.

“False?” Darcy said. “You mean we’ve come all this way for nothing?”

“No,” Ryder said. “I mean there might be more than the three horses we’ve been following.”

Tom stepped forward. “You mean they split up?”

“Or others were already waitin’,” Eli suggested. “Think about it – half the group went one way, the other half another. In that mess ...” He tossed his head at the woods. “... it’d confuse anyone.”

Tom studied the trees. “If’n it were just anyone. They’re still ‘round here somewhere. No one can move fast in that tangle.”

“You’re right, Sheriff,” Seth said. “But where did the other group go? Did they take off into the woods further up the tree line, or some ways back?”

Tom scanned their surroundings, then turned to Bowen, who brought Lorcan forward. “Lorcan, ya brought us this far, after a fashion. Do ya think ya can add anythin’ to what we already know?”

Lorcan shrugged. “I can try, Sheriff.”

“Fine,” said Tom. “If the good Lord’s willin’ to intervene on our behalf, I don’t much care how He does it.”

Lorcan nodded, took a deep breath and closed his eyes. The men watched with the same fascination as before. They were used to odd things happening around Doc Drake, miracles even. And none could argue that Lorcan was different as far as blind men go. But this was still very new.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen,” Lorcan said after a few moments. “I don’t ... sense anything really, just ...” He shrugged. “Darkness. And cold.” He shivered and rubbed his arms.

“Like a cave?” Harrison suggested.

Lorcan turned toward him. “Aye.” He moved his head as if looking around. “Exactly like a cave. And ...”

Darcy stepped forward. “What?”

Lorcan turned again, his sightless eyes meeting Darcy’s desperate ones. “Terrifying.”

“Georgie,” Darcy whispered. He groaned at the thought of her cold, helpless and frightened in some dark crevice. Would they have bound her? Most likely. But what were they doing hiding out in caves? Why not head straight for the nearest train station? “Where are these caves?” Darcy asked Harrison.

Harrison, hands on hips, sighed and glanced around. “They’re around here somewhere, but I couldn’t say where. You must understand, Colin and I haven’t been here in nearly twenty years.”

“I might be able to find ‘em.” Tom looked at his brother. “Eli, ‘member when we use to ride out here lookin’ for ‘em?”

Eli nodded. “Yeah, and how Pa’d tan our hides when he found out.”

Michael cracked a smile. “For shirking your chores to go exploring?”

“No,” Tom said. “‘Cause them caves are dangerous.”

“How dangerous?” Darcy asked.

“They run under the hillside,” Colin said. “But there’s one high up on the ridge, literally on top of the others. It has a large hole. If one wanders in and doesn’t see it ...”

Harrison made a whistling sound and brought one hand down on the other with a loud *smack*.

Darcy went cold. “We have to hurry. We have to leave now!”

“Agreed.” Harrison turned to Colin and Tom. “We might be able to recognize the ridge, but we’d have to ride out far enough to get a good look.”

“I’ll go with you,” Tom said. “Eli, you come too.” They mounted their horses and took off, leaving the rest of the group behind. Darcy hurriedly followed – he wasn’t going to leave anything to chance.

They rode several hundred yards from the tree line, stopped and turned around. “Recognize anything?” Tom asked.

Harrison studied the ridge. The timber was taller, thicker than before, but he saw a few landmarks. “Colin, do you recall when we and Duncan climbed up the side of the ridge to the top?”

“Yes, but ... where?”

Tom pointed to a spot that sloped into a sheer cliff. “I ‘member that cliff wall. I think the lower cave entrance is there – Eli and I found it once.”

“Yep, it is,” Eli said. “If’n ya ride ‘round that wall, there’s a hill ya can climb to get to the cave on top.”

“That’s right!” Colin said. “That’s how Jefferson and Cozette found us.”

“Cozette?” Darcy said. “The duchess?”

“That’s the one,” Harrison said. “If not for her – and Jefferson – Colin, Duncan and I would be dead.”

Darcy decided that story could wait for later. “Then we should head for that hill. Sounds like you can reach both entrances from there.”

“There’s also a third,” Colin added, “but I can’t remember where it is. That far hill will have to do.” They headed back to the others at a gallop. It would take time to reach the slope, let alone climb it.

As far as Darcy was concerned, they hadn’t a moment to lose.

\* \* \*

“YOU LOOK to be in fine health,” Aunt Henrietta commented as Mr. Boone removed Georgie’s gag while Stiles untied her ankles.

As soon as she was free from the handkerchief stuffed in her mouth, Georgie coughed and gasped, then stared at her aunt in horror. “What in the name of ...?” she rasped, and coughed some more. Her dry throat made it hard to talk.

“Give her some water, Mr. Boone,” her aunt instructed.

Mr. Boone rolled his eyes. He obviously wasn’t one to see to the needs of a captive. If Aunt Henrietta was, maybe she had a chance. Or did she just want to hear her beg for her life in a normal voice? At the moment, Georgie didn’t care. She took a drink from the canteen he held to her lips, spilling water as she did, and coughed again. “Aunt Henrietta, what is this about?”

Her aunt laughed. “I should ask you the same. Though it wasn’t hard to find you three, once we discovered you were missing. All that talk about Dorcas becoming a mail-order bride that one evening gave it away.” She stepped closer, mindful of the gaping hole nearby. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done to me?” Her tone was sharp.

Georgie cringed. “We couldn’t marry those men! They were old enough to be our grandfathers!”

“What of it? They were rich, powerful. You and your sisters would have wanted for nothing.”

“Except love, among other things.”

“Love?” Aunt Henrietta cackled. “You don’t know what love is. You never would’ve known what you were missing. Now look at you – pathetic, hiding out in some worthless flea-bitten town, never to marry. Even if you did, it would be to a man poorer than a church mouse. Trust me, things are better this way.”

Georgie stared at her. “What ... things?”

Aunt Henrietta smiled, looked at the pit and nodded to Mr. Boone. He grabbed Georgie’s arms and began to drag her toward it. “No!” Georgie screamed.

“You’re hardly in a position to argue, my dear,” her aunt said.

Georgie kicked at Mr. Boone. He simply picked her up, and she hit empty air rather than his shins. “Why are you doing this?” she cried as he reached the pit’s edge.

“Why?” Aunt Henrietta said with a laugh. “Oh, very well, I’ll tell you. Mr. Boone, bring her here.”

Disappointed at not getting to toss her in, he snorted in annoyance but did as she asked.

“Set her on her feet. If anyone’s going to push this heartless trollop to her death, it’ll be me.”

Mr. Boone sighed and set Georgie down. Georgie struggled against him, the pit not feet away. One good shove and that would be the end. She faced her aunt. “You wicked old woman!”

“Old? Yes, I suppose, but not too old to escape the pain of losing.” She closed the distance between them. “And you and your sisters have cost me dearly.”

Georgie smelled liquor on her aunt’s breath and backed against Mr. Boone’s chest. “We’re sorry, but we couldn’t do what you demanded. It was ludicrous!”

“Perhaps, but again, you three passed up the chance of a lifetime. I gave you everything and yet you took more.”

“What are you talking about?” Georgie asked as her eyes flicked to the pit and back. Maybe if she kept her aunt talking, she could figure a way out of this – not likely, but still worth a try. “We did nothing but serve and take care of you for years!”

“Take care of me? Oh, listen to that! You took care of me by killing my husband! Is that how you repay everything I’ve done for you?”

Georgie’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What? Uncle Samson? What has he got to do with any of this?”

Aunt Henrietta got in her face. “You killed him, you worthless little wretch!” she screamed.

It was all Georgie could do not to cry. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“I’ll tell you,” Aunt Henrietta sneered. “You hid in that treehouse one night and a storm blew in. My poor Samson went out looking for you, but you never came when he called. He was out there for hours!” She got in Georgie’s face again. “And he got sick and *died!* It was ALL YOUR FAULT!” She stepped away, letting Georgie see the hatred in her eyes.

Georgie shook her head in disbelief. “I was a child ...”

“That’s no excuse!” Aunt Henrietta yelled. “You killed my Samson!”

Georgie could only stare, terrified, as her aunt’s face contorted with rage, all aimed at her. She shook her head again as her lower lip trembled.

“Your tears are a little late, don’t you think?” Aunt Henrietta snapped. “Now it’s time to pay – an eye for an eye!”

Georgie sniffled and squared her shoulders. “I’ve done nothing but take care of you! If you’ve suffered losses, I’m truly sorry, but you can’t murder someone for it!”

Aunt Henrietta gave her a bemused look. “Oh, can’t I?”

Georgie was about to say something, *anything* to stall the inevitable, when she heard a grunt. She turned toward the sound, as did Mr. Boone – and realized Hanks and Stiles were nowhere to be seen.

“What was that?” Aunt Henrietta motioned Georgie toward her. “Give her to me. Find out what that was. And throw me that rope.”

Mr. Boone shoved Georgie at her aunt, who gripped her arms, fingers digging into the tender flesh. For an old woman, she held her as tightly as a hawk with a mouse. Which meant she had the strength to shove her into the pit too. Georgie studied the ground. It was smooth and hard, nothing to hang onto. It would come down to her strength versus her aunt’s.

Aunt Henrietta must have realized it too – she shoved Georgie to the ground and sat on her as Mr. Boone brought the rope, re-bound Georgie’s ankles and tossed one of the discarded handkerchiefs at her aunt. She made quick use of it and gagged her again.

Georgie, once again completely helpless, closed her eyes. This was it then, the end. All her aunt had to do was get off of her and either push or roll her to the edge. She didn’t even try to stop her tears from coming. *Please, Lord, take care of Hunny and Rosie. Give them long happy lives, fruitful marriages, and ...*

A dull thud followed by a succession of grunts caught their attention. Mr. Boone staggered backward into the cave, let out a roar and charged whoever had just hit him. Aunt Henrietta got to her feet, craned her neck to see what was happening around the bend, then looked at Georgie. “Time’s up, my dear.” She bent over, intent on shoving her into the pit.

But Georgie was ready, rolling at Aunt Henrietta instead. She didn’t think her aunt was strong enough to lift her. Using her own dead weight was the best chance she had. And by golly if it didn’t work – she was able to at least fight her aunt to a standstill.

“You’re as fat as that worthless sister of yours!” Aunt Henrietta grunted as she tried to push her toward the hole, only

to fall back on her haunches, then her derriere. “No matter – all I need is some leverage.” She planted her feet against Georgie’s side, braced herself with her hands and pushed.

Georgie screamed into the gag. If only her hands had been tied in front of her instead of behind – she’d at least be able to strike at the woman or grab her. But as it was, Aunt Henrietta was shoving her closer to the edge. She tried to sit up, but it was impossible, tied as she was with her body being kicked and shoved.

“Stop!”

Georgie yelped at the sight of Darcy, his face showing rage, confusion, determination and relief.

Aunt Henrietta took one look at him, smirked and pushed with all her might.

Darcy dove and landed on top of Georgie, stopping her inches from the edge. She stared into the blackness, held at the precipice by his body and one arm.

He grabbed Aunt Henrietta with his free hand. “If we go, so do you,” he growled.

Georgie, pinned as she was, couldn’t see Aunt Henrietta’s face, but what she heard was alarming enough: “You wouldn’t dare ... oh, very well, so be it.” Her eyes widened as her aunt dove on top of them and tried to push the three of them over. She felt her body slipping ...

Darcy gripped her tighter, let out a horrific roar and rolled over on top of Aunt Henrietta, Georgie held with one arm. She was now on top of them, her aunt squashed beneath Darcy – and now a yard from the pit, as Darcy had smartly rolled them away.

“Get off me!” Aunt Henrietta wheezed. “This instant!”

Darcy did, pulling Georgie up with him. He set her aside, grabbed Aunt Henrietta and shoved her at Michael as he ran into the cave. “Take care of this one.”

Michael looked at Aunt Henrietta as if he wasn’t sure what to do with her, before it registered. “The villainous aunt, I



presume?” he said flatly.

“Yes, and she tried to murder Georgie!” Darcy went to Georgie, fell to his knees and wrapped his arms around her waist, his head against her belly. “My love, my sweet, sweet love ...”

That did it. Her tears came in force, and she couldn't stop them if she'd tried. It wasn't the fear, the narrow escape, or even that her aunt had just tried to kill her that opened the floodgates – it was that Darcy loved her.

He removed the gag, untied her wrists and ankles, then pulled her onto his lap and held her. She cried without shame, her face buried in his chest. He stroked her hair, wiped her tears away, then, cupping her face, kissed her. She stopped breathing for a moment, still too unsettled to think. Instead she let his kiss take over, hold her, give her the comfort she needed. And Darcy's kiss didn't disappoint.

“Ahem,” Michael said.

Darcy broke the kiss and gazed into Georgie's eyes, ignoring his brother. “Are you all right?”

She stared at him, her tears stilled by his lips, and nodded.

He glanced at Michael and nodded. Michael took Aunt Henrietta's arm and hauled her out of the cave, just as Colin and Harrison rushed in. They took one look at Georgie and sighed in relief. “Thank Heaven you're all right!” Colin said. He glanced at the pit and cringed. “Oh dear. I forgot how foreboding that thing is.” He swallowed hard and took a step back.

Harrison stared at it too, his face pale. “Right. Let's get these two out of here.” He glanced around. “There was only the one man?”

“Man?” Georgie said, finding her voice. “Mr. Boone?”

“Is that the chap's name?” Harrison said. “Large fellow?”

Colin walked around, examining the cave. “How on Earth did they find this place?”

“Probably stumbled upon it,” Harrison said. “Thankfully, we remembered where it was.”

“No doubt.” Colin looked at Darcy, Georgie still wrapped in his arms. “Will she be okay?”

“Yes.” He looked into her eyes again. “She’s just frightened.”

“Best bring her outside,” Colin suggested. He nudged Harrison and together they left the cave.

As soon as they were gone, Darcy brushed more hair from Georgie’s face and kissed her again. It was a slow, gentle kiss, yet held a force she couldn’t identify. Desperation? Relief? Both?

Darcy broke the kiss and swallowed. “Georgie darling, are you sure you’re all right?”

She nodded as her eyes locked with his. “You saved me.”

He smiled. “Yes, but not without help. Thank the Lord there was only the one man to contend with when I got here.”

“Mr. Boone ...” She looked at him. “But what happened to the other two?”

His eyebrows shot up. “What other two?”

“Mr. Boone had two men with him – Hanks and Stiles. The three of them took me from the picnic and brought me here to Aunt Henrietta.”

Darcy’s brow furrowed. “Darling, we only encountered the one. Unless they made a run for it before I arrived.”

“Perhaps Michael found them ...” She buried her face in his chest, overcome with weariness, and shivered against him.

“I have to get you out of here.” Darcy gently removed her from his lap, then stood and pulled her to her feet. “Can you walk?”

She looked at him and was about to say yes, but he scooped her into his arms first. Not that she minded. He carried her outside, where Michael stood over a subdued Aunt

Henrietta. She sat on a large rock, hands tied behind her back, a sour look on her face. She glared daggers at them.

Darcy glared back. “Attempted murder will have you in prison for a good long while.” He looked her over. “Perhaps the rest of your miserable life.”

She said nothing. What could she say?

Darcy set Georgie down. “Where are the others?” He glanced around. “Did they take the big one down the hill?”

“No, I think Tom and Eli must have done it.”

“But they didn’t come up here with us. They were searching the caves below.”

Michael rubbed his face. “Don’t tell me he got away?”

Aunt Henrietta laughed. “Good for Mr. Boone! I hope he did – then he can finish the job!”

“What was that?” Michael asked, jaw tight.

She laughed. “I hope he finds her sisters and does away with them! At least I’ll have that satisfaction.”

“You murderous witch,” Michael spat. For a moment, Georgie thought he was going to strike her, but that wasn’t who the Comforts were. They were gallant, kind gentlemen, not the type to strike a woman no matter how much one deserved it.

“We’d better find Sheriff Tom and the rest, and alert them that this Mr. Boone escaped,” Darcy said.

“Serves you right,” Aunt Henrietta said with a sneer.

“Quiet, you,” Darcy ordered. “Unless you’d like the same treatment you showed Georgie.”

“Thrown into a bottomless pit to my death? On please, if only I could have seen her suffer that.”

Darcy eyes narrowed. He didn’t lift a hand to her aunt and instead, embraced Georgie and gazed into her eyes. “She can’t hurt you anymore.”

Georgie nodded. "I know." She stepped out of his arms and stared at her aunt a moment. "I did love you, you know," she finally said softly. "We all did."

Aunt Henrietta, stunned, looked away.

"Even when you were so horrid," Georgie added. "In time I know I'll forgive you. Hunny and Rosie will too." She took Darcy's hand. "Goodbye, Auntie." She walked away, Darcy at her side, and didn't look back.

## CHAPTER 27

Zachary loaded the remaining items from the picnic into the wagon, then helped Rosie up. Hunny had already left the canyon with Logan, the Cookes' foreman, and his family.

Zach looked at Rosie and smiled before giving the horses a slap of the lines. "They'll be all right," he said for at least the third time in an hour. "You'll see. My brothers will bring her back."

"Why didn't you tell us? We're not so delicate that we couldn't handle the news."

He looked at the road and back as they started up the hill. "And have you fret and worry? No. Maybe whoever took Georgie knew we were watching. That's why they struck here." He looked straight ahead, jaw tight. "How else could they have taken her right from under our noses?"

"Were any horses missing?"

"Horses?"

"Yes. That's one other explanation for her disappearance. Georgie hasn't been herself – I think she might have run away."

"Your sister *ran away*?"

She shrugged. "I'd rather think that than what everyone else thinks. Besides, Georgie isn't the bravest in the world. She'd probably return before dark."

He smiled at her. "You're right, she would. Poor thing."

They reached the top and headed for the main road. They could see Logan and Susara Kincaid's wagon pulling onto it. Hunny was riding in the wagon bed with the Kincaids' teenage sons Owen, Martin and Ferris. Even from this distance he could see the boys speaking with her animatedly.

"I feel bad for not catching it before," Rosie said.

Zachary looked at her, eyebrows raised in confusion. "What?"

Rosie fiddled with a loose thread on her dress. "Georgie and your brother."

"What makes you say that?" Though he already knew – he'd been thinking about it since Darcy took off with the other men in search of her. By rights he should have been the one to go, but he would've sooner charged a battalion of cannon than left Rosie's side. Yet Darcy was willing to leave Rosie without a second thought.

"That he's in love with Georgie." She looked at him with a knowing smile. "You could see it in his eyes."

Zachary sighed and nodded. "Yes, I noticed. For a moment I thought poor Darcy was going to lose his mind. I feel sorry for whoever took her." He looked at Rosie and smiled. "That is, if she's not hiding somewhere, safe and sound."

Rosie clasped her hands in front of her, probably to keep from wringing them, and nodded. "I hope she's safe. If men took her, then ..."

"Then Darcy will find her," he reminded.

"I know, it's just that ... oh, Zachary!" Rosie put her face in her hands and began to sob.

Zachary brought the team to a halt, wrapped the lines around the brake and gathered Rosie in his arms. "Sweetie, the men will find her. Both my brothers are good with a gun and they're with some of the best trackers in the West, I've been told. Sheriff Turner and his deputies are with him too, as are the Cookes. Even Mr. Mulligan went along."

She lifted her face and smiled weakly. “I’m not sure what he’ll do, other than pound someone with his big fists. I hope he does.”

Zachary realized the position they were in and released her, resting one arm on the back of the wagon seat. “They’re good men. Brave, strong, good with guns. I almost wish I’d gone with them, but...”

She sniffed back a few tears. “What?”

He leaned toward her. “But the thought of leaving you ... I couldn’t do it.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

Zachary scooted closer and tucked a loose wisp of her hair behind her ear. “Really.”

“You ... didn’t want to leave ... *me*?” she stammered.

He shook his head and moved closer, putting his arm around her. “I don’t think I could ever leave you. Especially not after what’s happened.”

She stared at him, eyes big as saucers. “Zachary?”

“Rosie ...” He kissed her, and she was softer and warmer than he imagined. His other arm came up, pulling her against him, and she responded in kind. She was like sweet nectar – once you had a taste, nothing else would satisfy.

“Rosie,” he rasped as he broke the kiss. “Oh, honey, I’m sorry. I got carried away.”

“Zachary?”

He looked at her. She was so beautiful. “What?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. Zachary’s eyes went wide with surprise, then closed as he again tasted her sweetness.

They kissed for a long time – longer than they should – and if his guess was right, what few families remained in the canyon would be driving out of it at any moment. They had to get moving. Besides, he didn’t want Logan and his wife to worry about them. With much reluctance, he broke the kiss,

tightened his arms around her and held her close. “By Heaven, Rosie, what have we been doing?”

She shrugged as best she could and giggled. “I don’t know, but it wasn’t this.”

He released his hold and looked at her. “Rosie Callahan, I think that, well, I ... I love you!”

She smiled. “Good, because I love you too!” They kissed each other again.

Rosie broke it this time. “But what about Darcy and Georgie? What if we’re wrong?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a problem.”

“But I know Georgie has great affection for you. Oh, this is terrible!”

“Now, don’t panic. I know for a fact that Darcy is absolutely in love with her – at least all the signs are there. He’s a protective sort. There’s nothing he likes better than to rescue a damsel in distress, any distress.”

“But then we might be wrong and Darcy is just being Darcy. And I love *you!*”

He laughed. “I heard you the first time.”

Rosie threw her arms around him and kissed him again. He was beginning to like this a lot, but if they didn’t get moving they could be in trouble. Professing their love was one thing, but they were in a public place, and they had to concentrate on getting Georgie back. He pulled away gently, unwound the lines from the brake and got the horses moving. “Doc Drake is with them if anyone gets hurt,” he said. Anything to keep his mind off their kisses.

“But he doesn’t have any bandages or instruments with him, does he? What if he needs some?”

He glanced at her with a wry smile. “Rosie, there’s a few things about Doc Drake you ought to know. In fact, there’s things about Clear Creek you ought to know.”

She cocked her head to one side. “Like what?”



“We’ve got about a mile and a half before we get to the Triple-C to talk about it. At least what I know – there’s still a lot I don’t.”

She stared at him and sighed. “All right, I’m ready – oh, wait!” She turned on the seat to face him. “Yes.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Yes ... what?”

“That’s my answer. For when you ask me to marry you. It’s yes.”

He chuckled. Then he laughed. Then he cackled, and had to stop the wagon again. “Just to make it official ...” He turned to her. “... Rosie Callahan, will you marry me?”

She nodded, threw her arms around him and kissed him. “I already told you, silly. Now, what did you want to tell *me*?”

\* \* \*

DARCY, Michael, Colin and Harrison crested the hill overlooking the Triple-C. Georgie sat in front of Darcy, sound asleep. He cradled her against his chest to keep her warm, not to mention himself – she was wearing his jacket. Summer evenings in Oregon weren’t as warm as they were in Georgia, and he was still adjusting.

“Well, this ought to be a happy reunion,” Harrison commented as he looked at the ranch house. “I dare say, returning alive should keep our wives from killing us, eh, brother?”

Colin rolled his eyes and smiled. “One would hope.”

Darcy smiled too. The Cooke brothers were amusing even in the face of danger. And practical – they’d brought Georgie and her sisters to the ranch instead of the hotel. She needed the immediate solace and comfort without worrying about fixing drapes or making tea. She’d been through a horrible ordeal, and while she’d come out unharmed save for a few rope burns, the betrayal of a loved one was cruel. Georgie’s aunt was pure evil in Darcy’s book.

Thankfully he would have little more to do with her. Sheriff Tom and his deputies had her in custody as they and the Jones brothers searched the area for her escaped henchmen. Who knew where they were? The only one they knew of was that Boone fellow. Bran O'Hare was keeping a watchful eye on her, while Doc Drake, Patrick Mulligan and Lorcan Brody returned to town and their families.

Yes, things could have been worse, and Darcy was thankful they'd got there in time. Literally – one more second and Georgie would have been lost. His heart thundered in his chest just thinking about it. He stilled his mind as they rode down the hill. A ranch hand came running from the bunkhouse, a lantern in his hand. "Harrison, Colin! You found her!"

"Sure did, Buck." Harrison dismounted. "Take care of the horses, will you? We have to get Miss Callahan inside."

"We posted guards around the ranch," Buck said. "Just in case."

"Thank you," Colin said as he also dismounted. "We caught one of the wretches, but three got away. Unless Sheriff Tom catches them."

"With Ryder and Seth with them?" Harrison said. "Of course they shall." He looked at Darcy. "She's still asleep?"

Darcy nodded, reluctant to let go of his charge but knowing he had to. "Let's get her inside."

No sooner had he said it than Belle and Sadie rushed out the front door onto the porch. "Harrison Cooke!" Sadie yelled, hurrying down the porch steps into his arms.

"Hello, wife," he said against her hair.

Belle ran to Colin and kissed him. "We were worried. Is she all right?"

"Yes, but she's had quite a fright and I would ask you not ply her with questions. Let her rest."

"Of course," Belle said.

Hunny and Rosie ran onto the porch and down the steps. “Georgie!” Rosie cried.

Georgie opened her eyes and stared at her sisters, but said nothing.

Hunny approached Darcy’s horse as Michael took her hand. “Will she be all right?”

“She will be,” Darcy said.

Colin stood beside his horse. “Hand her to me – we’ll get her inside.”

He did, dismounted and took her from Colin without a word. He carried her into the house where Honoria met him in the front hall. “I’ve prepared the bed in my room upstairs,” she told him.

He followed her there and laid Georgie on the bed. He saw a coverlet on a chair, took it and spread it over her.

“I’ll ask downstairs what happened,” Honoria said. “I’m sure you’re tired and hungry.”

Darcy nodded, unable to take his eyes off Georgie. She was so pale. He hoped she wasn’t sick or that the ordeal took more out of her than they knew.

Hunny and Rosie came into the room with towels, a nightdress and a pitcher of water. “We’ll take it from here.” Hunny put her hand on his forearm. “Thank you, Darcy. Thank you so much.”

“Michael told us you would explain later what happened,” Rosie said.

Darcy nodded. He felt drained now, angry and would like nothing better than to take it out on someone like Mr. Boone. He was sure Michael felt the same. Perhaps a duel? He shook the thought from his brain. “Yes, I’m tired – and not thinking straight.” He took one last look at Georgie and, not caring what her sisters thought, bent down and kissed her on the forehead. He wasn’t sure if she was asleep or not, but hoped his kiss brought her some comfort. Then he turned and left the room.

Downstairs everyone was gathered around the kitchen table talking at once. A couple of Belle and Colin's children were there, but their mother quickly ushered them out and told them to go home. Two ranch hands came in and were given instructions by Harrison to keep the place well-guarded over the next few days. Harrison planned to ride into Clear Creek tomorrow and find out if Sheriff Tom had tracked down the rest of Aunt Henrietta's men.

Until then the best thing to do was to keep their families safe, let Georgie's sisters tend her and maybe get back to normal. But Darcy wasn't sure he could. He watched Zachary across the table listen intently as Michael relayed their recent adventure. The Cookes stared at him open-mouthed. Harrison and Colin had missed Darcy's gallant rescue. All they knew was he got there just in time – they hadn't gotten the details. Michael himself only did on the ride back.

“And Bowen said she was all right?” Harrison asked. “No broken ribs?”

“Darcy's not that heavy,” Zachary commented. “And apparently Aunt Henrietta doesn't kick that hard.”

“Ironically, grabbing Georgie's aunt also kept us from going over,” Darcy added numbly. He shook his head. “I don't think I'll ever forget the look on that woman's face when she tried to push Georgie off the ledge. She's absolutely mad. Wicked.” He looked at Zachary and Michael.

Michael nodded. “Don't worry, she'll get what's coming to her.”

“That she will,” Harrison said. “Judge Whipple will be here in another week or two on his rounds. He won't take kindly to this, I can tell you that.”

They talked for another hour before Darcy and his brothers excused themselves. They'd sleep in the barn, then return to their homes tomorrow after riding into Clear Creek with Harrison to speak with Sheriff Turner.

And Darcy also had to speak with Zachary, who'd been unusually quiet that evening. Clearly something was bothering

him, and it wasn't hard to guess what. But he was too tired to speak to Zach about Georgie. Tomorrow would be better ... he hoped.

\* \* \*

“AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?” Hunny asked, tears in her eyes.

Georgie shrugged. She'd only woken up in Honoria's bed a few minutes before, having slept soundly and dreamlessly through the night. “I told Aunt Henrietta I would forgive her eventually. I'm sure we all will. After all, it's the thing to do.”

“She's right,” Rosie agreed. “It might take time, but if we don't, this will give us nightmares.”

Hunny nodded, sat on the bed and took Georgie's hand. Rosie perched on the end. “The most important thing is that Darcy and Michael brought you back safe and sound.”

“As did the others,” Georgie added, sitting up straighter against the pillows. She blinked a few times and looked at her sisters. “They might never have found me if they hadn't had help. Mr. Brody helped a lot, so I'm told.”

Rosie took a sudden interest in the coverlet and picked at a few loose threads.

“At this point I don't care how they found you, so long as they did,” Hunny insisted.

“And you don't think it's strange?” Rosie asked. “Especially after I told you what Zachary told me?”

“All right,” Hunny said. “I admit the people here are little ... different. But they're also kind and generous and mean no harm. Besides, I think we're staying, aren't we?”

Rosie nodded. “Of course we are – why wouldn't we?” She looked at Georgie. “You want to stay, don't you?”

Georgia swallowed hard. “Oh yes,” she said softly.

Hunny squeezed Georgie's hand. “There's something troubling you, I can tell.”

Rosie sighed. “I think I know what.”

Before Georgie could answer, there was a knock at the door. “Come in,” Hunny called.

The door opened and Darcy, Zachary and Michael filed in, positioning themselves around the bed. Darcy looked intently at Georgie. “Better?”

“Better. Thank you.” She smiled. “From the bottom of my heart.”

Darcy smiled back. “You’re welcome. But let’s not do it again, shall we? I don’t mind rescuing you from dastardly villains now and then, but we shouldn’t make a habit of it.”

She swallowed hard, her eyes darting to Rosie and back. “No, we shouldn’t.”

Michael stood at the end of the bed. He looked at Darcy and Zachary and cleared his throat. “I think there’s something we need to settle.”

Zachary took a deep breath. “Maybe this isn’t the best time. Georgie is probably tired.”

“I don’t love you,” she blurted.

Zachary’s eyes rounded. “You ... you don’t?” he squeaked.

“I’m sorry, Zachary. I wish I did. But I don’t. I ... love Darcy.” Rosie covered her mouth to stifle a gasp, or maybe a sob – Georgie couldn’t tell. “I’m sorry, Rosie – I don’t want to hurt you, but ...”

To everyone’s surprise, Rosie relaxed so much she almost went limp. “Oh thank God!” she gasped.

Michael was confused. “What are you ... what?” He looked at his brothers. “I thought ...”

“You thought I was in love with Georgie,” Zachary finished. “And Darcy with Rosie.”

“I’m so sorry,” Georgie said and looked away.

“No, no, no.” Darcy took her hand. “This is my fault.”

“And mine,” Zachary added.

Rosie's shoulders were shaking. "Oh thank God," she repeated.

Hunny looked at Rosie. "Well, now we know what's been bothering her. But why are *you* acting like that?"

Rosie spread her arms as if to say *isn't it obvious?* "Because I don't love Darcy! I love Zachary!"

"What?" Hunny yelled.

Georgie looked between Darcy and her sisters. "But I thought ..."

"We all did, sweetheart," Darcy said, stroking Georgie's hand. "We've been getting it all backwards all along. And all of us were too worried about hurting each other to talk it out and fix it." He shook his head. "Have you ever heard of such a mess ... well, actually, I suppose I have."

"You have?" Georgie asked.

"Ask Rose Turner about how she met Tom. But at least now we know. Because, Georgie ... I love you so much. And I will fight like a tiger to keep you – even if it means battling my own brother – what?"

Zachary and Rosie had just burst into laughter. "Now what?" Hunny asked.

Zachary calmed down enough to speak first. "I don't suppose now would be a good time to mention – *hee hee* – that I asked Rosie to marry me?"

"After I – *ahem* – after I already told him I'd say ye-e-e-es ..." Rosie fell back on the bed, laughing too hard to say any more.

Hunny scratched her head. "Lunacy. My sisters have gone around the bend."

Michael shook his head. "Well, then they'll match up well with my brothers." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "This is much more logical, you have to admit. Georgie, the more sensitive one, gets the aspiring knight in shining armor."

"I resent that remark," Darcy replied.

“Do you deny it?”

“Mmmm ... no.” Darcy kissed Georgie’s hand. “Milady.”

Georgie giggled. “Brave Sir Knight.”

Hunny finished Michael’s thought. “And Rosie the cook gets the man with the hollow leg. She’ll never lack for a taste tester.”

Zachary was still laughing too hard to answer.

Michael grinned and nodded. “Well, at least I know who I love – and *I* got it right on the first try.” He pulled Hunny close and kissed her. “And she knows I love her very much.”

“And now Georgie knows I love her,” Darcy said.

Georgie smiled and nodded.

Zachary finally caught his breath. “And Rosie knows I love her – and her cooking!”

Rosie almost choked, she was laughing so hard.

“Good heavens,” Colin said from the doorway. “Are you all sure you know who loves who now? Because I’m totally confused.”

Now all six looked at him and laughed.

“Shall I send for Preacher Jo?” Colin offered once the noise died down.

“Not yet,” Michael said. “We have to work out a few details. And just to keep things straight...” He got down on one knee. “Hunny Callahan, I know I already asked you at the picnic, but for Colin’s clarity I’ll ask again. Will you marry me?”

Hunny glance at Colin and back, smiled and said, “No. Changed my mind.”

“What? You ...”

“No, I’m teasing! Of course I’ll marry you!”

Michael stood, took her in his arms and kissed her, then said, “Don’t do that – it’s been too long a day.”



Darcy looked at Georgie. “I’ve not told you yet that I love you in so many words. But I do, sweetling, more than you could ever know.” He slipped off the bed and got on one knee, still holding her hand. “Georgie Callahan, I swear I will protect you for the rest of my life. You won’t go hungry and you will always have a roof over your head. No one, I mean *no one*, will ever harm you again so long as I live. Will you marry me?”

Georgie’s breathing quickened as her tears escaped. “I love you, Darcy. And yes, I’ll marry you.”

Zachary turned to Rosie. “Should I do it again?”

“Oh, hush.” Rosie wrapped her arms around him, hugging him with all her might even as she kept laughing.

Colin rubbed his hands together. “Jolly good! Now that that’s settled, how about breakfast? My wife sent me up to tell you it’s ready. Won’t she be surprised at the discussion around the table?”

Michael, Hunny, Zachary and Rosie followed a smiling Colin downstairs to breakfast. Georgie was still kissing Darcy when they left.

## EPILOGUE

THREE WEEKS LATER ...

“*A*nd do you, Michael, Darcy and Zachary Comfort, take Hunny, Georgie and Rosie Callahan respectively, to be your lawful wedded wives?” Preacher Jo asked.

The Callahan sisters were giddy as they stood next to their grooms. It had been a struggle to get there – their escape from Denver, the uncertainty and anger at getting off to a bad start with their so-called grooms, all the trouble Aunt Henrietta had caused. But it was all set to rights now.

Hanks and Stiles had been found trussed up alongside Mr. Boone in one of the caves below. The only reason Sheriff Turner and the others found them was by following a deep booming laugh that echoed through the caverns. It belonged to an old friend of the Jones brothers, come to pay them a visit – he liked to explore the caves when he was in the area. It was pure luck he’d been there at the time. The man had also rounded up two other men who showed up with a wagon to take Aunt Henrietta off to who knows where.

As for the sixth man, he was already in the wind, and none of the other five knew his name. Aunt Henrietta wouldn’t confess to a thing, not even her own name.

Not waiting for Judge Whipple to come to town, Tom and his deputies escorted her and her henchmen as far as the

Whites' stage stop, where U.S. Marshal Charles Gant and several deputies he'd borrowed took them on to Salem to stand trial for abduction and attempted murder. Georgie, Darcy, Michael and the others involved in her rescue would have had to attend said trial unless Aunt Henrietta pleaded guilty. Thank Heaven she finally did – something Gant said or did must have convinced her to talk.

“And do you, Hunny, Georgie and Rosie Callahan, take Michael, Darcy and Zachary Comfort respectively, to be your lawful wedded husbands?” Preacher Jo went on.

Now, their wedding day, it was hard to believe all the worry, confusion and angst had been cleared up in a few minutes the day after Georgie was rescued. Everyone had assumed whom everyone else would be with, but there was no script that said they had to play out their lives that way. How awful would it be to be married to the wrong person?

“... I now pronounce you husbands and wives!” Preacher Jo announced. “Gentlemen, you may kiss your brides.”

The Comforts each took their bride into their arms and kissed them to loud applause and cheers. Afterward, the three couples faced the congregation and smiled. They didn't have much between them in possessions or money, but what they did have was enough.

Cyrus was the first to congratulate them, taking Michael's hand and giving it a healthy shake. “This is the first *triple* wedding we've ever had in Clear Creek!”

“Folks will be talking about this for years,” added Wilfred.

“Thank you,” Michael told Cyrus. “We can't tell you how grateful we are for all you've done for us.”

Cyrus waved dismissively. “Think nothing of it. Call it a wedding present. Besides everyone in town loves Rosie's cooking. What's giving up a couple of hotel rooms? At least you each have a place to stay while you finish your cabins.”

“And we still get to work for the hotel!” Rosie chimed in.

“By saving our money, we can help our husbands get what we need for our homes,” Georgie added.

“It works out perfectly, Mr. Van Cleet.” Hunny kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“You’re all a lovely addition to the town,” Polly Van Cleet said. “Isn’t that right, Ada?”

Ada Brody, her hand on her stomach, halfheartedly smiled and nodded.

Mrs. Dunnigan recognized the signs. “Privy’s out back.” She took Ada by the arm and led her toward the church office, which had a door leading outside to the back of the building.

Lorcan stood proudly, a happy smile on his face. “The poor lass – she wasn’t this sick when she carried Aileen. It shouldn’t last this long, should it?”

Those nearby laughed, Harrison most of all. He slapped Lorcan on the back. “Each child is different. Better you than me, my friend. Poor Sadie ... what a time of it she had with Honoria. If we were to have another child I think she’d kill me.”

Honoria, standing next to him, swallowed hard. “I think I’ll just ...” She waved vaguely toward the church office before taking off at a dead run.

Lorcan laughed and put a hand on the nearest shoulder, Wilfred’s. “Take me to my wife, please.”

“Sure thing, Lorcan!” They left by the front door.

Grandma Waller eyed Harrison smugly for a moment. “You were saying, Harrison?”

Harrison stood stock still, his eyes darting between the office door and Grandma. “Yes ... well, I shan’t say any more.” He took one last look at Grandma before striding toward the church office.

The newly married couples laughed as they made their way down the aisle amidst cheers and good wishes. They knew as well as everyone else in town that Honoria and Ada were both with child. Harrison seemed to have just figured it out.

Outside, the wedding wagon was beautifully festooned with flowers and ribbons. Willie the stagecoach operator sat on the wagon seat and gave them a toothless grin. “Ya ready for yer weddin’ supper? I sure am – I’m starved!”

Michael, Darcy and Zachary helped their brides into the back of the wagon, then climbed up and settled next to them. The day was warm and bright and they couldn’t be happier. Yes, Clear Creek had its moments and its strange residents, but the six of them concluded that they wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. Willie gave the horses a slap of leather and the wagon lurched forward. The townspeople gathered behind to follow it to the hotel for the wedding supper, a much-anticipated event by the entire town.

The huge party was halfway there when Harrison came running from the church, a horrified look on his face. “Sadie!” he screeched.

Sadie, walking with Colin and Belle by the wagon, shook her head. “Oh dear...”

“Really? He just figured it out?” Colin remarked.

“Today of all days,” Belle added dourly.

Michael looked at Major, strolling next to his mother-in-law, and smiled. “Would you like to ride in the wagon?”

“Yes,” said Zachary. “It might be safer.”

Major shook his head, ignoring them and put an arm around his wife. “I don’t think your father realizes you’re no longer near the privy.”

“No, but Ada and Lorcan were still there when I left. They must have told him.”

Harrison caught up to them, half out of breath, and pointed at Major. “You scoundrel!”

Major glanced at his brothers, who were trying and failing to hold in their laughter. He rolled his eyes and looked at his father-in-law. “Yes, sir?”

But Sadie spoke before he could. “Harrison, I swear, if you make a scene today, you’ll be sleeping in the barn for the next

year.”

Harrison gaped at Sadie, Honoria, then Major before throwing his arms in the air. “Oh, bloody ... very well! But that doesn’t mean I won’t keep a watchful eye out!”

Major glanced at his brothers and his three new sisters-in-law riding in the wagon. They took one look at him and their laughter redoubled. All Major could do was grit his teeth and smile.

ALSO BY KIT MORGAN

If you enjoyed Dear Mr. Comforts please Check out the Prairie Bride Series here:  
<http://www.authorkitmorgan.com/prairie-brides/> You'll be glad you did!

All of Kit Morgan's books can be found at her website [www.authorkitmorgan.com](http://www.authorkitmorgan.com).  
Be sure to sign up for Kit's newsletter to learn more about upcoming books and  
special surprises!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kit Morgan, aka Geralyn Beauchamp, lives in a log cabin in the woods in the wonderful state of Oregon. She grew up riding horses, playing cowboys and Indians and has always had a love of Westerns! She and her father watched many Western movies and television shows together, and enjoyed the quirky characters of *Green Acres*. Kit's books have been described as "*Green Acres* meets *Gunsmoke*," and have brought joy and entertainment to thousands of readers. Many of her books are now in audio format, performed by a talented voice actor who brings Kit's characters to life, and can be found on Amazon, Audible.com and iTunes.

[authorkitmorgan.com](http://authorkitmorgan.com)

