



*Wherever
the road
will lead*

THE BELLE FOURCHE CHRONICLES



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KARI TRUMBO

Wherever the Road Will Lead

The Belle Fourche Chronicles

Introduction

Kari Trumbo



Copyright © 2023 by Kari Trumbo

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Contents

[From the Back Cover](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[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](#)

[To a Brighter Tomorrow](#)

[Prologue](#)

[About the Author](#)

From the Back Cover

When she accidentally takes sides in a family feud that consumes a whole town, the consequences could cost Tamar her life.

A failed mail order bride, her empty purse leaves her out of choices. She's forced to move to the Johlman ranch as a piano teacher to the owner's two daughters. Despite her wealthy upbringing, the rural ranch with its two servants feels much more welcoming than her own home. Leo, the rancher's son, makes her her heart dance faster than a waltz.

Leo can't believe the answer to his prayers just arrived on the train.

He needs to prove to his pa that he's serious about ranching, which means being serious about life. A wife would prove to the world he's ready to be a man. Trouble is, Pa just decided he wasn't worth waiting on and disinherited him.

Now, Tamar feels a connection to Leo she's never had before, but his father would never allow the union. Leo's love for Tamar is growing but he's got nothing left to offer her, except his heart.

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to one of my favorite worlds! How can I say *back* when this is book one? Well, if you're new to me, this series was created because so many of my readers begged me to return to Belle Fourche. **The Belle Fourche Chronicles** is a companion series to the [Brothers of Belle Fourche Series](#). You can read one without the other, but both are fuller and richer when read together. You will find that this series picks up during book 2, *What the Heart Holds*.

This book is also a bridge book to another of my series, [Return to Cutter's Creek](#). Tamar, the heroine of this story, really got her first book in *A Match for the Rancher*. She's a feisty socialite who knows exactly what's expected of her in her world, but when she enters cattle country...she is completely out of her element.

If you're joining this series as a lover of my Belle Fourche series, watch for cameos from your favorite characters. The Olesons live just up the road a spell. Now, where to begin? Ah, yes, it all started when Tamar booked passage on the train from Cutter's Creek, Montana where she'd arrived a month prior to be a mail order bride.

So, why is she now in Belle Fourche? Turn the page to find out.

Kari

Chapter 1

Dust, dust, and more dust clung to the buildings, windows, and Tamar's lungs as she slowly trudged up the street. She waved the cloud from in front of her face as a wagon piled high with hay and other things she couldn't name—but could certainly smell—drove past. The road right through the city was wide and the filthy cloud prevented her from reading the signs on nearby storefronts over on the opposite side.

“Isadora, how I wish I could...” she could do little more than mumble the words into her kerchief. Isadora might have told her to go to Belle Fourche to make her pay for treating her so poorly, but Tamar had purchased the ticket of her own accord.

Out of train track, out of money, and out of time before winter, Tamar would have to make her new home as pleasant as possible. After all her travels, could she finally put down roots here? With no one expecting her, nor waiting for her, she'd reached the end of her options. The boards beneath her feet rumbled with tremors as the cloud of dust heaved then multiplied. A thundering mass of cattle turned down the street toward her driven by a few nondescript cowboys.

She shrieked, grabbing her hems and valise as she scuttled as far away from the cattle as she could. Huddling near a store

window, she held her breath and covered her face, risking a quick glance through gloved fingers.

Brown cattle bobbed their heads as they walked down the street, neither running nor ambling, headed toward the railroad—or at least to that end of town. Men in wide-brimmed hats and what looked like leather trousers rode horses alongside the sea of cattle, whooping and driving them along.

While she'd gotten used to seeing the towering horses that pulled the stage, theirs were shorter, perhaps quicker, and more agile as they seemed to both keep in pace with and avoid the cattle. She chanced a closer look and inched to the rail of the boardwalk, emboldened by others who were doing the same.

Children had appeared from inside shops to point, stare, and exclaim over the herd, leading Tamar to reason that the drive couldn't be an everyday occurrence if so many people turned out to watch. An older man sauntered up next to her along the rail and leaned over the edge, a smile split the bottom of his face.

“Mighty fine day and even finer now.” He didn't even blink at the blinding dust. “That beef will bring in top dollar, it surely will. It'll also twist the Johlman family pert-near into a knot.” The man laughed heartily and slapped his thigh.

“Why should anyone care?” She certainly didn't. The faster the cattle got out of the street, the faster she could find the boarding house and inquire about positions to work in town.

“You're not from around here, are you?” He squinted and inspected her face. “No, siree. Now that I look on ya, you're certainly not. Everyone knows about the Johlman-Douglas feud. Been going on since people showed up in this area.”

Another man seemed to appear out of the dust at her side and her heart skipped a beat as more people pushed in closer to her. Would they argue right there with her caught in the middle?

“What do you know, you old coot? The Johlman’s have been here longer, and their sheep deserve the pasture land *they* bought.”

The first man stood toe-to-toe with the second, leaning in for good measure. “The Douglas family lived here two months longer, so says Ted at Acres Surveying. That means the land is theirs. Just because you support the Johlmans doesn’t make them right.”

Tamar backed away, tugging her wool coat tighter around her against the nip in the air. She doubted the men noticed her absence. Gracious, this was worse than Cutter’s Creek. At least there hadn’t been cattle running loose through town and men fighting in front of a lady, though there had been Colt...

She shivered. Colt had been wrong for her in the worst way. She could put up with a few raised voices if she didn’t have to be married to a farmer.

The cattle seemed to keep coming, an endless long line. Part of her wanted to dislike the Douglas family just for disrupting everyone in town—not to mention announcing their wealth in such a way. Her own father would never have put on such a display.

A subtle voice in her head that she was certain sounded like her mother reminded her Father’s opulence was often very much on display, and she was being contrary for thinking such things.

Thinking contrary had gotten her into her current predicament and taking the same path wouldn't get her out. She'd turned up her nose at every beau her father had invited to their grand parties in New York. She'd turned up her nose at the men her aunt had attempted to pawn her off onto. She'd even turned her nose up at the husband who'd ordered her as a mail order bride.

Now, she had to plug her nose as she walked down the street. If she turned it up, she might choke from the smell. As if her eyes had opened for the first time through the dust, she noticed a sign for a boarding house down a side street and she turned, feeling suddenly bone weary. Her trunk back at the train station could be dealt with when she had lodging and food.

The outside of the two-story structure was painted a smart whitewash, like they'd just freshened it up. The sign above the door was black and read, *The Belle Fourche Boarding House*. Black Victorian shutters adorned the windows and a pleasant porch wrapped around half of the front with a generous swing just waiting for her if the weather warmed a little.

"Cozy," she told herself. The building had to have been someone's house turned into a rented dwelling. Since the town was fairly small, rents might not be as expensive as she'd planned.

Finding work would be her first order of business in the morning. As she slowly climbed the stairs, an old dog with ribs visible down his rust-colored side raised his head and stared at her. Dark eyes watched her every movement.

"I've got nothing for you. Don't you give me any trouble."

The dog cocked his head, then laid it back down over his boney arms. The poor thing looked starved. She felt the urge

to pat its head but if it carried vermin, she might not be able to rid herself of them. Still...

She opened her small valise and pulled out some wax paper wrapped salted pork she'd purchased at the stop right before Belle Fourche. Her tastes had yet to adapt to the foods common among these people, but she'd forced herself to eat some of what was available. The dog looked worse off than she did.

"Here." She tossed the pork at the dog and he leapt a few inches to catch the morsel, shaking the whole stoop in his enthusiasm.

"Well, you just gained yourself a friend."

Tamar whipped around to see a smartly dressed man standing a few feet behind her at the base of the stairs. He had warm eyes with sun crinkles at the edges and a pleasant smile that begged her attention to stay focused right there. A wool frock coat stretched nicely over broad, but not overly so, shoulders.

"I'm sorry... Is he yours? You really should feed him more." Gracious, was she going to do it again? Couldn't she ever stop herself from speaking when she should keep her mouth firmly shut? She'd offend the whole West if she didn't.

The man laughed, revealing a crescent dimple down one cheek. "Well, he's not mine but he and I have come to an agreement. Every time I have to stay here, he lays by my feet at supper. Then, when I'm done, I casually drop him a few things and no one is the wiser but him."

The dog heaved to his feet and headed for the stranger. Now she could see the dog desperately needed a swim in a

river or something to clean him. He was almost as dirty as the cattle in the street.

“I see. And that’s the way these things are done?” Her father had never let animals near the house. They hadn’t even owned horses since they’d lived in New York and could hire drivers.

The man’s eyes met hers and their soft blue depths welcomed more conversation. She found that if standing on the porch in the chilly air didn’t freeze her, she would gladly spend more time talking to this particular gentleman.

“It is with me. Can I get the door for you?”

She flinched and turned back to her purpose. Of course he wanted to get inside and rest, probably as much or more than she did and she’d kept him outside talking about a dog. “I think I’ll manage. Thank you.”

To prove her vast ability, she tugged the door open and strode inside. There was a strange open area just as she came in with a wall splitting two areas right before her, forcing her to choose which way to go. She could select the right, with a lovely sitting room including every shade of red on the walls, couches, drapes, pillows, and quilts. Or she could go to the left where a small writing desk stood alone with a forlorn spindle-backed chair in the corner and dust on the baseboards. Forgotten plants wilted in the windowsill and a cat snoozed on the seat of a high ladderback chair.

A woman in a threadbare brown apron behind the desk smiled at her revealing a large gap between her two front teeth. “Don’t mind Miss Friss. She’ll move if you shoo her off.”

In the next instant, the handsome man behind her scooped up the cat and held it to his chest. The animal sprang to life

with a hiss as it pawed for his nose. He laughed, moving at the last instant to avoid Miss Friss's claws. The feline calmed the moment he touched her chin and began slowly scratching.

“Take your time. I've got the cat.” He chuckled, sending strange shivers down her arms.

“Drat you, Leo. I was about to have some fun.” The woman laughed.

Tamar glanced from the proprietress to Leo and back again. Would everyone she met try to take advantage of her or make her look silly?

“I was going to ask after a room, but perhaps I'm in the wrong place.” She gathered her skirt to leave so she wouldn't trip over it and embarrass herself more.

“No sense getting your nose caught on the lintel. I've got a room for you.” She held up a key and jangled it. “You can even have a corner all to yourself if you've got the money.”

She'd shared a room with Isadora but paid the entirety herself all the way to Cutter's Creek. Now she wished she had some of that money back. “And how much is the room, alone?”

“The room is \$2.90 a month with board. If you share, it's \$1.90.”

A slight scent of leather hit her just before Leo's deep voice tickled her right ear, his warm breath fanning over her cheek. “Ask about the daily rate. You might not need to stay an entire month and there's no refund.” Just as quickly as he'd leaned forward, he retreated.

“And the daily rate?” She felt like a fool and a puppet. Couldn't he have simply asked?

The woman hardened her jaw. “If you go by the day, it’s \$.08 each and you keep your yap shut, Leo.”

Some very quick figuring told her that \$.08 a day was more than the stay if she paid in advance, but Leo was also right, she might not need to stay that long. “I’ll go day by day, if you please.”

The woman handed her a pencil. “Sign right here in my book and I’ll show you to your room. Leo, you might as well follow, you know right where I always put you. What’s your business in town?”

He shrugged then set the cat back on the chair, giving her one last stroke down the back which elicited a loud purr from the beast. “I have to talk to the bank about grease wool and bellies. The weather was perfect this year and we might be able to get more for them.”

Tamar froze where she stood. Had he said, wool? Was Leo from one of the families those two men were fighting about? Which was the cattle family? The Johlman’s or the Douglasses?

“I was wondering if you were in town just to watch the Douglasses make a show of things or if you were in town on real business.” The woman cackled as she grabbed a second key.

“It doesn’t pay to feed into the Douglas way. We just do our job and raise our sheep. If that means fighting for what’s ours, then so be it.”

Tamar lowered to pick up her valise and her fingers came up empty. Frantically she felt around, then finally looked where it ought to have been and found the floor clear.

“I’ve got it for you.” Leo held out his hand to help her stand back up. Goodness, there were those blue eyes again.

While he was nothing like what she was hoping to find in a man, he was certainly a cut above what she'd met so far.

"Thank you." She dared not let her hand linger in his. If they had been in New York, talk would spread almost immediately. Stolen touches were strictly forbidden, but she wasn't in New York anymore.

Leo followed Tamar and the proprietress to the second floor. "Mrs. Keen, perhaps show..." Leo paused, apparently realizing no one had asked her name yet.

"Miss Godan," she filled in his question.

"Yes, perhaps you should show Miss Godan to her room first, so she doesn't worry."

"Worry?" Tamar stopped right where she stood in the hall. Staying in a boarding house was already testing her ability to keep her mouth shut. What could possibly go wrong now?

"I'm assuming you're used to hotels and finer establishments where they keep women traveling alone in one area of the house and the men in another." Leo's voice held an amused quality. Was he laughing at her?

"I..." She'd traveled with Isadora for so long she hadn't noticed what rooms they'd put her in. She wasn't alone then, so why be concerned? On the way from Cutter's Creek, she'd been on the train and had purchased a ticket with use of a sleeping car. So, again, nothing to worry about.

"Well, we don't have that here. I don't have enough rooms. I don't even keep men and women separate in the same room if I have a side of a bed that needs a person and a person has the money to pay for a spot." Mrs. Keen thrust the key in the lock and the door squeaked open.

Leo handed her the bag and she fumbled her way to the door, ignoring his offer until she was through the threshold. At least she'd paid for a whole room, and not merely one side of the bed. With labored breaths bordering on tears, she relieved him of her carpetbag and headed to close the door.

“Welcome to Belle Fourche, Miss Godan. I hope you enjoy your stay,” Leo called as she turned to pull the key from the lock.

She looked up and took a deep breath. Unable to answer him, she closed the door. How could she enjoy her stay when she was trapped?

Chapter 2

Leo washed his hands and splashed tepid water on his face, sullyng the water as it dripped off his chin. He hadn't realized the dust-up from the cattle had clung to him so much. Miss Godan probably thought he was a filthy farmer. Who was he kidding? According to half the town, he was. Worse, a filthy *sheep* farmer.

Cattle was king in Belle Fourche. Cattle for the railroad. Cattle to send east and farther west. Cattle to sell so the bank stayed full of money. Not sheep. His family had battled, both legally and perhaps illegally, with the Douglasses. The Douglasses had taken land, claiming it for their own. They'd fouled the water by letting their cattle wade in it. They'd stolen fleeces and even hobbled some of their sheep, making it impossible for them to return to the safety of the barn.

All because cattle was king.

Being in town seemed a worthless pursuit, but Pa had asked him to do the job and Ma had wanted him to have a break. Home wasn't far away if he changed his mind, Johlman ranch sat only about an hour's ride outside of town. Faster if he wanted to push his horse, which he never did.

His younger brother Gideon would return home. He was always doing just the right thing. Being the oldest came with responsibility and he wanted to take some of that on his own

shoulders, giving his father a rest. Yet he also craved light, meaningless conversations like he'd just had. Not all the time, but once in a while. The kind that put his father's teeth on edge.

Some people took the Johlman side. Though Leo agreed with them, he couldn't find any rhyme or reason why some did and some didn't. He was never quite sure whom he could trust. Even Mrs. Keen there at the boarding house would be friendly to him when he stayed, but if she saw him on the street would ignore him.

He straightened his vest in the mirror and wished he'd have listened to his ma and put on a tie. Miss Godan would've been impressed by a tie. He stared at his reflection as his face fell into the somber one his father expected. Miss Godan was a fine lady. Her clipped words and expensive, perfectly tailored dress told him everything he needed to know without her even having to tell him to go away.

Laughing with him and letting her tease him would be fine, but she wouldn't be interested in anything more than that. And why would he want to introduce her to his life? Even becoming his friend would force her to lose half the town. Then again, choosing a Douglas for a friend would do just the same.

The Douglas boys were close in age to Leo, Armstrong just two years younger and Kent a year older, but they'd been taught to be enemies of the Johlman's from the cradle. Any chance at friendship they'd had was destroyed by the constant expectation of fighting. When his sister Hannah had entered school, wondering if she would be treated well...it was the Douglas brothers who made sure she went home crying the first day.

And he'd made sure they went home crying the next.

That trip to the woodshed had been worth the trouble. Though, he'd asked his father a question that day that he'd been unable to answer. How could he tan Leo's hide for doing what he'd seen his own pa do? He still didn't know the answer.

Leo stretched his hands out in front of himself and laced his fingers then turned them, quickly cracking all his knuckles to relieve the tension in his hands. In a few minutes, he'd have to meet with the banker. Pa had said it was time for Leo to take over little bits of the business end of things. This was one matter he could take care of to prove himself. He knew a few people at the bank, but doubted any of them could help him. He'd have to speak to his father's old friend, Harvey Langerford, the owner.

He left his room and paused by Miss Godan's door, wondering if she was still there or if she'd gone down to supper. He might try to catch her there so neither of them had to eat alone. Then again, eating with him would get around town quickly. Did he dare do that to her?

He headed down the stairs and to the front door. As he was about to leave, deep green fabric caught his eye. The same deep green of the walking suit Miss Godan wore. He paused long enough to take in her slender neck, bent over the keys of the piano, her back straight, and her face relaxed as she lifted her hands, hovering for a moment above the keys.

In the next moment, a flourish of notes sounded as her hands seemed to fly making so many sounds all at once, but all of them working together to make the most complex music he'd ever heard. He felt his jaw go slack as he wandered into

the sitting room and sat on one of the red velveteen sofas, unable to leave.

She played until there were about ten boarders all sitting or standing around her. Some swayed to the gentle rhythm as she played. Everyone clapped when she finished, and she turned a pink hue that complimented the green of her dress. An idea took root and wouldn't let go. His sisters needed a piano tutor. Ma had said so. If he invited Miss Godan to teach, he could see her every day.

He stood, trying to shake the idea. How could he take away her chance to meet others in town? Everyone deserved an opportunity to make up their own mind about the feud, no matter that his family was in the right. Some folks just didn't see things properly. She might be one of them.

Even as he had the thought, he wanted to push it away. She seemed smarter than that. But she hadn't been there when the mess all began. She wouldn't know that his family held the deed to the land. Nor would Pa ever show it to her. He'd never even shown it to Leo, as he was too afraid the precious paper would be lost or damaged.

So everything remained a secret. His whole life seemed to be a series of joys related to work, always punctuated with a disaster. There was always something new, always some fresh problem, always some way he was expected to retaliate. And nothing came above protecting what was theirs.

Miss Godan turned and her gaze stalled on him. The moment her lips quirked upward, his heart responded in kind. He quickly scanned the room and didn't recognize anyone there. She stood and threaded her hands together in front of her.

“I didn't mean to disturb all of you.”

The others nodded as if they suddenly recalled they had somewhere to be, leaving Leo alone with her again. Her head tilted slightly, waiting for him to speak.

When he said nothing, she smiled briefly at him. “Was it something I said? It always seems to be something I say, though I nary know what.”

He laughed then tempered it to a chuckle. She would think he was laughing at her expense, and he wasn’t. He was merely overthinking every word before he allowed them out of his mouth. “I think you entranced people and they were a little shocked they’d been standing here this whole time.”

“Then I do apologize.”

“No need.” He wished he could think of something else to say. When there had been the dog and the cat to talk about, he’d been quick to make her laugh or say something. Now he was so unsure and fresh out of animals to make her laugh.

“I’m keeping you from work.” She took a step back, releasing him from any obligation he might feel to stay talking with her, though she could’ve backtracked right out of the room and he would’ve still wanted to stay.

“I’ve got all afternoon. Do you need something?” He held in a flinch. What could he have that she would ever need? A woman who dressed as she did and played piano like that? He needed to walk away before she laughed at him.

“I didn’t get to see the town. Too much dust.” She waved away invisible specks in front of her face. “I wouldn’t mind if someone would like to show me around and tell me what the town has to offer. I’ll be looking for work soon.”

“Work?” Like teaching piano... His mind wouldn’t let the idea go and now his needs would fit within her own. But going

out to Johlman Ranch would be even worse than being seen with him.

“Yes, I find myself in a predicament, stuck here in Belle Fourche with no way to pay for lodging, beyond what I have in my bag. Do you know of anyone who’s looking for help?”

Izzy Oleson had just started a bakery...but he couldn’t imagine Miss Godan would enjoy anything having to do with flour. The new teacher, Miss Stephenia Forde, might like someone to help her. Then again, rumors surrounding the teacher were rampant. She apparently kept walking out to the Oleson ranch alone to go calling on Arnold Oleson.

“I’m heading to the bank. You could check there.” He prayed his countenance didn’t give away any lingering motives in his heart.

“The bank?” She smiled slightly. “Money is certainly one thing I am well-versed in, no matter where I happen to be.”

While his family was not the wealthiest in town, they were doing well. Miss Godan had proven his theory correct—she was a woman of means which meant she would have little interest in him or his ranch.

He tugged on his frock coat then offered his arm. At least Ma had drilled manners into him deeper than a well. He might be in the middle of a land battle, but he could still be respectful to his elders, women, and those he esteemed.

Miss Godan looped her arm though his and a soft scent of flowers slipped past his nose. She stood near him, but not too close, and her footfalls were so light he couldn’t even hear the click of her boot heels.

“Do you need a hat?” Any number of women went without them and she hadn’t worn one earlier, but he wanted to sound

like he both knew she might need one and that he cared.

Her smile faltered only slightly. “Most of mine were misplaced or crushed in all my traveling. I only wear the few I have when it suits the occasion. Once I’ve found employ, I’ll replace them.”

He nodded, hating that he’d accidentally pointed out something she was lacking. He led the way down the quiet side street trying to think of anything he could possibly say to warn her about what she might face by merely strolling down the street on his arm.

“I heard the strangest thing earlier.” She glanced down at her feet as they strode along.

He waited, wondering what she might have heard and hoping it wasn’t about his family.

“Two men were arguing over the Johlman-Douglas feud. I heard them mention a sheep farm... Do you know them?”

He missed his footing momentarily then kept on walking. “I do. I’m Leo Johlman, oldest son and—if we don’t lose any more to those Douglasses—most likely to take over the family farm. And it’s a ranch, really, but the cattlemen don’t like it when we call it that.”

Miss Godan made a sputtering sound. “I daresay they have nothing to say about what you call your property. If that’s the word that defines what you do, then you should use it.”

He liked the way she thought, but he was finding there was very little about her he didn’t like. Even the way she said what was directly on her mind was exciting and different. But would his parents think so?

The bank lay just ahead, and he would be busy talking to Mr. Langerford for at least an hour. “Would you like me to

walk with you up and down the street before I go in? I wouldn't mind." On the contrary, completing the task his father had given him as a test seemed much harder now when faced with it.

Her steps increased in pace, and he matched her. "Oh, I would like to see everything. If you have time? Are there any large houses here in town?"

Well, his own was very large, but only because it housed his whole family. The Douglas home was huge, to tell the world how important they were. The Oleson ranch house was the biggest of the three, but they had a large family now.

"Here in town? Mr. Langerford the banker has a sizeable house. Which is interesting because he doesn't even have a wife to help him fill it. He lives there all alone."

"Does he have parties?" She gripped his arm with her other hand, encircling him with her warmth.

"I don't think so and if he does, I've certainly never been invited. There are a few other people in town whose homes are bigger than what they need, for certain. I don't think a single one will give you a reminder of home though. Wherever that is."

Her mouth fell open and her eyes widened, turning a bright, clear blue. "How did you know?"

Even though he craved easing the burden from his father's shoulders, he also saw the comfort in doing what he knew. He could only guess Miss Godan was thousands of miles from what was comforting. "It only makes sense to look for what you're used to seeing."

All of a sudden, the bank job seemed like the worst place in the world for her. If she said the wrong thing to someone,

she would be fired. He didn't want her to go through that turmoil. On the other hand, teaching piano to his sisters would help her to learn how people lived out on a ranch where she would have to try pretty hard to offend anyone.

"If you're not wanting to try at the bank, I may have another idea." He walked her past Izzy's bakery and Miss Godan stopped to eye the case through the window.

"Another idea? Better than the bank? Goodness, finding you was the best thing that could've happened to me."

His chest constricted with the praise, leaving warmth everywhere it touched.

"Hey...something smells like...sheep," Ephraim Nickson called from down the street. "I can smell you from here."

The man was older than Leo but still acted like a boy young enough for short pants. Miss Godan stiffened next to him. She inhaled deeply, her mouth falling slightly open. Was she testing Ephraim's words?

"Got nothing to say for yourself? Cat got your tongue?" Ephraim laughed.

Pa had always said, where the town was concerned, turn the other cheek. Nothing his family did was going to change anyone's mind for the better, but it might confirm the worst. He locked his jaw closed and tried to usher Miss Godan around him faster.

"Who's that with you, sheep scrubber? Must be your cousin because no one would want to step around town with Lazy Leo." Ephraim laughed at his own joke.

Leo's throat ached with all the stopped-up words he wanted to say and he was fairly sure the inside of his mouth

was cut from biting his own tongue. His pa's words tapped on his shoulder, *Don't say anything. Keep walking.*

Miss Godan froze and her arm went stiff then she tugged it free of his grasp as they passed Ephraim. The man sneered at her and she wound up and slapped Ephraim so hard it left an immediate red print on his cheek.

“How dare you speak to another that way? You are vile. Do you think I don't understand your foul language or what you insinuate? If I had to choose between Mr. Johlman's company for the remainder of my time here, or yours for even a minute, I would choose him.”

Ephraim's eyes widened and his touched his jaw. He moved it back and forth to test the pain then regained himself. “Is that so? Well, you do that. You made your choice, sheep lover.” Ephraim spun and stomped away.

Leo's stomach sank as he realized how many people had witnessed the scene. Poor Miss Godan couldn't possibly realize the severity of her words, but she'd just chosen a side. Worse for her, she'd unknowingly chosen it for life.

Chapter 3

The urge to bite her own tongue was strong, but Tamar refused to give in. She hadn't heard such rubbish since childhood. To think that an adult would stoop to such foolishness made her want to turn around and stomp back to the ill-cultured ruffian so she could finish saying what she'd begun.

Even as the waves of anger crashed over her, Tamar recalled the look of utter horror on Mr. Johlman's face when she'd slapped the man. Violence had never been her first choice, but he'd left her few others.

Leo had merely stood there, taking what the ill-mannered lout had to say. If Mr. Johlman wasn't going to defend himself and her, she could only do the job on her own. Her father had told her to resort to slapping a man only when warranted, because they would be ready for the assault the next time. If someone was going to insinuate that she would associate with a cousin in such a way, *that* slight deserved intervention.

She measured her steps to match his, finding that she'd sped up right along with her thoughts. "What does he mean, *I've chosen?*" Surely defending her own name wouldn't turn her into a target for more arguments.

Mr. Johlman's shoulders squared, and he set his jaw—a nice, firm jaw, if she were taking the time to notice—before he

slowly opened his mouth to speak. “He means, if you defend me you’re on my side. There’s no going back now. Half the town won’t talk to you civilly, I’m afraid. Word will get around quickly, even though you’re new.”

Heavens, the destruction was like back home. If she invited someone to one of her father’s parties who wasn’t quite of the same class as her father, the effect would be the same. One would think she’d broken a law.

“So, just like that, my fate is determined. All because one fool crossed our path?” That seemed terribly unfair, not just for her but for everyone involved.

“I’m afraid so. I should’ve warned you.”

This didn’t bode well for finding employment. She wouldn’t know who was on the Johlman side or not. And if she found somewhere to work and they later determined she wasn’t on the right side, they could dismiss her without warning. No income meant no place to live or money for food.

“You mentioned another idea for someone looking to hire?”

He led her up the street, past the lovely bakery, a doctor’s office and all the way down to the neat little school before he continued speaking.

“It may not be much and it’s sure to get you deeper into this mess... Might not be a good match.”

Why was everything from his mouth like prying a walnut from its shell? “Would you tell me, or must I guess?”

He chuckled slightly and kept his gaze firmly on his feet. “My sisters are in need of a piano tutor. Ma says they should’ve started years before now, but the only woman in town who knows piano well enough doesn’t want to get in the

middle of a feud. The man we hired before took advantage.” He shrugged and his gaze wandered off away from her. “The woman in town won’t consider Pa’s bid, no matter how much he offers to pay her.”

She recalled the foul name the ruffian had called Mr. Johlman, and her by extension. Not wanting to get in the middle was commendable, but she didn’t have that option any longer. “And what would your father offer to pay?”

The room and board at the boarding house would be expensive and she’d need to rent a horse and buggy daily, or at least as often as she needed to go out and give lessons. Finally, all those countless hours Father had insisted she spend at the upright would come to use...

“He would probably require that you stay at the ranch as he would for any other governess or tutor. If each of my sisters need daily lessons, you’d be better off to stay than to try to drive out. Living at the ranch would make giving lessons easier.”

A music tutor wasn’t a governess but staying would solve a few of her problems. Not to mention, she wouldn’t have to face any angry stares for choosing a side. Though, if the other side all acted like that man, she wanted nothing to do with them.

“I’d be willing to talk to your father and mother. I’m not certain what I would do once I was there if they decided I don’t fit what they’re looking for.” After Cutter’s Creek, she’d realized there were plenty of things in life she thought she knew but didn’t. She’d never once in her life considered she might not be suited to do something until she’d come west. That one decision had taught her much about what she did not know.

“Then you’ll stay until Pa comes back to town and he’ll bring you back here. Though I don’t see any reason he would. Ma is desperate. If he tried to turn you away, she’d probably take a set of sheers to him.” He laughed.

Tamar wasn’t sure if that was a threat, nor what he meant exactly, but she assumed the outcome would be bad. “Then when you’re finished at the bank, I’ll gather my things. Will you go back out to your ranch tomorrow or do you have more business in town?”

The fewer days she had to pay for the room, the more money would stay in her pocket. If she was in Belle Fourche to stay, she had to consider writing to her father and letting him know where he could find her, if he even cared. She wasn’t in Cutter’s Creek as she assumed he’d been told. Her aunt had never quite said just how much her father knew of the mail-order bride situation.

“Yes, tomorrow morning. Sunup. That’s when I usually leave so I avoid as many people as possible.”

She’d never bothered avoiding people. If they didn’t want to be polite, that was not a black mark on her character. “That is rather early.” She’d never actually witnessed the sun rise in all her days that she could recall.

“I also have to be back home to help with chores. We have workers, but Pa says many hands make light work, especially if they aren’t the ones you have to pay.”

Now this, she understood. Though her father would say that a man was worth his pay, and he should do the job to save the man who could afford to avoid the task. “I see. Then I shall be out of bed and waiting in the front sitting room when you’re ready to go.”

He smiled, finally standing straight once again. "I'm glad."

Another person's delight had never interested her. She'd only ever bothered with what mattered to her or her family. However, Mr. Johlman's pleasure at her response was like a warm breath over her soul, kindling a small spark.

"Well, here we are." Mr. Johlman stopped in front of the large brick-front bank.

There was a strange step up to the front door that she'd never seen anywhere else. When they'd left the boarding house, she'd planned to go inside with him, but now she had nowhere else to be during his appointment.

She bit her lip, then slowly released it. "Am I allowed to go to the mercantile?"

One side of his mouth hitched up and his eyes softened. "Yes. Places like the mercantile, the doctor, the bank...they don't take sides because it would cost them too much. But I wouldn't put it past the Douglasses to hire competition for all of them and force each one to make a choice." His hand gripped the doorknob tightly until his knuckles turned white.

"Mr. Johlman, don't borrow trouble. We've had enough for one day. I'll wait for you at the mercantile and if you take longer than I need, I'll walk back to the boarding house." Even after two strange encounters in the street, the little town still felt safe enough to walk alone.

He nodded his agreement, but hesitated in the doorway. "I'm sorry for inviting you along for the walk. I should've known better."

She'd never cared for dancing around the truth, far preferring to just say a matter as it should be said, rather than adding a sugar coating. However, he was different from her

and in a most pleasant way. Where she'd been quick to dissuade Colt from any attachment, Mr. Johlman piqued her mind, and perhaps her interest.

“I meant what I said. I would rather spend the entirety of my time in Belle Fourche with you than one solitary minute with that man we encountered, or any other of his ilk.”

WHEN HAD LEO EVER NOTICED A WOMAN'S EYES? HE glanced over his shoulder and watched Miss Godan's sure steps as she made her way down the boardwalk. Shoulders squared. Back straight. Everyone noted her. Yet she'd chosen him. And her eyes had been something to behold. He couldn't stop himself from noticing them now.

He shook the feeling from his head and took in his surroundings. She was new in town and knew no one else. The only other people she'd come in contact with had been rude. He closed the door behind him, finally shutting out the town, and entered the bank. The shiny linoleum floors looked slippery but, where he placed his boots, he found them not to be.

Of all the people they could've run into, why did it have to be Ephraim Nickson? He was the worst of the town. Most people just avoided him, no matter which side of the Douglas-Johlman divide they sat on.

“Leo!” The banker, Harvey Langerford, waved him into his office. “I've been expecting you. Come on inside.”

He hadn't anticipated such a warm welcome from the banker. As he entered the man's office, the utterly pristine condition of his desk took Leo aback. Usually, the man left scads of papers and work in stacks all over.

“Have you cleared your desk for me?” Leo held back a sigh. If he wanted to be seen as an adult, he couldn’t josh people anymore. He had to make conversation like his father would, with all seriousness.

The large banker laughed as he lowered himself into his chair. “I didn’t, but I thank you for noticing. My niece is coming to stay with me for a year to try to sort out some things. I want to make sure I don’t have anything that falls behind the first week she’s here. I think she would be about your age...” The banker seemed to eye him up and down.

“Twenty and two, sir.” He felt the need to remind people he was a full-grown man. His father certainly hadn’t noticed.

“Ah, that would make you a wee bit older than her, but not much. Perhaps...” The banker scrawled something down on a piece of paper, opened a desk drawer with a flourish, and shoved it inside, then closed it loudly. “There. That’s done. Now, what can I do for you? Not that I don’t already know.” His eyes fairly gleamed.

Leo took a breath. Father had to have talked to the banker already, so the work he’d come to town to do, was already done. Why couldn’t Pa ever trust him? He pushed his back into the the wooden ladder back of the chair and clasped his hands in front of him to keep from fidgeting. “I see. My father already spoke with you, then?”

“Of course he did. Bodey and I go way back, all the way to school mates. He told me you’d be stopping in and that you’d want to talk about futures.”

Since the only futures his family would discuss would be wool, the discussion was already finished. “It’s unfortunate that he couldn’t have let me do what he asked me to.” Leo

tried to keep his emotions completely in check, but a subtle twitch in his left eye couldn't be controlled.

“I understand. Though I've never had children of my own, I imagine letting them take over what you've always done is a mite difficult. Now, with Alicia coming to stay with me, I've got to think about parties and pairing her up with someone so she can get on with her life. Her family wants her wed so she'll be taken care of. Perhaps, if you've got a girl in mind, you could hurry things up a bit in the same manner. Nothing makes you into a man faster than taking on a family.” The banker tugged on his jacket front and beamed.

“A family...” He hadn't considered that option. Marrying someone would definitely force his family into finally seeing him how he wanted to be seen. He'd have the responsibility he craved...

And the Lord had seen fit to drop an eligible lady right in his path. Except she was just that—a lady. She might be in Belle Fourche for a while, but that wasn't destined to last. She would grow tired of nights looking up at starry skies instead of party lights twinkling over a dancefloor. She would weary of foods meant to comfort a palate, not excite it.

“I don't have a gal in mind, no. But I'll hang on to your idea for safekeeping.”

The banker gave him a sly look. “If you're still looking for someone after the new year, when I've exhausted my list of men who live here in town—she's never lived outside of city limits, you see—please consider coming in to meet my Alicia. She's a lovely girl. Maybe a little...quiet, but that's not always a bad thing.”

If he'd been offered the very same opportunity just a day before, he'd have considered everything an offer like that

would mean. A quiet girl who would give him good ties to the bank *and* make his family see him as his age would be hard to pass up. Now, he couldn't stop thinking about flashing blue eyes, an emerald-green dress, and a stubborn chin.

"I'm sure you'll have no trouble finding her someone she'd be more suited to. A sheep rancher and a banker's niece... Might not work out so well." In the same breath he realized Armstrong Douglas, oldest son of Louis Douglas, was probably also on his list. Armstrong making a match like that would mean ultimate success and might even be enough to push out the Johlman's. If the Douglas family tied themselves to the bank, the Johlman's would have to leave town. They'd be choked out.

And all because he had his eye on a woman he'd known for a few hours. A woman no less beyond his reach than this Alicia.

"Though, I'm willing to pursue it, if you don't find anyone else more suitable." The words physically hurt to say. Miss Godan would be right there on his ranch, while this Alicia could be a snob or worse.

"Good! As to the futures, you have nothing to worry about. Wool is selling high right now. You can go ahead and purchase the grain and feed you need from the mercantile, it's sure to be covered when the wool is in."

He nodded, realizing his father probably already knew the outcome. "Ma is working on the wool now and we'll have it ready for market soon." But Pa had probably told him that too and he'd still sent Leo into town and had him stay at the boarding house for a day. For nothing. What a waste.

Yet it hadn't been. Not completely. Maybe Pa knew something Leo didn't because he'd trusted the process and he

would come home with more than he came to town to get. He'd come home with a piano tutor and Ma would be pleased as a plum pudding.

If he was lucky, Pa would finally be proud.

Chapter 4

After a particularly restless night, Tamar didn't wish to spend any additional time sitting indoors and ruminating on her problems. Nighttime was when her mind raced and threw every option of failure at her. Mostly because all that had happened thus far in her journey could be counted as such. Her road had been a particularly bumpy one.

She'd agreed to go to Cutter's Creek, on the other side of the country from home. All on the whim of her aunt, who'd wanted to be rid of her. She'd taken counsel from Isadora, who had also wanted to be rid of her. Though, she now saw that Isadora often tried to smooth over Tamar's blunders in dealing with people. The more she took the time to speak to these people, the better she got.

Or did she? She *had* slapped a man yesterday. That incident repeated over again in her head and each time she wasn't certain if she'd done the right thing. Either way, she'd now become a friend to the Johlman family all while only meeting one of them.

Then there was the offer of employment and the strange flip in her belly when she considered staying out on the Johlman property, where she would see Leo Johlman daily. He was a fine specimen of a man, nothing like the men her aunt and father had attempted to match her up with. Those matches

had been to line their pockets, not for her happiness. Leo had wit and humor, things in short supply with many men she'd met.

Now, she had no one to think about except herself which was impossible to do with no option apart from the one Mr. Johlman had presented. And what if his father found her lacking? Obviously some people did or she wouldn't be where she was. She lowered herself into the long, wooden swing hanging outside the boarding house to wait for Leo. After freshening herself, she had nothing to do to keep her time. Her trunk still lay in her room since she'd been unable to lift the weight without help.

Rays of yellow gold shot over the horizon and an orange and pink glow spread in a thin line just above the rolling hills in the distance. Tamar took a deep breath as she noticed the subtle twittering of little birds and the fresh scent of the frost on the grass. How she knew the scent had to be the frost, she wasn't sure. It was as if her mind knew the memory, without remembering it fully.

"Morning," Leo's voice startled her from behind.

She turned in her seat and stopped the swing. "Good morning." He looked somewhat grumpy, though was making a valiant effort to hide it behind those warm eyes and crinkles beside his lips.

He handed her a mug of coffee. "I didn't think I'd find you out here." He glanced off toward the sunrise. "Didn't figure you for a watcher." He sipped his coffee.

She moved over on the swing, giving him room if he'd like to sit. Though he made her wonder where her thoughts went, she still wasn't certain if her confusion was the man himself,

or the fact that she hadn't managed to frighten him off yet. Perhaps it was only a matter of time.

"I've never watched the sun rise before." She wasn't sure what to do with her feet. Should she continue to swing or wait for him? When did all reason simply leave her behind?

Leo sat down but didn't seem in any hurry to move the swing for her. He took a deep breath, then frowned down at his steaming mug. "My pa will want to know a few things about you."

"Oh?" she hid her worry behind a deep breath as the sky brightened right before her eyes.

"Are you qualified? Have you ever taught anyone before?" His voice rumbled softly in his quiet way. Leo hadn't yet announced his presence with a boom, but more like a fog that was no less present, but rolled in quiet and unassuming.

"I've never been a teacher before, but I am fairly young for such things. I've had many years of piano. More than I would ever need to pass on the knowledge. Do you have books and lessons? Is that the issue, that we won't have materials?"

He shook his head and frowned. "No, that's not the issue. One of the other teachers left behind all the books Ma bought. The trouble is the last teacher who came didn't know what they were doing. They taught Hannah and Alice a few scales, then badgered them into learning more, all while he himself couldn't play a note."

Tamar held in a growl. Her own tutor had pushed her harshly until she improved beyond his teaching. Then he convinced her father that she belonged in his school as a star pupil to attract other students. She'd only attended for one year

before her father caught on to her teacher's ploy and pulled her out. That stint had almost ruined music for her.

"I assure you; I can play. This is a job I'm qualified to do. I am even qualified to complete it, unlike your former hire." Her own tutor had begged her to give up society life to become a teacher beside him, though she'd wondered at the time if he'd wanted her to make up for his own lack.

"I heard you play." He tensed his shoulders. She felt the strain coil in her own stomach. "It's only that I want to make certain my mother is pleased."

She did her best to hold in her hurt. He'd only heard her play once—and that was on an ill-tuned piano. "I'm certain, if given the opportunity to try, I will win her over."

The door behind them swung open and Leo fairly flew off the seat away from her like she'd suddenly lit on fire. She was left to sway to and fro until she could gently stop the motion.

"Mr. Gatlin." Leo touched his hat. "Thank you for bringing down the trunk."

The older man heaved her heavy chest down the stairs and to the waiting wagon, which she'd only just noticed was there. Leo must have gotten up much earlier than her and been back inside before she came out.

"Why in the world did you sit with me for coffee when you were all ready to leave?" She quickly stood and fixed her shawl pin then tugged on her traveling gloves.

He shrugged slightly. "That seat looked a lot more comfortable than the one we'll be on for the next few miles. Might as well enjoy it while we can." He shuffled his feet slightly. "I also had a question for you that I don't know quite how to ask."

Her skin prickled to attention. He'd been worried about her qualifications earlier, what could he be nervous about now? Her assurance must be enough, though suddenly she wasn't so sure. If the tables were turned, would her own doubts be satisfied?

"I was at the bank yesterday and the banker put an idea in my head. One that I'm having trouble shaking loose." He didn't look up at her.

She wanted to see his eyes, know his true thoughts. "Yes? What did he say?"

"He said I should marry." His neck turned a deep ruddy hue first, then it seeped upward until even his ears were pink.

"Marry? Goodness. I've heard about what goes on in banks all my life from my father, but never once do I recall him giving that advice to anyone but me." And she'd ignored that one piece for as long as she could.

TAMAR'S BLUE EYES DANCED, AND HE COULDN'T HELP BUT wonder where her thoughts had gone because they were no longer with him. He wanted her to stay right there, in the conversation. "He wasn't giving me financial advice."

"Obviously not. Unless..." She narrowed her eyes and her small hands seemed to quickly find their way to her hips. "Is he trying to pair you up for the sake of your family? Is he telling you to marry someone to make more profit? That's..."

She looked fit to sputter and he didn't want to see her any more riled than she was already. "No, not that." He scraped his hand across the back of his neck. Shoot. This wasn't how he thought this would go at all.

"Well, I should think he should stay out of it then. The bank is no place to be making marriage vows."

He wouldn't disagree. Instead of asking her what she thought of Harvey's plan like he'd intended, he headed down the walk and toward the waiting rig.

"Mr. Johlman!" He heard the soft click of her heels on the steps as she followed. "You wanted to ask me something?"

The question had been hard enough to consider before he'd messed up everything. He'd hoped she would think the idea of marrying him for security would be good enough. Then, he would come home married and his problems would be solved.

If she didn't like the idea of marrying because a banker had the idea of a marriage of convenience, then he wouldn't even lodge the question. "I decided to hold my peace for a while. Maybe the banker didn't have such a good idea after all."

He realized he still held his coffee mug and she had hers as well. "I'll take these back inside."

"No need." Mr. Gatlin took the mug and held out his hand for Tamar's. "You all settled up inside?" He eyed Tamar.

"Yes, both accounts. Thank you again for your help." He was sure Tamar wouldn't slap the older man for questioning her integrity, but Tamar would never merely walk away from a debt. He wasn't sure how he knew that as fact, yet he would testify to it.

"Good enough." Mr. Gatlin waved his free hand then headed for the front door.

Leo waited by the front wheel and held out his hand to help her climb up. She took hold of him and gripped some of her skirt and the side of the wagon with her other hand. She seemed to have a good handle on how to climb up the side,

though he wasn't sure how. She'd lived in the city and told him her family had rented taxis.

“You've ridden in a wagon before?”

She shook her head then settled into the seat. Once seated, she reached for her shawl, fixing the pins underneath until it laid just so. This was obviously an occasion she wanted to look her best, probably to impress his family.

“No, but I spent a fair amount of time at the little town I was in before this one staring out the window and watching people. I should've gone outside, but the dust bothered me. I thought the people did too. Perhaps they did. Perhaps I'm contrary.” She shrugged a shoulder slightly.

He didn't think so, but so far, he'd found everything about her pert-near perfect. “I wouldn't use that term.”

She frowned as she scanned the scenery around them, taking in the sky, the buildings, and probably the stiffly scented breeze from the stock yard. “What term would you use?”

Lovely, poised, intelligent... he could think of quite a few but she'd probably jump right out of his wagon and head back into the boarding house if he said what came to mind. “I think you're determined. Which is good, because you'll have to prove to my father you want the job and that you can do it.”

Her back straightened. “I've already said I'm not concerned about that.”

She might not be, but he was. Everything he'd done seemed to fall on deaf ears and high expectations from his parents. Nothing he did was either good enough or they simply didn't notice. Bringing Tamar home *couldn't* go unnoticed.

She arranged her skirts until they laid just so, then braced her foot against the buckboard like she'd been riding for years. If she was fidgeting and nervous, she managed to make herself look calm while doing it. For a woman who'd only watched, she'd learned a lot. Perhaps he'd do well with watching once in a while.

He flicked the lines and the horses surged to a start. That, she wasn't ready for and almost toppled right out of the wagon. She gasped and grabbed hold of the seat.

"Gracious me, I never saw that coming." She laid her free hand over her heart. "I'm as jumpy as a park squirrel."

He'd never heard something so silly come from her and he laughed until she finally laughed along with him. While the time usually dragged along as he rode from town back to home—especially when he had an idea to chew on—this time, the road seemed far too short.

Before he could get comfortable sitting next to her, he pulled to a stop in front of the house. His sister, Hannah, sat on the front step. She was a young woman now of nineteen and probably too old for a tutor, but Mama would tell her differently. She wore a sturdy blue dress for work. A basket of worn socks laid at her feet.

Hannah put aside the darning egg and the sock she'd been working on and stood, brushing off bits of yarn to the porch. "Leo Johlman, what in the world did you do now?" She stuck her hands to her hips.

Tamar flinched next to him, but he felt it rather than saw it. Her face remained placid as she turned away from him to look at Hannah.

“Good morning,” she offered as she braced her feet to stand.

He held her arm to keep her there. “Hold still until I come around. Getting down is harder than getting up.”

He ignored his sister’s question, choosing to look forward to helping Miss Godan instead. He reached up to lift her down off her perch as she stood. The woman had an impossibly slender waist and he marveled as he set her easily on the ground.

“Thank you, Mr. Johlman.” She reached for her shawl once again, though it hadn’t moved.

“Leo,” he said. He had to hope she would use his given name.

Miss Godan’s eyes sought his, surprise lacing the soft edges of her mouth, rounding them pleasantly.

She ducked her head. “If I’m to teach your sisters, it wouldn’t be proper—”

“I’d like it all the same.”

He heard the subtle growl of his younger sister right behind him. Her tapping foot was loud enough to bring Ma running. He’d almost forgotten about her presence.

“Who is this?” Hannah’s annoyed voice couldn’t be ignored.

Leo spun to face her and stand between his sister and her new tutor. He tried to smile but Hannah’s roasting glare made it falter. “This is Miss Godan, she teaches piano.”

Hannah’s look softened almost immediately. “Truly?” She leaned to the side to see around him.

Miss Godan stepped out of his protection. He suddenly felt alone and without purpose. Ma strode out the front door, rubbing her hands on a towel.

“Did I hear what I thought I just heard?” She shoved the towel into her apron pocket.

“Mrs. Johlman.” Tamar stepped forward and nodded in recognition and deference. “I’m here to teach your daughters piano.”

Hannah clapped and bounced on her feet, acting much younger in her excitement. “I’ll go tell Alice. She’ll be so pleased.”

Ma beamed. “Where in the world did you find her, Leo?”

Was Ma actually going to recognize him for something he’d done? His chest puffed slightly. “I met her at the boarding house. She plays like an angel.”

Ma smiled. “Well, if your pa agrees, that is an answer to prayer.”

He couldn’t help but think Tamar was an answer to more than one rapid and desperate supplication, but that still remained to be seen.

Chapter 5

Within minutes, Tamar found herself whisked inside Leo's spacious home, though he didn't follow. While his mother and sister seemed kind, she felt out-of-sorts without him by her side. A quick, calm breath helped her relax.

In the parlor just inside the front door, or perhaps it was a sitting room—she wasn't sure what the locals would call it—there was a tufted set of horsehair furniture situated in a comfortable array surrounding a large fireplace. An upright piano stood along one wall with a thin layer of dust covering it. The curtains had been flung wide to let in light, and a summer garden twined with golden dying vines lay just beyond the glass.

“Miss Godan, please, have a seat.” Mrs. Johlman indicated a chair and waited for her.

As Tamar sat, Hannah returned with a girl perhaps a few years younger who had to be Alice. Leo had mentioned a brother as well, Gideon, who was two years younger than Leo, but she wasn't sure how the girls fit in as far as age.

“Thank you,” she belatedly replied, lost in her own thoughts for too long. “Your son seemed particularly concerned that I live up to expectations. Would you like me to play for you?” She turned and eyed the dusty instrument,

hopeful it was maintained better than the one at the boarding house.

Mrs. Johlman settled herself and motioned impatiently for her daughters to sit. “That won’t be necessary just yet. My husband will be wanting that, I’m sure. This isn’t the piano you’ll use, anyway. It hasn’t been tuned in ages. Tell us about yourself. Where do you come from? We rarely get any female company out here, so let’s pretend for a moment that you aren’t here to work, but to visit.”

Tamar wasn’t sure where to begin since her life had been quite eventful the last few months. “A month ago, I arrived in a little town named Cutter’s Creek in Montana. I was to be a mail-order bride. Neither the groom, nor I, felt it was a good match and we parted amicably.” At least, she hoped they had. Colt wouldn’t have been happy as her husband. In fact, of all those she’d met, the only one who she worried did not think well of her at all was her traveling companion, Isadora.

“While there, I heard about Belle Fourche.”

Mrs. Johlman flinched, then nodded quickly, glancing at her daughters to hush their giggles. “I’m surprised you weren’t taken to wed right off the train. There are so many cowboys in town and very few women. The first thing I will tell you is to avoid Saloon Street. The name says everything you need to know, but if you see a saloon, don’t go that way.”

Tamar shivered, glad Leo had been there to walk her about when she’d been curious. “Oh, my. I have no need to go back to town yet, but if I do I’ll avoid it.” She felt that was the easiest way to broach the subject of staying. Leo had assumed his parents would want her there. Nothing had been said to confirm that yet.

“Yes, Mary is fixing up a room for you right now on the women’s side of the house.”

The women’s side of a house? She’d never heard of such a thing outside of the boarding house as Leo had mentioned. Did Mrs. Johlman herself stay away from her husband? Not that it was any of Tamar’s business, but her curiosity wouldn’t be quelled.

“I don’t expect you’ll need to visit there, but our room is at the very top of the stairs, separating the men’s from the women’s,” Mrs. Johlman explained. “Having a family this large would be good enough reason alone. However, we also occasionally have extra hands who stay—and no additional bunks in the bunkhouse. Bodey offers them the opportunity to stay here. So, you see, it was necessary to build the living quarters as two sides. Your room, however, will be on the women’s side, just up the stairs.”

Tamar nodded her understanding. When it came to the top of the stairs, she was to only go to her students’ side, not the other way, or she might be in dangerous territory. For her reputation if nothing else.

“Thank you. I’m sure it will be lovely. I stayed such a short time in Cutter’s Creek that I feel as if I’ve been traveling for months. I came from New York originally.”

Hannah and Alice’s eyes widened but they held their tongues. Obviously, Mrs. Johlman had taught them manners, even if she hadn’t thought so at first. Hannah’s sparkling eyes were growing on her. The young woman’s almost constant movement led her to believe Hannah was used to being much more active and outspoken, while Alice sat quietly, her hands folded in her lap.

“My, my. All the way from New York. Is that where your family is from? Are they expecting your return?” Mrs. Johlman asked.

The question pierced her heart. Tamar had left behind a loving father, but he’d been too interested in remarrying—her aunt of all people—for him to realize that same aunt was scheming against her. Father had been her champion, until his grief left him incapable of seeing what was right in front of him. Namely, his wife’s sister who wanted a station in life she’d never had before and loads more money.

“Yes, my father is there. I will write to him in due time, but he isn’t expecting my return.” And she wondered now how he would feel if she did. Had her aunt told him the truth? She couldn’t imagine her father ever agreeing to such a plan. Getting rid of Tamar had cleared the path for her aunt. No one would stand in her way of marrying Tamar’s father and hopefully producing a male heir, eliminating Tamar all together.

“Well, no need to worry. You can stay here as long as you’d like. Assuming of course that you can play. I’m sure Leo informed you of what happened the last time we hired someone. Bodey is still sure Louis Douglas hired that piano teacher and sent him here to make a fool of our daughters.”

Was every matter one of deceit? Surely *some* things happened that had nothing to do with the animosity between the rival families. “I certainly hope not. That would be a difficult and heartless prank.” The more she heard about the Douglas family, the less she wanted to meet them.

“We deal with things like that on a daily basis.” Hannah finally broke her silence. “The Douglasses don’t have daughters, only two sons. They don’t know the importance of

learning piano or other nice things.” Hannah sighed. “They only know horses and cattle and theft.”

“Hannah...” Mrs. Johlman’s word held a warning. “We don’t accuse people.”

Hannah pressed her lips together and her jaw hardened. The girl had been taught to dislike or perhaps even hate her neighbors, possibly behind closed doors, and was now being told to hold her tongue in front of others. Tamar doubted that such niceties were practiced at school, where she might have had to face the Douglas boys every day. Alice might still.

The sound of scratchy boots rubbing on clean floors sent tension skittering up Tamar’s spine. In the next instant, three men filled the doorway. One was older with slightly peppered hair, then there was Leo, and a man who had to be his brother, the earlier absent Gideon.

“Leo tells me he found a piano teacher in town. Tells me she can play right well. Let’s hear you, then.” The older man moved his head only slightly in an obvious command to get herself over to the piano quickly.

“But, Bodey, that piano—” Mrs. Johlman rose to her feet.

“Hush. I want to hear her play that piano.”

The time to prove herself had arrived and on an untuned instrument, no less.

FOR THE BAREST MOMENT, LEO WAS SURE TAMAR WOULDN’T fit into their life like he’d hoped. She seemed worlds away from his family, like she belonged in some far away drawing room with stately wood paneling and a servant to follow her around and answer every need. Then she stood, back rigid, and headed for the piano.

He watched her slowly open the wooden piece over the keys, then pull out the bench. She sat with a grace that neither his sisters, nor his mother, possessed. Alice sat with her eyes wide and jaw slack, in awe of Tamar. His chest puffed at their awareness of her talent before she even played a note.

Her fingers curled slightly, then came down and danced across the keys, playing a song that he'd never heard before. The notes were quick and intricate, shocking him into listening closer. He'd never heard anything like it come from their piano or any other.

Hannah's mouth dropped open and, just in front of him, he saw his mother squeeze his father's arm and look up at him with appreciation. Even though he felt like that should have been for him, since he'd found Tamar, he let it be. The decision to keep her was his father's. She had to impress him.

If the piano was out of tune, he certainly didn't hear it. Her fingers moved over the keys creating a masterful sound the likes of which the walls of his family's home had never heard. Leo clutched the high-backed sofa in front of him and enjoyed a few minutes where sheep and conniving families didn't matter. Didn't even exist.

When the song stopped, her fingers hovered over the keys for a moment until the sound of the last note slipped from the air and both his sisters erupted in clapping. "Can you help us to sound like that?"

He'd never heard his sisters so excited. The original tutor had been an embarrassment, but he'd assumed his sisters didn't truly care, since his lack meant they had less work to do. The girls had to do chores just like he and his brother, so when they'd sent the piano teacher away, the workload was more equal. Now, their work would increase.

Tamar slowly turned. Her eyes caught his for just a moment, bringing his heart to painful awareness once again. In the next moment, her gaze was gone, leaving him cold. How could he be so attached so quickly? She was sure to leave when the job was done, even if she took years to teach them it wouldn't be enough time for him. Especially if she didn't agree with marrying for convenience. But like a rose in spring, he didn't want to see her go.

“So, Father...” he dared ask since the room had gone quiet.

Pa glanced at him for a moment. “You’ve done well. Thank you.”

He'd wanted more, but at least they'd recognized his help. Tamar sat on the bench of the piano waiting for his ruling. Her back was as straight as an arrow. Her hair was piled on the back of her head in some intricate pattern and she touched it, obviously a nervous habit. He wouldn't have thought she could be nervous about anything.

“Now I know you can play. But can you teach? That is the question.” Father spread his stance and crossed his arms. “I won't be made a fool, twice.”

Tamar hardened her stubborn jaw and he felt her slipping away. If she didn't treat Father with the utmost respect, he would cast her off without a second thought. Leo gave her a look and prayed he conveyed that she should only give her opinion on teaching, nothing else.

“I have assured your son that I'm capable. If you'd rather, I can teach your daughters for one week and all I ask is food and a place to stay. If you feel I've done the job satisfactorily after that, then you could hire me further.”

Pa didn't relent like Leo hoped. His mother must have had the same hope, because she again squeezed his father's arm to get his attention. Father, however, only looked at Tamar.

"I'm sure you've heard about the family who lives the next place over. They've done some pretty underhanded things. One of those was to hire a man to make us look like fools. If you work for him, I'll drop you off at his front door and you'll never be welcome on this ranch again. Hear?"

Leo stepped forward before Tamar could speak. "She's already spoken up for us. Ephraim Nickson accused her of being a cousin, just because she was walking next to me down the boardwalk. She slapped him from here to Louisville." He wanted to laugh now that he thought about it again.

Pa shook his head. "I don't need an unstable female around here. If you can't control yourself, I won't have you teaching my daughters."

"But, Pa!" Hannah and Alice whined in unison. "Did you hear her play?" Hannah held out her hands toward Tamar, as if to beg for her teaching.

Ma finally tugged hard enough on Pa's arm that he couldn't ignore her without looking rude. "Bodey, she's a fine young woman all the way from New York. You know as well as I do that Louis doesn't have time to go that far out of his way to make life difficult for you. When he hired Davis, he only went over to Deadwood and found a saloon player."

Pa's chest rose and fell quickly, like he was doing his level best to hold himself together. "I didn't know that was what happened until right now."

Ma paled slightly and Leo wondered not for the first time how Ma managed to get information like that. Especially when

he also knew Pa often kept little facts from Ma's knowledge so she wouldn't worry.

"All that really matters is, this woman is from far away. Too far away to be a tool of Louis Douglas."

Tamar stood and folded her hands neatly in front of her. Leo tried not to stare but the harder he tried, the less success he had.

"You can stay until supper tonight. I need all day to think about this. If I don't want to take a chance, Margaret will take you back to Belle Fourche in the morning. You can contact someone from the Douglas family to pay for your ride back to New York. I won't do that for you."

"Pa, that's not fair," Gideon finally spoke up. He was always the quiet, go along, sort. Which was probably why Pa always took Gideon along when he needed to rescue sheep or do something to keep the Douglas family from taking what they shouldn't. He'd never trusted Leo with those jobs.

The moment Gideon spoke his piece, Pa's face shifted. "You think so? I'll consider it. Now, let's get back to work."

Leo watched as everyone filed out of the room except Tamar and even with her there, he still felt as hollowed out as an old stump. Gideon had the final word yet again.

Chapter 6

The flower garden, though cold and brown, just outside the sitting room proved a unique and private place to hide and rest. Tamar lowered herself to the ground, something she never would've done before now. The distant rolling hills that slowly turned into dark mountains and the warmth of the midday sun on her face made her feel...alive.

She chuckled softly as she touched a delicate leaf clinging to a vine. Nothing she'd done in her life had prepared her for that moment. When in her life had she lived where there was no library, no tea, no one to impress with her manners and posture? None of the people in the Johlman household were captivated by those things. Though she wished Leo was attracted to more than her musical talent.

A woman in a black dress approached. She had flaming red hair covered by a small kerchief barely containing her tight curls. Both kerchief and apron were the same vivid bright crimson.

“Good day, miss. Mrs. Johlman asked that I make sure you were well-attended. Do you be needing anything?”

Her voice held the softest lilt, like some of the men who worked the shipping wharf where Father checked shipments occasionally. Her nervous smile was as warm as a summer breeze.

Tamar tried to smile in welcome. “You weren’t born in Belle Fourche, were you?”

The woman laughed. “It’s pronounced Bell Foosh, and no miss. I was not.”

Now she understood why the Johlman girls had giggled when they’d met. She’d been pronouncing the name like they would in French. Her pride was stung, but it was just another thing to add the list of things she’d done wrong.

“Are you allowed to sit and talk with me?” Suddenly, after all her travels, she was lonely. The long and winding path of her travels had led her to a friend, hopefully one who liked her better than Isadora. The questions she’d been asked by everyone about home had made her remember all the things she’d left behind.

“Aye, as long as no one sees. Not for long though. I’ve got a kitchen to clean before me mum needs me to help with supper.” She slowly lowered down to her knees and pointed to the remnants of a dried pink flower. “The pink ones are me favorite.” She drew one to her nose and took a sniff, disappointment flushed her face for a moment before she released the flower. “No scent once they’re dead. When I’m cleaning all day, I can’t get free of the burning smell, but these clear me nose. That’s silly to you, I suppose.”

She remembered her nose burning when the house staff would scrub the floors back home. “It’s not silly. I’d bet it helps.”

She’d wanted so badly to fit in when she’d been in Cutter’s Creek, but at every turn she’d said the wrong thing. And now, she could see how she’d come across as unkind. Simply being unable to put herself in the shoes of others had made her seem uncaring. “How long have you lived here?”

The woman bent her head. “About five years now. Mum brought me with her when she came over to be a mail-order bride, but the groom was none too pleased about where we came from. We happened upon Johlman, and this was where we landed. I’ve found a good man now. Adam is a hard worker, he is. He’ll make a fine husband.”

Tamar had come all this way to become a wife, but now she never would. Being a governess of sorts, marriage and even courting would be looked down upon. Her gaze wandered away from her new acquaintance to the barn in the distance. She’d avoided every man her father and aunt had set her up to meet, including Colt in Cutter’s Creek. Not a single one of them made her heart race like Leo did.

“Where did you meet Adam?” Tamar brushed some dried grass from her skirt while trying to turn her focus back to the woman sitting next to her, the woman who had taken the time to come and see to her needs. Funny that she didn’t consider this woman inferior like she would have in the past.

“Adam works in the stockyard. He’s a cowboy, though I know little about what goes on there. He knows nothing about here, either.” Her eyes danced as a smile played over her lips.

“I don’t think I caught your name.” Tamar gave a slight nod. “I’m Tamar Goden, hopeful new piano teacher to the Johlman girls.”

The maid flashed a ready smile that lingered in a glow over her cheeks. “The missus said as much. I’m Mary, if you please. Once Adam takes me to wed, I’ll be Mary Stafford.” She sat a little straighter. “A fine name, so me mum says.”

Tamar got the impression that questioning what *Mum* said would be a grave mistake. “Will you continue to work here after you marry?” She knew nothing about this side of life. In

her circles, women didn't work. Even her own position would be a new one, one her father had removed her from not a year before.

"Of course, miss. I will keep on working right up until we have wee ones. Then, I'll work hard to raise them."

Was raising children work? She felt certain it was for most people who didn't have servants to do the job for them. A subtle ache started in her chest and fanned out over her body until it left her feeling hollow. She'd never wished for children, but now that door was closed to her—one she wouldn't have explored if the choice hadn't been taken. Now, her insides burned with the injustice.

"I know nothing of families and work. Is that what you want?"

Mary sat back and her eyes widened quickly, then narrowed. Had she offended once again? Had she said something she didn't think was insulting when it was?

"Isn't that what every woman wants? To marry a man she fancies and to have a child or two? Perhaps it's my station. I shouldn't have assumed." Mary stood and did an awkward curtsy that almost felt like an insult, as it was such an afterthought.

"Mary...I didn't mean to upset you. Please, sit back down. I'm sorry." Isadora had apologized for things Tamar had done before Tamar had left Cutter's Creek, now she felt like she owed one in return. If Isadora had never said anything, she wouldn't have known her words were cutting people to the very quick.

Mary settled back down but wouldn't look her directly in the eye. "I can only stay another minute. The missus will need

me as will me mum. I turned down your room and made sure your trunk was put away.”

Tamar shivered, suddenly realizing her place should've been there, doing that work. She wasn't there to make more labor for the staff. “I do hope that wasn't time wasted. Mr. Johlman hasn't said I can stay yet.”

Mary covered her mouth with her hand which couldn't quite cover the mischief in her eyes. “I may have been listening at the door when Mr. Johlman and his sons were talking about you. I don't think you have anything to worry over. If you want the job, it'll be yours.”

Her mouth quivered for a moment, wanting to smile but afraid too. When had she ever been afraid of anyone or anything? She was the only heir—at least for now—to the Godan shipping fortune. Until her aunt could produce a son, she would be.

Mary and her pleasant speech faded away for a moment and she recalled sitting in her father's office, listening to him do business. He'd ignored her, assuming she had no interest or capacity for such things. He'd never even lowered his voice when he'd taken people to task for making mistakes. Maybe Mary wasn't so wrong to want to work for her money. She certainly didn't treat people as expendable.

“Thank you, both for the room and for your words of comfort.”

A rosy blush stole up Mary's pale cheeks to the roots of her dark hair. “I only did what I was asked to do, miss. Once they announce tonight that you have the job, you'll be expected to sit with and eat with the family. There'll be no more talking with me. The missus doesn't allow us to be

friendly with the governesses when they've used them. You'll be privy to things we're not."

She felt yet another tentative friendship slipping away. Her charges were not likely to be friends either. She'd had enough governesses to know that was the way of things. Was this to be a lonely position? She closed her eyes and spoke hope to her heart for someone to fill the hole of loneliness she'd never known before. Surely, she would have someone to talk to.

Leo's name floated through her mind. There would be *someone* whom she could talk to... Someone who was certainly no charge of hers, nor truly the one whom she worked for.

"I don't think that's fair. I'm getting along with you fine."

Mary gave a dismissive gesture. "It's for the family. They'll talk about things they don't trust us with. If you're one of us, they won't trust you. Don't cut down the apple tree to reach the fruit at the top. Get a ladder." Mary stood and brushed off her skirt. "I'll be seeing you when I stop by to make sure you have everything you need when we turn down the lights at night."

Tamar wanted to grab her new friend's hand and hold tight. Was she really doing something so drastic as cutting down a tree for a piece of fruit if she wanted to continue having a friendship with Mary? "Perhaps we can talk when no one is looking? Quietly. They will be none the wiser. I'd like that...if you will?"

If the staff had done such a thing to her father, they'd have paid for it. Mary could very well lose her job for it, as could Tamar now. She was as much hired help as Mary was. Yet she wanted the friendship all the same.

Mary ducked her head, hiding a cheeky smile. “Yes, miss.”

LEO PUT TWO FINGERS TO HIS LIPS AND WHISTLED LOUDLY. Dotty and Madge, two orange and white sheep dogs, came trotting toward Leo and his father. His father kept them for herding, guiding, and protecting the flock. These two were mostly herders.

Pa sat up straighter in his saddle and stretched his back. Leo had noticed him doing that more and more the older he got. His father would never willingly quit working the ranch, but Leo could see doing the job made him sorer than he let on.

“Who is that woman? Really.” Pa gathered the reins, then gave his horse some slack.

He’d answered that question in front of Ma and his brother earlier in Pa’s office, but now they were alone. The question nettled him like an October burr. “I told you. She’s a woman I met at the boarding house. She stayed there in town last night and played the piano. When I offered to show her around before I went to meet up with Langerford, she told me she was looking for work. I figured it was Providence.” He’d intentionally used that word with Ma too, because meeting her, coupled with Langerford’s words, seemed like a little gift from above.

He still hadn’t mentioned how bothered he was that Pa had spoken to Harvey first. That could wait until Miss Godan was hired. Pa had hinted to Ma that the deal was settled, but now Leo wasn’t so certain.

“And why did you show that woman around when you should’ve been doing your job?”

Leo gripped his reins and turned his head away. Pa was far too observant to miss his anger. “I had all day since I was told

to stay in town. I was being neighborly, especially since the only other person she met in town was Ephraim Nickson.” Why couldn’t Pa ever trust him?

“Who told you to stay in town?” Pa clipped the words as he turned his mount and headed for the pasture.

Gideon waited at the gate and held the swinging door open wide as the two riders and horses passed through, then closed it behind them. Pa dug out the field glasses and held them to his chest as he rode up the nearest hill.

“Ma told me to. She said staying was your suggestion.” He should’ve checked, but he hadn’t wanted to have the wool pulled out from under him again.

“And does that sound like something I would agree to? Every day is a workday here. If you can’t manage working every day of your life, then this is not the place for you. Maybe you’d rather live like the fancy lady you brought home, with frills and servants? Maybe New York impresses you? It doesn’t impress me. I’m sure she’ll want the same pay as if she lived in New York, too.”

Pa pressed his knees together hard and his mount responded immediately, jumping forward into a canter. Leo rushed to keep up. Seemed like Pa was always trying to put him in his place.

“I don’t want that. I’ve never wanted that.” All he’d ever wanted was to be seen as good enough for his father to trust him. He didn’t have to be great or wealthy. He didn’t have to meet anyone else’s expectations, except Pa.

“When are you going to quit fooling around and settle down? When are you going to realize you’re a full-grown man and more is expected of you than when you were a child?”

He'd been trying to fulfill that expectation, those shoes that seemed insurmountably large, for as long as he could remember. Pa had been driving him to take over since he was tall enough to mount a horse. He'd been helping with everything he was capable of doing. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong. I don't see it. Everything I do, I do to impress you. It's never enough."

Pa slowed, then tugged the reins and came to a stop. Leo stopped alongside him, and the dogs loped in a wide circle around them, tongues lolling.

"Then you've got to try harder. Right now, my plan is to leave this place to Gideon. He's got the backbone to protect the land from the Douglasses. He'll make sure the legacy lives on. He doesn't take days off. He listens and does what he's told."

Pa could've just as well gutted him right there. Leo couldn't move or speak. No response was probably better than anything he could have said anyway. Words weren't going to sway Pa. Action would. And it started with taking a wife and getting serious about doing whatever Gideon did...only better.

A few hours later, he'd helped Pa gather the woolies who'd missed the sheering. Sheep tended to be, well, sheepish. They herded when they wanted to and broke off and hid when they wanted to. Every year he and Pa had to spend time hunting down the ewes who'd avoided the sheers.

Pa didn't say anything further and Leo wasn't sure if Tamar had a job or not. He'd find out the final ruling when everyone else did. That had always been the way. Pa made his decisions in his head and could change his mind any time until he announced the answer, at which point, it became gospel.

That fact worried Leo most of all. Pa had come right out and said Leo had been removed as the first son, the one to inherit. Would he change his mind, or would Pa be as stubborn as usual and keep him excluded, no matter how hard he worked to improve?

Pa, Dotty, and Madge herded the wily sheep into the barn where Gideon had set up the doors to create a channel, funneling them right to the holding pen for sheering. He had the sheers sharpened and waiting in one of the small birthing pens.

Gideon wrangled one huge woolly ewe into the pen then closed the others off to wait their turn. With a quick flip, the sheep was on its backside between Gideon's calves. He had the whole animal fleeced of its heavy wool within minutes. Pa carefully gathered the wool, stowing the fleece in a protective bag. Ma would clean and card some of it before trying to sell them all.

The wool that wasn't as nice and wouldn't pull a great price would be kept and spun for their own use, some for clothing, some for knitting, and some would be used as insulation in the barn. As much lanolin as possible would be pulled out first for use in salves and creams. That too, would be sold.

Leo glanced at the sky and took a deep sniff. Mostly, he could smell the woodstoves burning, but if he focused really hard, he could smell roast mutton and rosemary. Mrs. Eliza knew how to cook about anything, but mutton was her specialty. By all accounts, he should be tired of eating sheep, but Eliza Adkins could tease the best flavors out of whatever was put in front of her, and they put a lot of mutton in front of her.

He dashed in the back door, avoiding his mother at the front. Ma would want to know how his day had been and he wasn't prepared to tell her.

“Leo, you scamp, you're here for a sweet before supper, are you? I told Mary you would be. Now, tell me all about this lady friend I've been hearing about all day?” Mrs. Eliza handed him an oatmeal cookie the size of his hand.

He eyed the sweet and his stomach clenched as his mouth watered. Growing up and being an adult meant not indulging, not avoiding what he should face, not talking to the help... All things he'd always enjoyed. Perhaps too much.

“Miss Godan is someone I met in town. If Pa says she can stay, she'll be teaching piano.” And if he could stick his courage, he'd marry her. Assuming she didn't laugh at him or run.

He nibbled the cookie and his mouth instantly wanted more. There was no sampling when it came to Mrs. Eliza's treats, either you'd better prepare to leave full or not come at all.

“My Mary says this Miss Godan is quite lovely.”

Heat rushed up Leo's cheeks. He'd be a fool not to notice that. Tamar had soft hair that framed a lovely slender face. Her cheeks were high so that even when she ducked her chin slightly, she still looked regal. She was as graceful as a bird in flight.

“Well, I can see from the look in your eyes that you noticed. Might be time to start thinking about a future...” She winked and went back to plating supper.

Oh, he'd been thinking about a future, all right. But was his future thinking about him?

Chapter 7

An overflowing table waited in the dining room for Tamar. She hesitated for a moment in the entry, unsure of where she should sit. Families always had rules about this sort of thing and while she could guess Mr. Johlman would take the head of the table and his wife would sit to his right, the other seats were a mystery.

Leo appeared at her side and his reassuring hand on her back gave her a moment's pause. He would know. She could trust him. He gave her a quick smile and a roguish wink then led her to the end of the table and seated her at his right.

Mr. Johlman cleared his throat. "I believe we discussed that the seat at the other end of the table now belongs to Gideon?" His penetrating gaze left her cold.

Gideon flushed a deep red while Hannah and Alice exchanged confused glances. Mrs. Johlman was the first to speak as she raised her chin high. "This was not discussed with me. Since I'm still half of this partnership, nothing will be changed right now. Sit." She eyed her husband, daring him to question her.

All of the children and Mrs. Johlman sat where Tamar assumed they usually did, but a discomfiting tension lay over the room. No one dared break the charged silence. Mary entered through a side door and caught Tamar's eye for a

moment before ducking her head, but not before Mr. Johlman saw the exchange.

“Miss Godan, you will train my daughters in musical instruction. Both instrumental and vocal. You will reserve an hour per day per girl. I will pay you a stipend of no more than \$.75 per day. Since you’re living and eating under my roof, that is more than generous.”

He turned his cold blue eyes on her and a shiver traced up her spine and lodged firmly in her chest. He didn’t like her. Not one jot. He was keeping her there to keep the peace with his wife, probably using her as a pawn for later. He’d agreed now so his wife would need to agree to something else—probably ousting Leo from his familial place—later.

Suddenly, she didn’t want the job so much. Leo deserved to be the rightful heir. He was sweet and kind, but not only that, he was knowledgeable. From what she’d seen, he was a hard worker as well. She opened her mouth to refuse the offer but Mr. Johlman kept speaking, cutting her off.

“I also expect you to act as we see fit. You are not to have any sort of relationship with anyone in this household. Not the servants, not my daughters, not my wife.” He shifted his focus to Leo. “Not my sons.”

Her chest clenched. Would working for the Johlman be worth the trouble? She needed money and a place to stay. There wasn’t enough in her reticule to return to New York, even if she’d wanted to. There were very few jobs she was suited to and even fewer that would give her a place to stay.

“I can abide by your rules.” But she wouldn’t be pleased about them. Where would she find kinship? “Do you at least go to Sunday services so I can see people there?” She’d never attended, but Isadora had said she’d find church was the place

to get to know a town. That might be her only option for companionship.

Mrs. Johlman reached across the table and laid a supportive hand over her husband's arm. "We don't always go, but you're welcome to take a horse any Sunday you wish. You're not a prisoner here."

She could just as well be. She'd never in her life ridden a horse, nor had she driven a wagon. Hannah reached over and took her arm.

"We may not be fast friends, but I look forward to learning. I'm so glad you're here."

She'd never heard the like before. *Glad* that she was there?

Leo pursed his lips briefly. "Perhaps you'd be willing to entertain us with a song after supper?"

"Oh, yes!" Mrs. Johlman's eyes immediately brightened and she released Mr. Johlman's arm. "That would be lovely. This house has been so long without music. However, first..." She held out her hand to her husband and to Gideon then bowed her head.

Leo took Tamar's hand in his and she was so taken by surprise that she almost forgot to take Hannah's hand as well. Mr. Johlman prayed briefly, far too briefly, for Tamar to get her senses back in a row before Leo released her then started eating.

She'd had lamb before, but never mutton. Her father had said mutton was for poor men, that it was tough with no flavor. Now, she was faced with trying his theory. Though, she had to admit, of all the fare she'd had since leaving New York, this was at the very least, recognizable.

With slow precision, taking her time to be neat and tidy, she sliced off a bite and found her father wholly wrong. The meat was tender and flavorful and not tough in the slightest. Leo leaned closer to her, but not enough to be noticed by his father.

“Mrs. Eliza can make a turnip taste like the best thing you’ve ever eaten. I don’t know what you ate in New York, but she’ll keep you fed.” Despite the awful start to the meal, Leo hadn’t lost his humor, a trait that made her think he was strong in more than just frame. Though there was nothing lacking there, either.

A quick glance around the table filled her with an odd contentment. Even the gruff Mr. Johlman could be handled. He wasn’t much different in disposition than her own father. In time, he would come to ignore her presence, just as Father had, and everything would be well in the Johlman home. Excepting the music. Now, there would be music.

As she finished her meal, Mary came around and removed all the plates, replacing them with dessert. She was quick and silent. If Tamar hadn’t been watching for her, she probably wouldn’t have given her much notice.

Mr. Johlman had made a rule, but his wife seemed to temper him, soften him. Would she be angry if Tamar broke the rules, as long as she never shared anything she heard the family say? Could they make Tamar leave just for talking?

Leo caught her eye and again her heart skittered around like a rabbit. His hand lay on the table instead of bothering with his dessert like everyone else at the table. His hand was that of a man who’d worked hard. Callused and strong. Nothing like the cleanly trimmed fingernails and pale skin of her father’s.

Without noting her stare, he concentrated on something Gideon spoke about. Every flick of his jaw muscles was fascinating as she tried to discern his thinking, just from his expression, giving her all the time in the world to document every part of his face, right down to the three lines beside each eye. Marks of a happy life.

Marks she might never possess. Those only came with good and happy times, of which she was still foreign.

THOUGH HE'D RAVED ABOUT MRS. ELIZA'S COOKING, LEO hadn't been able to eat much past the lump in his throat. Pa had set him aside, once and probably for all. If not for Ma and his siblings standing up for him, he'd be in Gideon's place, at Ma's side. Or maybe he was relegated to the women's side of the table...

Having Tamar at his side did little to rouse his appetite when her keen gaze seemed to take in his every movement. If his own father found him so lacking, did she as well? She said nothing as she sat there, eyeing him. Yet he couldn't afford to meet her stare with Father watching his every move.

Gideon laughed softly. "You should've seen that last wooly ewe. Sometimes they just lay still, kind of scared of the shears. That's good, because there's no chance of nicking them if they don't move. This one...she didn't want me anywhere near her. When I finally finished, she tossed a look over her shoulder at me fit to knock me over." He laughed again. "You'd think she was a ram."

Hannah and Alice both gasped at his statement and Leo's stomach fell. While his sisters could feign surprise at Gideon's frank words, Tamar wouldn't be used to them in the slightest. He forced himself to finally glance at her and her pink cheeks said what her surprised mouth could not.

“Gideon...” Ma tilted her head. “We have guests.”

Pa narrowed his eyes. “I don’t pay guests. She can get used to the little talk of sheep we allow at the table or she can leave. I’ve got more to worry about than whether or not we offend the sensibilities of a foreigner.” He pushed his empty plate back and flew to his feet. “This is still my family, not some drawing room. The sooner everyone remembers that, the better.” He stalked to the fireplace mantle, gripped a redwood pipe, and stomped from the room leaving everyone silent in his wake.

Ma was, as usual, the first to speak. “It’s his way. He’s been so worried. The Douglasses are growing bolder about taking our land. Every time we have an assessor come out and stake out our property, they have someone else come out and pull them, then re-stake it. And the stakes move farther and farther onto our land.” Her eyes glistened and she turned her head away. “I’ve said too much, but now you understand. We can’t lose our land, or we lose everything.” She stood and quickly followed her husband.

Without the commanding presence of the Johlman elders, the room felt empty, though there were still five people there. Leo refused to hang his head. He’d done everything he could to defend their land. Even things that made no difference at all, like the school fights. Land was precious in Belle Fourche. Only so many ranchers could live there and the Johlmans had been some of the first.

“That’s more than Pa has said to us about the feud in months.” Hannah’s mouth formed a hard line. “We’re expected to put up with the comments and slurs, but never told why. The town knows more about what goes on around here than

we do. If Alice didn't still attend school, we'd never have reason to leave."

Alice flinched. "Kent Douglas scowls at me when I see him as I walk by the stockyard like I'm a particularly nasty poison." She closed her eyes. "Some of us don't want to know any more than we already do. I wish there was a peaceable way to fix all of this."

Gideon shook his head before he looked around to each person at the table. "You've got your head in the clouds, or maybe in the sand. It's good for you to learn music and stay in the dark about what's going on otherwise. Pa wants to make sure you marry well and don't have to live with this the rest of your life."

Hannah straightened her spine. "It makes him seem cold and unfeeling. Why, how he treated Leo at this very table..." She lowered her voice and cast a glance at both doors to the room. "It's appalling."

"Don't say such things." Leo had to defend his father if he was ever going to earn his place back. Not that Gideon didn't deserve the ranch with all the work he did, but as the first born, Leo wanted his place in line.

"What if Mary or Eliza heard you? They could lose their respect for Father and leave. Do you think for one minute they would be easy to replace? Not only do they do a good job, finding people willing to do the job on our ranch is nearly impossible."

Pa hadn't taught him that, he'd noticed on his own. Everyone in town had chosen a side, whether they said so or not. Anyone they hired could be talking behind their backs. Eliza and her daughter Mary had been much like Tamar. They'd arrived with little information and nowhere to stay.

“I’m sorry.” Hannah sighed. “It just seems this situation continues to get worse and worse. When I was younger, it was molasses on my school chair. Now...it’s burrs under my saddle to see if I get bucked off.” She flinched. “At least I didn’t end up under the horse’s hooves.”

He still didn’t know who’d put them there, but her saddle blanket had a row of them, neatly placed so she would know it wasn’t an accident. No wonder Pa was suspicious of everyone. “But that happened two weeks ago, well before Miss Godan ever came. He has no reason to suspect anything she’s done. She’s new here in town.”

Alice spoke so quietly he had to lean forward and cup his ear to hear her.

“But my doll was yesterday, the very day you were gone and she came to town. I’m not saying it was her...but Pa’s worried. This happened in the house.”

In all the commotion over Tamar’s arrival, he hadn’t heard anything about a doll. Then again, Pa wouldn’t have considered a doll important enough to tell him. Or rather, too personal to tell him. “What happened?”

Tamar subtly shifted in her seat, just slightly, giving him the impression she was suddenly worried. Perhaps having her here wasn’t the best idea for her. He’d considered the house safe from invasion.

“I don’t play with dolls.” Alice said in an overly fierce voice, yet her jaw still trembled. “Someone took the hand off the doll grandmother gave me last Christmas... The China doll made to look like me.”

Tamar gasped and her hand went right to her neck. He wasn’t sure which woman he should comfort first, his sweet

sister who'd had only a day to deal with the utter shock of someone going in her room and destroying something she loved, or the woman at his side, just hearing it for the first time.

Hannah made the decision for him by wrapping her arm around the youngest Johlman. "Ma moved you into my room and all's better now. You can stay as long as you like."

Tamar glanced around the table quickly, her gaze flitting from one to the next, then landing on him last and holding, her eyes intense.

"Pa doesn't talk about this much," he said. "In fact, we all try to keep our talk about the Douglas family to a minimum. This is beyond anything that's ever happened before."

And now he knew exactly what he needed to do to get back in Pa's good graces. He had to find out who was to blame and take care of them.

Chapter 8

Rooms upon rooms lined the long hall between the front entry and the grand music room at the very end. There, in that large room where the sound was sure to carry was where Tamar was to meet Alice and Hannah for their first lesson.

Mary had come in very early to help with her hair and taking her laundry from the day before. She'd chatted with her friend in muffled tones to avoid the sound of voices carrying. When Mary had giggled at something Tamar had said, they'd cut off their talking, but Tamar had forgotten to ask when she should go.

Luckily, all the doors stood open for her to peruse as she slowly walked by. Never had she expected such beautiful floors and large open rooms on a rural ranch. Though Leo had never intimated the Johlman's were wealthy, they had enough to make Tamar feel at home, yet not. Their wealth wasn't ostentatious, but since she knew what to look for, the grandeur was obvious.

Far down the hall someone began plunking on the piano and Tamar quickened her steps. If the instrument could be heard that clearly throughout the house, she had to make sure her students learned quickly.

"Good morning," she stopped in the doorway taking in the lovely sunny room. A magnificent mahogany grand piano

stood in the corner, the focal point that drew her eye. Everything else surrounding the instrument was white or light colored to accentuate the heavy weight meant to draw the eye.

Hannah sat at the keys, frozen, with her mouth open as if she'd been caught in the act of misbehaving. Her dark hair was swept up neatly in a bun at her nape, and delicate wisps tickled at her ears.

“Good morning,” Alice bobbed slightly. “I hope you slept well.”

She had, despite worrying about this meeting. Two whole hours with the girls, teaching them to play and sing, which was perhaps the harder part. She'd spent the overnight hours recalling her own lessons and where she'd started. The first place was to ascertain where they were in their training. If they'd had none, she had quite the job ahead of her.

“Hannah, why don't you find a place in the book where you think you can play, and then demonstrate your knowledge.” She gave a slight nod of encouragement and Alice fled to the nearest settee to wait her turn.

Hannah's gaze darted from page to page as she slowly flipped through them, then to Tamar. She worried her lip and scrunched her forehead. “I...can't really recall...” she said with much less passion than she'd shown the night before after supper.

“I see. Can you play the first page?” Perhaps starting at the beginning would have to be the way of things.

Hannah flipped the thick book to the first page and slid the wooden dowel in place to hold the book open. Without a hint of nerves, she plunked her hands over the keys and proceeded to play a very elementary version of *Mary's Lamb*.

At least she knew a few notes...with one hand. Tamar gathered a stool from the corner of the room and positioned it near the bench. She'd always hated to share the seat with her teacher as he always sat far too close for her liking. She wouldn't put that type of pressure on her own students.

“Good. Let's try that again until you can play it smoothly, with no stops. Learning piano is like learning needlepoint, you must first train your fingers to do as you please, so they don't get in your way.”

Both Hannah and Alice giggled at her words and her chest inflated just a bit. Perhaps she wasn't as useless as her aunt had made her out to be after all.

“I think that's been my trouble all along, Miss Godan. My fingers don't get out of their own way.” Hannah finally cracked a small smile.

She recalled a verse Isadora had quoted on their trip west. *Train up a child...* She'd never been one to go to church, but the start of the verse had struck her, the meaning too. If you trained a child the way they should act, even if they temporarily went astray, they would return. Hannah and Alice could return, they just needed a map and guidance.

“Let me see the book you're learning from.” She held out her hand and Hannah gingerly removed it from behind the block, then handed it over. She carefully looked through the pages. While the songs were not overly advanced, they did make a considerable jump after only a few lessons. “We'll follow this for a few weeks, then work on other things. When you're comfortable, we'll return to this book later.”

Alice, finally finding her small voice, piped up, “We have other books too, Hannah just likes that one best. This is my

favorite.” She pulled a thin primer from under her leg and slowly approached Tamar.

The child was downright timid, something Tamar had never learned how to deal with. How would she teach this child without scaring her? She took the lesson book from Alice’s small hands and leafed through the pages.

“It’s very similar to Hannah’s. If that is the book you’d rather use, then that’s perfect. You won’t have to share.”

“Ma doesn’t want us to share, and this is supposed to be my hour.” Hannah scowled at her sister.

Alice ducked her head and rushed back to the settee. “I’m sorry.”

Tamar answered before Hannah could, since keeping order in the small class was her job, not Hannah’s. “You’re fine. Let’s continue.”

A shadow appeared near the door, drawing her attention from Hannah’s plunking notes. She wasn’t sure how she knew it was Leo, perhaps she’d already learned his stature or stance, but the shadow comforted her instead of frightening her.

Hannah played the final note with as much enthusiasm as if she’d just played a full concerto.

“Good, let’s try again.” She stood, putting her hand to her ear to let Hannah know she was still listening even as she walked. Not that the whole house couldn’t hear the piano with the door and top of the piano left open to release the most sound.

She peered outside the door and smiled at the shock on Leo’s face at catching him listening at the door.

“I’m sorry to disturb you.” He took a step back. “I came in for water and to talk to Ma, then I heard the piano...” He swiped off his hat as if she’d scolded him.

Tamar touched his arm, wanting to put him at ease, but the action seemed to do exactly the opposite. His breath caught and held and she found herself hoping he would breathe.

“Leo, this is your house. You’re welcome to walk down any hall you please.” Especially if he walked along to see her once in a while.

His mouth did a quick flip and as suddenly returned to a frown. “They have a ways to go. I’d best let you get back to work.” He flopped his hat back on and headed for the door.

She held in the urge to wave after him. When had she turned into a lovesick ninny? That wasn’t like her. Tamar Godan was a woman on her own. Yet what did that really mean? That thought only led to more loneliness.

“Very good Hannah.” She nodded her appreciation. After playing only three times, the song was now recognizable. It was a start. “May I ascertain where Alice is in her knowledge, then you can return to the bench?”

Hannah stood, giving her seat to her sister and the scene played out once again. Neither sister knew much more than a few notes and though they rested both hands on the keys, they only used one, leaving the other stiff and awkwardly moving back and forth as a shadow.

After two hours, not only did she know more about her charges, she also needed headache powders. At least she had a very good reason to seek out Mary if anyone should catch her talking to “the staff”. She rolled her eyes as she headed for the kitchen.

THE LAST PLACE LEO EXPECTED TO SEE TAMAR WAS IN THE kitchen not two hours after he'd last seen her in the piano room. To be fair, he'd known she would be there. The moment he'd heard the piano, he'd known, and he couldn't stay away.

Only after she'd realized he was there did he rush off like the fool he was. A fool over her, at least. Normally, he wouldn't spend so much time wandering the house, but he'd found every excuse that made sense to be back inside today. He had to catch someone in the act of sabotage.

Whoever had been breaking in had turned bold and he needed to make sure no one was hurt. Burrs under a saddle were alarming since it hurt the horse and could injure the rider. While Alice's doll might seem trivial, he took that as a personal threat. The doll looked like his sister.

Tamar sat at the servants' table with a steaming cup sitting next to her, massaging her temples. Mary sat next to her and spoke to her in hushed tones. He wanted to know what they were saying, especially since Pa had told her just the night before not to be caught talking, yet they were in the room most likely to be found.

"What's going on?" He raised his voice slightly more than intended.

Tamar visibly flinched and she pressed her fingers to her temples. "Two hours of piano when I haven't played regularly in a year."

Truly? He'd thought she played like an angel strums a harp. He lowered his voice. "You can't sit here. Father could come in any moment. I'll take you to the study."

"The room smells of tobacco. She'll only hurt worse. Just leave her be for now." Mary shooed him.

Mary had never given him trouble before. Perhaps Pa was right about keeping lines drawn. “Miss Godan?”

She sighed and gathered her tea. “I didn’t think I had to worry about you, too?” Her tired eyes met his and he wished he didn’t have to push her. But if he didn’t, she’d be on a loud buckboard back into town to ride a loud train...

He rested a hand on her back and the tips of his fingers tightened at the feel of her soft cotton shirtwaist. She was dressed in a prim white top with a deep blue skirt. Very subdued and perfect for teaching. Yet, if she put on a jacket, she’d be ready for any occasion at all.

He held open the door to the study and took a deep breath. He’d never noticed a prevailing odor of smoke, but he and Pa had spent time in that room, pipes in hand, talking about the future of Johlman Hills. That seemed so long ago now.

Tamar settled into a soft chair and tucked her feet under her just as Ma did when she was under the weather. He kneeled in front of her. “I’m sorry to have to move you. I just didn’t want Pa to send you away on your very first day.” Truth be told, he’d miss her already.

“I don’t want to be sent away.” She gave him a weak smile. “I’m not certain I’ll be up to sitting through another supper like last night. What does one do in this house when one is not feeling well?” She scrunched her face, forming lines in her forehead.

He wanted to massage her temples for her. “I’ll let Mrs. Eliza know.”

“I thought there was no talking to the servants?” She eyed him. “Or is that only an edict for me?”

He wished he could truly explain what Pa had gone through with past help. Then she might understand. “Not just you. None of the men outside are allowed to converse outside of what’s needed to do the job. No jawing. No friendship. All work.” Not like it was when he was a boy. Not like it was before Quincy Phelps.

She slowly shook her head. “Ruling with an iron fist doesn’t bring loyalty.”

He knew that, but he also couldn’t change his father’s mind now. Not after the rule had been made. “Pa doesn’t change his mind mid-stream. Once he says something, he does it.”

Tamar slowly set her tea on the table by her chair and bent her arm over the armrest to create a pillow for her head. He reached tentatively for a stray hank of her hair that had fallen near the nape of her neck but once the softness touched his fingers, he wasn’t sure what to do with it. He couldn’t tuck it behind her ear, nor did he know how to put it back where it belonged.

He sought her eyes, which was probably the worst thing he could do if he wanted to figure out what to do next because he was immediately lost in their blue depths. As deep as the ocean and seemingly as far away. This woman was everything he could never have. She was rules and society. She was forbidden by his father. She wasn’t interested in him in the slightest...

She smiled. “Is something the matter with my hair, Leo?”

He’d never heard her say his name and his chest about burst with the pleasure. It was like receiving a new name that he’d never heard before but was completely *him*. He leaned forward ever so slightly and brushed his lips against her hand.

He was near her lips, so close, but her hand would have to do for now.

She let out a small gasp of surprise and he found he liked the sound.

“I’ll check on you later. If you need, send me a note and I’ll have Mary make up more tea. Cold tea isn’t worth drinking, especially for a headache.” He released the strands of her hair through his fingers, recalling the softness even as he walked away.

Tamar had found her way into his very mind, but if he let her into his heart, where would that lead her? He was nothing now. He’d wanted to ask for her hand to secure his place with his father. Now, he needed to secure his place in his own family before he ever risked telling her his heart. With how Father felt about Tamar, he’d send her away for good and his word, was law.

Chapter 9

Coffee had barely warmed Leo's lips when Pa's foreman Joseph slammed into the house and raced to the dining room.

"Leo, drop it. Fire in the western valley!" He'd barely gotten the words free of his mouth before he turned and ran back outside.

Leo left his cup on the table, sorry for the mess but every second counted. He grabbed his hat and took an extra second to wet his handkerchief in the water by the sideboard. If he had to face fire, he wanted something wet over his face mouth and cheeks.

Coal, his dapple-gray gelding, waited for him, twitching with the energy surrounding them. People rushed around, gathering water in barrels, packing potato sacks in the wagon, and collecting horses.

"Gideon!" Leo called to his brother where he stood helping the line passing buckets of water to the barrels.

His brother caught his eye but continued working.

"I'm going to ride down there with Dotty and Madge, see if I can drive the woolies closer to the barn."

Gideon nodded his approval but didn't offer to come along. Pa would tell him not to break the line. How had

Gideon known before Leo had? He hadn't overslept. Who'd told his brother, but left him out, making him look tardy?

Coal dropped his head, his black mane whipping back against Leo's gloved hands. The worry had him gripping the reins too tight. He let up some slack and immediately Coal's muscular neck seemed to lengthen along with his stride.

Sheep huddled in large bunches away from the smoke. A line of red, dancing fire lit the low grass of the valley. Behind it, black desolation where the fire had started. Luckily, the grass was thick, green, and frost-covered so it hadn't spread fast. Maybe that was the intent. To scare them, but not ruin the resource. Because the Douglasses wanted that valley too.

He pulled up on the reins and turned Coal in a wide arc around the edge of the frightened sheep. He didn't want to drive them into further danger. With a rapid high whistle, Dotty raced one way and Marge the other. Coal knew what to do without any help. A well-trained horse made all the difference.

The sheep were more scared of the horse than the dogs, so Coal's presence drove them toward either of the herders, who then zig-zagged them closer together until they were in one quickly moving bunch. With a keen eye for any woolly wanting to break free of the herd, he drove them from a distance, keeping them well away from the smoke.

As he crested the next hill, keeping them away from the fire wagon, Pa waved an acknowledgement at him, then kept on. At least Pa could see he wasn't worthless. He'd done his part. Now, they just had to put out the fire. He had to find somewhere to keep the sheep where they wouldn't mix with rams and where there was enough grazing to hold them for a while.

They'd just come from the eastern pasture which was higher and smaller. They'd never kept the sheep in that section past July. Now, in October, the grass was dry and dead. They would paw and rut to get at the good stems underneath, but that would kill the growth next spring. He had little choice though.

The dogs waited for his cue, driving the sheep slowly ahead of him. He steadily directed Coal, more with his knees than the reins, toward the east pasture. Eddy, one of their hired hands saw where he was headed and unlatched the wide gate for the fence. The opening was intentionally wide so the sheep wouldn't even notice him standing there outside of their focus.

Waiting near the gate, Leo let the dogs do their work. If he tried to do anything now, the sheep might spook. Sheep were fickle beasts, allowing themselves to be led by one but occasionally going against the grain to prove anyone wrong that a sheep always did as it was told. A spooked sheep often became an unwitting leader.

A sense of relief washed over him as Eddy swung the gate shut and latched it. With a turn, he saw Eddy's shoulders relax as well.

"That sure was something. There was a nip of frost this morning. I know it doesn't reach that low in the valley and there's still moss there to keep it green...but what could've started a fire?" He shook his head and pursed his lips.

The talk was just making noise and both men knew it. Nothing would've naturally started a fire on a chilly morning with frost in the air where no one was supposed to be.

"Sheep don't start fires," Leo stated the obvious. "But people who want land do."

Eddy took a deep breath. "I've got a family to feed. I like working here, but I've been getting threatening letters for nigh on a month now."

Leo dropped his gaze to his feet. Without help, the ranch would have to shrink. "Does my pa know?"

Eddy sighed. "Nope. Not yet. I hate to tell him now. I'm not the only one, neither. You do what you will with that information, but I've seen too much recently. No one has been harmed yet, but all these things...they add up."

They all added up to the Douglasses finally trying to rid the valley of the Johlman family. Without the sheep ranch there, they could double their operation. Endangering people and livestock left an acid in Leo's stomach.

"I need to let Pa know. If you all suddenly leave, we'll be in a hard place."

Eddy shrugged. "With how he's been with you lately, I'm surprised you're not going to be the first to leave. Can't say as I'd happily put up with his treatment and still do the job."

He'd never even considered quitting. Was that what his father ultimately wanted? Was that why he'd suggested going off to the big city with Tamar? "I'm not leaving. This is my home, and I will not let anyone stand in my way." Even if Gideon did become the heir, he'd never send Leo away.

"Be that as it may, I'm not family. If anything else happens, I'm leaving. If anything happens to harm people, not only am I leaving, I'll be telling the sheriff about it. This has gone on long enough. The law should've been brought in."

He understood Eddy's sentiment, but Pa didn't. Forcing the law to choose a side was dangerous. As it was, if either family had an issue, the law dealt with that one issue and left

everything else alone, no sides taken. Once the law decided who was right and wrong...the other party could be left outside any protection at all.

And assuming his family would be found in the right had put him in a rough place more often than he could count. There were no guarantees.

“You have to do what you have to do. I’m going out there to help them put out that fire.” He gave Eddy a nod.

“I’ll get the dogs some water and keep an eye on the barns. You just never know...”

The unstated threat left Leo’s empty stomach aching like he’d been hit by a rock. Would someone target their barn or family, knowing they were all out battling a fire?

GRAY SMOKE CLOAKED THE WEST SIDE OF THE HOUSE AND AS often as Tamar had tried to divert Hannah and Alice’s attention back to studying, she, too, was distracted.

“Do you think everyone is all right? Do you think the sheep are all right?” Alice bit her lip, her eyes glistening.

For fifteen, she was young, or perhaps just more tender than Tamar recalled at that age. She patted the girl’s hand. “I’m sure your father and brothers will do everything they can. We do nothing by worrying here.”

Hannah laid a small pewter cross she’d been holding on the top of the piano. “I’ve been praying for them all morning. I dare say, it’s difficult to trust when you can’t see the results.”

Tamar didn’t know much about prayers, nor their effectiveness. “Perhaps your mother has received word?”

Hannah laughed harshly. “Never. Pa tells her nothing about what goes on outside the doors of this house. She doesn’t

know how many sheep we have, nothing.”

Tamar gently closed the cover over the keys of the piano. “I can see we’ll get nowhere further today until we know everyone has made it safely through the day. Do you have other studies to work on or chores to keep your minds busy?” Her own childhood of privilege left her woefully unprepared to deal with the coiled tension in her own stomach, much less that of the girls.

“Hannah doesn’t. She’s done with school. I have my studies... If I can study.” Alice wrung her hands.

Leo was out there, making her just as distracted as the girls. Mary had been tidying the dining room and freshening the coffee carafe when Tamar had come down to breakfast. All morning, she’d taken care with her appearance since she only saw Leo at breakfast and evening meals. When he hadn’t been there, she’d asked after him.

Mary had explained about the fire and nodded to the window. She’d wanted to show the appearance of good health after Leo tended to her needs the day before. Now, she felt ill all over again. What if he were injured? His grin flashed through her mind, twisting her thoughts even more. He’d kissed her hand, sending tingles of pleasure through her body...and she hadn’t told him his touch was welcome.

Then again, what was one to say? She wasn’t supposed to entertain him in the slightest. His father had pronounced it so and kissing her certainly didn’t follow orders. Now, a day later, she could barely think about drinking tea much less any other distraction.

As if on cue, Mary pushed a cart into the room with steaming water, tea leaves, and finger sandwiches. “Ladies.”

She curtsied slightly. "If you need anything else, just ring." She pointed to a new wooden handled bell sitting on the cart.

Alice's brow furrowed. "A bell? Why, that's just silly. I'll come down and ask for what I need if I need anything at all."

Mary frowned slightly and ducked her head. "Mrs. Johlman asked me to tell you to use it." Her gaze lifted and met Tamar's with a knowing glance.

It wasn't that Mrs. Johlman didn't trust her daughters to know what to say and what not to, she didn't trust Tamar. With her presence, she'd implemented a bell.

"I refuse. How degrading," Tamar said. She might not have thought so before leaving New York, but now that the use of the bell lay squarely on her shoulders she could feel the same shame Mary had to feel.

Hannah clapped. "It will be our secret. If we ring the bell, it will be so Mother thinks we're using it, but she's always upstairs and will never know the difference."

For as much as she wasn't supposed to befriend these women, Tamar felt her reservations falling away. She wanted the inclusion in the group. She craved the comradery. "Agreed. I won't be part of that foolishness. I'm capable of walking down a hall."

Mary curtsied once again, this time with a roguish smile. "Enjoy your tea, ladies. If I hear anything from Eddy or Riker, I'll let you know."

The names of all the workers around the ranch still hadn't stuck firmly in Tamar's mind, but Hannah and Alice seemed to know who these men were. "Do they work for your father?"

Alice nodded. "Riker is new. He replaced Quincy."

Hannah sighed heavily. “Quincy is the one who set Father on edge. Or over it, some would say.”

Alice tenderly reached over and held her sister’s hand. “I didn’t mean to speak of him. I’m sorry.”

Tamar finally had something besides Leo to worry over that was strong enough to move her from her spot by the window. “What happened?”

Hannah dropped her head and picked up a tea towel to crumple in her fingers. “He was my first love. He and Pa became good friends, enough that Pa had even talked to him about what he could do on the ranch as...as part of the family.” Her voice broke and she hid her face in the towel.

Alice glanced up at Tamar, her blue eyes shining with tears. “We didn’t know Quincy was a cousin of the Douglas family. He didn’t have a Douglas last name. He wasn’t from around here...” She sighed, wrapping her tiny arm around Hannah and hugging her tight. “He learned a lot of things about the house and ranch, mostly because we never kept secrets with those we trusted. But no more trust.” She shook her head, hard. “Now, we’re not allowed to talk to any of the men outside of orders. We aren’t allowed to speak to anyone who works in the house in any sort of friendly way.”

One interloper had cost the family trust and connections. Since she was still new, they thought of her as just the same. Now Mr. Johlman’s insistence she stay away from his sons made complete sense. He was protecting his family in the only way he knew how. If she never learned the workings of the ranch, nor really the family, she couldn’t take information to anyone.

He would expect her to do her job and nothing more, then leave with no connections. If he ever found out she was

making friendships with his daughters and with Mary, they would all suffer the consequences.

She recalled her father's deep and loud anger when people had gone behind his back to do things against his wishes, thinking they were cutting needless corners. There was always a reason behind a rule when business was involved.

Yet, as she looked between the two sisters and the tea tray left by Mary, she couldn't deny she still wanted what they so freely offered. They trusted her and she wouldn't tell the Douglas family anything. She didn't even know them and couldn't point them out on the street.

Though, perhaps that was the biggest danger of all. She sucked in a fortifying breath and brewed some stiff tea to steam away the worry. "Girls, we need to be watchful. Someone was in this house. Someone you trust isn't who they say they are and for your father's sake, we need to find out who he is." She took a sip of tea and clenched her teeth against the burn on her lips.

Hannah stood and Alice followed. They met her at the cart. Hannah had wiped her eyes and now her chin was firm without the slightest quiver. "Pa allows the men in the kitchen for food. We have to be careful to watch that door. Pa wouldn't notice them going in there, but if they leave the kitchen, that's when they become a suspect."

Alice nodded, though more timidly. "I'll do my part. Small as it may be since I'm gone most of the day."

The sisters might never have a knack for the piano, but they had honor and loyalty down by rote.

A commotion near the kitchen door sent all three girls racing to hear the news. Leo and Gideon stood by the door

smelling of smoke, their faces blackened with soot. Both sisters pelted the brothers with questions the moment they crossed the threshold.

Gideon held out his hand for quiet. "I'll answer anything you want to know as long as you wait until I get a drink first."

Leo's gaze scanned the room and he leaned against the wall for support as soon as he caught sight of Tamar. She rushed to his side, needing to know he was all right. Though she knew nothing about treating fire damage or smokey lungs, she knew battling a fire could kill.

"What happened?" she whispered, wishing she could thread her fingers with his despite the soot to feel that he was sound as much as see him. She reached for the pitcher of water Mary handed her and poured a glass for Leo, then handed it to him.

He glanced at Gideon. "I still need some fresh air. I'll be outside." He downed the water in a gulp. With a cough, he turned to head out the door.

Gideon gave him a slight wave and Leo slipped his hand to her back and led her out the back door. A moment later she found herself in the same secluded garden she'd enjoyed when she'd arrived. Hanging vines, though dried, provided privacy.

Leo coughed slightly and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "The fire was set, Tamar. It isn't safe for you here."

"I'm not leaving unless you're telling me to." She wasn't sure where the words came from, but they were out before she could stop them. She'd always been stubborn, and she wouldn't leave Leo.

He chuckled softly. "I'm not telling you to leave. I'm telling you things may get dangerous. I can't watch over you like I'd like to. My focus is split." He took a deep ragged breath.

"Don't talk. You sound like you've eaten gravel." She touched his hand gingerly, and he responded by holding her tight.

"I was worried about you the whole time. What if someone came to the house while we were all fighting the fire?"

"The girls and I will keep a good lookout. We won't let anything happen."

He closed his red-rimmed eyes. "I didn't bring you here for this..."

She hoped he'd brought her for more than just piano lessons. For as much as she understood Mr. Johlman wanting her to stay away from Leo, she couldn't. "Why did you?"

He cupped the back of her neck and drew her close. When his mouth came over hers, her heart pounded not only with wonder, but worry. He tasted of smoke and ash, yet she didn't want him to stop. Her first kiss would be her last if anyone saw them.

She caressed his stained face, and he loosened his hold on her. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"What's going on in there!" Mr. Johlman's voice boomed from behind them.

Tamar whipped around in time to see the fury in Mr. Johlman's eyes before he focused on Leo. "Get in the house. We have some talking to do."

Chapter 10

“Pa!” Leo’s voice seemed to carry through the yard far beyond the distance it should’ve.

Tamar held her breath and chased after the two men, though her head was still light from the kiss. Leo would shoulder all the blame as he always did, and she couldn’t let that happen. Mr. Johlman stomped into the kitchen with Leo close behind. She caught up as the door slammed behind them.

No matter how generous and kind she tried to be, she always ended up sending a house into turmoil. First her own household with her refusal to wed. She’d been standing in the way of her father and aunt marrying. Then, in Cutter’s Creek, when she seemed to offend everyone by merely breathing. Now, by falling for a man she had no business falling for.

But her heart said it would completely surrender if she stayed on that ranch.

She swung the door open and followed the pair. Leo should not have to face the wrath of his father alone. She certainly hadn’t pushed him away. Yet, in the moments it had taken her to reach for the handle and open the door, they were gone.

Mary stood by the stove near her mother, her hand at her chest. “Deary, me. I’ve never seen him so angry. What in

heavens happened out there? Was it the fire?"

Tamar wanted to crumple into a heap. "I need to find them. Where did they go?"

Mary shook her head slowly, even as her eyes zeroed in on the doorway to make sure they were alone. "They went to Mr. Johlman's office. You're not welcome there any more than I am. I'm sorry. If you want to make sure his ire doesn't fall on you, you'd best make sure you have all your work done for the day before he leaves that room."

She had given the girls a break because of the fire... perhaps getting them working again would put Mr. Johlman in a better frame of mind to listen to her. Or, the dissonant plonking would send him into a fit of rage and she'd be gone by the afternoon.

"That is...perhaps...the best course." She headed for the door to find her students.

"Miss Godan..."

Tamar stopped short at Mary's use of her proper name. "Yes?"

Mary dabbed a white towel in the water and rubbed it on a bar of lye soap then came over and gently scrubbed at both sides of her face. "I think I know after seeing you what put Mr. Johlman in such a fit...and it wasn't the fire." A smirk caressed her lips. "If you go into that piano room with his sooty handprints on your face, and your lips all rosy from his...the girls aren't likely to listen to a word you have to say about music."

Gracious. She wanted to melt right into the floor. Her memory danced through the last few minutes, and she recalled he'd also laid a warm hand on her back. "Is my shirt soiled in

the back as well?” She turned slightly and tried to see, but with her corset she couldn’t twist enough.

Mary laughed as did her mother. “Well, better that it’s back there than anywhere on your front, but yes. He definitely touched your back....” Mary bit her lip. “How are we going to get you to your room without anyone seeing the state of your clothes?”

Mrs. Eliza slowly stirred a pot of something, probably whatever they would have for supper, assuming Tamar would still be there.

“Grab the painting and gardening smock that Mrs. Johlman got for Mary. You’re about the same size and with her dark skirt and hair, if she ducks her head...perhaps she could pass for you in the hall. If the person didn’t look too closely.”

Tamar had her doubts. While her hair was the brown that was all the fashion right now, it was nowhere near the vibrant red of Mary’s. “I don’t think anyone would be fooled and they would wonder why I’m wearing it.”

Mary tapped her lips in thought. “You’re right. Better to create a diversion. The only three people indisposed in the house at the moment are Mrs. Johlman and the girls. Why don’t I go up and grab the sheets? Mrs. Johlman always insists on helping me with those because the mattresses are so heavy. I can pretend my back has a twinge like Mum’s, then she’ll call the girls to come help. That should clear the hall for you to make it to your room.”

“But what about the extra work for you?” She never would’ve considered that before, but now she could think of little else. Why should her troubles bring more work for someone else?

“I’d have to do the sheets tomorrow anyway. What’s one day?” Mary shrugged a shoulder. “Just don’t go kissing the boss’s son again when he’s all sooty, because I can only do sheets once a week.”

Both Mary and Eliza broke into fits of laughter. Cutter’s Creek Tamar would’ve stomped off at being the target of the joke. But Belle Fourche Tamar wanted to laugh right along with them. She had gotten herself into a predicament.

“Thank you. I can’t tell you how much your help means to me.”

Mary blushed slightly. “It’s nothing. Give me ten minutes, then make a run for it. You’ll hear us wrestling with that mattress all the way down here.”

Tamar paced in the kitchen once Mary had left. Though Eliza was kind, she wasn’t as open to friendship as Mary and the talk ceased, leaving her ears open to hearing little things she hadn’t before, like the yelling from down the hall. Mr. Johlman seemed certain Leo thought he was too good for the ranch.

Things quieted for a moment, and she heard a loud series of thumps from upstairs.

“Girls! Come help. Mary strained her back!”

Then came the dashing footsteps of two girls who had hearts of gold and were ready to come to the rescue. Without the feud, this family would be cherished in the community. All the children were good. The men respected. A misunderstanding had ruined everything, forcing people to act in ways they shouldn’t.

Tamar held a slow and steady pace to her room. If she ran, someone might hear her and come out to ask her for more

help. Then, Mrs. Johlman would see her red face and blackened shirtwaist. Her cheeks burned at the thought. That simple action, one she'd enjoyed far too much, would've ruined her reputation in New York.

There was no walking in gardens alone with single men there. There would've been no stolen kisses, not that she'd wanted them. For as much as she'd missed New York and all the trappings of city life, Belle Fourche felt like home even in the short time she'd been there. Leaving here would hurt much worse than leaving the big city.

After freshening her clothes, she thoroughly washed her face and patted a little sprinkle of talc over her cheeks to lighten her skin and take away the redness from scrubbing. If Mr. Johlman called her into his office to fire her, she wouldn't give him any proof of what had transpired in the garden merely by walking through the door. Even the shirtwaist she changed into was much the same as the stained one.

She straightened her spine and headed for the girls' room. They looked mildly surprised to see her when she knocked. "I think we should try to finish our lesson now that the fire scare is over, don't you think?"

Alice ducked her head and neatly folded her hands in her lap, while Hannah stood and adopted a warrior's pose. Feet apart. Shoulders squared. "Our brother is fighting to stay in this household. I don't think he needs music to accompany him." She turned away. "And I don't think right now is a suitable time to remind father you're here."

PA BLUSTERED LIKE A FALL WIND, STEADY AND HARD. BUT that's all it was, bluster. And just like a good gust of wind, it could do damage when he hit on a weak point, like Tamar. Leo

did his best to keep his feelings beneath the surface. Giving anything away would make him look guilty to his father.

“You listening, boy? Or are you already planning what your mansion in New York will look like?” Pa’s insult hit the mark.

He kept his tone steady, respectful. “I’m not, nor will I ever be, interested in living in New York.” He wasn’t sure what he would do if Tamar wanted to return there. She’d never mentioned returning.

“I strictly told her to stay away from you. I would think that you’d be smarter than a spring stump and assume that the same would go for you. You know nothing about this woman. She could be anyone.”

“But she’s not. She is not another Quincy.”

Pa flinched. Bringing Quincy into the conversation may have been low, but it needed to be said. Quincy had weaseled his way into Pa’s good graces. He’d yet to forgive himself for that lapse. “We don’t know that. We didn’t know with Quincy, and we may never know with her.”

“Are you suspicious of her every move because I brought her here? Everything that I do meets with your disapproval. If Gideon or Ma had found her in town, would you have welcomed her then?”

Pa didn’t meet his eyes when he shook his head. “That’s foolishness. I don’t trust anyone until they prove to me they can be trusted. That woman is doing everything she can to make sure I never trust her. The fact that you put her above your own family makes me think I was right in dealing with you as I have.”

“What about the fire?” He’d done his work there. He’d helped in every possible way and was still covered with the grime to prove it. “I saved that part of the flock from the fire. If I was working for the Douglasses, wouldn’t I have let them perish?”

Pa’s head swung up to meet his eyes so fast it made Leo slightly dizzy. “I never, ever, said you were working for the Douglasses. Why would I? Why would you even bring that up?”

What other reason would he have for kicking Leo out of the family?

“Haven’t you? What other reason could you have to distrust me as much as you do? You treat me like I’m Quincy. But I did my job.”

“That you did.”

At least Pa could admit that, even if it was forced and hardly a compliment. “You’ve never laid out what you expect of me. You get angry with me for listening to Ma. You get angry with me for not listening to Ma. You seem to think that just because I’m the oldest, I should know how you think.”

“I always did.” Pa slammed his hands down on the desk and leaned forward. “When I was your age, I had to know my Pa’s thoughts and do the work. I’d taken over for him by the time I was your age. If you can’t do this, you’ll amount to nothing. And that piano teacher would be gone if not for your mother. If I find her doing what I expressly asked her not to do, I’ll send her back to town.”

Leo prayed, both for his own sake and for Ma’s, that Tamar listened to orders for the next few days until Pa calmed

down a little. He would send her a note through his sisters because getting caught with her would be disastrous.

“I’m watching you, boy. I know you can do this if you put your mind to it. The fact that you don’t is what worries me. There is no fortune to send with you if you leave. You won’t be welcomed back like the prodigal son. Do the job or leave.”

He stood and gathered his hat, ready to scrub his face and start over. Shadowing the favored son had worked right up until the minute he’d followed his heart into the garden. That couldn’t happen again, no matter how much he wanted it to.

Loving Tamar had to move to the end of the line until he could convince Pa he deserved to stay in the family at the very least. As he made his way down the hall, Mary caught up with him. A huge bundle of sheets weighed her down. “Sir!”

He stopped and waited for her to reach him. “I left a pitcher of warm water in your room for washing...and made sure Miss Godan was able to clean up without being seen as well.” She did a short bob in place of a curtsy which he’d always thought was silly anyway. They didn’t live where the servants should have to *act* like servants.

“Thank you. I appreciate that you looked out for her.” He kept his voice low so his father wouldn’t hear him talking with Mary, though they were discussing work. “Please do your best to avoid her in the coming days until Pa isn’t so angry. She will take the brunt of it if you do.”

Mary nodded and pursed her lips as she shifted the large bundle in her arms. “Aye. I figured as much. I’ll tell Mum as well.” She bustled down the hall, probably more so she didn’t drop the sheets than that she wanted to go. Mary usually liked chatting more than any other woman they’d hired in the past.

He stopped by his room and found the pitcher just as Mary had said, with a clean shirt and trousers draped over the back of a ladderback chair. He changed his trousers and washed his face and hands before touching the white shirt.

When he looked ready to head back out to the barn, he took up his pen and some stationary Ma had given him for Christmas a few years before.

Hannah,

Father is in quite the state. It would be best to give him nothing more to anger him. Please let Miss Godan know that she should avoid talking to anyone unnecessarily. I don't want to see her have to leave.

He paused, hovering the pen over the paper. He certainly didn't want her to leave. If she did, he knew he would never find her again. His pulse quickened as various possibilities ran through his mind. Too many to ever check.

I'm sure this will be short-lived. Pa will return to the way he was as soon as this recent spate of attacks stop. Until then, please ask her to be as silent and respectful as possible so we might all keep our positions.

Father could dismiss him just as quickly as Tamar. The family knew it but putting it to paper made it all the more real.

Your brother,

Leo

At least he could be certain his sister would never let the note be found. He'd shared secret missives with her as children and she'd always tossed them in the fire after reading. She would do no less now. If only the rest of his family could support him so resolutely.

At least he had his brother and sisters by his side, and perhaps, sometime in the future, Tamar would join them.

Chapter II

The Johlman sisters made a good point about keeping the reminder of her presence from Mr. Johlman. Especially with Mr. Johlman's anger lingering over the house. Best to avoid any confrontation in a hallway. Yet, Tamar still had to do something to avoid his anger besides cowering in her room.

Avoiding the kitchen to be sure she didn't meet anyone, Tamar left out the front door and headed for the garden she'd left not an hour before. The garden where they'd been found. The garden she might never see the same ever again.

A solid wood arch marked the entrance with tangled vines up each side. Thorns along the thick branches made her think they might be roses. If she was still there in the spring, she would know. She wandered down the nearest path surrounded by browning foliage and crackling leaves under her feet.

She tugged her shawl tighter around her and took a deep breath of crisp air. Winter was cold in New York too, but the chill felt different here. The wind seemed less raw, or perhaps the difference was all the thoughts bouncing around in her head were more so. Her first kiss left her wanting another and yet, another would be disastrous for all involved.

If she were smart, she would leave. Just like she left New York. Just like she left Cutter's Creek. She wasn't meant to be here. There had to be somewhere in this world where she

belonged, where she wouldn't cause a stir. Yet the garden held her in place like an invisible door had closed her in. This felt like home. Despite Mr. Johlman's temper, the beautiful rolling hills of Belle Fourche spoke to her soul.

At the edge of the garden, a low railing kept all the plants contained. She stood next to it, looking out over the expanse of pastures. A line of wire fence traced the gently sloping hills until she could see them no more.

The night before, she'd written a letter to Isadora back in Cutter's Creek. Perhaps her traveling companion had meant to trick her and teach her a lesson by sending her to Belle Fourche, but Tamar had needed such a lesson. The hard truth was that, by having Isadora fight her battles, she hadn't learned anything. She'd needed to arrive somewhere on her own in order to learn for herself.

Reaching Belle Fourche, alone and unexpected, had forced her to act accordingly. If she offended everyone she met, she would have nowhere left to go. While the test had been one of the most difficult of her life, she'd passed. Perhaps not spectacularly, but she was still there and had employment.

Without Isadora's shove, she wouldn't have come to Belle Fourche, cow and sheep town. She wouldn't have ever thought she'd fit in. If she did, she probably would've unknowingly chosen the Douglas side of the feud, since Hannah had told her they were much wealthier.

And she would've been on the wrong side if what the Johlman's said was true.

Rustling in the leaves behind her made Tamar turn to see who'd joined her. Her heart sank just a little in disappointment when it was Mary's rosy head and smiling face that bobbed

through the entrance. She had to push away her feelings for Leo but how could she train her heart not to seek him?

Mary glanced over her shoulder. “Good afternoon. I saw you out the kitchen window, barely. It’s pretty well hidden in here with the trees and bushes.” She glanced around the wide space.

Tamar stepped back deeper into the garden away from the rail in case anyone should walk by. Within moments, her world felt utterly private and hidden again. That privacy wasn’t true though. Mr. Johlman had easily seen her and Leo.

“We shouldn’t be caught talking. Not today. I don’t want Leo to pay for my oversight.” Nor Mary, but she doubted the woman would believe that.

Mary nodded. “I heated some water for tea. I figured you’d like that better than coffee, though that’s what most of the men around here drink. Horrible black stuff.” She shuddered.

As much as she craved the time with Mary, she couldn’t indulge. Leo’s position within the family was too tremulous to be tested. “We should find somewhere else to talk.” Tamar headed for her friend but stopped short when Mary held up her hand.

“I’m heading back inside in a trice. I need to know that you won’t tinker with Leo’s heart. He’s a good man. He’s got a tenderness to him that his father does not. A tenderness his father sees as weakness, but it’s not. That tenderness. That understanding...it will lead to the end of this awful feud. I know it. If he can only hang on.”

Tamar swallowed hard. She’d noticed the very same. Leo was a man capable of working hard and doing what needed to

be done, but also caring about everyone involved. “I would never. I would leave before I would hurt him.”

Mary shook her head and touched Tamar’s shoulder with a surprising grip. “I don’t think you understand. If you leave now, that *will* hurt him. He’s not frivolous.”

Tamar’s head spun with what Mary was saying without uttering the words. Leo had staked his claim over her without ever asking to court her. Perhaps he’d already known it wasn’t necessary, that her heart was hooked. She nodded softly. “I know. And I accept.” Mary wrapped her in a quick hug and Tamar’s heart hitched at the friendly contact. She shivered, feeling a tremor up her back. Someone was listening and she didn’t want to be caught in the garden once again. The moment they pulled apart Mr. Johlman’s eyes locked onto them.

“You.” He made a thousand accusations in the one word.

“Mr. Johlman, Mary had just come to get me for tea...” Her voice gave out, knowing he’d seen them embrace. That excuse would never suit him.

“Pack your trunk and leave it at the end of your bed. One of my men will be taking you back to town in one hour. If you know what’s good for you—and I have every reason to believe you don’t—you won’t talk to a single person from my household again.”

COAL HAD TAKEN TO LIMPING SLIGHTLY ON THE RIDE BACK UP to the house after fighting the fire, giving Leo the best excuse at his disposal to be out of the house. He led the gelding into a stall and tempted him with a feed bag before grabbing the tools needed to clean out Coal’s hooves.

Taking care of his horse was one of the most important parts of his job. With the vast area of pastures they had, he couldn't be without one. There were other horses available, but he wanted his mount ready whenever he needed. Good care took time.

He'd checked three hooves and picked out one rock before Hannah rushed into the barn. "Leo? Where are you?"

He wasn't usually back there, but he'd wanted a little privacy with his own thoughts. That moment with Tamar had left him a little shaken and distracted, two things he couldn't be if he had to face his father again.

"Back here." He waved from the other side of the high-walled stall.

She raced back to him. Her pace alone set him on edge.

"What's the matter? Is something wrong with Alice?"

She stood near the end of the stall, clear of kicking hooves should Coal decide he didn't appreciate her being there. "It's Tamar. She's gone. Father just left with her."

He nudged his way past Coal to Hannah. "Gone? Where? Why?" Too many questions. He'd faced his father, taken on the blame. Why had he gone for Tamar?

"He was too angry to even yell. I learned from Ma that he caught her talking to Mary in the garden. It's my fault, Leo. I couldn't find her. I didn't give her your note." She handed him the folded paper he recognized from a few hours before.

He turned to brush past Coal again and follow Pa. "Did he take her into town?"

Hannah caught his arm, holding him in place. "You can't go after them. If you do, he'll cut you out for sure. Ma is in

distress. She didn't see this coming. She liked Tamar. If she loses you, too." Her eyes glistened. "Please, Leo..."

He wasn't sure what she was asking of him. "What about Tamar? Isn't she important too?"

Hannah gripped harder and a tear escaped down her cheek, surprising him. Hannah was as tough as nails. She'd gotten her strength from her father. "I don't know. I only know that if Pa sends you away, Ma will get the melancholies like she did after Quincy. I can't go through that again."

He would hope losing a son meant more to her than losing a future son by law, but he wasn't about to point that out to Hannah when she'd loved Quincy. "I have to go after them. I'll somehow convince Pa to accept both of us back. Something is wrong. He's worried about all these things happening so close to the house and he's taking it out on us."

She nodded. "I know, but that doesn't make it any easier on him. Someone close at hand is doing this. Either for the Douglasses or to make it look like the Douglasses are at fault."

He hadn't considered that. Leave it to Hannah to give him a new angle. Everything that had ever gone wrong seemed to be another thing added to the list of schemes perpetuated or perpetrated by the Douglas clan. But what if it wasn't true?

He couldn't deal with that now, but he'd ruminate on those things later. "I've got to try."

She stepped back, wrapping her arms around her middle. "I'll go back in with Ma and try to make this better."

"Hopefully, I'll be returning with your teacher. Ma has always wanted you to have a fine education, like a proper lady. I think that's also bothering Pa. He accused me of wanting to

live in the city. He sees it as weak. He can't mesh the two in his mind and he needs to."

"I'll have Ma talk to him. Maybe that will put his mind at ease... If Miss Godan comes back with you, that is. He might just shove her on the first train out of Belle Fourche, cattle or not, and consider himself rid of her."

Pa had been known to do rash things like that. He wasn't a soft and gentle man. Sheep empires weren't built by careful men. Leo slowly backed Coal out of the stall, letting Hannah back away at the same pace so he would have room to saddle his mount.

"I'll be careful. I'll do this like Gideon."

Hannah snorted in a most unladylike way. "Gideon is too much of a follower to ever go after Tamar. He'd listen to Pa and head out to do chores. A follower never makes a good leader. Remember that, Leo." She turned and fled the barn.

STRANGE HOW RIDING NEXT TO MR. JOHLMAN MADE THE TIME on the wagon seat go so much slower on the same ride as it had gone with his son just days before. Had she really fallen so deeply for Leo in only a few days? Tamar gripped the side of the seat, doing her best not to brush against Mr. Johlman in the slightest.

His jaw was set in a hard line, and she kept her eyes off him because even turning her face toward him seemed to pique his anger. At least keeping track of the road, the hills, the houses they passed, all kept her mind from clinging to the fact that each step took her further from Leo and she hadn't even been allowed to say goodbye.

Each hill crest brought her farther from where she wanted to be. Icy wind bit at her cheeks and stung her eyes.

“Why?” she asked, finally. She couldn’t just sit there, straight backed, letting this man dictate her life. He could tell her to leave his ranch, but he couldn’t make her leave Belle Fourche.

“I gave you a direct order. You were on my property. I was paying you to do a job and that means you follow my orders.”

“What about Leo? Doesn’t he get a choice?” She wanted to point out that his heart should matter, but she didn’t know his heart. He’d shown her, but not told her.

“Leo is a boy in a man’s body. He isn’t ready to take the lead and probably never will be. Sending you away will be good for him. Life isn’t a string of fun times followed by happiness. It’s choice after choice, most often a forced choice between two difficult things. He doesn’t see that yet. His head is squarely in the clouds.”

“Perhaps you don’t see the value in that, but the world does. He has optimism. If you worked with him, you wouldn’t see the same side of the coin all the time. You’d see both. If I hand you a penny, it is worth the same, no matter which side is facing up. Don’t you see that?”

“Leave it to you, a big city woman, to bring money into this. Is that all you know?” He flicked the lines and the horse jolted ahead, jarring her forward.

Far from it. “I was learning to love your land and your family before...” She stopped herself from finishing the sentiment.

A few minutes later he pulled to a stop in front of the boarding house. “I will pay for three days for you. That should cover what I owed you for my daughters. After that, you’ll

cover your own or you'll leave." He turned away and climbed down.

She was still unsure of her footing as she tried to make her way down the side of the wagon without looking like a fool. She'd managed before, but now she was nervous and angry.

Mr. Gatlin came out, scratching his head behind his ear. "What's this, Bodey?"

"This is not my problem anymore. Take her trunk inside." He brushed past the man and headed inside, leaving Tamar alone outside in the cold. The feeling was getting a little tedious.

She controlled every breath, careful to show no weakness as she opened the door and headed for the small office. Mr. Johlman seemed to fill the whole room as he handed a few dollars over to Mrs. Keen.

Mrs. Keen's eyes gleamed with a triumphant smile. "Welcome back, Miss Godan. I'm afraid I no longer have any unshared rooms, it being so late in the evening. At least the money Mr. Johlman has put aside for you will last a little longer." She laughed.

Tamar refused to rise to the bait. There was nowhere else for her to go that she knew of without leaving town. That train was her last option, and she wouldn't take it lightly. The moment she sold what she could to board a train, she would lose her chance of ever seeing Leo again.

Mr. Johlman turned on his heel and strode from the room leaving nothing but a cold dread in Tamar's stomach.

"Well, you've burned bridges with the Douglasses and the Johlmans. What are you going to do now?" the proprietress cackled.

Chapter 12

Leo slowed his horse to a walk as he rode into town. He'd expected to see Pa and the wagon either by the railroad station, the stagecoach station, or the boarding house. But Pa wasn't anywhere along the main street. He wouldn't have gone down any side streets, since Pa didn't drink or cavort.

Leo slowed Coal once again to look down each street, but came up empty. The wagon wasn't even at the bank. No one had passed him on the ride in, so he couldn't have gone back home. He had to be somewhere.

The new teacher dashed from inside the mercantile and raced toward the bakery, her petticoats flashing at her hems. He tried to flag her down, but she just waved and kept right on running. "Miss Forde!" he called, since she was the only person in the street who would talk to him.

She slid to a stop and turned to face him. "Yes, Mr. Johlman?" Her eyes looked...accusatory. That was new.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

She flattened her lips and shot a glare at him hot enough to burn him right off his saddle. "As if you don't know. I trusted you, Leo Johlman. I tried not to take sides and to only look at the people involved in this mess. Now, I'm going to have to get Izzy and I'm forced to take a side. Hopefully her husband

is nearby and will know what to do. The cowboys at the stockyard might not be able to stop what you've done, but the Olesons will." She turned on her heel and dashed into the bakery.

His stomach instantly knotted. *What he'd done?* Had Pa made trouble for the Douglas clan in retribution for all that had been happening at home? Leo wouldn't put it past him. He'd gone on the attack for less. Breaking into the house, the barn, and starting a fire were hitting pretty close to home.

With a jerk of the reins, he headed back for the stockyards near the railroad station. Leo hadn't bothered to look there, because Pa wouldn't have taken Tamar to the stockyard. But, he might have gone there after leaving her somewhere else.

Which fire should he put out first? Take care of his pa and get them both out of trouble, or go find Tamar? His answer came barreling right at him. Pa had the wagon going as fast as the axels could handle, kicking up enough dust to coat the town.

"Pa!" he called, hoping the man would hear him and stop. This back and forth had to end.

"Get out of here!" Pa yelled as a massive, braying, stampede headed his way. Leo barely got out of the way before the herd overtook him. People screamed as they raced to get inside.

"Pa!" Leo tried to see around the buildings, but he couldn't get close enough to the corner without risking Coal. He didn't want to get pulled into the massive rolling herd of beeves.

And as fast as the herd had come, it was gone. The first person to run by the alley where Leo had taken cover was Dr. Spight and his new nurse Anne. He dismounted and raced

around the corner. Part of the boardwalk along the street was broken and trampled. Store windows had been broken. One man lay in the street...

“Pa...” Leo recognized the dark jacket immediately. “No...not for this...”

Armstrong Douglas raced past him then stopped and turned. His dark blue eyes, usually joking, now pegged him as thoroughly as chains. “This was your doing. All our work. Two years of stock. Gone. You’ll pay for this.” He grabbed Leo’s shirtfront, hauled back and punched him in the nose before Leo could even think about blocking the blow.

“Let me go. I’ve got to get to my pa!” At the end of the street, he could see the doctor and nurse hefting him towards two people who’d made a makeshift litter from a sheet.

Armstrong shoved him to the ground. “I won’t forget this, Johlman.” He stomped off, apparently unwilling to pummel someone who wasn’t ready to fight back. Leo pushed off the ground and forced his feet to move to the end of the street.

They wouldn’t be taking such care if he were dead. Leo chanted to himself.

“What happened? Is he all right?” He asked once he reached Dr. Spight.

Pa’s face was bloodied by his right eye, and he wasn’t conscious. His arm was bent at an odd, unnatural angle.

Anne pushed him back, out of the way. “He’s alive, but we need to get him back to the clinic.” She glanced up and down the street. “There’s plenty for you to do while you wait for us to work on him. Let us do our job and do not come into the clinic until we call for you, since he is currently wanted for a

crime.” Her clipped English tones brooked no argument. She meant no disrespect, but he felt lost without following.

They hefted Pa and the sheet strained against the weight but didn’t tear. What had he done? Did Pa really release all those cattle? The ones the Douglasses had just brought into town to be sold off? Leo knew enough about cattle to know that it took longer to mature them than sheep, and the investment could be great.

Pa would never be able to pay back the loss, assuming he had released them and someone saw him do it. If he survived, they’d have to jail him and take him to court. What had happened was basically rustling. Pa had never done anything like that before, which made Leo hope Pa was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Another thing he would blame on the Douglas clan.

Leo wouldn’t leave town without seeing to Pa, but while they were working on him, he could go find Tamar. He went back to the alley for Coal and led him on foot through town as people gathered splintered boards and swept up glass. Most didn’t even bother to look at him. Some were so used to the battle they just shook their heads. But the weight of what had been done sat on his shoulders. This was much worse than a fire.

He pulled up in front of the boarding house and breathed deeply for the first time in what felt like hours. Tamar sat on the swing where she’d been that morning when he’d shared a coffee with her. Her chocolate hair and rosy cheeks were so welcome he wanted to race to her.

She stood and came to the railing of the porch. “What happened? I heard a commotion from town.”

The boarding house lay two blocks away from Main Street and while she'd probably heard the cattle, he doubted she'd ever seen a stampede. "Someone turned loose all the Douglas cattle from the day you came into town."

Her eyes widened. "But...they didn't make *that* much fuss the first day."

While he appreciated that she could talk of normal, natural things and not the thing keeping them apart, he wanted to push the normal out of the way and get to the important.

"They had a passel of cowboys keeping them in line that day."

She nodded slightly. "I wasn't supposed to talk to you ever again. Your father says I'm terrible at taking orders."

They were apparently even more alike than he thought. "Pa isn't in any condition to complain." He hated the nagging feeling that Pa had rustled those cattle. He'd managed to keep his respect for the man through the threats and the anger, but this tested him.

Tamar tilted her head. "He was caught in it?"

Leo nodded and the look of sorrow on Tamar's face nearly broke him. Pa had been nothing but cold, and some could claim cruel, to Tamar, yet she still felt pity for the man. From this moment forward, Tamar deserved nothing short of his best and that meant telling the whole truth.

A THOUSAND QUESTIONS MUDDLED AROUND IN HER HEAD AND wanted to be answered, but Tamar knew enough about Leo Johlman not to ask them. He'd get to telling her why he'd followed her when he was good and ready, not a moment before.

“Is your Pa all right?” That would be on the forefront of his mind, not her.

He nodded once then took a deep breath. “That nurse said he was breathing, and they would work on him. I never got to talk to Dr. Spight myself.”

She stepped back, inviting him up the stairs. Now was not the time to comment on the oddity of a doctor named spite. Settling herself neatly on the swing, she waited for him to join her. Even without his father there to stop her, the words didn’t want to come. She didn’t want to hurt Leo more by making his father angry, should he ever find out.

“You left.” His words were mildly accusing.

She saw his accusation for what it was—fear of losing his status as the head of his family, and a desire to find something else to blame for it.

“Your father found me talking to Mary in the garden. I had no choice. I was ordered to say nothing and pack my trunk. We left in under an hour.”

“But he told you not to...” Leo collapsed into the seat next to her, his shoulders weighed down with his own thoughts.

“He did. Mary came out to tell me something. We were speaking of household matters. She offered me tea.” Perhaps that was a stretch, but Mr. Johlman hadn’t heard their conversation, only saw them together. “I was in the garden, and she came out to tell me.”

He chuckled sardonically. “In the garden, the one place where you’d been discovered before.” Ruddiness tinged his neck.

Leo, being a compelling man of exceptional quality, was not one to reach out—excepting of course when he’d kissed

her. Her own cheeks heated. She summoned her courage and laid her hand over his, feeling the same pop though her as their skin touched.

“I needed to be back there.” Would he understand what she meant? Would he know that she wanted more of him, not less? Certainly not a goodbye.

He glanced at her, and his eyes warmed a few degrees until the rest of her trembled under the heat. “I don’t know what to do, Tamar.”

When he said her name, the word was more personal than it had ever been. She squeezed tighter to him. “Tell me.”

He took a deep breath, but his shoulder hardened against hers, feeling much like resolve against her, not with her.

“Pa has always said that the business of ranching is a man’s business. He doesn’t tell Ma anything he doesn’t need to. He doesn’t want to worry her with things when she has her own cares to manage. Why should she have to deal with both?”

While she could understand the sentiment, by sharing the load they could help each other. Perhaps neither burden would be quite so heavy if shared between them. “Because she’s his wife and she still has to manage her acquaintances in town, no matter the strain on them because of the feud.”

“Ma manages fine. It’s Pa who doesn’t always. He wants to have his hands in everything. I don’t see all that he does, and I can’t do what he does. I’ve tried. I wanted him to see me as an equal. When I told you that first day that I was looking into a marriage of convenience, I was thinking about you.”

Tamar sucked in a breath and held it. What had she said to him that day? They’d barely known each other, yet even then

she'd trusted him more than anyone else. The invisible cord between them was there even then. She hadn't gleaned from their conversation that he'd been talking about her at all. She wanted to stop him then and there, but Leo went on.

“I wanted to marry you before I even brought you home to show my father that I'm serious. I'm a man. I can start a family. I can be trusted.”

Her head spun. Married? If she were to accept such a proposal, only Leo would do. She'd been offered before and turned them down flat. Even the man she'd agreed to marry as a mail-order bride didn't suit and she'd left. She'd known that upon meeting him.

“I...don't know what to say...”

“Say nothing. I can't follow through with that anymore. Father has turned his back on you. If I marry you now, I seal my fate as the son removed from the family. I can't do that, Tamar. They are my life. My future.” His shoulders slipped another inch.

If he wasn't proposing, why had he come? “If you're going to listen to your father and stay away...then why are you here now? I don't understand.” His fingers tensed around her hand, holding her tighter and confusing her even more. He was pushing her away yet pulling her close.

“I can't see myself with anyone else.” He wouldn't look her in the eyes.

She wanted to turn him to face her, to see what his eyes and heart would tell her that his lips would not, or rather, his voice. His lips had done some fine talking all on their own.

“If I choose you, I lose the good life I have and can offer you nothing. How is that an offer at all? If I don't choose you,

I keep at least a shadow of the life I've had, the security and family. Yet, that's no life either. A man is supposed to leave his family and cleave unto his wife."

When he faced her, pain zinged through her, quelling any excitement his words may have offered. He loved her, even if he hadn't said it yet. The choice had to be his, she couldn't force him to choose her over his family. Bitterness was not a welcome lifelong companion in a marriage. She could live without money. The last few months had proven that. But she couldn't live without at least one solid friend.

Leo was that friend.

"I did nothing. Mary did nothing. When all of this washes out, your father will see that. I don't know what to do here in town, but I'll find something. I'm not leaving."

He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close until her forehead rested against his. His arm held her tight and she touched his prickly jaw with both hands, hoping every ounce of tenderness in her flowed through the connection between them.

"No, you're not leaving. And I refuse to break a promise. I'm taking you back home. You agreed to teach my sisters. The house is Ma's domain and she'll be sore that Pa took you away. You're right, if we won't share what goes on in the barn, we should have no say in the house. Ma is the master there."

Her stomach tumbled, knowing he was making this choice for her and knowing he would take the consequences for it. Yet she would trust him. She had to. "I'm scared." Facing his father on another ride into town when he'd thought to never deal with her again set her stomach churning.

“Father will be too weak for a while to even come home. Hannah said you had an idea to figure out who has been coming into the house. We’ll work together. I think whoever is invading knows my parents don’t share matters, meaning they’re using my parents’ weaknesses against them. Help me?” He tilted his face up slightly and her breath went shallow at the depths of color and heat in his eyes.

How could she not? She loved him. If he could choose her above his family, yet try to fix the whole problem, how could she ever say no? “Of course.”

His smile lasted only a moment before his lips touched hers. Tender. Full of pain and the choices he’d made. Full of her and a few regrets. That love he’d yet to speak aloud was there too, full bodied like fresh coffee and just as recognizable.

She enjoyed the kiss to the last and when he separated, she laid her head to his neck. “I don’t know where we go from here, Leo. But I pray with everything in me that it isn’t apart.”

Chapter 13

Alice's fingers fell harshly against the keys at the sound of her father's muffled voice in the front entry. She leapt to her feet, pushing back the bench.

"Pa!" Her eyes lit up as she raced for the door. At the exit she slid to a stop. "I'm sorry, Miss Godan."

Tamar couldn't blame her. It had been a long week and they were all waiting on his return. At least the child had a good enough relationship with her father to be excited about his reappearance. Hannah hovered near the back of the piano.

"What will you do? You're not supposed to be here." Hannah's body went rigid. "We haven't figured out who slipped into the house yet. No matter how we watch, we haven't caught anyone and with someone nipping food from the pantry... Pa will assume it's you. Ma's request to keep you won't stand if Pa puts his foot down."

She knew it well. Bodey Johlman was about as stubborn as the day was long, but his family respected him. "I don't know. Your mother asked that I let her handle the details. I'm simply glad that I got the last week to teach you. You've both improved." Which was true. Once they'd applied themselves to learning, thinking their father might be more willing to keep Tamar if they showed progress, they had flourished.

Yet, she'd held back. While Leo had spoken of working together, they hadn't talked all week. He'd been called to do his father's portion of the work in addition to his own. While Gideon helped, the bulk of the load fell on Leo. Twice the sheriff had come out to talk to him about the release of the cattle, which had been found and returned. From what Hannah had told Tamar, the sheriff assumed Leo wasn't talking, not that he didn't know what his father had done.

Now, Bodey was home and the sheriff could speak directly to the man who'd most likely committed the crime. But, what would happen to the family if he were arrested? Would Leo and Gideon just keep on working themselves to the bone? Since neither of them spoke much about work, she couldn't even offer to help in what little capacity she could. Unlike Isadora, who'd immediately jumped in to help Colt when there had been a need. "How I wish I'd brought Isadora with me..."

"Who?" Hannah tilted her head in confusion.

"A...friend I left back in Montana." A friend who wouldn't have been happy to leave. Time to stop thinking only of herself. "We may need to increase our efforts. Doing the same things every day hasn't worked because we've abided by the rules of the house. If I'm going to be thrown out on my ear again, it will be because I've taken an active part in breaking those rules. What say you?" She wanted Hannah's help, especially since Bodey didn't seem to care much about who his daughters spoke to as long as they did it in the house, and not with his men.

Hannah's lip crept up in a soft reassuring smile. "I'm in. Let's leave Alice out of this. She is timid and unsuited to clandestine behavior. She likes to talk too."

Alice also got away with talking to anyone she pleased, being the child both parents doted on. Their youngest was the sweetest of girls, giving her a sunny and optimistic mien. “I agree. For now, this is between you and me. I haven’t seen or heard anyone going through the house. While everyone, including you, gets your father settled, I’ll go speak to Mary and see if she’s noticed anyone. With food disappearing, the kitchen staff will be the first to be blamed. She won’t want to be cast out any more than I do.”

Hannah gave a resolute nod. “Good. I’ll keep Pa and Ma busy. This house was set up with lower ceilings than those in most houses and it makes the noise of the pianos sound everywhere, or so it seems. There’s a piano in Ma and Pa’s chamber. If they leave, I’ll fall against the piano. You’ll hear it. Get away from Mary quickly.”

The plan was as solid as any she could come up with on her own. She reached out and tugged Hannah into an embrace. The girl, not so many years younger than herself, hugged her tightly. “We’ll get this figured out and then you’ll be able to know my pa. He’s really not a beast. I promise.” With a last squeeze, she dashed from the room.

There was no time for being dainty or worrying over her footfalls. Any of her own would be drowned out by the sound of Hannah rushing anyway. Tamar took off down the hall headed in the opposite direction. The kitchen wasn’t far from the piano room, but it was far enough from the bedroom where Hannah was headed that Tamar hoped she could hear the sign if she needed to.

Mary stood near her mother, cutting carrots. She glanced up, surprise lighting her face. “Deary, you shouldn’t be here.

Mr. Johlman will be in a state from the pain of moving back out here.” She laid down the knife. “What’s the matter?”

Tamar headed for her friend and gathered both women close in a small huddle. “Hannah and I have been watching for whoever is sneaking into the house.”

“They’re nicking my canned goods.” Mrs. Eliza crossed her arms with a loud *harrumph*.

“And if we don’t catch whoever it is, you’ll be blamed for it as surely as I was blamed for talking with Mary. You’re absolutely right, Mary. He’s home, sore, and looking for a fight. If we figure all of this out, then he won’t be.” Tamar listened for the piano, but no noise came from upstairs.

“We don’t stay here at night, but I take a tally before I leave. Whoever it is, they aren’t stealing much but I notice.”

“And soon, so will Mrs. Johlman.” Because food that wasn’t used would have to be replaced. “How far away do you live?” If they could stay for just a few days, then no one could get near the food.

“We live just up the road. It’s not much, but it stays warm in the winter.” Mary raised her chin. Fierce pride narrowed her eyes and firmed her jaw.

“Good. But I want you to bed down here, if you can, for three days. If we don’t find out who this is by then, you can go back to your house.”

Mrs. Eliza narrowed her eyes. “You’re talking like the missus of the house. What gives you the right to tell us it’s warranted to stay?”

Nothing gave her the right. That was the simple truth. But she’d been the daughter of a man who ran a business where many ships were under his command. She’d learned how to

speak and get attention. “I’m not the woman of this house and if Leo is tossed out, I never will be. But if he isn’t, if I can help him stay with this family, then I will do everything I can to make that happen.”

Mary nodded her agreement. “If this means that Leo will keep his place, count me in.”

Mrs. Eliza took a minute. One that ate at Tamar until she wanted to wiggle free of the discomfort. She also knew that whoever spoke first would be the one giving in, and it wouldn’t be her.

“Aye. Count me in.”

LEO’S BONES HURT FROM HIS HEELS ALL THE WAY TO THE TOP of his neck. Just walking sent jarring pangs of pain through him. This was what his father dealt with every day. No wonder the man wanted a son to take over. The son he’d hoped Leo would be but wasn’t. Not yet.

After his father’s arrival, he’d finished a few chores that couldn’t wait, then headed for the house. None of the family had been allowed in by his sickbed to see him all week. The sheriff had claimed it was so that they couldn’t “get their story straight” but enough of the story had to have been the same that the sheriff had released Pa instead of arresting him.

The house seemed strangely quiet as Leo pressed through the front door. In the hall toward the back of the house where the kitchen was, he heard a man talking to someone else. None of his men should be back there and Pa wasn’t up to walking that far. He listened closer but couldn’t hear what was said.

It has to be Gideon... No one would walk into the house in the middle of the day when Mrs. Eliza and Mary were most likely to be standing there. He was just letting his imagination

run away with him. A moment later, he heard a horrible discordant note, like the piano crashing through a window. He raced up the stairs, skipping the piano room down the very hall where he'd heard men talking. The sound hadn't come from that one.

He slammed open his parents' door to find Ma huddled over Hannah where she lay on the floor.

"Dear! Hannah? Are you all right?" She looked over her shoulder at Leo. "She just fainted dead away."

Leo took only a moment to look over his pa and make sure he was upright before he headed over to his sister to help Ma. She'd gotten Hannah's head to her lap and was lightly slapping Hannah's cheek. "Girl. Snap out of it."

He knelt by Hannah's side and reached for her hand. Her skin was chilly to the touch, but he wasn't expecting the delicate squeeze she gave him. Her face remained completely placid even as Ma's little slaps became more forceful. He reached for Ma's hand. "Stop, she'll wake when she's ready." At least he hoped that was what her signal meant.

A moment later, Miss Godan rushed into the room. "I heard the commotion. Is Hannah all right?"

As if on cue, Hannah's eyes fluttered open. "Oh, what am I doing on the floor?" She met his eyes for only a moment, just long enough to convey that he knew nothing, and he'd best keep it that way.

Tamar kneeled at his side, her knee brushing against his. How he missed her. They hadn't had a moment to speak in days. He'd been coming home too late to see her at supper. She was usually already in her room for the night when he

came in. Even without Pa in the house, he still had to act in a becoming way.

Pa nearly exploded from his spot on the couch. “What is she doing here? I brought her into town. I told all of you that she was not welcome here. Who disobeyed me?”

“I did.” Four voices rang in unison, all but his own shocking Leo. He glanced around and noticed Tamar, chin firm and eyes flashing at his side. She’d answered, as had his mother and Hannah.

“I see.” Pa narrowed his eyes and the dark smudges under them seemed to deepen. “You think I can’t send you all away so, therefore she’s safe. You’d better hope nothing happens around here.”

He should tell his father everything. He should tell him how he’d been working himself to the bone and how someone was still managing to do little things around the ranch every day. Annoying things that weren’t usually dangerous. But Pa would just blame Tamar, even though she wouldn’t know the first thing about finding burrs, much less placing them. She wouldn’t know where they keep their feed to spill a bag of it all over the floor to invite in the rats...

“I am not working with the Douglas family. I’ve never met them, and I won’t go to them.”

He touched her hand, needing to speak to her before he talked with his father. He should’ve done it before now, but all the work made him feel like he was slowly drowning.

“Get out. All of you. I need my rest.” He pointed for the door and his gaze caught on and held his wife’s.

In that instant, Leo knew what marriage was all about. It was standing up for what you believed but still working with

your spouse. Pa would kick everyone else out of that room and he and Ma would talk about what was next. He needed her now. He couldn't shunt her to the side and use the excuse that she shouldn't worry about anything, because she'd been the only one there all week between the two of them.

Ma helped Hannah to her feet and Leo helped Tamar. He lowered his voice. "Come, talk to me?" He nodded toward the door where Gideon stood, quiet as a statue.

She followed him without question, yet her eyes told him she had a whole bushel of them. He'd answer every one if he could. He led her down the stairs and toward the kitchen. Gideon had been in the room upstairs with Pa, meaning whoever had been talking in the kitchen wasn't Gideon.

Mary sat at the table taking a brush to one of Pa's frock coats. She focused so intently she didn't seem to notice them enter the room.

"Mary? Who was down here talking?"

Mary looked between his eyes and Tamar's at his side and she did not answer.

Tamar stepped forward. "It's okay. You can say."

Mary looked pained, like answering might cost her everything. "It was me Adam." Her accent colored her words heavily and she whipped a handkerchief from her pocket. "I know he's not supposed to be here, but Mum is under the weather. He came by to cheer me and take her home. I sent him quickly on his way..."

This was what all those rules had wrought and hadn't helped a lick. "You need not worry, Mary. Your secret is safe with me," Leo assured her.

Once he talked to Tamar, he'd have a very long talk with his father about the way the rules had to change. If they didn't, they'd lose all their help. He headed for the door and grabbed his hat, then pushed it on his head. He held the door for Tamar. She wrapped herself in a thick wool cloak, then followed him. Her eyes were bright and blue, too pretty to fathom. He didn't have the words.

After a few steps, he threaded his hands in hers. "I'm sorry I've been so busy. I've missed you."

She stood at his side, gripping his arm and holding him close. "I've missed you, too."

"I take it Hannah had some sort of signal for you, having to do with the piano?"

Tamar giggled. "Yes, though I never dreamed she'd go to those lengths. I hope it didn't scare your mother too terribly. I needed to speak to Mary and the piano was to warn me someone was leaving their room."

"Did you see Mary's intended come in?" He wanted to test Mary to make sure she wasn't one he had to watch. He wanted to trust her, but her word had to be truth, or he couldn't.

"I didn't. I was only down talking to her for a minute and was already back in my room for a good ten minutes before I heard the piano. I expected a few notes, not that crash."

He nodded, realizing Mary's explanation was plausible. "Anything else gone from the house?"

Tamar dropped her gaze to the ground. "Some food. Mary is going to stay the next few days. Her mother too, once she's feeling better. I didn't mean to take over your mother's household, but we have to end this."

He touched under her chin and the chill of her skin bothered him. He hated that he had to take her out in the cold just to talk. “Thank you. Of all the people who had cause to turn on us, it was surely you. Yet you’ve chosen to stand by our side.”

Her cheeks flushed slightly as her gaze rose to meet his. “That’s what happens...when you love someone.”

Chapter 14

A clatter down in the kitchen woke Tamar from a deep sleep. She tossed the blankets off and shivered in the deep, penetrating cold in the room. A muffled scream had her reaching and fumbling for the matches next to her oil lamp. Her quivering hands made the task longer than usual.

Light spilled around the room, and she hefted the small heavy lamp at its base and headed for the hall. Her room was on the main floor, like the other servants, and far away from the second floor where the family lived. They may not hear the noise.

Hairs on the nape of her neck sprung to life as Tamar crept down the hall toward the kitchen.

“What’s that?” a male voice she didn’t recognize whispered loudly.

Another man answered. “A light! Run. *Oof...*” His final word was punctuated with a heavy thud.

A woman’s scream sent Tamar racing down the hall. She made it to the kitchen as a man she didn’t recognize hauled his fist back to punch Mary.

“Stop, this instant.” Tamar found her voice through her fear.

The man froze and stared at her, giving Mary time to dash out of range.

“Who are you?”

The light of her lamp didn't reach deep enough into the kitchen to see his face well, but he could certainly see hers, making his question irrelevant if he worked on Johlman ranch. She knew some of the hands, though not all, by sight. She'd never spoken to any of them.

Mary rushed to her side, her candlestick weapon of choice held over her head. The weight of the pewter stick had to be impressive, but that didn't seem to slow her.

“He's Hannah's former intended, Quincy Phelps. This one is Riker Nickson.” She pointed at him with the stick.

Riker Nickson, the brother to the man who'd accosted her on the street when she'd been walking with Leo. Yet, what could she do now? She couldn't arrest him, couldn't stop him. His accomplice was knocked out, but she doubted there was enough honor in him to stay just because his friend couldn't leave.

Tamar took a step forward and Mary shadowed her. “You're caught. You've been seen. This has to end. Are you here under the authority of the Douglasses?”

Riker laughed quietly, certainly not loud enough to wake anyone else. She quaked at the idea of sending Mary to rouse Leo, but how else could she get this to end. Yet, if Mary left, Riker would simply run.

“The Douglas family gave good cover, but only one of them knows a thing about this. Louis Douglas is too powerful to even care about you. They'd burn you out in a second if they put their mind to it. But the Johlman's are so scared of

them even breathing this way that this house was easy pickings. If you think I'll tell you who's behind all this, you're a fool."

The words grated over her heart. Fear could turn a man sour and make him believe things he wouldn't normally. There was a healthy dose of fear feeding the feud and she wasn't sure how much of it could accurately be blamed on either family. But this wouldn't stop it; it would fan the flame. Bodey Johlman would never in a lifetime believe Riker wasn't acting under Mr. Douglas's direction. And he'd never ask the source for verification.

"Did you let those cattle loose too, to make it appear as if Mr. Johlman was guilty of rustling?"

Riker slunk a few steps closer, and she forced her feet to hold their ground. At the very least, she could toss the lamp at him. Might hurt him or he might catch it, but she would get away.

"It wasn't me. I know who it was, but I was here that day." He took a few more steps, almost closing the gap.

Tamar knew that was a lie, Leo had told her he wasn't on the ranch that day. She searched near her for anything to use as a weapon that wouldn't light the house on fire. Mary lifted the heavy candlestick higher. Now she couldn't send Mary to get help. Riker was too close. Leaving would mean an attack. Someone would get hurt and most likely her.

The glint of a gun shone in the dull light of her lamp and Tamar sucked in a breath, her arms went weak. She hadn't lived in the West long, but it'd been long enough to know the damage a gun could do.

“You’re going to set that light down on that table right there and you’re going to set down that stick. I’m going to tie your hands, gather my friend here, and we’re going to take a ride in my wagon down to the river. It’s frozen near the edges, but the center is open enough. Everyone will think you were both so scared of Bodey Johlman’s return to the ranch that you went for a little stroll and never came home.”

Mary nudged her shoulder slightly, but she wasn’t sure what the woman was trying to tell her. She didn’t want to avert her eyes from Riker and that gun for one moment. Which would be worse, getting shot because she ran and having the family wake, or being slowly frozen in a running river?

With a shove, Mary pushed Tamar out of the room and against the wall in the hall, the lamp swished out with the sharp movement and Tamar’s head knocked hard enough to see a flash.

Mary raced back into the dark room and a bright blast of a shot exploded, filling the house.

“Mary!” Tamar ran into the kitchen, heedless of the man as the back door opened and moonlight spilled in for a second before he disappeared.

Tamar set the lamp on the table and fell to her knees, feeling around on the floor for Mary. “Mary? Answer me, please.” Tears burned her eyes. Her friend had faced danger and possible death to save her. She couldn’t leave her on the floor.

“Over here,” Mary rasped. “I need...Mum...”

“You need a doctor.” She crawled over to where Mary lay, her eyes now adjusted to the darkness and the lump huddled on the floor.

“Tamar?” Leo’s voice was an anchor in the darkness.

“Leo! Over here. It’s Mary. She’s been shot. She needs help.”

Leo kneeled at her side and reached for Mary, gently running his hands down her arms. “Get that lamp lit. I’m sure that shot woke the house. I’ll have Gideon ride for the doc.”

She nodded as she stood, even knowing he couldn’t see her in the dark. She found the light and the matches Mary had left on the table the day before. Thank the good Lord for Mary’s habit of leaving them there.

In an instant, the small lamp shed weak light over the room.

“He hit her arm. Literally a shot in the dark. Not fatal if we can get the doctor here to clean and take care of the wound. I’ll staunch the bleeding. You get some hot water from the stove reservoir so I can wash the wound.”

She loved that he’d taken charge of the situation because she hadn’t a clue what to do. Gideon appeared next, slinging his braces over his shoulders to hold his pants up. “What’s happened?”

“Riker Nickson is what happened.” She pointed to the other mound on the floor. “He and his friend were nicking food and causing trouble to make you think it was the Douglasses.” She realized her words sounded accusing, but how could they go so long just believing some other family was responsible for everything? That was worse than believing in luck, good or bad.

Gideon toed the man’s shoulder until he rolled over, revealing a young, freshly-shaven face. Freshly enough that

the upper part was still tan from working outside while the bottom half was pasty white.

“Quincy.” Gideon almost growled. “So, it was at least partly the Douglas clan.”

No, it couldn't be. But why had she believed the word of a thief? She'd been ready to shake Leo for believing a lie when he'd lived this his entire life. Even if some things weren't as they seemed, enough were to keep the doubts alive.

“Gideon, head to town and get Doc Spight. Mary's going to need him.”

Tamar fell to her knees at Mary's side. “I'm here.” She touched Mary's hand and squeezed it. “I don't know why you did what you did, but thank you.”

Mary gave a weak smile, her eyes rolling slightly until she blinked rapidly. “You're practically the lady of the house. I didn't think. I just ran.”

Leo's eyes caught on hers and held tight. He wanted her to be the lady of the house in truth, but would a woman from New York City ever be ready to help run a sheep ranch?

LEO ITCHED TO CHASE AFTER RIKER BUT IF HE WAS STILL hanging around the house, he'd be leaving Mary and Tamar vulnerable. The sound of dragging feet followed by a thud drew his attention from Mary's shoulder.

Pa appeared in the doorway, pale and sweaty from the exertion of walking down the stairs and hall. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and leaned against his huge shotgun for support. “You go after whoever did this. I'll watch over the women. I'm no good out there, but I can stand sentry.”

Leo nodded his agreement, not wanting to push against his father even though he wanted to stay near Tamar. He reached to her where she huddled on her knees next to him. "I'll be back."

"I know." Her eyes told him a thousand stories and all of them spoke of a future. A future he wouldn't miss by landing in a ditch by the hand of a thief.

He pushed to his feet and rushed to his room where he kept his gun belt. While he didn't often need guns to work the ranch, that didn't mean he didn't know how to use them well. After strapping the familiar weight to his hips, he headed out into the dark, moving quietly and keeping to the shadows.

Movement to his right caught his eye and he froze alongside the shadowed back of the house. The moon gave good light, almost too much. If he wasn't careful, he'd be seen. Leo said a prayer that his brother made it safely to town and back without meeting up with Riker or one of his lackies on the road. The truth was, he had no idea how big of a team he was up against.

Riker had offered to work temporarily in Quincy's place and Pa had never had any trouble with Riker, only Ephraim. He'd later learned of an agreement between Pa and Riker, one he wouldn't have agreed to. Riker was a mediocre worker, often avoiding the other men. Now Leo knew why. He hadn't been there to work, but to cause trouble. Talking to the other men would've eventually made him suspect because they were all as close as men who worked together could be. Almost family. Riker had never fit in.

He pulled his gun, slowly cocking the hammer, and held it in the air. Silence met his ears and nothing further rustled. If Riker was waiting him out, he'd wear down before Leo. After

threatening Tamar and shooting Mary, Leo wouldn't just let him get away and he wasn't going to assume the sheriff would handle it in the morning. Riker might be long gone by then.

Slowly, something moved from the darkness around the barn. A man carrying a saddle toward the remuda. None of their men would be out at night. Leo shifted slightly, following from a distance. Riker strode toward the door, risking a pass through the moonlight.

Could he do what needed to be done? If he was forced to shoot Riker, he'd have to live with that the rest of his life. While he could justify it because Riker had already shot someone, shooting another man was serious.

Riker hadn't left, but he was planning to. Probably with a Johlman horse. Leo followed as closely as he dared, dashing across the open area between the house and barn as quickly as possible. His heartbeat thrummed in his ears as he pressed his back to the wall just outside the barn. The familiar scent of stale hay and dust coupled with something foreign tickled his nose. Something...feminine.

A woman screamed from within the barn and all worry about the future evaporated as Leo rushed in, then slipped back into the darkness by the wall to remain unseen.

"Who's there?" Riker yelled. "I know you're there."

Leo wasn't sure if he meant the woman, or him, so he held his tongue.

"Riker? What are you doing out here at this hour?" Alice held up a tiny lantern from the corner where she lay curled in a ball with Dotty. The dog licked her face and whined a warning.

“I’m just going for a ride, little lady. Want to come along with me?” He smiled offering her a hand.

Leo’s skin crawled with the threat lacing Riker’s offer, yet Alice didn’t seem to notice and her lanternlight didn’t reach him.

“No, sir.” She shivered and hugged the dog. “I heard something in the house and came outside to see what was going on but couldn’t find anything wrong.”

Leo held his breath. If he shot now, Riker would land at Alice’s feet. She was too young, too sweet, too impressionable to deal with that sight. He would have trouble dealing with death that close up.

“Why are you going riding, Riker? Isn’t it late? The sheep are all huddled for the night and Madge is out there with them.”

He prayed Riker wouldn’t get perturbed by her questions. The sooner he left the barn, the sooner Leo could follow. With Alice there, he was stuck. Powerless. His sister smiled gently up at the man who’d taken aim at both Mary and Tamar in the last hour, not knowing she was in danger.

“Alice, run!” Leo stepped out of the shadows and into the splash of moonlight by the door raising his gun as he spoke.

Riker threw down the saddle and lunged for her. Dotty growled a warning just moments before she leapt from her spot, breaking free of Alice’s hold. She stood firm at Alice’s feet, hackles up, teeth bared. Growl deep.

A pistol cocked, drawing Leo’s full attention back to Riker. “Call off the dog, or I’ll shoot them both. I don’t even care if I kill them or not. One bullet is all it will take.” He lined up his

aim and pretended to take the shot. “You’ve got to the count of three.”

“Dotty, down.” Leo’s chest ached from the strain.

“Good. Now drop your gun, right at your feet and kick it into the stall to your right.” Riker didn’t take his bead off Alice.

She whimpered softly. “Leo?”

“Just hold tight, Alice. We’ll get you out of here.” Somehow. Sometimes a man had to do what he didn’t want to, to get what he needed most. He couldn’t lose Alice and at this range, she was a goner if Riker pulled the trigger.

Leo laid his gun down and kicked it as he was told, then raised his hands to his head for good measure.

“Good. Good.” Riker smiled. “I’m going to get this saddle here in a minute and I’m going to ride right out. But I think I need to make sure you don’t follow me.” He took careful aim, then raised it away from the dog right at Alice’s head.

“Leo!” Alice screamed. “Help!”

Leo took off at a run just as a gun blasted. Blinding light filled the air. Leo couldn’t hear anything. He stumbled forward, landing on his face as Riker fell lifeless to the ground.

Chapter 15

Mary's wound seemed to turn darker as the minutes ticked by and Tamar prayed the doctor would come soon. Bodey stood watch at the door but said nothing. Mary's breathing became shallow, and her face pinched with pain.

"Tamar...tell me mum...I thought of her. If you see...me Adam, tell him I loved him." She closed her eyes.

"Don't you dare," Tamar mumbled. "Don't you dare leave me." She pressed a little firmer with the kitchen towel against the wound, realizing that if no one earthly could help her, certainly God could, if he wanted to. He hadn't seemed to be all that important to her father and had only come out as a curse from her father's lips. But if He was more, she would do anything to keep her friend. A prayer formed in her thoughts, jumbled and just as she opened her mouth to speak the words aloud Hannah appeared at the door.

"Pa! You shouldn't be out of bed. Alice is missing. When she wasn't in our room, I thought she'd risked going to sleep in her own bed. I didn't check until I couldn't bear wondering where she was. She's not in the house. Ma is looking for her everywhere."

Pa stormed out the kitchen door and into the dark without a word. "Now what?" Tamar glanced at the closed door. At any moment either the help she'd prayed for or the killer she'd

prayed would go far away would walk through that door and there wasn't a thing she could do about which arrived.

The door swung wide and a tall, skinny man stood silhouetted in the light. "Mary?"

Mary's eyes fluttered open. "Adam? Is that really you?"

He rushed to her side, jostling Tamar out of the way and took over the task of holding the towel to her arm. At least the wound seemed clear, the bullet had entered and exited, leaving a hole in the cabinet behind her.

"I'm here now. Doc is on the way. Gideon said he'd be an extra minute because he had to go fetch him."

Mary's face squeezed in anguish and a tear slipped down her cheek. "I can't believe you came."

"Gideon stopped on his way into town. Why wouldn't I come, darlin'?" He brushed the tear away. "You're my world." His voice shook slightly, yet his hand was firm.

Dr. Spight set his bag down next to Mary and immediately started giving orders. "I'll need more light than this lamp. Clean towels. Fresh hot water." He drew something out of his bag. Pressing it to Mary's chest, he listened intently.

Everyone left the task of watching the door and went to work, though Tamar kept one ear listening outside for any sign of Leo. As she set a bowl of hot water next to the doctor, a loud shot rang out, echoing through the house and over the hills. Then silence.

The doctor stopped and listened for a moment, then went back to cleaning Mary's wound. "Wonder if I'll see another patient in a few minutes," he stated coldly. "When a feud gets to the point of shooting, it's time to do something about it." He looked around the room and seemed to realize he was

surrounded by women and one man who had nothing to do with the fight. He shook his head and went back to work.

Tamar watched out the window, but no one else came. What was the shot? Where was Alice? She couldn't risk going outside on her own, yet fear tangled in her throat, choking off everything else.

The faintest hint of light grayed the horizon and blurred the shadows. Tamar shivered. The coldest hour had arrived and yet they'd heard nothing. Mrs. Johlman rushed into the kitchen.

Alice slipped through the door, a sob wracked her body at the sight of Mary. Hannah clutched her close, shielding her from the scene.

"I thought I heard your voice. My gracious, child. Don't ever scare me like that again." Her mother tugged her free of Hannah's arms and held her close.

Tamar knew that hold. Her mother had hugged her much the same way long ago. Mothers often did when they realized their children were growing up and minutes of childhood were becoming scarce.

"I should go out and find him," Tamar mouthed the words, only realizing after Hannah gasped that she'd said them out loud.

"You will not," Mrs. Johlman answered. "You'll stay right here with the rest of us until Bodey, Leo, and Gideon return. That is our lot in life. We wait for the all clear."

She'd forgotten that Gideon hadn't come in when the doctor had arrived. "Where did Gideon go?" She directed the question to the doctor, since he seemed to have given Mary

some type of sedative and she was now fully sleeping on the floor.

“He went to follow his father. Bodey was limping toward the barn as I pulled in. Gideon told me to go nowhere but the house and to leave my horse at the front. I followed orders.”

Tamar touched the cold window and drew a line through the thick frost, feeling the sting of the cold against her skin. A life without Leo would be like that every moment of every day. Cold. Stinging. Lifeless.

“I can’t just sit here and wait. He’s out there.”

Hannah wrapped an arm around Tamar’s shoulders and hustled her to the nearest chair. “I’ll fix you some tea. I know you don’t want it, but what good will you do out there? You have no gun. You don’t know what you’re looking for, nor where. You’re more likely to get in the way than be a help. Stay inside where he knows you’re as safe as possible.”

She didn’t want to admit Hannah was right and sitting there made her feel helpless. She closed her eyes and finished that prayer she’d started earlier. Some of the cold ice around her heart melted, just like it had done with the pressure of her finger on the glass. Peace settled where pain had been.

There was no assurance that Leo would be all right. There was no assurance that neither of them wouldn’t hurt. But there was something she couldn’t explain that calmed her heart and let her sit and wait with the others. Something that made her wish she knew more.

“I see movement in the barn.” Adam dropped the lacy window curtain and headed for the door. “Movement that’s not stealthy like they’re gun fighting. I’ll go outside and check on

them.” He cast one more weighty glance at Mary, then headed out the door.

Tamar recognized the look in his eyes. She’d seen the same heat from Leo. Did he love her? She’d known he’d wanted to kiss her, but was there more to it? Leo liked to be lighthearted, but his thoughts were true and his own. He was no scamp and according to Mary, neither was Adam.

She fingered the edge of the delicate teacup. Never again would she go through another night like this one without knowing Leo’s heart. That particular doubt would be gone. If she would worry about anything, it would be only his safety. That took enough of her concern.

The moment they could be alone, their future would be established.

RINGING FILLED LEO’S EARS AS HE SEARCHED HIS CLOUDY vision for Alice. She lay a few feet away, her head buried in Dotty’s soft long fur. The dog, now at rest, allowed the attention even though she wasn’t generally the nurturing sort. Everything was nurturing to Alice.

Leo pushed himself up, getting his knees under him as the realization dawned that Riker had gotten away. The shot had gone wide, embedding in the wall near the door , but Riker had made a run for it.

His father’s hand appeared near his side and he gingerly stood, not wanting to knock the man over who’d saved his life and who was still weak.

“Alice, girl?” Pa’s gruff voice tore through the silence. “I need you to go on in the house. I didn’t see anyone else outside. The doctor is in there working on Mary.”

Alice's chin trembled. "Is that what the first shot was? He shot Mary?" Tears shone in her bright blue eyes.

"Yes, girl, but she'll be all right. Mary is tough. You'll see."

Alice slowly stood and brushed the hay from her sleeping gown. Leo peeled off his coat and draped it around her, both warming her and giving her the comfort she'd been needing from the dog. As she headed for the door, Pa stopped her and whispered something in her ear. The next instant, she clung to Pa like she'd never see him again and he kissed the top of her head.

"That's my girl. You're all right now. I've got you," he murmured until she finished quaking into his chest.

She wiped her nose daintily and headed for the house. Pa waited until they heard the kitchen door close before he said a word. "If I hadn't been injured, I would have blamed this on you and Miss Godan."

Leo took a breath, knowing Pa needed to get out what he needed to say. Interruption would change the outcome, but not in a good way. "And now?"

"I got home and the chores were all done. The work didn't pile up. The house was as it should be. Ma says you've done all of my duties plus your own. You may have gone back to get that woman, directly disobeying me, but you did everything I asked of you outside of that." He turned, leaning on his shotgun for support until he made it to a stall where he could lean.

"I love her Pa. I'm looking for your blessing."

Pa shook his head slowly. "You don't need my blessing."

“I do. I want to hear that I’ve done something right. I want to hear that you’ll welcome Tamar into the family. I want to hear that I’m your son again.”

Pa held up his hand for silence and took a deep breath before continuing. “You don’t need my blessing because you’re a man. You love her. What am I supposed to say to that? I never said you weren’t my son. I said you weren’t going to inherit the ranch. I’ve changed my mind about that. You showed me this week that despite the temptation to spend every waking moment with Miss Godan, you didn’t. You put the ranch first when you needed to. That’s acting like a man. I’m proud of you, son.”

Leo’s chest ached to wrap his pa in a strong embrace and slap his back, but Pa’s current frailty held him back, not that Pa wanted him to notice. “I was useless with Riker. He’d have shot her. He told me to lay down my gun and I listened. I trusted him to do as he said.”

“No, you weren’t useless. You thought you were doing the right thing to save your sister. If you hadn’t put down your gun, he’d have shot her anyway. You couldn’t have gotten a good aim before he got a shot off. He’d have pulled that trigger the moment he saw you move that gun anywhere but down. I’m afraid after the cattle incident in town, and the fact that they still don’t have anyone arrested, the sheriff isn’t going to look too kindly on me with this.”

“He shot Mary.” That had to mean something.

“Maybe, but his pa could claim it was Quincy and since she brained him good, Quincy probably won’t remember if he did or not. He might even say he was defending himself against her. Tamar is a foreigner around here, no one will

listen to her word.” Pa swiped a shaking hand under his nose. “This whole season of my life is aging me past my years.”

“Let me help you. I want to marry Tamar and do my part. I can.”

Pa nodded absentmindedly. “I know you can. I just don’t know how to break this curse without moving. This land, it’s all I’ve got to pass on to you. There is nothing else. The sheep, the house, the horses, everything else could be gone in an instant. This land will remain. You can’t let the Douglasses take it.”

Leo reached out and clasped his pa’s hand, feeling years older with the weight of his words. “I promise you I won’t. Ever.”

“Then I suspect it’s time you go back in that house to let that woman know you made it through the night. Surprised she hasn’t run out here, since Alice returned to the kitchen.”

The swirl of light fabric in the breeze behind him caught his eye and Tamar stood there, waiting, her flannel wrap tugged tightly around her as she shivered in the cold.

“Leo...? Are you all right?” Her teeth chattered.

“Go, warm her up and take her into the house. I’ll have the doctor come out and take Riker back to town for his family. Gideon will have to ride back into town for the sheriff.”

“I won’t let them take you.” He’d claim he pulled the trigger himself before he let them take Pa back to town.

“We’ll cross that bridge later. For now, take care of that poor woman. Shaking like a leaf.” He chuckled and headed out the back door of the barn.

Before he could even fully turn around Tamar ran to him, Gideon waiting behind. He absently noticed Josie Littlebear, from the stockyard, with him. His brother stepped back, giving them a private moment and heading with Josie to the house. He opened his arms for her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck as she hurtled into him. He captured her lips the moment she was secure. He poured all the fear, the hurt, the misunderstanding, and the wait into that one kiss and she returned it with just as much passion until heat flushed his entire body.

After only a few weeks, she'd found her way into his very blood and there was no separating her from him. She was his already in spirit. Soon by law.

No longer chilled, he set her back on her feet and cupped her cheeks as he looked deeply into her expressive eyes. He'd been so afraid of losing her just that morning and now she was here, in his arms, looking up at him like he was her hero. And that was exactly what he wanted to be. Even if no one else looked up to him, she did. He might never fully be the son his father needed, but he could be the man Tamar wanted. The job seemed to have been made by the Almighty to be perfect for him alone.

"I love you, Tamar. Say you'll stay here with me forever. Not because you're a teacher. Not to show my father that you're innocent. Not because you've chosen the Johlman family in front of a few people...but because you want to be with me."

She nodded and a tear built on her lashes. He quickly wiped it away before it could freeze.

"I love you, Leo. I don't know when it happened, but I love you and want to stay here. Even if your father never

accepts me. You do, and that's all that matters.”

He kissed her nose and held her tightly. “Let's go inside and warm up.” Only then did he notice how stiff his fingers had become in the cold.

“And tell your mother. I hope she won't mind one more daughter.”

“You play piano.” He laughed. “She'll love you completely.”

Chapter 16

One week later

Reverend O'Hare stood near the roaring fireplace of the huge sitting room. Tamar waited in the hall with Mary at her side, her arm in a sling. Both Adam and Leo stood near the preacher and Hannah plunked uneasy notes over the recently moved piano. Ma's eyes were red, and she dabbed at them with her kerchief from her seat next to Bodey in the front.

Mary whispered as she pressed against the dressing still covering her wound. "It's good the sheriff saw what Riker had done or this day wouldn't be happening. I'm still confused as to how." She shook her head, her red curls bouncing. "I never dreamed of getting married in this house."

Tamar didn't mention that Reverend O'Hare had asked for the service to take place out there and not at the church since the town was in an uproar over all the troubles at the ranch and Quincy's involvement. He'd worried a happy wedding—especially two happy weddings—so near the night when the shooting had happened would send a ripple of anger through the Douglas supporters, causing more unrest.

Josie Littlebear had been accused of releasing the cattle in the stampede. She'd been injured and was staying at the ranch, causing even more gossip. The family knew why she was

there, but the town assumed she'd used her position with the stockyard to work with Mr. Johlman to release the cattle.

"It's a lovely room," Tamar said. Though it was nothing like what her aunt would've pictured for her wedding. She hadn't bothered to tell her father and aunt any more than that she'd arrived in Belle Fourche and was staying there. They didn't know she would wed that day, nor would they care. They were hopefully having their own newly married happiness.

"Aye." Mary waved to her mum who took a seat in the back. She'd been working on a grand feast, including a cake, all day. Mrs. Johlman had even hired helpers for her.

Alice tapped lightly on her shoulder and smiled softly. "It's time." Her eyes glistened with sweet tears and Tamar handed her a spare kerchief.

"Thank you, Tamar. I can't wait to call you sister." She hugged her close, then headed for the seat next to her mother.

Tamar found Leo with one quick glance around the room. His eyes were on her with his own surprise and wonder. She'd chosen a dress that she'd only worn back in New York, hoping that the way it clung to her waist and plunged like evening attire wouldn't bother Bodey too much. She'd wanted to impress Leo and his singular focus on her told her the plan had worked. Her mouth went dry from the heat in his eyes.

Mary went silent next to her, and she reached out for her friend's hand. "I feel like I'm not only joining the family but welcoming you into it too."

Mary nodded but didn't readily agree. "As long as I work in the kitchen, there'll be a separation between us. Mr. Johlman may have lifted his rules about talking, but you're

still a lady of this house, more after today than you were yesterday. If anything, I'm further away from you now. Not that I blame you. If I'd caught the eye of the man of the house, I'd take him up on his offer too."

Heat flushed her cheeks. Yes, their love had grown fast, but it *was* love. "There was no choosing. I love him, Mary. I don't know what the next years will bring, but I can promise you one thing. You have a job here as long as you want to work and with that, you have my friendship. You've proven more true than anyone ever has to me. I don't forget that." She wove her fingers with Mary's.

"I won't leave here until I'm told to. I love this ranch and this family, no matter how surly Bodey can get. With you by his son's side, it will only get better."

Hannah's plunking became more determined, and an almost recognizable version of the wedding march began. Tamar situated herself at the doorway, ready to walk to Leo so she could become his wife. Mary positioned herself at Tamar's side for the double ceremony.

They walked down the aisle together, even as the few attendees stood. For once, no one in the house was thinking of the Douglas family or what would happen next. For once, the Johlman's allowed themselves to be family.

Tamar held out her hands to Leo and he took them, curling her fingers within his own. The warmth left her head light and a smile growing over her lips. In only a few days, they would celebrate their first Thanksgiving as a family, her first holiday as a Johlman. Tamar Johlman... She'd said the name over and over the night before and still couldn't believe that would be her name, and the utter joy she felt at repeating it.

For a moment, she was sure her father was there ready to stop the wedding. She saw a man sneak around behind Reverend O'Hare and then Josie, the woman who seemed to have a deeper friendship with Gideon than anyone spoke of, shuffled him out the side door, right near Hannah at the piano. But no one else seemed to notice anything and she shook off her worries and focused on Leo's nervous smile.

She said her vows and shared a chaste kiss that still left her heart reeling, and then it was done. Though everything externally was the same, inside, she burst with the feeling of opening a new door.

Leo took her hand and led her back into a private chamber set aside for them after the ceremony. He slid the pocket door closed then caressed her face. "Mrs. Leo Johlman."

Her heart skidded to a stop hearing her name from his lips. "Leo..."

His mouth came down over hers a moment later, expanding her joy until it couldn't be contained. He released her far too soon, then held her hands as he had during the ceremony.

"We need to go out and be with the family and find out what happened with Josie during the service, but I wanted a moment alone with you. I won't get many the rest of the day." He nuzzled her ear sending shivers down her spine. "My father may never fully tell you what being a part of this family means. I almost feel like I've tricked you, but you saw what it's like." His eyes sought hers.

She straightened, squaring her shoulders like her father had taught her. "I've traveled many roads to reach this place here with you. Now, my wandering journey ends. I can manage this life. No matter what. With you by my side."

TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED WITH JOSIE AND GIDEON, TAKE a look at *To a Brighter Tomorrow*, book 1 in the Belle Fourche Chronicles. Turn the page for a short excerpt.

Chapter 17

The dining room table was no place to tell Pa or Ma about the woman Gideon had been meeting with in secret for over a month. Especially when his older brother Leo had just brought home a new piano teacher for his sisters. A piano teacher Pa didn't like.

Instead of talking about what he'd rather, he focused on their day. "That last sheep sure gave me trouble this afternoon. You should've seen the look she gave me after I finished clipping her." Gideon laughed, trying to diffuse the tension in the room. He hated conflict more than anything. Would do whatever he had to do to prevent another argument.

Anger and resentment flowed down the table at him like a river, though Ma didn't seem to notice. She laughed at Gideon's attempt and continued to talk with the new arrival. Pa, as usual, wanted nothing to do with anyone who wasn't one of his closest friends and confidants. Which meant right now was about the worst time possible to tell him about Josephine.

What he'd said made Pa explode with anger when Tamar responded with embarrassment. Pa stood so quickly, his chair slid back, then he left the room, Ma trailing after him. No, today was a very bad day to say anything about the woman he suspected Pa wouldn't like. Not that anyone else would know

or care. They all assumed he was little more than a work horse around the ranch. He did his work and didn't question anyone.

Mostly, that was to stay out of the way.

Gideon's way had always been easy, follow Pa's lead and do whatever it took to stay away from the anger. Pa's fuse seemed to grow shorter and shorter as the years passed. How he presented something would make all the difference. He'd either light Pa's fuse or cast light on the situation.

He vaguely listened to his sister's and brother explaining to the new piano teacher, Miss Tamar Godan, why there were so many rules in the house. Gideon felt the weight of those rules on his shoulders, too. All because the man his sister Hannah had chosen a year ago had turned out to be related to the Douglasses. A family who was, and would always be, their enemy.

He should've seen Quincy's deception from a mile away, should've known he was a Douglas, even though he didn't have a Douglas name. Gideon had questioned to himself where Quincy had come from and why he was suddenly so smitten with Hannah, but he hadn't wanted to hurt his sister. His silence had cost the family their peace.

No one would surprise him again.

But for now, getting out and seeing Josie was topmost on his mind, not the new piano teacher. "I'm going out to do one last check on the flock." He stood and pushed his chair in. "No need to join me." Not that Leo ever offered to come along. His brother didn't see the need once the sheep were in for the night or in the summer once the dogs were let out to guard the flock. Leo wanted his evenings. This gave Gideon much-needed time, since work was actually the last thing on his mind.

He headed through the kitchen, waving quickly to Mary and Mrs. Eliza and grabbing a small bundle of cookies he'd placed by the door. He slipped it in his pocket for Josephine and tapped the flap to make sure it was safely bundled away. She didn't often get sweets.

Within minutes, Raya, his roan mare was saddled and ready. Pa had given him the horse knowing most of the hands didn't have a gentle hand for spirited mares, but he had the patience. That had paid off because no one else could touch his horse.

Josephine waited in the distance atop a rise near the entrance to their spread. She never came onto the property uninvited, no matter how often he invited her. She knew his pa wouldn't welcome her presence, making her *uninvited* no matter what he said.

Her dark straight hair whipped in the bitter wind, and she stood tall in her seat like the warriors of her past. "Gideon," she said as he approached. Her dark thin lips broke into a smile revealing straight teeth, bright against her caramel skin.

He reached into his pocket and waved the bag full of cookies. "Josie." His heart pounded even as he glanced all around to make certain they were alone.

"What's the occasion?" She asked softly, as if she didn't know.

"It's not every day Josie Littlebear turns twenty." He rode alongside her and stopped, facing her, then handed the bag over.

She ducked her head as she untied the small bit of ribbon holding the cloth bag closed. She never gave smiles frivolously and he'd learned to cherish each one.

“Dried cranberry?” She sniffed the bag subtly. “They smell sweet.”

“I hope they are. I asked Mrs. Eliza to make them since you said you liked them so much this summer. That’s the last of the cranberries until next year.”

She nodded, tucking the package into her dark wool coat. She rode astride, but in a skirt, revealing men’s boots on her feet, and trousers covering her legs which didn’t surprise him. She’d told him women’s footwear was uncomfortable and tight. Men’s boots allowed a foot to ‘breathe’, whatever that meant. He wasn’t about to put on women’s boots to test the matter.

“You look perplexed, Gideon. What about tonight bothers you more than others?” She leaned slightly on the pommel; arms crossed as she subtly watched everything around them.

He wished he could be as relaxed on a horse as she was. She was beauty in every way possible, sewn by the Almighty into one woman.

“Leo brought home a piano teacher. I’d planned to tell Ma and Pa about you tonight, so I could secure a real invitation to the ranch.” He paused, feeling exposed. He never shared his feelings with anyone. “But I can’t when they were so agitated over a strange woman in the house.”

She laughed. “And you don’t think a strange woman sitting on the edge of your land, with a shotgun in her saddle, a pistol on her hip, and a knife in her pocket wouldn’t make them any less...agitated?” Her narrow dark brow rose in challenge.

Gideon had never asked how a woman whose family had grown up Oglala Sioux on the Rosebud Reservation had

managed to leave and survive, despite the overwhelming odds against her. She refused to look back, he wished to know more but held his piece. She obviously had her ways.

“I’d hoped that they would see, after a month of meeting you here, that you have nothing against my family.”

“That would be a lie.” Her jaw hardened in that stubborn way he’d come to know meant she wouldn’t be dissuaded. “I *do* hold a grudge against your family for deciding that you cannot know your own mind about with whom you choose to pass your time. If a son cannot be trusted, what good is he?” She sat, if possible, even straighter in the saddle. The mix of her Catholic school upbringing and her reserved demeanor were just like her, as opposing as could be yet still what he’d come to expect.

“He trusts me.” Though Gideon’s words rang hollow. How far did that trust reach? Leo was clearly smitten by Miss Godan, an obvious outsider who couldn’t have a connection to the Douglas clan, yet Pa had wanted to toss her out the moment he saw her.

“Does he, now?” Thin dark eyebrows both arched in challenge. “I would question your statement, but it would do me no good. You will follow your father until he digs a grave for both of you.”

His insides clenched at her prediction. “Is that what you think? That Pa will get us all killed?”

She nodded slightly. “This is a battle I would choose to join, if I were allowed. I’m not. Your father wants nothing to do with brown people. If he knew you were meeting with me, he’d toss you out as fast as the stranger.”

While Pa had never said anything about his feelings toward the Indians or anyone else that he could recall, he doubted Pa would accept one as family, either. He'd never hired any of the vaqueros who came north from Mexico for work, stating that they knew cattle, not sheep, so they would be better suited to work for Douglas. Gideon had believed that as truth until Josie's statement. Was he really just against all people of darker skin?

"Your fear isn't rooted in the fact that I'm a stranger, Gideon. But rather in the fact that I am a stranger who is much different from you." She dismounted in one smooth movement like she was made to ride a horse, then gathered her mount's reins. "Come, walk with me."

He followed suit and held Raya's reins loosely, giving both horses room. Raya would nip if anyone or anything came too close.

"I want you to stop worrying about bringing me up to your family. I'm happy to meet you here nightly for as long as you want. I know that secrecy is my destiny." She looked off over the hills.

"That isn't fair, and it isn't what I want." He'd wanted to shout from the rooftops what he felt for this woman. What did it matter that her skin was a shade darker than his own? There was nothing about her that didn't impress him. Those same things would impress others if they'd only allow themselves to see her unique and special qualities.

"I don't know what fair is. I only know the life I've lived." She walked slowly, her hair rippling in the breeze.

"I want to give you a life like you've never known. I want to share each moment with you." Yet now that seemed like

dream, not a reality. Would they ever get beyond meeting like this? Not if she wanted him to keep her a secret.

“Are you asking for my hand, Gideon?” She turned to face him, and half of her mouth tipped up. Her dark eyes held a challenge, but it was tempered with something else, something like...hope.

He waited to answer, to see if she would finish a smile, or leave him. He opened his mouth to answer when he saw the smile fade before she could finish.

“You see? Even you are afraid of what that outcome would bring. You’re not ready yet.”

“No, I am. I only need my father’s blessing...” One that he now wasn’t sure Pa would ever give.

“I can’t protect you from anything without this land and my Pa’s blessing. I will get that for you, no matter what it takes.” Pa would see the light, just as Gideon had on that long-ago morning when she’d ridden into his life.

“I know you think you can, and I have to trust in you. It’s all I can do right now.”

She’d never let him hold her hand, since she saw that as weak and childlike. Yet he wanted connection between them. He craved that touch. Stopping at the crest of a hill, he waited for her to turn and face him.

Cold wind bit at his cheeks. Soon, the weather would prevent any meetings between them. Evening would be too dark and if Pa saw anyone lurking near the house, he would shoot first and ask questions later.

“The time for me to make myself understood is now.” He drew her close and held her though, until she was actually in his arms, he was sure she would stiffen and fight the contact.

Yet she didn't. She finally, momentarily gave in to the connection. Her arms wound around him and held fast. "Trust me, Josephine?" He hadn't meant it as a question, but the crack in his voice made his words sound like one.

"Unlike most people I've met, I trusted you from the first. You are a good man, Gideon. A man of your word. I simply don't know what will happen if you don't find what you seek."

To a Brighter Tomorrow

By Kari Trumbo

Prologue

The grizzly bear moved in a zigzag motion, snuffling the air and the ground. An early spring wave of heat had her out and hungry. Gideon Johlman held a tiny lamb close to his chest, gently covering her nostrils in the hopes of keeping her from bleating and alerting the bear to their hiding place. After her long sleep, her fur lay dull over her wide head.

His heart ratcheted as the bear approached, the skin on her sides was loose and swayed with her movements. She could probably think of nothing but filling that empty belly after her long nap, but he didn't plan to be the snack she sated herself with.

If only he hadn't gone out to look for the lamb alone, but Pa had sent him and he always listened without question. He reached for his sidearm, slowly, so the few leaves in the tree left from fall would hide his movement.

Carefully, he pointed his revolver toward the sow and pulled the trigger. The shot went wide, not that he'd have enough power with his pistol to do enough damage to scare off a hungry bear. If he hit her, he'd probably only make her angrier.

The bear stood straight up and stared at him. Their eyes met and the lamb sensed his tension. She wiggled, trying to free herself from his arms. He loosened his grip only enough

to calm her, but not release her. In the next instant, a shot rang out. In the blink of an eye the bear was gone.

He gasped in air, trying to see where it had gone, but the limbs of the small scrubby tree where he'd sheltered from the bear covered all but a small swath of his view. He carefully climbed out and risked looking around.

"That was quite the predicament you found yourself in," a husky female voice said from behind him as she expelled the spent shell casing.

He whipped around and the lamb called out in protest. The woman's eyes dropped immediately to the lamb in his arms and she slowly approached. He'd never seen the woman before. She wore a dress and men's boots similar to those on his own feet. Her coat was much too large, wool, and threadbare in places. Her rifle pointed at the ground, but she cradled it in one arm and could be ready to shoot again in a moment's notice.

"Thank you." He didn't know if the bear was dead or had just run off and he was too captivated by the stranger to look.

"I wouldn't normally do anything to harm a bear, but I saw you shoot. You were terribly lucky. And underprepared."

He held out his hand in greeting and instead of taking it, she touched the top of the lamb's head. "There, now your precious baby is safe."

He wasn't sure what to say, but after a quick glance where the bear had been, he knew what he had to do. His family couldn't know he'd been trapped by a killer animal, or they wouldn't trust him again, but he refused to let the bear go to waste, either.

"Let me bring her home, then I'll return to help you."

She chuckled. “You’ll return? I’ve heard that before, though usually as a threat.”

“No threat. Give me thirty minutes. At least we have cool weather to get the butchering done. That bear will take some time.”

She glanced around the small glade where he’d managed to find himself trapped just a few minutes before. “There are plenty of trees. I’ll get started...just in case you are not a man of your word. I’ve found that very few are. If I can trust you, that will be something unique indeed.”

He gathered the little lamb to his chest and vowed as he left that she would never be able to say that of him. He’d already felt a weak bond, a connection with her that he couldn’t explain and he would do nothing so stupid as lie to break it.

Get your copy of *To a Brighter Tomorrow*, the next book in The Belle Fourche Chronicles.



Where western meets happily ever after.

Kari Trumbo is a *USA Today* bestselling author of historical and contemporary Christian romance and romantic suspense. She loves reading, listening to contemporary Christian music, singing when no one's listening, and curling up near the wood stove when winter hits. She makes her home in central Minnesota—where the trees and lakes are plentiful—with her husband of over twenty years, two daughters, two sons, a few cats, and a bunny who's the star of one of her books.

Head over to www.KariTrumbo.com to get your free book and be on her mailing list to find out about new books and deals!

