

MONTANA SKY SERIES

BECOMING
Mine

kindle
worlds

MARGARET
A NEVADA BOUNTY NOVELLA
MADIGAN

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BECOMING MINE
A Nevada Bounty Novella

By Margaret Madigan

A Montana Sky and Nevada Bounty Crossover Novella

Cover Art by LeTeisha Newton of Boundless Tales Designs

Welcome

Welcome to the Montana Sky Series Kindle World, where authors write stories set in the 1880s including my “world” of Sweetwater Springs and Morgan’s Crossing, Montana Territory. Aside from providing backdrop, setting, and townsfolk, I haven’t contributed to the stories in any way. The authors bring their own unique vision and imagination to the KW books, sometimes tying them into their own series.

Becoming Mine is written by Margaret Madigan and ties into her two existing titles, *Gambling on the Outlaw* and *Depending on the Doctor* in the Nevada Bounty series, set in 1870s Nevada. Margaret has written in other Kindle Worlds, and I met her when she expressed interest in joining the Montana Sky family. Although *Becoming Mine* is a sweet romance, Margaret’s other titles, including those in the Nevada Bounty series, cover the full heat range of romance. She enjoys writing for the KW audiences, and I’m happy to have her as part of the Montana Sky Series Kindle World.

I hope you enjoy reading *Becoming Mine*!

Debra Holland

About the Book

After her father and older brother die, Ruby Jackson is left to support herself and her remaining family. But the employment available to women isn’t good enough. So Ruby cuts her hair, changes her name to Ray, and dresses as a man to get a better job. What she finds when she takes a position at a Virginia City silver mine is a handsome man who complicates her plans, and steals her heart.

Miles Collins manages a silver mine in Virginia City. He's one of the most eligible men in town, but has a reputation for being gruff and distant. He's a sworn bachelor, until he bumps into Ruby Jackson on the sidewalk, and suddenly marriage doesn't look so bad.

As Miles court Ruby, she faces a dilemma; tell Miles about Ray and risk losing him, or make Ray disappear and hope Miles never finds out. Before she can decide, they're called to the Montana Territory to help an old friend survey a new mine property, and along the way Miles discovers Ruby's secret. Miles is betrayed by Ruby's lies, and Ruby's hurt by Miles' thoughtless rejection. Can they reconcile their differences and find the love they both desire more than anything?

Chapter 1

May 1883, Virginia City, Nevada

Ruby Jackson fidgeted on the hard wooden chair outside Miles Collins' office at the North Hill Mining Company in Virginia City, as she waited for her interview appointment. The trousers, vest, jacket, and tie itched and constricted in ways she hadn't imagined men's clothes would. Used to the layers she wore as a woman, she'd always assumed men's attire would be more comfortable. It turned out she'd been wrong.

"I hear Collins is a bear to work for."

Ruby turned her head to acknowledge the only other man waiting. There had been five to start; two had already been into Collins' office and left, one red-faced, one dejected. Another faced the bear now behind the closed door.

"Then I suppose he needs to be tamed," Ruby said, lifting her chin with forced confidence. She'd practiced lowering her voice, but she'd been told she had a husky voice for a woman anyway, so she didn't have to work very hard at sounding like a young man.

She'd heard the rumors that Miles Collins could be prickly at best, usually cranky and demanding, and sometimes worse. No wonder the man had remained single so long—information she'd learned when researching

him and the company before taking such an enormous step.

“Good luck. The last man who worked as his clerk didn’t last more than six months.”

Then maybe a woman should take a crack at him.

“You think you can?” Ruby asked.

The man shrugged. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think so.”

“Okay, then. May be the best candidate win,” she said.

“Name’s Peter Smith,” the man said, grinning and offering his hand.

Ruby shook it and looked him in the eye. “Ray Jackson.” She’d decided to call herself Ray only because it started with an R, which would help her remember to answer to it.

“Well, Ray, I hope that’s me. I need the job.”

“None of us would be here if we didn’t,” she said, echoing his earlier sentiment.

She’d never spoken truer words. Her father and older brother had both worked in the mine. Her father had died a year ago at the age of fifty, but with the health and body of a much older man. After that, Ruby and her older brother Charlie had moved from the farm south of Carson City to Virginia City where Charlie had supported the family—their mother, younger sister, and younger brother—while Ruby earned some extra money as a maid in the red light district. Now her brother was gone following a cave-in, leaving the

family struggling for income.

Ruby had tried all over town looking for work, and had found several jobs, none of which would support a family. The kinds of employment available for women didn't pay enough. So she'd decided to kill two birds with one stone. She'd become a man, on the outside anyway, and be paid like one. But if she could work for the mine that had taken her father and brother, maybe she could either find a way to make it better for other families, or make them pay some kind of compensation. She wasn't naïve enough to think either of those things would actually happen, but her mother struggled with grief over the losses, and Ruby especially missed Charlie.

What she longed for was something to heal her heart, though she had no idea what that would be.

The door to the office opened and the third man to interview stepped out, thin-lipped and fuming.

Miles Collins stood in the doorway and called for the next interview. "Mr. Smith?"

The sun shining through the window behind him left Miles' face in shadow, but his form filled much of the doorway, leaving the impression of a hulking brute.

Peter stood and straightened his jacket, then followed Miles into the office.

Ruby shook her head. *Smith and Collins. Men called each other by last name unless good friends. Didn't they?*

She surveyed the space around her, a small, open room with a desk that would soon be hers, and the few hard chairs lined up against the wall opposite Collins' office. It wasn't a very pleasant place. A rug, better lighting, some cushions for the chairs, maybe some mine-related décor, or even some flowers, would go a long way to making the room a nicer place to work.

You're thinking like a woman again.

A difficult habit to get out of, since she was one, but as the oldest surviving child in the family, the duty fell to her to support them.

Smith emerged a few short minutes later, looking grim. He glanced at her, then away before heading down the stairs and out of sight.

"That leaves you, Mr. Jackson," Collins said from the doorway. "I hope you're up for the job."

She stood and squared her shoulders, holding the hat that had belonged to her father tight in her hand. "Of course I am," she said.

He stood aside and gestured for her to enter his office.

Once she had, he rounded the desk and sat in his chair, steepling his fingers while she took a seat across from him. She fought the urge to behave like a modest woman and glance down at her lap, or tuck hair behind her ear.

The last was made easier since she'd cut it. All of her long, chestnut curls had floated to the floor as she wept over them. Now, she wore a cap of short curls and waves which she did not fuss with as she faced Miles Collins. Nor did her gaze waver as she remembered her family depending on her.

Not that they knew where she was. She'd told her mother she'd taken a position as a governess with a rich family in Virginia City, and that she'd send money as she earned it. After taking such drastic steps to change her appearance, she had no choice but to get this job at all costs.

He watched her from across the desk, and she watched him back. In the light, his features were striking—strikingly handsome, unfortunately for her. She'd hoped given his reputation he'd be an ugly beast. But his black hair was brushed neatly back from his broad forehead and his sharp blue eyes pinned her to her seat. Prominent cheek bones, a square jaw, dark brows, and a day of beard shadow added to his stern aura.

Ruby pushed aside any thoughts of attraction. Miles Collins ran the company where her father and brother had died. That was enough for her. Besides, she'd long ago decided she'd never marry and give up her independence. She might struggle to make a living, but she'd seen how marriage and raising children had defeated her mother, so Ruby would chart her own course.

Also, he thought she was a man.

After several moments studying her, Collins finally said, “You’re awfully young for this job.”

“I’ve just turned twenty, which is plenty old enough.”

She was, in fact, twenty-six, but standing shorter and slimmer than most men, without facial hair, or a deep voice, she couldn’t pretend to be much older than twenty. Nobody would believe her.

“You can read and write and do sums?”

“Of course I can. I’m quite capable.”

“And you can take direction?”

“If the directions are reasonable, yes.”

His eyebrows went up. “Oh really?”

“Can you tell me the details of the job? What I’ll be doing?” Ruby asked. Her heart skittered in her chest at her own boldness, speaking as if he’d already hired her. But men were straightforward, weren’t they? They spoke to each other without artifice, rather than the way men and women spoke to each other, which involved politeness and hinting around the corners of what they really meant.

“I need someone who can handle correspondence, manage my schedule, assist with the accounting, order supplies, keep the office cleaned up, and whatever else I need.”

“Sounds like you want a wife,” she said, then snapped her mouth shut

as his brows scrunched together in confusion.

“I beg your pardon?”

Darn. She’d stepped over a line. Backtracking, she said, “That didn’t come out right. I didn’t mean you personally need a wife. I would never presume to suggest that, nor do I even know if you already have one. That’s really none of my business.”

While she fumbled through her clumsy explanation he crossed his arms and cocked his head. At first she assumed he was angry but the longer she rambled, the more amused he appeared. When his eyes sparkled and crinkled at the corners, she stopped and sat silent for a moment before offering a final comment.

“It sounds like you need to hire a woman,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because the tasks you outlined are all things that women generally handle both in their personal and family lives, as well as the sorts of positions women are allowed to hold, so they’re good at those things.”

“That may be true, but I can’t have a woman here,” he said, all amusement vanishing from his expression.

Now it was her turn to be confused. “Why not?”

“There are too many men here. It would be distracting for them, and could be dangerous for her.”

“Perhaps it would be a problem for men who have no manners and have never been taught how to treat a woman,” Ruby said tartly. “I’m certainly not one of those men. Are you?”

He chuckled, a rich soothing sound. “These are rough men, son.”

“So that excuses them from proper behavior?”

“Well, no.”

“As the boss, if you tell them how you expect them to behave, they should behave that way or lose their jobs.”

A cloud darkened his visage as his lips thinned and he sat forward in his chair, leaning his elbows on the desk. Maybe she’d pushed it too far. Now that she thought about it, she sounded more like a harpy than a young man.

“I do set ground rules for behavior, but not having women on the premises is one less potential problem to deal with.” The finality in his voice brought an end to the discussion.

“Certainly. I merely meant to point out...”

“...how badly I’m running the operation?” He asked, interrupting her.

She felt a blush starting up her neck. She’d need to quell that reaction, or she’d never pass for a man. As far as she knew, men didn’t blush.

Sitting up straighter, she said, “No. Only an opinion and observation. Is it wrong to make note of the shortcomings of one’s gender? To strive for improvement and higher expectations?”

One corner of his mouth hitched then dropped back into seriousness. “It is not. And you may continue to do so in your new role, assuming you’re interested in working among all the low class brutes here.”

She froze in her chair, speechless, uncertain he’d meant what she thought he did. “Are you offering me the job?”

“If you still want it.”

“I do. But why would you hire me after I smarted off to you?”

“Because I’m looking for a clerk, not a lap dog. I need someone who is smart and can think one step ahead of me so I don’t miss anything or make mistakes. The fact that you question me says you’re not just a yes man. That you think for yourself and will keep me on my toes.”

“No, sir. I’m definitely not a lackey.”

“Good.” He rose from the desk, signaling that Ruby should stand, too. At the door, he stepped out into the lobby space. “This will be your desk. I’ll expect you here first thing tomorrow morning.”

“I have one more question for you, sir,” Ruby said.

“What is it?”

“How long have you managed here?” Charlie had been gone for six months, and she didn’t recall him ever mentioning the name of the man who managed the mine. When it came down to it, Ruby had to know whether Miles bore any responsibility for Charlie’s or her father’s deaths.

“I’ve only been here a few months. The previous manager moved on, and I was hired after he left. So, will you be here tomorrow morning?”

Relief washed over Ruby. She had no desire to work for the man who’d been careless enough to allow her father and brother to die on his watch. She didn’t know if Miles Collins would be any better, but she’d find out.

He offered his hand to shake.

“Yes, sir,” Ruby said, taking his hand. It engulfed hers, warm, strong, work-hardened and completely off limits.

Miles Collins watched Ray Jackson stuff his hat back on his head and leave the office, a new spring in his step. That boy was seventeen if he was a day, but his eyes shone with intelligence and when he set his jaw Miles saw the man he’d become—candid, honorable, tenacious.

Too bad he was so pretty. Boys who looked like him—curly locks flopping into his face, big brown eyes with long lashes, full lips, smooth skin, and shorter than average—suffered teasing and torture at the hands of other boys, and later on at the hands of men. He’d seen it too often. Sometimes it crushed their spirit, sometimes it made them stronger. Ray seemed to be part of the latter group.

It remained to be seen how well he’d hold up to the working world of

men. Miles wouldn't take it easy on him. If he wanted the job, and insisted on claiming to be older than he really was, he'd have to work just like any other man.

Miles returned to his office, grabbing his coat and hat, and putting out the light. His older brother Isaac was in town, and they planned to meet for dinner. He hadn't seen any of his brothers or their families for months. All three of his brothers were married now, had children, and were settled. He was the odd man out as the remaining bachelor, and although he'd been so busy with work he'd barely been able to spare the time to miss having a family, there were moments it hit him. Lately, the loneliness in those moments had taken on a different character. Sure, he missed his brothers and their families, but he wondered what it would be like to have a wife of his own.

But finding and courting a woman seemed like such a chore. So much work.

He shrugged into his coat and headed out the door, locking it behind him. If he didn't hurry, he'd be late to meet Isaac.

As his boots thumped down the wooden stairs, it occurred to him that if he considered it a chore to find a wife, perhaps he wasn't really ready for one. On the other hand, he'd heard of mail order brides. Maybe it would be easier, less of a messy hassle, to just make a business arrangement.

He shook his head. No. While expedient, it eliminated the one thing he witnessed in his brothers' marriages that he envied the most—love. They all enjoyed the kind of contented companionship he wanted, too.

However, the struggle and turmoil they'd each gone through to find love didn't seem worth it to Miles. Hadn't he heard that many arranged marriages evolved into affection eventually? Could he be happy with affection?

At the livery on the mine property, he fetched his horse from the man who cared for them, and headed into town.

Isaac was easy enough to spot when Miles walked into the dining room of the inn. A few years older than Miles, Isaac shared many of the same features with Miles, their oldest brother Wyatt, and their father, including black hair, broad shoulders, and height. Their youngest brother Sam had inherited the fair hair and looks of their mother.

When Isaac saw him, a grin cracked his face and he stood to greet Miles, grabbing him into a bear hug.

"It's good to see you, little brother," Isaac said.

"Sam is the little brother," Miles said, taking a seat at the table.

"You're both little to me," Isaac said, joining him.

"I'm thirty-six, that's hardly little."

“And yet...”

The waiter interrupted the conversation and Miles ordered the special of the day.

“What has you so cranky today?” Isaac asked.

“I’m not cranky.”

“I’ll admit, it’s hard to tell since you’re always grumpy, but you’re definitely more grumpy than usual.”

Miles shot him a sour look. “If you must know, I do have some things on my mind.”

He tore a hunk off the bread Isaac had already ordered, and buttered it.

“Is it the new job?”

“There’s a lot of work to do. The previous manager wasn’t very organized, or conscientious, it seems. I have to clean up a lot of his poor business practices.”

“The Kiss of Fate misses you.”

Miles had managed the mine Isaac and his wife Beth had discovered for many years for turning it over to Beth’s friend Lydia, a competent manager in her own right.

“I’m sure Lydia has it running like a well-oiled machine.”

“She certainly does. But I doubt the work load is what has you out of sorts. You thrive on that sort of thing.”

“I hired a new clerk today, a young man who claimed to be older than he is. He seems competent, though, and he wasn’t intimidated by me.”

“Smart boy,” Isaac said. “He’ll go far.”

“Funny.”

The waiter brought their plates and set Miles’ in front of him. The rich, meaty smell of lamb drenched in gravy made his stomach growl. He used the remaining chunk of bread to sop up some of the thick liquid from the plate, and savored it after shoving it into his mouth.

“The new employee isn’t what’s bothering you, though, is it?” Isaac asked.

“You’ve become a nosy busybody in your old age,” Miles said.

Isaac chuckled. “As you pointed out earlier, we’re not so old. But Beth has had a steadying effect on me. She’s softened all my rough edges.”

“Mmph,” Miles grunted the noncommittal sound around a mouthful of potatoes.

Isaac remained silent long enough to get Miles’ attention, and when he looked up at his brother, he caught the thoughtful look on his face.

“What’s this really about, Miles?”

Miles sighed and placed his silverware on his plate, before wiping his mouth with the napkin.

“I’ve been wondering about getting a wife.”

Isaac snorted. “You make it sound like an easy thing. Just order one up and you’re all set.”

“It is possible,” Miles said, bristling at his brother’s teasing.

“Why do you want a wife?”

A good question. “I see the way you and Wyatt and Sam are with your wives and families. You’re happy. In love.”

“And you want that?”

“I do, but I’m not unaware of the fact that I’m thirty-six, set in my ways, and as you so fondly and frequently point out, I’m...”

“...churlish? prickly? cantankerous?”

“I was going to say serious.”

“You’re way past serious, brother. It’s going to take a special kind of woman to tame you. One you certainly won’t find in a catalog somewhere. If you order a bride by mail she’ll spend ten minutes with you and change her mind.”

“You’re not making this any easier,” Miles said.

“Of course not. Why would I? None of us thought you’d ever marry, so I want to savor this moment. It turns out your heart isn’t made of stone after all.”

“I’m glad to know my brothers all have such high regard for me.”

“In truth Miles, you know we all love you. Our wives have been

scheming for years to find you a match, but we've told them it won't do any good until you're ready. You're that stubborn."

"Hmph. Thank you for that. I'm not so far gone that I need your wives to turn me into a charity case."

"I don't know. Now that you've broached the subject, it'll be hard to keep them reined in. You know them. They're a determined lot."

"You'd better manage it."

Isaac put up his hands in defense. "As if I could control them once they've truly set their minds to something. I suggest you find yourself a wife before they get wind of it, or you may as well surrender any control over the matter."

Chapter 2

Ruby hadn't thought beyond getting the job, and the realization hit her as she left the building and had no place to go.

She couldn't go home to her family, because she'd lied to them. Aside from that, they'd never approve of what she'd done.

The rooms she and Charlie had rented when he worked at the mine were gone. She'd left them this morning, unable to pay any further rent.

So what was she to do?

She wandered the streets of Virginia City, unused to going about her business without the interested eyes and greetings of the men she came in contact with. Dressed as a man, she'd become invisible to other men.

As the sun headed down the back half of the afternoon, she found herself in front of the brothel where she'd worked part time cleaning. If anyone would accept a woman in unusual circumstance it was Della Kinney and her girls.

Ruby climbed the stairs and stepped inside the spacious foyer. Still early enough in the evening that the business of the day had yet to commence, the place felt more like a home than a brothel. A large dining room opened to the left, and a parlor to the right. Having cleaned the building, Ruby knew the kitchen was through the hall to the back of the

house, and up the stairs each of the women had her own room.

One of the women—Cecelia—a pretty blond with alarmingly large breasts, approached her from the dining room.

“You’re a little early, son.”

Cecelia stood a couple of inches taller than Ruby and smiled down at her in a way that spoke of teasing. As if she were poking fun at Ruby, or in this case Ray.

“I need to speak with Miss Della, please.”

“Who is it, Cecelia?” another woman named Sally—a brunette with striking blue eyes—asked as she joined them in the foyer. “Oh, well aren’t you darling? A little young, perhaps, but sweet.”

“Is Miss Della here?” Ruby asked, trying to remain patient.

Two more women joined them in the foyer.

“What’s all the commotion—oh. Who’s this?” Ruby remembered this woman’s name to be Betsy, a petite woman with a tiny waist.

“Is this your first time, sweetheart?” The last woman’s name was Victoria, a tall redhead with a warm Southern accent.

They all stepped in closer, surrounding her like vultures hovering over a juicy carcass. Ruby lost track of who said what as they all talked over each other, but the gist of it was an excitement over a young man and who would get to be his first.

“Ladies, let the poor man breathe.”

Ruby recognized Della’s voice. Finally.

The women parted to reveal Della standing a few feet away, tall, proper, and imposing. When she saw Ruby her brows scrunched together and she cocked her head, studying her.

“Do I know you?” she asked.

Did she ever. “May I speak with you in private, ma’am?”

“Whatever you have to say, you can say in front of my girls.”

Ruby sighed. This wouldn’t be easy. She reached up and slid the hat off her head, then brushed the hair back from her face.

“Miss Della, it’s me, Ruby Jackson. I need your help.”

Della’s brows shot up in recognition. “Ruby? What in tarnation are you doing dressed like a boy?”

Ruby’s confession set the women off again and there was no following the jangle of voices one on top of the other.

“Ladies,” Della said. “Give Ruby some space. Let her talk.”

Ruby swallowed hard against the lump in her throat. She’d accomplished what she set out to do, but it felt like she’d lost so much more in the doing of it.

“After Charlie died, my family needed an income. I mean no offense, but the money I’ve made cleaning here and other places hasn’t been enough.

I looked around and it seemed like all the jobs that paid enough to live on were men's jobs or..."

She couldn't figure out how to tell the women she didn't want to do the job they did without insulting them.

"Don't worry," Cecelia said. "If we had choices we probably wouldn't do our job, either."

"It's a hard life, even working for someone as good as Della," Betsy said.

Ruby nodded, then continued. "I knew I could do some of those other jobs, but I'd never get any of them as a woman. So I became a man. But, I didn't think far enough ahead, and now I have nowhere to stay."

"Did you at least get a job?" Della asked. Her expression wavered somewhere between disapproval and sympathy. Ruby needed sympathy.

"Yes, ma'am. Clerk to Miles Collins at the North Hill mine."

Victoria whistled. "That's impressive. I hear Collins is a tough customer."

"Not that any of the women in town would know," Sally said. "From what I hear, he's never frequented any of the brothels in Virginia City."

"Maybe that's why he's got a reputation for being so bad-tempered," Cecelia said.

That set the women off laughing. Ruby couldn't help a smirk at the

thought. Mr. Collins hadn't seemed bad-tempered to her, just serious. She wondered what his face would look like with a smile on it. Would it light up? Would it change completely?

As the laughter settled, Della said, "So you need a place to stay? Why come here?"

Ruby shrugged. "I don't know. I walked around the city this afternoon trying to worry through the problem, but had no ideas until I looked up and found myself here. I suppose my feet knew the answer before my head. Do you have room for me? I'll pay rent once I start getting paid."

The look in Della's eyes tipped over into sympathy and the knot of concern in Ruby's belly began to loosen.

"I suppose we can find space for you," Della said. "What kind of person would I be if I turned away another woman in need? But while you're here, you'll need to dress as a woman. I can't have people thinking I have a man living under my roof, even if you do look more like a boy. We'll call you the maid, or maybe my cousin from back East, and you can stick to the back of the house."

"Thank you so much, Della," Ruby said, reaching for Della's hand. She squeezed it in hers, so grateful that the prick of tears burned the corners of her eyes.

"You're welcome. Betsy, you're the closest to Ruby's size, do you

have a dress she can borrow? Something modest?” Della asked.

“Certainly. I’ll go see what I can find,” Betsy said, turning to head up the stairs.

“The rest of you should get ready for the evening business to start. Someone wake Chloe, and go make sure Sarah has supper ready so we can sit down to eat,” Della said. “Ruby, follow me.”

Della led her through the kitchen and down a back hallway to a small room near the entry to the cellar. A narrow bed, a dresser with a basin and ewer on top, and a rocking chair filled the small space.

“It’s nothing fancy, but it’s a place to lay your head,” Della said.

“It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“Miss Della?” An older black woman dressed in a loose-cut dress, an apron dirty from cooking, and a white cloth head wrap stood in the doorway.

“Yes, Sarah?”

“I’m short of a few things—bacon, coffee, flour. Mercantile closes in a half hour,” Sarah said.

“Is supper finished?”

“Not yet, ma’am.”

“Well, Ruby. It looks like you’ll get to earn your keep until you have enough money for rent. When Betsy brings you that dress, I’ll send you to the mercantile,” Della said.

Ruby adjusted the shawl Betsy had loaned her to wear over the dress. The dress was a tight fit and the neckline plunged below where Ruby was comfortable, but the girls assured her it was still acceptable for wearing in public. If this passed for modest in Betsy's wardrobe, Ruby hesitated to consider her other dresses.

Still, she was grateful for the shawl.

She hurried down the boardwalk, staying to the outside so as not to get squished into a wall when she passed other people. She'd pinned her hair up the best she could under a simple felt hat that sat far enough back on her head to cover most of her hair.

Her stomach rumbled as she neared the mercantile. She hadn't eaten all day, and if she didn't make this a quick trip, the likelihood was good the rest of the women at the house would only leave her pan scrapings for supper.

Deep in daydreams of savory meat and hearty bread, she ran headlong into someone, bouncing off him with a loud, "oof."

"Pardon me," a familiar male voice said. His hands gripped her shoulders, setting her steady on her feet.

Her hand flew to her chest as she looked up into intense blue eyes. "Oh, Mr. Collins, you startled me."

"Do I know you?"

“Um...”

Of course there was no way she would have known him as Ruby, but he'd startled her so badly, she'd blurted the first thing that came to her mind.

Another man stood behind Miles, maybe an inch or two taller, a couple of years older, but with the same black hair and blue eyes. This one had a touch of silver at the temples, though. Must be a brother.

“You must be related to Ray Jackson. Maybe his sister?” Miles asked.

“Yes!” She said, grasping at the lifeline. “Ray is definitely my brother.”

“You look remarkably like him.”

“Resemblance is strong in my family. As it is in yours, I see. This must be your brother?”

Miles glanced at his brother, then back at Ruby. “Yes, this is Isaac Collins. I'm Miles. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?”

“I'm Ruby Jackson. Pleased to meet you, sir.”

She dipped a little curtsy, and when she came back up he had a flummoxed look in his eyes.

A lock of her hair had come loose in their collision and it fell now into her face. His hand twitched upward and for an instant she thought he might reach up and tuck it back into place. Instead, he shoved his hand into his pocket and swallowed hard.

“Are you all right, sir?” she asked.

Isaac chuckled behind him. “He’s just fine, ma’am. Probably distracted by our dinner conversation.”

Miles snapped out of it and shot Isaac a sour look before turning back to Ruby. “It was a pleasure to meet you. Tell Ray I expect him bright and early.”

Isaac was probably right that their dinner conversation about women and wives had been the catalyst for his distraction on meeting Miss Ruby Jackson, and also for her playing a role in his dreams all night long. He’d never tell Isaac that, though, or his brothers wouldn’t ever let him forget it.

Those dreams—and the woman herself—haunted his thoughts this morning, leaving him out of sorts. On the one hand, her pretty face and expressive eyes appealed to him, and he kept coming back to the way her lips had formed a charming ‘O’ when they’d bumped into each other, and the sweet pink blush on her cheeks when he’d pointed out she looked like her brother. That hadn’t been the most considerate comment on his part. What woman wants her looks compared to a man, even if he is her brother? The reality was that Ray looked more like her than she looked like him.

On the other hand, he resented that she’d taken up residence in his mind. They’d only just met. How could one woman have wheedled her way into his imagination in such a short time? In thirty-six years no woman had

managed it so far. Why this one?

He sat slumped at his desk deep in thought about Ruby Jackson when her brother Ray peeked in the doorway of his office.

“Good morning, Mr. Collins,” Ray said.

“Good morning, Mr. Jackson.” Miles sat up in his chair, pushing Ruby out of his mind. He had work to do. “Are you ready to work?”

Ray grinned. “I am, sir.”

“I have a pile of correspondence I need to deal with, and some errands you can run for me.”

“Sir? Could we start with a tour of the mine buildings, so I know where everything is? Maybe you can introduce me to people I’ll be working with.”

Miles scowled at Ray for being right, and for being Ruby’s brother, which made him responsible, somehow, for Ruby distracting him from competently doing his job. But the eager look on Ray’s face quelled his urge to snap at him. It wasn’t Ray’s fault Miles apparently had a crush on his sister.

“Yes. That’s a good place to start.”

Miles stood and rounded the desk, heading for the door. Ray fell in step next to him and they spent the next couple of hours visiting every part of the property. Miles introduced Ray to everyone from the accountant to the blacksmith to the cook and all those in between. Without exception, Ray

smiled and shook hands and put each man at ease. By the time they'd circled back to the office, Ray had made friends with every man on the property.

"You have a way with people," Miles said as they climbed the stairs back to his office.

Ray shrugged. "It's not that hard. I just try to be nice."

"Hmph. Not so easy when you're the boss."

"Do you think the men don't like you?"

"I don't need them to like me, I need them to respect me."

He wasn't there to be friends with the men. He had a business to run, and in order to do that, workers had to respect and maybe even fear the boss.

"They do respect you. But remember, you'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

"I don't need to catch any flies, Ray. I need the flies to do their jobs."

Ray smiled. "Work does make the world go round, after all. Speaking of which, now that I have a feel for the place, what would you like me to do first?"

"Love makes the world go round," Miles said, immediately regretting having said it. It had just blurted from his mouth before he could stop it.

"I'm sorry?"

Now he'd be forced to explain himself. "You said work makes the world go round, but the saying is love makes the world go round."

“Well, I wouldn’t know anything about love, and when you think about it, it really is work that makes everything move forward.”

“I suppose.” Miles moved to his desk and shuffled the stack of papers, sorting what he wanted to give to Ray to work on. But the semantics still bothered him. “Have you ever been in love, Ray?”

Ray looked at him, wide-eyed and for the first time all day at a loss for words. When he finally found his tongue he said, “No, sir.”

“Sorry. That was an inappropriate question.”

“No, it’s all right. You just surprised me. I actually haven’t been in love. Have you?”

With the tables turned, Miles realized how uncomfortable the question was when aimed at himself, and wished he hadn’t asked it. But what could it hurt to talk to the boy?

“No. Not yet. Maybe someday.” Ruby popped into his head unbidden.

“Maybe,” Ray said.

Selecting one of the stacks of papers he’d sorted, he picked it up and handed it to Ray. “I met your sister the other day.”

Ray’s head came up from studying the papers, his eyes wide with surprise echoing the expression on Ruby’s face when Miles had bumped into her. “Oh?”

“The two of you look remarkably alike.”

Ray made a disgusted grunting sound. “I know,” he said. “It’s one of the first things people remark about, and it’s been a bother all my life.”

Miles smiled. “I imagine. No man wants to be told he looks like his sister.”

“Mmph,” Ray said. “If you’ll excuse me, sir, I’ll get started on this.”

“Certainly.”

Ray made his way out to his desk. Miles could see him from inside his own office, and the way in which Ray went about sorting and stacking the papers, his expression the picture of determined intensity, reassured Miles that he’d made the right choice. The boy was easy to work with, unlike most men who’d held the position. The last man had spent more time bristling at Miles’ requests than working. As if every chore Miles asked him to do was an insult to his manhood. The whole situation had been tiresome. Why would a man apply for a subordinate position if he couldn’t take direction?

Maybe the trick was in hiring a younger man, one just out of boyhood. Those men hadn’t yet established themselves and were still used to others giving them instructions.

Either way, Ray seemed industrious and hadn’t once yet scowled at him.

As he worked, a bit of hair fell in his face and Ray tucked it behind his ear, a gesture that exactly replicated the one Ruby had done the day before.

Not only was it eerie, but it brought her back to mind.

He wondered what she did for a living. Was she married? The thought struck a note of panic in his heart, though for what reason he had no idea. He'd only just met her and had no claim on her, but clearly somewhere in his mind he'd already decided he had enough interest to perhaps pursue her. At the very least, he'd like to meet her again since their encounter had been so brief, to get to know her better. The likelihood was good that if they spent more time together it would break this mysterious spell that seemed to hold him in its grasp. The chances they'd like each other were small, but he was still inclined to find out.

Before he lost his nerve, he stood and went to the door of his office.

“Ray.”

“Yes, sir?” Ray said, looking up at him with the question in his eyes.

“Is your sister married?”

Ray's brows went up and he just stared at Miles as if he'd lost the power of comprehension. Miles had taken a step toward him to be sure he hadn't had some sort of fit, but Ray recovered his wits and sputtered, “I'm sorry, what?”

“I asked if your sister is married. Is it wrong of me to ask? Is she seeing someone?”

“I...no...,” Ray stuttered. “She's not married. Or seeing anyone. Why?”

Ray seemed taken aback, as if nobody had ever thought to ask about her before. Miles liked how that impacted his chances of attracting her affection.

“I think I’d like to call on her. Do you think she’d be receptive?”

Chapter 3

Ruby sat at the table in the kitchen at the brothel, an untouched piece of apple pie on the plate in front of her. Sarah leaned against the counter, and Cecelia, Victoria, and Chloe shared the table with Ruby. Each of them worked on their own pieces of pie.

“He asked if you’d be receptive to him calling on you?” Cecelia asked between bites of pie. “What did you say?”

Ruby ran a frustrated hand down her face, wondering for the hundredth time in the last few days how she’d got herself into such a mess.

“I told him I’d have to ask her...me,” Ruby said.

Miles had asked Ray about Ruby on Thursday. She’d demurred, telling him she—Ray—would ask Ruby—herself—if she’d be amenable to Miles calling on her. On Friday, Miles had given a note to Ray to pass to Ruby. The note had been polite and charming and had asked if Ruby would be so kind as to do him the honor of joining him at the dance the following week. On Saturday, Ruby—as Ray—had told Miles he’d given his sister the note and he’d let Miles know as soon as she replied, so she’d bought herself a little time. Now, on Sunday, Ruby had a day off to consider her situation with the help of the women at the brothel who had quickly become her alternate family.

“Do you want him to call on you?” Victoria asked.

“If it weren’t for Ray, I would certainly consider it.”

“Mr. Collins is one of the most eligible men in Virginia City. He’d be an excellent catch,” Chloe said.

“I don’t even know that I want to ‘catch’ anyone,” Ruby said. “I’d never really thought about it.”

“You haven’t thought about marrying?” Chloe asked.

“Well, I suppose I’ve thought about it, but I never really liked the idea. Why would a woman want to give up her independence to become some man’s property?”

Sarah made a knowing grunt. Ruby had no idea if Sarah had been a slave before the Civil War, but she was old enough and if Ruby had to guess from her response, she’d guess yes.

“You don’t want to get married, ever?” Chloe asked.

If anyone had asked Ruby the same question before she met Miles Collins, her answer would have been that she never wanted to get married. But now she wasn’t so sure.

“I don’t know. Maybe in the future,” Ruby said.

“How old are you?” Cecelia asked.

“I’m twenty-six.”

“Hmm. You don’t have much future left to be considering marriage,”

Cecelia said.

“Mhm,” Chloe—who looked to Ruby to be about fifteen—said.

“You’re far beyond being an old maid.”

“If you were to marry,” Victoria said. “What do you think of Miles Collins as a suitor?”

Ruby considered the question for a moment before answering, “First of all, any talk of marriage is premature. He’s only asked to see me, not marry me. Otherwise, he’s handsome, and smart, and after working with him for a few days I like him and appreciate how good he is at his job. But how am I supposed to manage both Ray and me? If he ever found out I doubt he’d be understanding,” Ruby said.

Sarah made a sound of agreement, and they all turned their attention to her. “You got yourself into some kind of mess, that’s for sure,” she said.

“Yes, I did,” Ruby said. “It wouldn’t be a mess if I’d never run into him on the sidewalk. If I’d never met him as Ruby I could just go on being Ray, working a job I like for a boss I like, and earning a good living.”

Victoria snorted. “That’s fine if you were actually a man doing that job. But you’re a woman and you already admitted you find Mr. Collins handsome. Do you really think you’d be able to continue to work with him as if you weren’t attracted to him?”

Ruby thought about how often every day she went in and out of his

office—of his presence. Being close to him made her heart flutter. He smelled good, and she liked his smile which he didn't share often enough with anyone. It felt like a prize when she pried one out of him. They'd already developed a good working rapport, and he talked to her with the confidence that she was Ray. It was refreshing to be treated, if not as an equal on the job, at least as a fellow man.

But he'd never talk to Ruby in the same unguarded, straightforward way, which sparked a certain resentment that he'd treat her differently based on his assumption about whether she was male or female. She was still the same person with the same intelligence and ideas and thoughts, but the more she thought about it, the more it stuck in her craw that he'd treat her differently as Ruby than as Ray.

“No. I wouldn't. But why should I give up a good job just because I'm a woman?”

“You can't force him to accept something he won't,” Sarah said.
“Men don't understand a lot of things.”

Victoria, Chloe, and Cecelia all looked up from their plates, glanced at each other and burst out laughing.

“Ain't that the truth?” Victoria said.

“So what am I supposed to do?” Ruby asked.

“Can you keep up the ruse of being Ray forever?” Chloe asked.

Ruby hadn't thought about that. Did she really want to be Ray forever? Even if she did, could she pull it off? In fact, the longer she continued the deception, the higher her chances of being discovered. She hadn't considered the long term consequences, only the short term gains.

"No, probably not."

"Then we need to come up with a way to get rid of Ray that isn't suspicious," Chloe said.

"But if I get rid of Ray, I'm back to the same dilemma I started with, trying to make a living," Ruby said.

"If she's getting rid of Ray because of her interest in Mr. Collins, shouldn't we wait until she knows whether she wants to pursue a relationship with him?" Cecelia asked.

Sarah shook her head. "Chloe's right. Ray was a bad idea from the start."

"I disagree," Victoria said. "Ray was a wonderful idea. You like the job, don't you, Ruby?"

"I do."

"You just couldn't have anticipated being attracted to Mr. Collins," Cecelia said.

"True."

"So shouldn't you be certain what you have to look forward to after

Ray is gone? If you like Mr. Collins, shouldn't you make sure you have a future with him before you give up a job you like and that supports you and your family?" Cecelia asked.

"You want her to get him to propose to her before she stops being Ray?" Victoria asked.

Cecelia shrugged, neither confirming nor denying. But Ruby got the sense that's exactly what she meant.

"That feels like a deception of another kind," Ruby said.

"All I'm saying is, it's not just about you. It's about your family, too. So don't give up a good job until you're sure you have something to replace it—whether it's a husband or another job," Cecelia said.

The frustrating truth of what Cecelia said settled over Ruby like a gloomy cloud. From the silence that followed, it must have sunk in for all of them. They'd all come from far flung places to find a home and family together, and if it weren't for the fact that their income depended on selling their bodies to men who didn't love them, Ruby envied the closeness of these independent women. They accepted her into their home, and treated her with respect, but she wasn't one of them. She couldn't know their fears, their disgrace, their dignity, their secret dreams. But she dared to feel at home among them anyway.

On the other hand, they lived their lives by their own rules, defying

propriety and decorum and charting their own courses. She certainly admired that kind of courage. Why should she do what everyone expected, just because they expected it? What if she wanted something different?

Then she thought about Miles Collins. Would it be so bad to have a husband if she could have one like him?

She glanced at each of the women around the table. They were hard-working, smart women playing the hand they were given in life. But would they ever find true love? Which was more important in a woman's life—the freedom of self-determination or the joy of love?

“What if I don't want a husband?” Ruby asked.

They all, every one of them, looked at her with a wistfulness that made her heart ache.

“Honey, men are complicated and imperfect and can be impossible sometimes, but if you find one who will love and cherish you, that's something you should grab hold of and never let go,” Victoria said.

“But I thought you all prized your independence,” Ruby said.

“We do,” Cecelia said. “And we love each other like sisters, but we get lonely, too.”

“God made men for women and women for men,” Chloe added. “We frustrate each other and we butt heads sometimes, but we still need each other. We're drawn together.”

“Sometimes against our will,” Victoria added, a wry smile on her face.

Their insight surprised Ruby. “So you’d give up everything you have for love?”

“Real love?” Chloe said. “Certainly. But I wouldn’t be giving anything up. I’d be getting so much more.”

“Besides,” Cecelia said. “What would we be giving up? We’ll always be sisters and friends, and as much as it’s nice to be independent, I’d happily give up working from my back.”

“And the snubs and jeers and being shunned by everyone in town,” Victoria added.

Ruby pushed away from the table, determined that Ray’s days were numbered. She’d give Miles Collins a chance and if he proved to be a man she could love she’d dispense with Ray. If he didn’t, well, Ray had served a purpose and maybe she’d find a real governess position to support her family.

“Thank you, ladies. If you’ll excuse me, I must write a note to Mr. Collins accepting his invitation.”

On Monday morning Miles found Ray already at his desk, hard at work.

“Good morning, Ray.”

“Good morning, sir.”

Ray followed him into his office and waited patiently while Miles hung his coat and hat on a hook on the wall.

“How was your day off?” Miles asked as he sat behind his desk.

Ray’s responding grunt sounded as if his day off hadn’t been so good.

“I have a letter for you.”

Miles’s heart stuttered as Ray tossed the note onto his desk, then felt ridiculous for being excited that Ruby may have replied to his invitation. He’d only seen her the one time, yet he’d allowed her to take hold of his imagination. Seizing an iron grip on his dignity, he cleared his throat and said, “Thank you.”

He moved the folded piece of paper to the side of his desk to read later, after he’d attended to some of his more urgent correspondence.

But Ray stood in front of him, waiting. “Aren’t you going to read it?”

“Later.”

Still, Ray stayed for a moment longer, the look on his face judging Miles for not reading it. They looked at each other for an uncomfortable spell before Ray finally drew in a deep breath and released it, then turned on his heel and went back to his desk. His tense posture suggested his displeasure. Why would he be so upset? What did it matter to him if Ruby chose to accompany Miles to a dance?

Unless Ray disapproved.

When it came down to it, Miles knew nothing of their family. It could very well be they had no father and Ray was the head of the family, in which case—in an ironic twist—Miles would need Ray’s permission to court Ruby. Assuming Miles decided he wanted to court her formally.

Better to resolve it sooner rather than later. He picked up the envelope and broke the wax. He couldn’t help himself from lifting the letter to his nose to take a whiff. It smelled of fresh paper. He had no idea what he’d been hoping for, but not finding it left him disappointed.

The note read:

My dear Mr. Collins,

Thank you for your kind invitation. I would be delighted to accompany you to the dance on Saturday next.

Sincerely,

Miss Ruby Jackson

While he couldn’t deny the excitement that filled him that she’d agreed to his request, her note was frustratingly brief and uninformative. Was he to meet her there, or call on her to escort her? Would they need permission or a chaperone?

Already this enterprise of incorporating a woman into his life had distracted him from his job and disrupted his otherwise steady disposition.

If he hadn't already made the invitation and she hadn't already accepted, he'd call the whole thing off.

But he had and she had, so best to sort it out.

Then he remembered the pretty blush on Ruby's cheeks when they'd met, and the way her hand had flown to her chest, and that lock of hair that had fallen loose.

He stood and went to talk to Ray.

"Yes, sir?" Ray asked as Miles approached him.

"I've invited your sister to the dance next Saturday, and she's accepted, but she's no more gregarious than you are, so I have some questions for you."

Was he mistaken, or had Ray bitten back a smirk?

"What do you need, sir?"

"Will I need to request your father's permission to accompany Ruby to the function?"

Ray's expression fell flat. "Our father's dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Do you have an older brother, or are you the head of the household?"

"Ruby doesn't need my permission. She's a grown woman. She

makes her own decisions.”

Ray’s manner had shifted. If Miles had to put a finger on it, he’d call it defensiveness, though over what Miles had no idea.

“Certainly. I understand. My problem is this, she didn’t mention whether we should meet at the dance or if I should escort her. I’d be happy to escort her, but I don’t know where to call for her.”

“She lives at Miss Della Kinney’s house,” Ray said, studying him as if daring him to respond.

Miles suddenly understood why. “The brothel? Ruby lives at a brothel? For God’s sake, why?”

He was flabbergasted. How could he have misjudged the situation so badly? He’d requested the company of a whore to a public function. Isaac and his brothers would never, ever let him hear the end of this.

Ray stood and planted his fists at his waist. “Ruby is not a whore, if that’s what you’re thinking. She works as a maid at the brothel.” Miles tried not to show his relief as Ray picked up steam. “But she doesn’t judge people for how they survive in the world. Those women are doing the best they can and deserve as much respect as anyone else. I mean, have you ever really given any thought to the few options women have?”

Miles cocked his head. “What do you mean what options they have? Why would they need any? Their fathers take care of them until they find a

suitable husband.”

Ray made a disgusted sound and flung his hands in a gesture of giving up. “Did you ever think maybe women want more from life than just cooking and cleaning and having babies?”

“Ray, you are a strange boy.”

A startled look crossed Ray’s face before he rearranged his expression back to his dignified business face. “If treating everyone—man or woman—with the kind of respect I want to be treated with is strange, then I guess I am. Sir.”

He added the last word as an afterthought, and for some reason it stung. Miles had grown accustomed to Ray, a fondness for him sneaking up on Miles unexpectedly. He couldn’t blame Ray for defending his sister, and although he had some odd views about women, his principles clearly meant a lot to him and truly, he could have worse ideas. That as a young man he’d been left with the responsibilities of manhood after his father had passed, and that he stood up for his older sister’s interests was admirable.

Although Ruby lived in a brothel, Ray assured him she wasn’t a whore, so he trusted Ray’s word.

“I apologize for making assumptions about Ruby. Will you tell her I’ll call for her prior to the dance?”

“I don’t live with her,” Ray said. “But I’ll get the message to her.”

Chapter 4

Saturday came far too fast, yet not fast enough for Ruby. It was torture to work side by side with Miles every single day, secretly enjoying his company while waiting for Saturday when she could finally be herself.

They'd quickly developed an amiable working relationship. While he barked gruff commands at the other men, he treated Ray with respect. Not that he didn't bark at her, too, but Ruby reveled in the freedom of being regarded as an equal person, if not of equal rank. Her world had shifted drastically, and as if she'd discovered a secret land hidden in plain sight, she learned that men in the company of other men behaved like different people. Certainly they were crude and rough around the edges, but they were also forthright and afforded each other a certain loyalty.

Ruby found the whole thing both fascinating and frustrating. She much preferred the way men treated each other and wondered why in the world they couldn't be the same with women.

"You look a hundred miles away," Chloe said.

Ruby sat at the vanity in Della's room. She glanced in the mirror in front of her, at Chloe's reflection. Chloe stood behind her, fussing with Ruby's hair while Betsy and Cecelia sat on the bed watching.

Chloe had pulled Ruby's short hair up and pinned it to the top of her

head, then applied a hair piece that matched Ruby's own hair color remarkably well. It gave the illusion that Ruby had more hair than she did.

"I was just thinking about the men at the mine," Ruby said.

"One man in particular, I imagine," Cecelia said with a sly smile.

"I've never been anywhere with a man. I don't know how to behave," Ruby said. "Look. My palms are sweaty. Won't he find that unpleasant when we dance?"

The woman all laughed.

"You spend all day with men, and Mr. Collins in particular," Cecelia said. "And if you haven't scared him off yet as Ray, you won't as Ruby. You are the same person, after all."

"And in my experience, all men have sweaty hands anyway, so he won't even notice," Betsy said.

"Not all men have sweaty hands," Cecelia said. "There's a certain accountant in town who has the softest hands I've ever felt."

That brought on another round of laughter, and a blush from Ruby. She had the vaguest of ideas why Cecelia found soft hands on a man agreeable, but imagining Miles' hands caressing her cheek or bringing a curl of her hair to his nose for an intimate whiff gave Ruby the urge to fan herself. She'd noticed his hands before—broad and calloused with a dusting of dark hair. They appealed to her, and beyond that they caused an unfamiliar flutter

in her belly.

“Okay, stand up and let’s have a look,” Chloe said.

The ladies had found among them an appropriate dress for Ruby. Pretty blue with white lace at the neck and cuffs of the elbow-length sleeves, it complemented her dark hair and eyes, and fair skin.

“You look beautiful,” Betsy said.

“He’ll be bewitched,” Cecelia said.

Ruby primped in the mirror, smoothing the skirt and patting at the strange-feeling hair piece pinned to her head.

“Quit fussing,” Chloe said. “They’re right. You’re beautiful.”

Sally rushed into the room, out of breath. “Mr. Collins is here,” she managed.

Ruby’s heart fluttered in her chest, the same way it did when she saw him at work. Now she wouldn’t have to hide her attraction to him like she did when she was Ray.

Checking her appearance one more time, she took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “I’m ready.”

At the bottom of the stairs she found Miles Collins, the handsomest man she’d ever set eyes on with his dark hair brushed back, hat in hand, conversing with Della Kinney. She liked that he hadn’t smiled for Della. He’d shared his stern expression with her, but when Ruby caught his eye

coming down the stairs he turned to her and the expression he saved for her about stopped her heart.

Somewhere between awe and befuddled, his blue eyes sparkled and his jaw dropped, and he stared. And it energized Ruby like nothing ever had before. If this was what attraction between a man and woman felt like, she understood how difficult it was to resist. All of her arguments against it seemed trivial.

Miles came to meet her at the bottom of the stairs. “Good evening, Ruby. You look lovely tonight.”

“Thank you.”

Behind her the ladies whispered amongst themselves, and when Ruby heard someone say, “Damn, that is one fine man,” her cheeks heated and she glanced away from Miles, embarrassed. But not before she noticed him smirk.

He bent his elbow and offered his arm. “Shall we go?”

Hooking her hand into the crook of his arm, she said, “Yes, please.”

They headed out the door and down the porch steps. When Ruby glanced back up at the house, Della and the girls stood smiling and waving, warming Ruby’s heart. Despite complicating her life, Ray had done her several favors, one of which was to bring her into the acquaintance of the women of Miss Kinney’s brothel. Ruby loved her family and missed them,

but these women had adopted her as a sister, and she'd grown to love them, too.

Ray had also brought her to Miles Collins.

"I hope you don't mind walking," Miles said. "It's a beautiful evening for a stroll."

"I don't mind at all."

The dance was being held at the dance hall across town, which meant Ruby had the pleasure of walking beside Mr. Miles Collins, arm in arm, the entire distance between the brothel and the hall. She had no idea what the night would bring, but she wanted to savor every moment of it.

Even though Ray knew the answer in excruciating detail, Ruby wasn't supposed to, so in order to make conversation she said, "Tell me about what you do at the mine."

With his free hand he reached over and patted her fingers where they wrapped around his arm. "You don't want to hear about that. It wouldn't be of any interest to you."

She stopped in her tracks and pulled her hand from his arm. He turned, looking puzzled.

"How do you know it wouldn't interest me?"

"Well, it's not something women are typically interested in."

She crossed her arms. "First of all, I'm not a typical woman.

Secondly, I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know. And last, I'm probably far more competent than you imagine."

An amused half-smile curved his lips as he shook his head. "You are definitely Ray's sister."

"Oh?"

"The both of you have strong opinions." He held up his hand as she drew breath to argue with him. "And I apologize for insulting you, Ruby. I'm happy to talk to you about my work. What would you like to know?"

She smiled, pleased that he'd taken her seriously, even if he hadn't at first. She stepped toward him and took his arm again, this time grasping it with both hands.

"What's it like to work at a silver mine?"

"Hasn't Ray told you?"

"We don't live together, and we don't see each other often." Her stomach soured around the lie. In general, she liked being Ray and liked that he allowed her to have a good job and a certain freedom that being a woman didn't. But walking and talking with Miles as Ruby, an uncomfortable guilt ate at her.

"Why not, if you don't mind my asking."

"I'm a grown woman. Ray has his own life."

He nodded, accepting her answer. "Working at a mine is challenging,

but satisfying...”

She listened to him describe the things she already knew, but he filled his narration with his love of the work so she saw it through his eyes, with his particular joy in the hard work, dealing with the men, the gratification of doing the job well—all the things she felt about her job.

By the time he’d finished, they’d reached the dance hall. A line of people waited outside to get in, it was that crowded. The air was filled with the excitement of ladies in pretty dresses and fancy hats, and men in their best suits, looking freshly washed and shaved. The dance was a break from the usual drudgery and routine. A chance for people to enjoy themselves.

Music drifted on the warm evening breeze, a piano and a banjo, and Ruby shivered with glee.

Miles mistook her, though, and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “Are you cold? We should be inside soon.”

His arm warm across her shoulders, she didn’t want him to remove it. “No. I’m excited. I’ve never been to a dance before. Have you?”

“My brothers and sisters-in-law have dragged me to a few. I’ll admit, I never enjoyed them much. But tonight I think that’ll be different.”

“Tell me about your family,” she said, a warm glow filling her that he looked forward to tonight as much as she did.

“I have three brothers—two older, one younger. They’re all married

and have children. Wyatt's the oldest. He's sheriff of Palmer, south of here. Isaac, the brother you met when we ran into each other on the street, is next. He owns a ranch in Palmer. Sam's the youngest. He's a writer. Owns a newspaper. What about you? I know about Ray. What about the rest of your family?"

Darn. She hadn't thought ahead. She didn't want to talk about her family, but there were still several people in front of them and she had no excuse for not answering his question. "Well, my father and older brother, Charlie, have passed. My mother, younger sister Hannah and youngest brother Henry live on a farm south of Carson City."

"I'm sorry about your father and brother."

Ruby bit her tongue. She almost said something about their deaths, about the mine, but she didn't want to ruin the evening. Miles had nothing to do with the mine at the time they died, so mentioning it seemed pointless. That thought alone triggered a wave of guilt. She should have more respect for her father and brother than to put her own feelings above them.

Since she'd been working at the mine it had become clear to her how dangerous it could be for the men who did the hard work down in the mines. Miles made a point of establishing rules to keep the men as safe as possible, but by its very nature, mining was hard, risky work. She owed it to the memory of her father and Charlie to do what she could to improve the

condition of miners however she could, even if it only amounted to making suggestions to Miles when she thought of them.

But tonight she put thoughts of the mine, and her father and brother aside. Tonight was for her.

They finally made it inside, and it was better than Ruby could have hoped. On one wall a table had been laid out with a punch bowl and desserts. Some of the ladies from the church smiled and served and accepted compliments for their delicious sweets.

Colorful bunting decorated the walls, tables and chairs had been pushed to the outside to make room for dancing, and musicians had taken up location surrounding the piano in the front corner of the room.

“It’s beautiful,” Ruby said.

“And you’re the prettiest one here,” Miles said.

Ruby smiled. She couldn’t remember being so happy, like floating on joy.

Miles guided her over to the church ladies who fussed over them and commented on what a lovely couple they made as Miles fetched drinks for them. By the time they’d quenched their thirst, the music had started and people moved to the dance floor.

“Can we dance?” Ruby asked.

“I’ll warn you, I’m not good at it.”

“I’m not either, but I want to try.”

He offered her one of his rare smiles, and she had to squelch the urge to bounce on her toes.

When he held his hand out, she placed hers in it. Somehow that simple gesture felt intimate and full of promise. But she shook the thought from her head. It was just a dance. Nothing more.

He led her to the dance floor where she put her other hand on his shoulder, and he put his on her waist. Despite his claim that he couldn’t dance, he led her around the floor like he’d done it a hundred times. It was magical, and the attention he paid to her, making sure she didn’t feel foolish when she missed a step, or bumped into someone, turned what would have been embarrassing into just another part of an entertaining evening.

They danced through several songs, and when the musicians took a break, Miles led her to a table.

“You have a seat. I’ll go fetch us something to drink,” he said.

Ruby fanned herself, then pulled out the handkerchief she had tucked in her sleeve to dab at the perspiration on her forehead. She hadn’t realized how warm it had become in the hall with so many people in one room. But it was a pleasant heat that left her content and muzzy.

Miles returned with punch for both of them, and took the seat next to her. The murmur of conversation filled the room as people stood and sat in

groups catching up on the most recent gossip.

“Thank you for the drink,” Ruby said.

“Thank you for coming with me. I’ve had a good time.”

“Me too. I never knew dancing could be so fun.”

“I haven’t generally found it to be so. I believe the company makes all the difference,” he said, holding her gaze.

Ruby swallowed the punch she’d just sipped. His expression remained serious as he said the words, suggesting more to her than a simple compliment. She knew him well enough by now to understand the gravity of his statement. He rarely praised or flattered, and never gushed. Compliments were as few and far between as his smiles, and she’d received both in one night. The fact that he didn’t smile as he pointed out how much her company had made his evening only emphasized the depth of his feelings.

But how could he possibly have feelings for her? They’d bumped into each other once, and spent several hours together this evening. Was that enough time to decide he had feelings?

She searched her own emotions. Foremost among them was happiness. At the moment, nothing else in her life mattered because there was no place she’d rather be, and nobody she’d rather be with. That pulled her up short. Of all the people in her life, she really wouldn’t rather be with any of them. She wanted to be with Miles. Did that mean she had feelings for him?

Did it mean she loved him, or was falling in love with him? People didn't fall in love that fast. Did they? She was certainly attracted to him, and liked him, and wanted to spend more time with him beyond tonight.

Oh my. Maybe she was falling in love with him.

He watched her quietly while she digested what he'd said. It couldn't have been an easy confession for him. It certainly left him vulnerable if she didn't agree, and in the time they'd worked together she'd never seen Miles expose himself to vulnerability.

"The company has been most agreeable," she said, adding her openness to his.

A slow smile spread across his lips, as if he'd just won something important. If he felt the same secret satisfaction she did that some tacit agreement had passed between them, his smile was warranted. She mirrored it.

After the dance, he walked her home again, the cool breeze welcome after the heat in the dance hall had gone beyond pleasant into stifling. Still, everyone had been reluctant for the evening to end.

When they reached Della's house, Miles said, "I had a wonderful time, Ruby."

"As did I."

"I'd be honored if you'd allow me to call on you again."

“I’d like that very much.”

He actually grinned, making her heart flutter. “Good.” He took her hand in his and kissed the back of it, sending shivers down her spine. So brazen, but also lovely. “Sleep well, Ruby. Until I see you again.”

The next few weeks passed in a happy haze. Ruby balanced Ray and his growing friendship with Miles at work against Ruby’s burgeoning courtship with Miles outside of work. After leisurely walks and window shopping,

a picnic, meals together, and an evening at the opera house, Ruby no longer had any doubt that Miles was courting her. The more time she spent with him as both Ruby and Ray, the more she liked him, admired his work ethic and integrity, and discovered that underneath the sometimes gruff exterior lived a kind, sensitive man she’d grown to care about.

Her only frustration was that Miles refused to talk about Ruby to Ray. In a fit of curiosity one day after she’d gone with Miles to an ice cream social, she asked him—as Ray—how the day had gone with his sister, Ruby.

Miles had said they enjoyed their time, but that he didn’t believe it honorable to talk about Ruby to Ray behind her back. He’d been stern and brooked no further discussion of the subject, leaving Ruby frustrated she couldn’t at least use Ray as an avenue of information.

As she walked arm-in-arm with him to the Silver City Inn for supper,

the problem of Ray niggled at her. She loved her job and had no desire to give it up. But if Miles' ultimate intention was to marry Ruby, she'd have to get rid of Ray. She'd never be able to hide him from Miles, and her conscience—which she'd conveniently been ignoring while she enjoyed Miles' company—became louder and more insistent by the day.

It was time to formulate a plan. Maybe Ray should go East.

“Ruby?” Miles asked. “You look like you're miles away.”

Ruby almost laughed. If he only knew. “I was thinking about my family.”

“Speaking of which, I was just saying we're having a family supper this weekend at my brother Isaac's ranch.”

“That sounds very nice,” Ruby said.

Miles stopped walking near the side of the road and faced her, taking one of her hands in his. “I'd like you to come with me and meet my family.”

Ruby froze and took a moment to clear her throat and swallow. He wanted her to meet his family at a large gathering. Elation and dread mingled in her gut. They both knew inviting her indicated how serious he was about her. A man didn't do such a thing unless he saw a future together. Was she ready for that? She didn't know, but she wanted to find out.

But it also meant Ray needed an excuse to vamoose. Ruby would sit down with the ladies at Della's and they'd come up with a plausible plan.

With that stewing in the back of her mind, she smiled and squeezed his hand. “Of course I’ll go. I can’t wait!”

Chapter 5

Miles fidgeted in the seat of the carriage he'd hired to travel from Virginia City to Palmer, where his brother Isaac lived.

As many times as he chided himself for his nerves—remembering he was a grown man for Heaven's sake—he still couldn't manage to banish them completely. He'd never brought a woman to meet his family, and had no idea how they'd react.

When he told Isaac, his older brother had grinned ear to ear, which didn't bode well for Miles. How could he have known, after all, that despite his years of staunch claims that he'd never marry, he would run into Miss Ruby Jackson one day? He only hoped they had the decency to treat Ruby with respect, rather than to tease her as he expected them to tease him.

On the other hand, if Ruby became a member of the family—which Miles had come to hope she would—he had no doubt they'd accept her and welcome her with open arms.

He just had to suffer their indignities until then.

As they passed through Palmer and turned onto the road that led to the Collins' Lazy D ranch, Ruby rested her hand on his knee. "Are you all right?"

"Of course I am." The words came out gruffer than he'd intended, but

she didn't seem fazed.

“You've been awfully quiet the closer we get to your brother's place.”

He felt obliged to warn her rather than have her face any surprises. He was confident she'd field their comments with aplomb, but she deserved to be prepared.

“I've just been thinking that I hope my family will go easy on you. I anticipate they'll be merciless to me, but you don't deserve that.”

She cocked her head and scrunched her brows in a gesture that brought Ray to mind. Miles wondered what plans Ray had for his day off, and he felt guilty for not inviting him along, too. Ray didn't seem inclined to discuss his life outside of work, so Miles became accustomed to thinking of Ray only in the context of the mine. He had to remind himself that Ray didn't live there, and now imagined him alone in his time off.

Vowing to invite both Ruby and Ray to his own home in Virginia City in the near future, he said to Ruby, “I didn't even think to ask Ray what his plans were for today, I was so anticipating spending time with you.”

Ruby's smile sweetened. “Ray went to the farm to be with Mother and the family, but it's kind of you to think of him. Now, will you tell me why you think your family will be merciless to you?”

Miles grabbed the brim of his hat and lifted it off his head enough to run some of his fingers through his hair, before replacing the hat, a gesture he

used to help him collect his thoughts. “I’m thirty-six years old, Ruby. I’ve spent my entire adult life doing the kind of work I love while my brothers met and married women they loved. I’ve claimed staunchly and on many occasions that I intend to remain a bachelor until I die of old age. I suspect since I’ve never brought a woman to meet my family, my brothers and their wives will feel free to bedevil me about doing so now.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve grown up with three brothers of my own. I’m sure I can handle myself with yours.”

He grinned and patted her hand, still on his knee. He’d found himself smiling a lot more since meeting Ruby. Even though it felt unfamiliar, he liked it.

“They’ll love you,” he said.

Once he’d proposed to Ruby—as he planned to this evening after supper—he looked forward to meeting her family and reassuring them she’d be well taken care of.

If he were being honest with himself, which he always tried to be, his plan to propose had him fidgeting more than introducing Ruby to his family.

It was a big step, but one he had decided he was ready for. He’d never met a woman like her, or one who captivated him so completely. Between her beauty, intelligence, and spirit, she stood out among the usual meek, docile women he’d met. He liked that she challenged him, and even if that led to a

rocky marriage, he'd prefer that over bland and passive.

So, even though they'd only courted for a few short months he chose not to prolong things or allow her to get away.

They pulled into the yard at the ranch in early evening. Miles took a moment to attempt to see it through Ruby's eyes.

The property was large, a business that ran several hundred head of cattle, but also bred and raised horses.

Many of his brothers' children, and those of Isaac's friends Nellie and Diego Morales, played in the yard, running and laughing and squealing as the sun made its way down for the day. They ranged in age from toddlers to early teens.

A quick glance at Ruby found her smiling at their antics. So at least she wasn't put off by that many children.

"Miles." His brother Isaac called to him from the porch where he sat with their oldest brother Wyatt, and Diego, the head cowhand at the ranch.

Miles stepped down from the carriage and went around to the other side to offer Ruby assistance, then tucked her hand around his elbow. It was meant as a gesture to reassure her, but he drew as much or more strength from it.

He led her to the porch but before he could introduce her, Isaac stood and bowed.

“We meet again, Miss Jackson.”

Ruby made a small curtsy next to him and said, “Indeed we do, Mr. Collins. Thank you for inviting me into your home.”

“You’re quite welcome. But honestly, we had a motive. We needed proof that any woman would see fit to spend time with Miles.”

“Very funny,” Miles said.

“By the way, this is Miles’ oldest brother, Wyatt, and my friend, Diego Morales.”

Diego, in his always quiet way simply nodded.

“We didn’t believe it,” Wyatt said, puffing on a cigar before standing to greet Ruby. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am. And kind of surprised you actually exist.”

Ruby smiled. “Miles is a fine man. I don’t know why you’d think I wouldn’t want to accept his affections.”

“I wouldn’t argue Miles’ character with you, ma’am,” Wyatt said, retaking his seat. “He’s always been a good man. But he’s a stubborn and opinionated man, too. So when he digs his feet in and swears up and down he’ll never do something, then turns around and does it, well, it’s our prerogative as brothers to torment him about it.”

Ruby nodded. “I suppose that’s fair.”

“What?” Miles said, not sure she’d really acknowledged their right to

tease him.

Isaac burst out laughing, Diego smirked, and Wyatt grinned around his cigar.

“I like her, Miles,” Wyatt said. “She’ll fit right in.”

At that moment Isaac’s wife Beth popped her head out the door and said, “Are they here yet?” And when she saw Miles and Ruby she stepped outside, smoothing her apron. “There you are,” she said.

She hugged Miles, then extended her hand to Ruby.

“Beth Collins, this is Ruby Jackson,” Miles said. For Ruby’s benefit he added, “Beth is Isaac’s wife.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Ruby said.

“Why don’t you come inside and I’ll introduce you to everyone else,” Beth said.

A nervous frisson skittered down Miles’ spine. Did he want to let Ruby out of his sight? To subject her, alone, to all the women and remaining children? And Sam, who was undoubtedly inside as well? It would be overwhelming for her, and he felt an obligation to make this easier on her.

“I’ll go with you,” Miles said.

“Now, Miles, she’ll be fine,” Beth said. “You stay here with your brothers. I’ll send Sam out.”

Miles glanced at Ruby, raising his brows in silent question. *Do you*

want me to go with you?

She smiled and patted his shoulder. "I'll be just fine."

Then Beth took Ruby by the hand and Ruby disappeared into the ranch house.

Isaac laughed again. "You should see your face, brother."

Miles worked to school his features as he sat in an empty chair. "My face probably shows my worry about throwing poor Ruby to the wolves five minutes after arriving here."

Wyatt snorted. "If she can survive that, you'd better marry her as consolation."

Their youngest brother, Sam, stepped out onto the porch a few minutes later. Tall, slim, and dirty blond, Sam's only resemblance to the rest of the Collins brothers was his jawline and devilish smile.

"Your lady friend is holding her own, if you're concerned about that," Sam said as he leaned against the porch railing. "Oh, and it's good to see you, Miles."

Miles relaxed just a bit with Sam's report. "Good to see you, too. How's the newspaper business?"

They passed the next half hour in the kind of easy conversation Miles missed. Through the years he and his brothers had often argued and found themselves at odds, and adding Emmett and Diego to the mix hadn't changed

that, but always in the end they came back together and compromised because for each of them, family meant more than anything else. A few times Miles had pushed them, especially in the early years when he'd begun managing the Kiss of Fate gold mine, the mine Beth and Isaac had stumbled on before they were married. But his brothers had always reeled him back in.

When Sam's wife, Daisy, announced supper was ready, all the children in the yard stampeded inside, followed by Miles and the other men.

"Where's Emmett?" he asked, just noticing him missing.

"Accident out at the Shadow Ridge ranch. He went to treat the injured," Wyatt said.

Which made sense, since he was the local doctor. As the husband of one of Beth's friends and partners in the Kiss of Fate mine, Emmett was as much family as the rest of them.

The family spent the evening laughing and eating and talking. As Miles watched Ruby with his family—holding her own as Sam had said—Wyatt's words rang in his ears. *If she can survive this, you'd better marry her as consolation.* Miles' determination to propose grew as he watched Ruby jump in and help the other women, and joke with the men. She even handled the children with skill.

Once supper had concluded and all the dishes had been cleared, he couldn't wait any longer.

He found Ruby drying dishes and chatting with the other women in the kitchen.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr.-I’ll-Be-A-Bachelor-Forever,” Daisy said. Sam’s buxom, red-haired wife always said what she thought, often irritating Miles. But tonight he didn’t care.

“I’m happy to see you, too, Daisy,” Miles said. “Ruby, I’d like to speak with you alone, please.”

His request must have come across as too formal because a circle of female frowns greeted him after he made it.

“Of course,” Ruby said. “I’ll be back, ladies.”

Miles turned and marched from the room, through the dining room and living room, and outside onto the porch. Only then did he check to be sure Ruby followed him. Now that he’d made the decision to propose, he wanted to get down to business.

“What are you scowling about?” Wyatt asked, outside again and smoking another of his cigars.

“I’m not scowling. And don’t you ever go anywhere else but this porch? It’s like you’ve grown roots.”

“Grouchy too, I see,” Wyatt said, blowing a smoke ring.

Ruby caught up with Miles and rested a hand on his shoulder. “Is everything okay?”

Miles scrubbed a hand down his face, then took a deep breath to calm himself. “Yes. I just wanted to talk to you alone, but I suppose with such a large family privacy is in short supply.”

Wyatt held up his hand in surrender, but still didn’t budge an inch.

So Miles took Ruby’s hand and led her across the yard and inside the main horse barn. When he found it empty of any other people—only horses in their stalls—he sighed his relief.

“You’re behaving as if you’re angry, Miles,” Ruby said.

“I’m not. I’m flustered, to be honest. Will you have a seat, Ruby?” He indicated a bale of hay, and she settled onto it.

“What are you flustered about?”

He cleared his throat. Nothing else for it but to dive in. He’d put thought into what he wanted to say, but at the moment he couldn’t remember any of it. Had his brothers struggled this much proposing to their wives?

“When we met, I knew there was something different about you. For the first time in my life I wanted to spend time with a woman.”

Ruby bit her lip and tried not to smile and at first he couldn’t figure out what he’d said that was so funny, until he realized what he’d said.

“That’s not what I meant. I’ve spent time with women.” That didn’t help either. He sounded like he whored around. “Not that it’s been a lot of women. Only a few. But they were all whores.”

Now Ruby stifled a giggle, covering her mouth with her hand.

“What I mean to say is, you’re a lady and the first one I’ve ever been interested in courting. I never thought I’d marry, but you’ve changed my mind.”

Ruby stopped giggling when he got down on his knee in front of her and took her hand in his.

“What I’m trying to say is, will you be my wife?”

Ruby yanked her hand from Miles’ and jumped up from the bale of hay. *Holy mother of God*. He’d taken her completely by surprise, and here she was taking Mary’s name in vain and she wasn’t even Catholic.

Had she been daydreaming about marrying Miles? Certainly. Did she think he’d propose to her this evening at his family’s home? Not at all. Now he’d put her on the spot and she had to answer him.

Daydreaming was a far cry from facing the reality of it.

Did she love him enough to marry him? Because she’d seen enough loveless marriages to know she didn’t want one. His family, though. There was so much love in that house, it filled every nook and cranny and every bit of the air around them. The place reeked of love.

It was a lot to live up to.

She turned and looked at Miles, who now stood and looked stricken that she hadn't immediately hugged him and cried *yes, darling!*

But like him, she'd spent her whole life claiming she never wanted to be married. For him, it was easy. He'd just have a family to support, but he'd still be Miles Collins, independent man.

He was asking her to give up her entire identity. To stop being Ruby Jackson, free woman and become Ruby Collins, wife and property of Miles Collins.

That was a lot to ask of anyone.

Then, of course, there was the enormous lie she'd been telling him for several months. If he ever discovered that, would he still want her as his wife?

Looking at him, she wanted nothing more than to wipe the sadness from his face and to give him what he wanted.

She went to him, took his face in her hands, and looked deep into his beautiful blue eyes and said, "I'm sorry, I can't."

Chapter 6

They rode back to Virginia City the next morning in cold, awkward silence, much like the rest of the previous night had gone. Ruby had begged off the rest of the evening due to a headache and retired to her room. She had no idea what Miles had told his family, but they all said their goodbyes the next morning with grace and kindness, leaving Ruby to quietly grieve losing the chance to call them family.

Now as they returned to Virginia City over the rutted path, Ruby cringed when their legs rubbed together with each bump. The tension in his thigh matched the tension in the rest of his body. His jaw bulged where he ground his teeth, evidence that matched the humiliation in his eyes.

Ruby didn't know how to talk to him. She wasn't afraid of him, but his anger may as well have been a third passenger in the carriage. So, she let it go until they got back to town.

He parked the carriage in front of Della's house, but sat staring straight ahead.

Ruby sighed. "Are we never going to speak again?"

"I don't understand," he said. "I thought we were a good match."

"We are."

He turned to look at her, the rawness of his feelings displayed on his

face. It took her breath away. Maybe he saw it as more than just a match. His proposal had been businesslike, despite the bended knee, but now he looked broken. Lost. Like he actually loved her.

Her heart squeezed at the thought of it, and she remembered all the things she'd talked about with Della's girls. About finding real love.

She'd never felt it, so she couldn't be sure, but she thought she loved Miles, too. His gentle touch, his kindness, and his generous, considerate way with her filled her heart. How could she not love him?

But it scared her to death to give any man that much control over her heart.

"We could have a good life together," Miles said.

Ruby ducked her head, studying her hands in her lap. She had to either tell him about Ray now, or make Ray disappear tomorrow. She couldn't agree to marry him with that lie hanging over them.

She took a deep breath and let it out, readying herself for the conversation. Clamping down on her feelings for him, she whispered. "There are things you don't know about me."

Things that will make you hate me because I lied. Things that will make you change your mind about marrying me.

He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. "I don't care, Ruby. Everybody has secrets. But you can't feign goodness of heart."

“I’m afraid,” she said. The naked confession made her squirm.

“Of what? Of me?”

He looked hurt she’d even suggest it, so she rushed to reassure him.

“No, not of you. I’m afraid of losing myself. I’ve been Ruby Jackson for twenty-six years. I don’t want her to disappear into Mrs. Miles Collins.”

His brilliant smile shone in afternoon sunshine. “Nobody could ever turn you into something you didn’t want to be,” he said. “And I would never presume to try.”

Spoken like a man who’d never had to struggle simply because of who he was.

He had no idea the way the world had forced her to be someone else, and that someone else stood between them undiscussed. She couldn’t bring herself to say the words *I am Ray* and dash his belief in her. She couldn’t crush his hope, not to mention her own.

She’d have to manufacture a tragic accident for Ray, and tell her family of her elaborate fiction. From now on, there’d be a mysterious new member of the family that nobody had ever met, but who they’d have to pretend to grieve.

The idea was insanity.

But she loved Miles Collins, and he loved her, and she just couldn’t help herself.

“Yes,” she said. *Damn the consequences.*

“Yes?”

“Yes, I’ll marry you.”

She waved goodbye to him from the doorway, then closed it and leaned against it, sighing her pleasure. Before she faced fixing her mess, she’d savor her one moment of pure joy, knowing that Miles wanted her, loved her, and she’d said yes.

“So?” Chloe said. “How was it meeting his family?”

Ruby opened her eyes to find all the girls gathered around. Even Della lounged against the wall behind the rest of them, curiosity obvious in her eyes.

“He asked me to marry him,” Ruby said.

Gasps passed around the circle, but Chloe said, “What did you say?”

“I couldn’t help myself. I said yes.”

The gasps were followed by squeals as all the women engulfed her in hugs and congratulations.

“Have you decided what to do about your double life?” Della asked as the girls settled down.

“I have to get rid of Ray,” Ruby said.

“You’re not going to tell him the truth?”

“I tried, but I couldn’t do it. It’ll be easier just to make Ray disappear.”

“But is the easiest thing the right thing?” Della asked, with a knowing and uncomfortably judgmental cock of her brow.

“Oh come on, Miss Della,” Cecelia said. “How many women do we know who have secrets and lies in their marriages?”

“How many men do?” Sally asked to a chorus of agreement.

Victoria made a snorting sound. “I’ve never been married, but I’ve known a lot of men, and I don’t believe many marriages are based on honesty. In my opinion, if you get rid of Ray, you’ll be doing fine.”

Della cocked her head in concession. “That’s a fair assessment, ladies. I just want to be sure Ruby is true to herself.”

“So what are you going to do with Ray?” Chloe asked.

They spent the next couple of hours sitting around together coming up with scenarios for disposing of poor Ray. Ruby finally settled on the most innocuous plan they concocted; to send Ray back east because of an inheritance, and have him die of pneumonia or influenza or some such disease. Ruby already grieved for Ray. He’d served an important purpose for her, but she couldn’t keep up the ruse. It was unsustainable, even if Miles hadn’t proposed. Still, he’d become an important symbol of what she could accomplish.

The next day at the mine, Ruby made several attempts, as Ray, to tell

Miles she was leaving, but each time she wanted to start the conversation, she either lost her courage or they were interrupted.

Finally, she took a pile of correspondence to his desk and said, “Mr. Collins, I need to talk to you about something.”

Miles looked up at her. “What is it, Ray?”

Butterflies did a reel in her belly, but she forged on. “I’ve received word that an uncle has died, and I’ve been named in his will. I’ll need to travel to Ohio to accept it.”

“Oh, certainly. I can spare you for a time while you deal with that.”

Ruby cringed on the inside that Miles had no idea that once Ray left on his journey, he’d never be back.

“Thank you, sir.”

Miles grunted acknowledgement as he moved on to reading his correspondence.

As Ruby turned to leave the office, Miles said, “Wait a minute, Ray.”

“What is it?” Ruby turned back to face Miles, who continued reading from the letter he held.

He finally looked up and waved the letter in the air. “A friend of mine in the Montana Territory has taken ownership of a mine and has asked me to come up and inspect it and help him hire a good manager.”

“Oh.”

Ruby didn't see what that had to do with her or Ray.

Miles seemed to catch on to that fact. "I'd like you to come with me to help manage that. You can help us set everything up, and as much as I hate to admit it, I've come to depend on you to keep me focused. I'm more organized and accomplish more with you around."

Ruby cringed again that she was taking that away from him, but the compliment didn't go unnoticed despite her guilt at abandoning him.

"Thank you, sir. But I was hoping to make the trip to Ohio as soon as possible."

"Is it urgent? Our travel to Montana Territory shouldn't take more than a couple of weeks. You can leave directly from there for Ohio, if you'd like."

As much as she wanted for Ray to stand up to Miles and say, no, I must go to Ohio now, Ruby felt bad enough about Ray's impending death that she relented. Ray would take the trip to the Montana Territory, then leave for Ohio as soon as it was reasonable to do so, but in reality Ruby would return to Nevada to await Miles' return so she could break the bad news.

"Certainly. I can do that."

"Good. We'll leave at the end of the week."

The train trip to the Montana Territory, other than being long and boring, passed with very little incident. It gave Ruby time to think.

Miles had come to visit her at Della's and told her he and Ray would be away for a short time. They even set a date for their wedding—in April the following year. He was kind and apologetic and attentive, and guilt washed over her like an enormous wave.

The next day Ruby—as Ray—boarded a train with Miles and Roger Hodges, one of the engineers at the mine. Ruby was actually thankful for Roger's presence because it took the pressure off of her to interact with Miles exclusively. Roger served as a chaperone without even knowing it.

It killed her to be so close to Miles without being able to tell him she was there. But when it began to overwhelm her, she reminded herself that Ray would be gone after this trip.

So as they traveled, Ruby listened to Miles and Roger talk, occasionally participating in the conversation if they included Ray, but mostly she daydreamed about her wedding and wondered how her life had become so complicated.

Several months ago she didn't have a way to support herself or her family, but at least she didn't have to hide who she was. Now, she sat next to the man she'd agreed to marry, but he didn't even know it.

She shook her head. It was madness.

At one point Roger stood and yawned and said, "I'm going to go stretch my legs. Be back in a bit."

Which left Miles and Ray alone.

They sat in silence for a while. Ruby was ready to pretend she was asleep to avoid the feeling they had nothing to talk about, but then Miles turned to her.

“Has Ruby told you yet that I proposed to her?”

Ruby made a surprised choking sound, only because she hadn't expected him to bring up the subject.

She cleared her throat and said, “Yes, she did.”

“And?”

“What else do you want me to say?”

Miles shook his head, an exasperated look on his face. “I don't understand your family, Ray. I told Ruby that since your father has passed, I'd like to meet your mother to ask her permission to marry Ruby. But Ruby dismissed the idea as unnecessary. When I asked about talking to you to get permission, she nearly bit my head off.”

“Why would you ask my permission? You're not marrying me, you're marrying her.”

Ruby fumed at having this conversation again, even if it was as Ray this time.

“That's what she said. It's a tradition of respect for a suitor to ask a father's permission to marry his daughter. And, failing a father, the oldest

male member of the family.”

“Ruby isn’t my property. She can make her own choices.”

“Which is also exactly what she said. Even so, I’d still like to meet her—your—family since I’ll be marrying into it.”

Ruby—as Ray—shrugged non-commitment. Ray didn’t have any feelings about it one way or another. Ruby, on the other hand, had many feelings. She wanted very much for her family to meet the man she planned to marry. She couldn’t be more proud of him, or more in love. But first, she had to get rid of Ray and warn her family about him. In the months she’d been working at the mine, she hadn’t had time to visit her family. She worked six days a week, and if she left to visit them it meant Ray would have to be gone, too. The logistics of it became too complicated. She had at least managed to send letters and money to her mother, which afforded her a great deal of pride. Because of her, the family had enough money to live. But she couldn’t tell her mother about Ray in a letter. It had to be in person, which meant she hadn’t been able to yet.

She didn’t look forward to telling her mother about Ray. She’d have words for Ruby about all the lying to the family about what Ruby had been up to, and lying to Miles about Ray.

But if Ruby ever intended to get out from under this mess, she’d have to face her mother’s wrath.

“You’ll have to arrange that with her,” Ruby said, implying that Ray had no more interest in the conversation.

“I’ll do that,” Miles said. “If you’ll excuse me Ray, I’m going to go take some fresh air.”

Miles left Ruby alone, allowing her to gaze out the window and watch the world slip by. As the miles passed, Ruby considered how much she’d miss being Ray and the freedom of being a man. Not that she’d particularly miss pretending to be a boy, but she’d miss the job. She took satisfaction in the work itself, but also in earning her own money and not depending on anyone else to take care of her. She didn’t want to give it up, and because of that desire, a new idea began to brew in her mind. As the trip progressed, it took root and blossomed.

After Ray was gone, she’d propose to Miles that she take Ray’s place. Since his primary argument against having a woman at the mine was that it would distract the men, being his wife would provide her protection from that concern. Plus, she already knew the job, though he wasn’t aware of that.

By the time the train finally pulled into the station in Sweetwater Springs, Montana Territory, Ruby was more than ready to get off the train and out of her own head. She itched to have the trip over and get back home so they could get on with their lives.

As the train slowed, Ruby watched out the window. The town looked

very small compared to Virginia City. One street of hard-packed dirt ran from the train station at one end of town to the white-steeped church at the other end. In the space between the two, Ruby made out a few false-fronted businesses including a mercantile, a school, a saloon, a blacksmith, and a livery stable.

“Not much to it,” she said.

“No, there isn’t,” Miles said. “Our business is actually north of here, but we’ll meet my friend Daniel Bernard at the saloon later to talk business, and make arrangements to inspect the mine.”

Roger’s face lit up. “I’m game for relaxing at the saloon.”

Miles had stood and collected his things. Ruby followed suit and trailed after Miles as he exited the train.

On the platform Miles stopped and looked around, as if searching for something, and a moment later grinned and headed directly for a tall, lanky, sandy-haired man standing behind the crowd.

When they reached him, Miles held out his hand to greet the man. “You must be John Carter.”

The man cracked a smile, the skin around his eyes crinkling when he did. To Ruby, he looked like the kind of man who lived his life outdoors as much as he could.

“I am. And you’re Miles Collins?”

“That’s right. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to spot you, but you look a lot like Mother’s side of the family,” Miles said.

“Isn’t it funny how resemblance can still be strong even in second cousins?”

“You two are second cousins?” Ruby blurted.

Miles laughed and said, “Sorry. This is my clerk Ray Jackson, and my engineer Roger Hodges. Gentlemen, this is my second cousin John Carter.”

Ruby gave Miles a skeptical look. “You two look nothing alike.”

“Maybe not, but John here and my brother Sam could be first cousins, if not brothers,” Miles said.

“Well, family is always welcome,” John said. “My wife Pamela is expecting us for supper at the ranch. You’re all welcome to come, of course.”

Roger held up a hand and said, “Thank you, but I’m going to beg off. I have an appointment at the saloon I need to keep.”

“We’ll meet at the saloon tomorrow morning with Mr. Bernard. Don’t be late,” Miles said. “How about you, Ray? Saloon or supper with my family?”

Ruby swallowed down her doubt and said, “Supper, sir. If I won’t be intruding, that is.”

“Not at all,” John said. “My godson, Nick, is about your age. The two of you should get along just fine.”

“Your godson still lives with you at age twenty?” Ruby asked.

Carter’s brows shot up. “You’re twenty?”

Miles’ smirk irked Ruby, but she lifted her chin and said, “Yes, sir.”

Carter nodded, though he didn’t look convinced. “Well, then. I apologize. Nick is fourteen. Still, I suspect you’ll have some things in common anyway.”

They rode out to the ranch on a buckboard—Carter and Miles up front and Ruby bouncing around in the back. But the scenery made up for the sore behind. After having lived near the mountains of Nevada, she’d assumed all mountains were the same, but the mountains of the Montana Territory were a completely different thing. Enormous and craggy, snow-capped and majestic, they took her breath away. On top of that, the green late summer valley where the Carter ranch had been built reminded her of the Collins family ranch—similar in that its imposing size would impress anyone, but different in its geography. While the Carter ranch was all bright green and lush trees and open grassland, the Collins ranch was high desert with scrubby green and yellow grass, mesquite, juniper, and Ponderosa.

They pulled into the yard at the house and Ruby hopped out of the buckboard, happy to have her feet on the ground again.

As they headed for the house, a woman emerged onto the porch. She smiled sweetly, her plump cheeks giving Ruby a preview of the kind,

generous grandmother she'd be someday. Ruby liked her immediately.

John took the porch steps two at a time and kissed his wife on the cheek. She blushed and ducked her head, clearly in love with her husband.

"Gentlemen," John said. "This is my wife, Pamela." To her he said, "I hope you've got supper on the table. I'm so hungry I could eat a bear."

Pamela's brown eyes twinkled as she smiled. "Supper is ready, but you'll have to settle for beef. We're fresh out of bear."

"It's nice to meet you, ma'am," Miles said. "I'm Miles Collins. John's cousin, and this is Ray Jackson, my clerk."

"Please come inside, and make yourselves at home," Pamela said.

Inside, the house had the kind of warmth and appeal Ruby expected after having met Pamela. It put her at ease, but at the same time worried her that she'd ever be able to make this kind of home for herself and Miles. Did she want to? She'd watched her mother slave to keep things cleaned and washed, and her family fed while Ruby's father worked to earn a living. Her mother never stopped working. Did Ruby want to do that?

Pamela seemed happy. Ruby wanted to be happy, and being in love with Miles certainly made her happy. But so did having a job. She enjoyed working with Miles and didn't particularly like the idea of being stuck at home all day washing and cooking and raising children while he left every day for a job. She thought her mind might just shrivel up and blow away.

It was a lot to think about. Ruby decided to put it aside for the moment. After Ray was gone, she and Miles could discuss it.

“I’ll have supper on the table in a few minutes,” Pamela said.

John kissed his wife on the forehead before she headed for the kitchen. “Have a seat and tell me about the mine you’re here to inspect.”

Ruby felt like she should go help Pamela so she didn’t have to do all the work herself, but that wasn’t something Ray was expected to do, so it would seem odd if he did. Instead, she sat and listened while Miles and John talked about mining and ranching.

“How about you, Ray? Do you plan to stay in mining, or do you have other interests?” Carter asked.

“I’m certainly interested in the mining industry, but I don’t want to be a clerk forever.” She glanced over at Miles. “No offense meant to you, sir. You’ve been good to me, but I’m more interested in mine safety.”

“Mine safety?” Miles asked.

“Certainly. Both my father and older brother were miners, and died as a result of their jobs. So it’s important to me.”

Miles brows came together, showing his concern. “Ruby told me they’d passed, but I had no idea they’d been miners. I’m sorry you lost them.”

Ruby shrugged. “They chose the work, and they both enjoyed it. But

Father died of sickness, and Charlie died in a cave-in. How many men do we lose every year to illnesses or injuries or death caused by working in the mines? I'd like to look into ways to make the work safer for our men."

Carter nodded in agreement, and Miles cocked his head and looked at her as if seeing Ray in a new light.

"That's an admirable goal," Miles said. "We've made some strides in that area since I took over management."

"If you take care of the men who work for you, they're more likely to work harder and be more loyal," Ruby said. "And you can always improve their working conditions."

Carter chuckled. "Looks like you've talked yourself into a promotion, Mr. Jackson."

Miles only managed a "We'll see," before Pamela came to collect them for supper.

All through the meal, Ruby's mind worked at safety solutions for the mine—ways to improve the work and production for the men. She tried to focus on the conversation, but she was excited about having had the courage to bring up the subject, and encouraged that Miles hadn't dismissed it. When she took the job at North Hill mine, she'd been determined to either find ways to make things better, or receive compensation for her family's loss. In a way she'd received compensation in the form of learning a job and being

paid for it. She'd also found Miles.

But she could still do more good for others. Her mind raced with ideas for preventing the accidents and conditions that killed her father and Charlie. Although she hadn't seen the mine before Miles took over management, she'd taken the time since she'd been working there to review the records and knew the improvements he'd made. But she could do more.

Supper flew by and afterwards the Carters invited Miles and Ray to stay at the ranch for the night, and John offered to drive them back to town in the morning for their meeting.

"That's very generous of you," Miles said.

"It's no trouble at all. You're family," John said.

Chapter 7

Back in town the next morning, Miles led Ray to the saloon where they found a slightly worse for wear Roger already sitting with Daniel Bernard.

Miles approached Daniel and offered his hand to shake. “Daniel. It’s good to see you.”

Bernard shook his hand. “Good to see you too. Thank you for coming.”

“Good to see you too. It’s been a while,” Miles said. In fact, he hadn’t seen Daniel since he’d been a guest instructor at Colorado School of Mines, and met Daniel while doing some bank business. They’d hit it off and been friends ever since.

“It has. I didn’t know if you’d be willing to come, but there’s nobody I trust more in the mining business to help me with this project, so I figured it wouldn’t hurt to ask,” Daniel said.

“Appreciate that,” Miles said. “I see you’ve met my engineer. This is my clerk, Ray Jackson.”

They all shook hands, then Daniel took a seat, and Miles and Ray joined them.

“Tell me about your project,” Miles asked.

“As you know, I’m a banker, not a miner,” Daniel said. “But I bought the rights to this claim from a man who desperately needed the money, and

couldn't afford to develop it. So now I need advice to get the operation up and running."

"Certainly. That's why I brought Roger with me. He can help you with the engineering required, and help you find a good engineer of your own."

"Before we discuss all your management details," Roger said, jumping into the conversation. "How about we go look at the site? I can't do anything until I see it."

"That's a fair request," Miles said. "We'll go inspect it then Roger and I can give you a fair estimate of the expense and work involved in developing it."

"Let's do it," Daniel said. "We'll need to put together gear and supplies. It's a day's ride. My things are upstairs. If you wait a few minutes, I'll collect them. We'll need to go to the mercantile, then rent some horses for you lads at the livery."

Miles waited with Ray and Roger while Daniel collected his rifle and belongings from his room above the saloon, then they walked to the livery stable and while Daniel collected his own horse, Miles rented horses for himself, Roger, and Ray.

"This little filly can be a bit excitable, so be sure to talk to her gentle-like," the stable master said of the horse he gave to Ray. Ray looked at the

man askance, and Miles had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

“I’ll take the filly,” Miles offered in an effort to save Ray from a frisky horse.

But Ray shot him a defensive look. “I can handle her.”

“If you say so,” Miles said, but he’d keep an eye on the two of them just in case.

They headed out of town after a brief trip to the mercantile to purchase supplies—canteens, food, blankets, and a few other things they’d need for camping out.

Daniel and Roger hit it off as if they’d been friends forever, which left Miles to plod along behind Ray at the back of the pack. He had no idea how far out of Sweetwater Springs the stake was, but Daniel had said it was a day’s ride, so Miles settled in for the long haul.

The scenery was pleasant enough, and it gave him time to think about Ruby and getting married and what life would be like after that.

He hadn’t lied to Ray on the train that he didn’t understand their family. Not that he’d had a chance to meet them, yet. Ruby’s and Ray’s odd behavior regarding their family made Miles wonder why. What were the two of them hiding? He didn’t like feeling suspicious about his fiancée, or about Ray. He loved Ruby, and he wanted nothing secretive between them. Marriage had a better chance of success if the two involved were honest with

one another.

He shook his head, clearing the thought. He had no idea if either of them hid anything. Maybe their family was just different. He really only had his own family for comparison, and who was he to say his family was normal? He'd press Ruby when they got back. If they were going to be married, he should know her family no matter what they were like.

They'd been traveling the better part of the morning, and had transitioned into some rocky, hilly terrain when Daniel turned in his saddle and waved them all up toward him to talk, dragging Miles out of his thoughts.

Ray moved his horse up alongside Roger, and then everything happened so fast, Miles didn't even have time to react.

The filly snorted and screeched, then reared up, kicking at the air before dropping back to all fours and bolting away at full gallop.

Roger, Daniel, and Miles just gaped at each other as the filly took off into the distance, Ray holding on for all he was worth.

Then the telltale rattle broke their surprise and the rest of the horses danced nervously away from the rattlesnake coiled in the gravel near their hooves.

"Whoa boy," Daniel said, fighting with his horse to get him under control.

Roger struggled with his own animal.

Fear tightened Miles' gut as he wrangled the reins to keep his skittish mount in check. Ray clearly didn't have the experience required to handle the spooked filly.

"I'm going after Ray," Miles called over his shoulder. He didn't wait for the others to reply, just gave the horse his head and chased after Ray. He only hoped he didn't find Ray dead after being thrown.

It took him too long to catch up, and by the time he did he was afraid he'd lost him.

When he came upon him, Miles' heart jumped into his throat at the sight before him.

Ray had indeed been thrown. The filly stood nearby, calmly munching on grass unaware of what she'd done.

Miles had barely pulled his mount to a halt before sliding from the saddle and running to Ray's lifeless form, crumpled on the ground.

"No no no," Miles said, gently rolling the boy to his back. "Stay with me, Ray."

God, Ruby would never forgive him if Ray died while in Miles' care.

He leaned down and placed his ear near Ray's mouth, hoping to hear or feel his breath. Miles held his own breath as he listened, and let it out in a rush of relief when Ray exhaled onto Miles' face.

Thank God.

Miles pressed his fingers to Ray's neck, and the steady thud of Ray's pulse flooded Miles with relief. At least he wasn't dead.

Doing a quick inventory, Miles checked Ray for serious injury. His fingers came away from Ray's head red with blood. So he'd hit his head when he fell.

Arms seemed to be okay, ribs elicited some twitching and a groan. But reaching under Ray's coat, Miles' fingers encountered something wrapped around Ray's chest. Had he already broken some ribs and wore a wrap because of it?

Why would he not have told Miles about that? Miles opened a couple of buttons on Ray's shirt and sure enough, he wore a wrap across his chest.

Then Miles noticed the swell beneath the wrap, then the other swell, and he scrambled backward away from Ray.

What the devil?

Miles sat back and puzzled on the problem.

Ray wore a wrap around his chest to conceal what were clearly breasts.

Which meant Ray was a woman.

Miles couldn't make his mind comprehend the implication of that. A woman had dressed up as a man and fooled him into hiring her, and he'd been working with her—him—ever since.

Who would do that, and why?

Then it clicked in his head. Not only was Ray a woman. Ray was Ruby.

Ruby and Ray weren't sister and brother. Ruby was Ray.

The woman he loved and planned to marry had played him for a fool.

Ruby woke up in a bed with a splitting headache, pain in her ribs, and discomfort in her right ankle.

“Oh, good, you're awake.”

Ruby's gaze followed the female voice to find Pamela sitting in a chair nearby.

“How did I get here?”

Her head felt muddled with the throbbing ache, making it difficult to latch onto any one thought for longer than a moment. She recalled a horse and a snake and...

“Oh my God,” she said sitting bolt upright in bed, then flopping back down when pain stabbed at her head.

The horse had panicked and taken off running when a rattlesnake hissed and put up a clatter. The last thing Ruby remembered was yanking on the reins and the horse rearing, and losing control before she slid off the

horse's rump and toppled to the ground.

"Miles brought you and asked if we'd care for you until you could travel back to Nevada," Pamela said. She studied her hands in her lap as she spoke, avoiding Ruby's gaze.

So, Miles had discovered her secret and now Pamela and John knew as well.

She could only imagine the scene after the horse had thrown her. Miles had probably rushed after Ray, worried about him, and when he'd found Ray injured he'd checked to be sure Ray was alive only to discover Ray wasn't who he claimed to be. Miles had to have been horrified at the discovery, and then when the implications set in, he had to feel betrayed.

Ruby covered her face with her hands. This wasn't at all what she'd wanted. She'd got herself into such a shameful mess.

"Where is Miles?" Ruby asked from behind her hands, afraid to hear the answer.

"He went to survey the mine."

He'd left her alone.

She couldn't blame him, even if it did break her heart. He wouldn't even stay to make sure she was all right.

Ruby scrubbed her hands down her face, then crossed them over her middle.

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience, Pamela. I appreciate you taking me in despite...everything.”

“I’ll admit, it is rather shocking.”

“I really need to talk to Miles. Explain myself.”

Pamela cleared her throat and shifted nervously in the chair. “Miles didn’t seem amenable to explanation.”

He’d have to talk to her sometime. Unless his intention was to toss her aside and ignore that she even existed.

She shuddered at the thought. Would he really do something like that? It seemed cruel, and not in his character. If he was anything, he was fair and despite being angry she thought he’d at least hear her out.

And if he refused to see her, at least she knew where he worked.

Should she dare show up for work as Ruby?

Probably not. That might push him beyond his limit.

She’d let him cool down some, then seek him out so they could talk.

“So you’re meant to get me back on my feet then put me on a train?”

Ruby asked.

Pamela shrugged and made a noncommittal sound that confirmed Ruby’s assumption. “I don’t understand the situation, and your relationship with Miles is none of my business. But I’ll do what I can to make sure you recover from your injuries. I’ll not rush you out of my home.”

“Thank you, I appreciate your kindness.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Ruby wanted to get on the train now, she felt that out of place despite Pamela’s assurances. Miles had left her with strangers. Just dumped her and left, as if she’d never meant anything to him. He couldn’t even be bothered to be polite.

Now she was left to explain herself—or not—in the company of people she’d only just met, in embarrassingly delicate circumstances.

“He was too angry to stay with me?”

“I didn’t speak with him, but when he spoke with John my impression was that he was hurt and confused,” Pamela said. Then as an afterthought she added, “In addition to being angry.”

“I apologize that you find yourself in the middle of this. If you or John could take me to the train station tomorrow, I’ll be on my way and cause you no more trouble.”

Pamela stood and came to sit on the edge of the bed. She took Ruby’s hand in hers and patted it. “I can’t say as I understand any of what’s happened, but if it helps any, I saw the look on Miles’ face when he brought you to us. His heart was broken with worry for you. He may be angry and hurt now, but he loves you. Whether that’s enough to heal the damage between you, I don’t know, but real love is always worth saving.”

Her eyes shone with earnestness as she squeezed Ruby’s hand in her

own, enough that Ruby grasped at her encouragement. What other choice did she have? She loved Miles and despite how hopeless things looked now, she had to believe she could make things right.

John drove Ruby to the station the next morning. Pamela had been generous enough to share one of her dresses with Ruby, who blushed when she realized all she had to wear were Ray's clothes.

John wasn't as sympathetic to Ruby's plight as Pamela, but he behaved like a gentleman and put her on the train with nary a negative word.

The trip passed in an anxious fog and before she knew it, Ruby stepped off the train in Virginia City and headed back to Della's with her tail between her legs.

She trudged up the steps, her feet as heavy as her heart, and pushed through the front door not even caring that Della might be angry she hadn't used the back entrance. Inside, she went to the kitchen and flopped into a chair at the table. Sarah was hard at work, as usual.

"Child, you look like the world done you wrong," Sarah said, wiping her hands on her apron.

Ruby huffed a half-laugh, half-sob. "Sarah, you have no idea."

"Your man discovered your secret," she said, crossing her arms and daring Ruby to tell her she was wrong.

“He did,” Ruby said, hanging her head.

Della entered the kitchen at that moment. “Oh, Ruby. You’re back.” She took a closer look, then had a seat. “What happened?”

“Her man found her out,” Sarah said.

Tears had begun to slip down Ruby’s cheeks. She’d suppressed them all the way home, but now the dam had broken and there was no holding them back.

“I don’t know what to do, Della. I had a plan to get rid of Ray. It wasn’t perfect, but it would have meant he’d be out of our lives and we could get married and we’d be happy. It wasn’t honest, but it would have fixed everything and put Ray behind me. But that stupid horse had to throw me and Miles found me and then....discovered the truth.”

She covered her face with her hands, embarrassed for even her new family to see her humiliation.

“I really wanted to marry him,” she said behind her hands.

“Do you love him?” Della asked.

Ruby dropped her hands to her lap and faced Della, her anguish naked on her face. “With all my heart.”

“Then why are you giving up?”

She threw her hands up in exasperation. “I’m not giving up, I just don’t know how to fix things.”

“You don’t fix them by surrendering,” Della said.

“It ain’t a war, Miss Della,” Sarah said.

“If you want it bad enough you have to fight for it,” Della said. “Maybe it’s not a war, but anyone worth loving is worth fighting for.”

Ruby swiped at her tears. “I’d planned to go see him when he gets back from the Montana Territory, and explain myself. But I thought about it all the way home and I don’t know how to do that. What I did was such a betrayal. It wasn’t intended to be, but I should have confessed about Ray when Miles began courting me. By that time it was already too late to tell him without humiliating him.”

Della made a scoffing noise in her throat. “Men and their pride will be the world’s undoing.”

Sarah grunted in the affirmative.

“Maybe,” Ruby said. “But if I have any hope of making things right with him, I’ll have to swallow my own pride to appease his.”

Which, on a certain level, she found galling. On the surface Ray had been a practical solution to her financial problems. She hadn’t bargained on falling in love with her employer, and that’s where Ray became a liability of her own making.

Della laughed—a wry, knowing laugh. “Ruby, darling, that’s the only reason life goes on—women swallowing their pride to appease men. History

is built on it.”

It turned out that despite Ruby’s willingness to make amends, Miles stayed away from Virginia City. Ruby sent word to the mine to let her know when Miles returned, but no word came. Days, then weeks went by and Ruby began to worry.

She didn’t want to impose, but she finally sent a telegram to the Carters in Montana. They responded that Miles had already left.

Ruby stood in front of the telegraph office, holding the paper in her hand. “Where are you, Miles Collins?”

Chapter 8

After Miles dropped Ruby at the Carters, he went back and finished his obligation with Daniel, steadfastly refusing to discuss the accident, or Ruby, or Ray.

He owed his cousin John an enormous favor. He'd dumped Ruby in their lap with no ceremony, and while John was a good man and understood as much as he could, Ruby really had been Miles' responsibility, but he'd been too much of a coward to deal with it. He'd turned tail and run.

He'd never dishonored himself like that before. But dammit, Ruby had humiliated him. What was she playing at dressing up like a boy? How could she come to work every day, look him straight in the eye and lie to him like she had?

Sitting in Isaac's study, a glass of whiskey in hand, his gut still twisted with Ruby's betrayal, but adding to his confusion was the fact that he also still loved her.

"You ready to talk to me yet, brother, or you need some more time to mope?" Isaac asked.

Miles had gone straight to Isaac's ranch from Montana, unable to face the mine or Virginia City. After all, he'd met Ruby by literally running into her on the street. He didn't want to chance doing that again while trying to

avoid her.

He'd have to see her eventually, and talk to her. He couldn't avoid her forever. But right now his heart was broken and his pride bruised, and he was confused and angry.

Maybe talking to Isaac would be good practice for talking to Ruby.

"It's about Ruby."

Isaac rolled his eyes, irritating Miles. "I figured that much," Isaac said. "What happened?"

Miles scrubbed a hand over the stubble on his jaw. It had been several weeks since he'd discovered Ruby's secret, and he hadn't said a word to anyone about it, even John Carter. He'd finished his obligation to Daniel, then gone to the ranch and worked himself exhausted.

Talking wasn't so easy. He didn't know where to start, so he just blurted, "Ruby is Ray. Was Ray."

"You want to start at the beginning? I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"I told you I hired a boy named Ray as a clerk at the mine."

"Right."

"And you were there when I ran into Ruby on the street in Virginia City."

"I was."

“Ruby was dressing up as a boy she claimed to be her brother, and working at the mine. She was Ray. They were the same person.”

It sounded as outlandish out loud as it did running in an endless loop in his head.

“Well, that’s something you don’t see every day.”

Miles quirked a brow at his brother. “That’s all you have to say?”

“I don’t know what else to say. Have you asked her why she did it?”

“I…”

He hadn’t actually said a word to her since he’d discovered her secret. It hadn’t even occurred to him to ask her why. He’d been so humiliated he’d wanted her out of his sight.

“You haven’t talked to her at all, have you?” Isaac asked. Shaking his head, he added. “Little brother, you really are dim-witted sometimes.”

Miles’ hackles went up. How dare Isaac call him dim-witted? He’d been the one wronged, after all.

“She lied to me. Don’t tell me if Beth had done the same, you wouldn’t be angry.”

“Beth is an impetuous woman, and she did foolish things—including lying—while trying to save my sorry hide. She saved my life, and I’m a better man because of her. If I’d let my pride get the best of me, you and I wouldn’t be sitting here talking about your wounded pride, brother. I’d be

dead, hanged for a crime I didn't commit. So maybe before you condemn her, you could listen to her side of things?" Isaac said.

Why did a few minutes talking with Isaac make Miles feel like a guilty ten-year-old again? When he and his brothers were boys, they got in hundreds of arguments and Miles had won a reputation for holding a grudge the longest, for stubbornness, and Sam especially had gone so far as accusing him of pouting.

It wasn't an appealing trait in a man. Certainly he'd used the tendency to stubbornness to his advantage in the business world on occasion, but in personal relationships it only made things worse. He thought he'd learned to curb it as he got older, and perhaps with his brothers he had, but he'd never been in love before so he was bound to make mistakes, wasn't he?

"I suppose for the sake of fairness, I should."

Isaac snorted. "For the sake of fairness. Let me ask you this, Miles. Do you love her?"

"I thought I did, but then she betrayed me."

"No, I didn't ask if you felt betrayed. I asked if you love her. If you really love someone, you don't stop loving them just because they do something that makes you angry. You still love them, you're just angry, too. So, do you love her?"

"I thought I did," he said again. "But I've never been in love before, so

I don't know what it feels like.”

Isaac nodded. “Okay. Can you imagine living the rest of your life without her?”

Miles let his imagination consider the question. He'd thought he had a good life before he met Ruby. His job was challenging and satisfying. He had a home and friends and family and sufficient money to be comfortable. But then he met Ruby. She was pretty, and smart, and made him laugh. She warmed his heart, and she awoke things in him he didn't know he'd been missing. Suddenly his job wasn't as important as spending time with Ruby. He couldn't wait to see her so he could share stories about work, or about things that had occurred to him throughout the day.

But because she'd lied to him, she already knew all the same stories because Ray had been there when they happened.

Still, he'd been happier in the months he'd known her than he could remember ever being. That had to be worth the time to hear her out.

“I could live my life without her, but I don't really want to.”

Isaac shook his head again. “You're the most cantankerous man I've ever met, Miles. You should count yourself lucky any woman would have you, whether she dresses as a man or not. Open your heart and think of someone besides yourself for once and listen to her.”

Isaac's words shook Miles. Not only were they harsh, which the

brothers were known to do with each other now and then, but they struck a chord. He could be prickly, but did people other than his family see him as worse than that? Had women dismissed him because of it? He'd never really given the opinion of others that much consideration, but Isaac declaring he should count himself lucky Ruby would have him stopped him short.

After she'd lied to him, she should be lucky he'd have her.

He hung his head and closed his eyes. Perhaps this was the kind of attitude Isaac was talking about. Thinking only of how any given situation affected himself wasn't charitable to begin with, but certainly lacked compassion or forethought. He may be cantankerous, as Isaac claimed, but he wasn't heartless.

The empty pain in his chest attested to how much heart he had.

"I miss her," he said, his voice a strained whisper.

"Then for God's sake, go talk to her. You can't hide here forever. Not that you aren't welcome, but I will kick you out eventually."

Isaac grinned and lifted his own whiskey glass in a mock salute. Miles echoed the gesture then downed the amber liquid, welcoming the burn. Tomorrow, he'd go find Ruby and listen to what she had to say.

The next day Miles rode to town and knocked on Della Kinney's door. He didn't care that it was broad daylight and he stood on the porch of a brothel

where anyone who passed by would see him. He'd made up his mind to talk to Ruby, and he'd damn well do it no matter what people might think.

The door opened to reveal Miss Kinney herself. She gave him a dubious once-over.

"Took you long enough," she said before finally stepping aside and holding the door open for him.

"Is Ruby home?" he asked, removing his hat.

"She is. You can take a seat in the parlor while I fetch her."

He settled onto a settee, and ran a hand through his hair. Slipping a finger into the collar of his shirt, he pulled at it trying to loosen it. It felt uncomfortably tight. He brushed at a bit of dirt on his pants, slid his fingers over the brim of his hat, cleared his throat, fidgeted on the seat. He'd never been this nervous. Why was he so nervous?

What was taking them so long?

Just as he gathered himself to stand and search for Ruby, Miss Kinney rounded the corner with Ruby trailing behind.

He hadn't seen her for a while, but looking at her now, she took his breath away. She wore a red calico dress that emphasized her feminine curves to discomfiting effect, and she hadn't bothered to pin her hair back. The short dark curls tumbled around her face, and when she caught him staring, she pushed them back behind her ears in a gesture reminiscent of Ray.

It was the strangest feeling, like seeing a ghost in another person. But Ruby and Ray were the same person, rather than images of each other.

She stepped in front of Miss Kinney, and crossed her arms. Lifting her chin and looking for all the world like a fragile creature fighting for dignity, she said, “Mr. Collins. What can I do for you?”

If his heart hadn’t already broken, it did now. He’d caused her this hurt by abandoning her with his cousin and turning his back on her. So much so she referred to him as she would a stranger.

Certainly she’d lied to him and owed him an explanation. It would be a while before the humiliation no longer stung, and before he could trust her again. But he hadn’t given a thought to how his behavior would hurt her, and that required forgiveness as well.

He ducked his head for a moment. He’d been so selfish.

Taking a deep breath, he squared his shoulders and prepared to make things right. “Ruby, would you sit with me?”

She didn’t respond for a moment, but just as he thought she’d walk away, she entered the room and perched on the second settee opposite the one Miles had sat on.

“Would you like me to stay?” Della asked.

“No, that’s fine Della. Thank you,” Ruby said.

Miss Kinney made a disapproving noise, but turned on her heel and

left them alone.

Miles returned to his seat. Now that Ruby sat across from him, he found himself at a loss for words. He'd come to ask for an explanation, and he still expected one. But seeing her, he had a hard time holding onto his anger and humiliation. All he felt was relief to be with her again. His heart swelled full and whole. He just wanted to put everything behind them.

"Miles," Ruby began.

"How are you?" he asked. "Have you recovered from your injuries?"

"Oh. Yes, I have. None of them were serious. Thank you for asking."

The question seemed to have put her off. She'd expected him to be angry, to castigate her for lying and betraying him, not ask after her health.

"Ruby, I'm sorry I left you alone at the Carters' ranch." Miles reached across the space between them and took her hand in his. Touching her reassured him, connected them. "That was unforgivable, but I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me anyway."

She blinked, and opened her mouth as if to respond, but no words came out. She blinked again. Miles bit his lip to keep from chuckling. He'd surprised her into silence.

Finally, she composed herself, closing her mouth and clearing her throat. "Well," she said. "I certainly didn't expect that."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm angry and betrayed. It'll take time to build

trust again. But I've done a lot of thinking and Isaac may have pointed out a few points I hadn't previously considered."

"I'm sorry, too," she said, her voice timid. "I became Ray only because I needed a job, and a way to help support my family. With my father and older brother gone, my mother couldn't earn enough to support us, and it's not so easy to be a woman in need of work. There aren't a lot of options. Ray wasn't very well considered, but I never thought you'd hire me, and then you did and I fell in love with the job."

"You were good at it."

She blushed a pretty pink at the compliment and it warmed his heart.

"Then I met you as myself and I fell in love with you. By that time, it was too late. I had no idea how to tell you about Ray without hurting you. If it makes any difference, it wasn't an intentional betrayal. I wanted to tell you, I just didn't know how."

"Does your mother know about Ray?"

Her hand flew to her chest and she gasped. "Oh, no. She wouldn't approve. I told her I'd taken a position as a governess with a family here in Virginia City. I've sent money every month since I started working at the mine, but she doesn't know."

He nodded, turning the information over in his mind. She hadn't set out to fool him. Ray had come before he ever met Ruby, which in an odd way

reassured him.

“I’d like to start over now that Ray’s gone,” Miles said. “And this time, can we agree to be honest with each other?”

Her brows went up in shock. “You still want to marry me?” She asked, incredulous.

“If you’ll have me,” he said.

She covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes glassy as if she might cry. Damn, he hadn’t meant to make her cry.

A couple of tears slipped down her cheeks, but she nodded and when she moved her hands she was smiling. “I will,” she said.

“Good. I suppose we’ll need to make some changes,” he said, shifting into business mode. “We’ll have to find you another place to live. I can’t have my future wife living in a brothel.”

The smile dropped from her face in an instant. He backpedaled, trying to figure out what he’d said.

“We will need to make some changes. You can’t just tell me where I can live, or work, or make choices for me. If I want to live in a brothel, I will. I love these women. They’ve been a family to me, and I won’t treat them as if they’re unworthy.”

“I didn’t realize,” he said. Which as Isaac had pointed out was one of his biggest problems. He vowed to work on that every hour of every day from

there on out.

“If not for Ray and the mine, I very well could have ended up working here.” Her lips thinned to an indignant line, and she crossed her arms over her chest, a determined, immovable force.

“You’ll need to be patient with me, Ruby. There’s a lot I don’t know. I grew up in a house full of boys and men, and I’ve worked in a world of men all my adult life. I’m unfamiliar with the problems women face.”

“What do you expect from a wife, Miles?” She asked the question with sincerity. “We should clear that up now before we go any further. You ask me if I’ll still have you, and I love you, but I don’t know that my expectations of marriage and yours are the same. So tell me, what do you want from a wife?”

Suddenly his idyllic image of coming home from work to a wife who had prepared his evening meal and kept his home clean for him and raised his children...felt like a trap.

But when he thought about it, none of the marriages he’d seen in his life—Isaac and Beth, Wyatt and Angeline, Sam and Daisy, Emmett and Lydia, even family friends Nellie and Diego—lived up to that ideal. All of his brothers’ wives were smart, fearless, spirited women who refused to be slaves to tradition. And all his brothers were the happiest men he knew. He wanted what they had.

“I used to think I wanted a woman to take care of me and raise my children,” he said.

Her expression soured. “You want a servant and a brood mare.”

Though her words were blunt and shocking, her meaning was clear enough. She wouldn’t live that life.

“I don’t. I used to think I did, but what I really want is for both of us to be happy. Is that something we can work at together?”

He saw a twinkle of hope in her eyes, but she squared her shoulders and asked, “What if something that makes me happy is to keep working at the mine?”

“No,” Miles said. Hearing his tone from her perspective made him cringe, but he couldn’t have her at the mine. It was too dangerous.

“Just no, without any discussion. That’s not a very good start at working together toward our happiness.”

“It’s not safe for you at the mine. I can’t have you there as the only woman among all those men.”

“Do the men respect you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think any of them would be abusive toward your wife?”

His blood boiled just thinking about it. “They’d pay a heavy price if they did.”

“Then I don’t see the problem.”

“It’s not a place for a woman. It’s rough and vulgar.”

“I know. I’ve been working there for several months. I’m used to it and it doesn’t offend me.”

She dismissed his arguments with troubling ease, and by the growing confidence in her expression she knew it. Did he want her at the mine? When he thought about it logically, it made sense. She already knew the job and she was good at it, and she’d be in the office where he could keep an eye on her. She also had a point that as the boss’s wife, the men would be obligated to treat her with respect, or risk their jobs.

On the other hand, he didn’t want to have to worry about her or watch over her all day.

“I don’t like the idea,” he said. Disappointment clouded her expression, but he added, “But I’ll agree to try it for a while and see how it goes.”

Her face lit up and she threw herself across the space between them, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Thank you.”

He closed his arms around her, nuzzling her neck. She smelled faintly of lavender—fresh and feminine. He pulled back enough to kiss her sweet, soft cheek, and thanked his lucky stars for her.

“What will we tell the men about Ray?” she asked, shifting to sit on the settee next to him.

“We’ll tell them what you told me—that Ray went back east. You’ll take over his position as my wife and as Ray’s sister. That should be enough for them to treat you with esteem.”

She scooted closer to him, twined her fingers with his, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Thank you, Miles. For listening to me. For forgiving me.” She sat up and looked him in the eye. The sincerity he saw there took his breath away. “For giving me a chance. I’m sorry I hurt you, but I love you and I promise to always be honest with you.”

“I hurt you, too,” Miles said. He gave into the urge he’d had for ages and reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear, caressing her cheek as he did. “I promise I’ll never do that again.”

The ghost of a smile twitched at her lips, but before it could fully form she closed the space between them and placed her lips on his. The kiss surprised him, but he recovered himself and slipped his fingers around the back of her neck, pulling her to him for a proper kiss. The kind a husband gave a wife he loved.

Sharing his life with another person would take adjustment. Evaluation of his beliefs. But when he thought about what his life had been,

or might be again if he lost Ruby, he didn't want to go back to that. Despite Ray and her deception, Ruby had still managed to civilize him like waking up from a long sleep to a clear, fresh day, and he couldn't be happier.

Epilogue

April 1884

Ruby stood in the garden of Miles' home on the outskirts of Virginia City. She still wore her wedding dress. They'd only just been married, and now their guests had come to Miles' home—her home now, too—to celebrate.

She had a hard time believing this was her life now. It was too much to hope for.

Clusters of family and friends chatted and laughed and celebrated in the warm spring afternoon. She'd insisted on inviting Della Kinney and her girls, and although Miles had balked, Ruby had insisted. As she watched now, they got along just fine with Miles' family and especially with the men they'd invited from the mine, bringing a smile to Ruby's face.

Her mother crept quietly beside her, lacing her fingers with Ruby's. "This is such a beautiful home, Ruby."

She turned and hugged her mother. "It is. I can't believe I'm going to live here."

"You found yourself a good man."

"I did. I almost lost him, you know."

Her mother pulled back and caught her eye. "Oh?"

"It's a long story, and not terribly important now. But I should tell you.

You'll be scandalized, but I hope you'll understand. It's almost funny when I think about it now; though not quite."

Her mother's expression asked her to elaborate, but Ruby just patted her mother's hand and watched Hannah and Henry making friends with Ruby's new nieces and nephews. They looked so shy and happy, her heart nearly burst.

A male voice clearing his throat behind them startled them apart, but it was only Miles.

"Mrs. Jackson," Miles said. "Welcome to our home."

Mother glanced down, a quiet smile on her face. "Thank you, sir."

"You don't need to call him sir, Mother. He's family. Call him Miles."

Miles smiled. "Please do."

Mother looked up at Miles. "I was just telling Ruby how lucky she is. You'll take good care of her."

Ruby heard the anxious question in her mother's statement—what does this mean for us?—and it broke her heart. Her mother's marriage had been good, but too short, and full of difficulty. Still, she'd loved her husband.

"You have my word, Mrs. Jackson. And you and your children, too. I won't have my family struggling."

Grateful tears stung Ruby's eyes as her mother's chin quivered and she nodded her thanks. If Ruby didn't already love Miles, his gesture would have

made her fall in love with him. They'd discussed it before the wedding, that the income she earned while working at the mine would go to her family. She insisted they were her responsibility. Miles had agreed, but accepting her mother and siblings as family meant the world to her, and she knew his offer to take care of them had nothing to do with her work at the mine. He'd do it even if she didn't earn a cent.

“Mother, you know Daisy is Miles' sister-in-law. She's a modiste. She made my wedding dress. You should go talk to her.”

Her mother's eyes lit up, and a shy smile started at the corners of her mouth. “Maybe I will,” she said, taking a few steps in the direction of the effusive redhead. Daisy was never difficult to find in a crowd. “Thank you again Mr....Miles.”

After her mother headed in Daisy's direction, Ruby said, “Mother has always loved clothes and hats. We never had enough money for her to have a fashionable wardrobe, but I can remember her gazing in the windows of dress shops when we'd go to Carson City.”

“I'm sure Daisy will be happy to bend her ear on the subject of fashion.”

Ruby tucked her hand around Miles' elbow. “Speaking of which, you look very handsome today, Mr. Collins.”

“I'm naught next to you, Mrs. Collins. You're nothing short of radiant.”

He tucked a finger under her chin and lifted her head to kiss her. She savored the warmth of his lips on hers, looking forward to a lifetime with him.

She broke the kiss, but he pressed his forehead to hers, an intimate tete-a-tete of husband and wife.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too. Thank you for becoming mine. I promise to spend our lives proving myself worthy.”

THE END

Acknowledgements

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To my family: As always, thank you for being there for me. I love you.

To my readers: Thank you for your support and for your enthusiasm for my books. I'd be nowhere without you!

Other Books by Margaret

If you enjoyed BECOMING MINE, don't forget to read [GAMBLING ON THE OUTLAW](#) and [DEPENDING ON THE DOCTOR](#), the first two books in the Nevada Bounty Series.

NOTE: Although *Becoming Mine* is a sweet romance, *Gambling on the Outlaw* and *Depending on the Doctor* are higher on the heat scale. If *Becoming Mine* is a 1 on a 1-to-10 scale, *Gambling* and *Depending* are in the 6 to 7 range.

I've also written in the Special Forces: Operation Alpha Kindle World. If you enjoy contemporary military romance, check out the first three books in the Sealed With A Kiss series:

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I write historical romance for Entangled Publishing and paranormal romance for Evernight Publishing. I write contemporary romance, historical romance, and science fiction through M&M Publishing, and have written in several of Amazon's Kindle Worlds. I'm an Oregon Ducks fan. I'm a donut and pastry addict (pretty much any carbs, really). I like cats. I'm terrified of balloons. When I'm not writing you'll find me in a classroom teaching English, or working as a literary agent for an amazing agency...and of course, wrangling my family.

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