

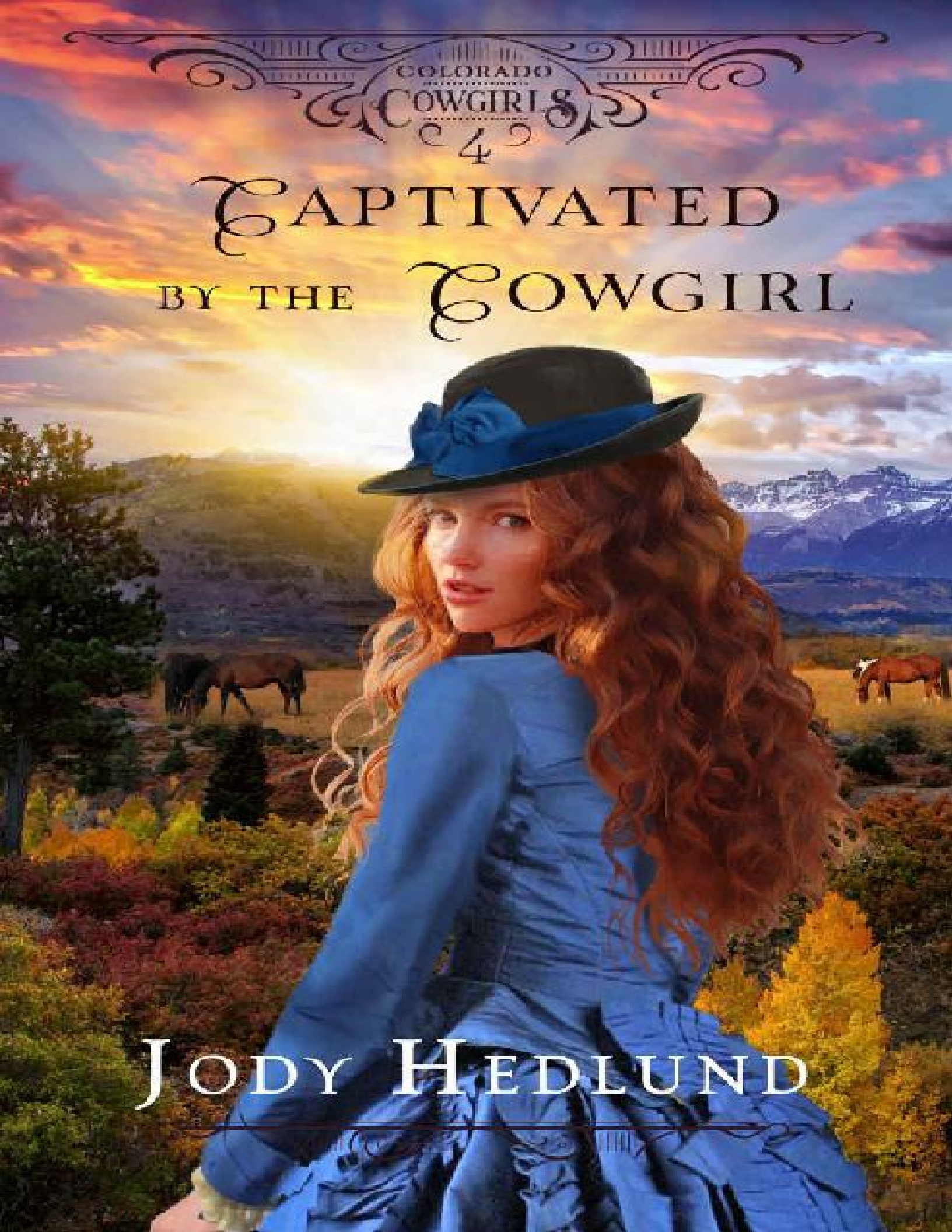
COLORADO

THE DAUGHTERS OF  
COWGIRLS

4

CAPTIVATED  
BY THE COWGIRL

JODY HEDLUND



CAPTIVATED  
BY THE COWGIRL

## BOOKS BY JODY HEDLUND

### **Colorado Cowgirls**

[Committing to the Cowgirl](#)  
[Cherishing the Cowgirl](#)  
[Convincing the Cowgirl](#)  
[Captivated by the Cowgirl](#)  
[Claiming the Cowgirl: A Novella](#)

### **Colorado Cowboys**

[A Cowboy for Keeps](#)  
[The Heart of a Cowboy](#)  
[To Tame a Cowboy](#)  
[Falling for the Cowgirl](#)  
[The Last Chance Cowboy](#)

### **Bride Ships Series**

[A Reluctant Bride](#)  
[The Runaway Bride](#)  
[A Bride of Convenience](#)  
[Almost a Bride](#)

### **Orphan Train Series**

[An Awakened Heart: A Novella](#)  
[With You Always](#)  
[Together Forever](#)  
[Searching for You](#)

### **Beacons of Hope Series**

[Out of the Storm: A Novella](#)  
[Love Unexpected](#)  
[Hearts Made Whole](#)  
[Undaunted Hope](#)  
[Forever Safe](#)

[Never Forget](#)

**Hearts of Faith Collection**

[The Preacher's Bride](#)

[The Doctor's Lady](#)

[Rebellious Heart](#)

**Michigan Brides Collection**

[Unending Devotion](#)

[A Noble Groom](#)

[Captured by Love](#)

**Historical**

[Luther and Katharina](#)

[Newton & Polly](#)

**Knights of Brethren Series**

[Enamored](#)

[Entwined](#)

[Ensnared](#)

[Enriched](#)

[Enflamed](#)

[Entrusted](#)

**Fairest Maidens Series**

[Beholden](#)

[Beguiled](#)

[Besotted](#)

**Lost Princesses Series**

[Always: Prequel Novella](#)

[Evermore](#)

[Foremost](#)

[Hereafter](#)

**Noble Knights Series**

[The Vow: Prequel Novella](#)

[An Uncertain Choice](#)  
[A Daring Sacrifice](#)  
[For Love & Honor](#)  
[A Loyal Heart](#)  
[A Worthy Rebel](#)

**Waters of Time Series**

[Come Back to Me](#)  
[Never Leave Me](#)  
[Stay With Me](#)  
[Wait for Me](#)

An Uncertain Choice  
A Daring Sacrifice  
For Love & Honor  
A Loyal Heart  
A Worthy Rebel

**Waters of Time Series**

Come Back to Me  
Never Leave Me  
Stay With Me  
Wait for Me



CAPTIVATED  
BY THE COWGIRL

JODY HEDLUND



NORTHERN LIGHTS PRESS

Captivated by the Cowgirl  
Northern Lights Press  
© 2023 by Jody Hedlund  
Jody Hedlund Kindle Edition

Jody Hedlund [www.jodyhedlund.com](http://www.jodyhedlund.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.

Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are unavoidable. All other characters are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design by Roseanna White Designs  
Cover images from Shutterstock



Captivated by the Cowgirl

Northern Lights Press

© 2023 by Jody Hedlund

Jody Hedlund Kindle Edition

Jody Hedlund [www.jodyhedlund.com](http://www.jodyhedlund.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the author.

Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are accordingly inevitable. All other characters are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design by Roseanna White Designs

Cover images from Shutterstock

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Half-Title

Books by Jody Hedlund

Title Page

Copyright Page

*Chapter 1*

*Chapter 2*

*Chapter 3*

*Chapter 4*

*Chapter 5*

*Chapter 6*

*Chapter 7*

*Chapter 8*

*Chapter 9*

*Chapter 10*

*Chapter 11*

*Chapter 12*

*Chapter 13*

*Chapter 14*

*Chapter 15*

*Chapter 16*

*Chapter 17*

*Chapter 18*

*Chapter 19*

*Chapter 20*

*Chapter 21*

*Chapter 22*

*Chapter 23*

*Chapter 24*

*Chapter 25*

Author's Note

About the Author

*Chapter 20*

*Chapter 21*

*Chapter 22*

*Chapter 23*

*Chapter 24*

*Chapter 25*

Author's Note

About the Author

# I

## **Fairplay, Colorado October 1878**

“I would like to hire help.” Felicity Courtney tapped on the advertisement she’d carefully crafted before sliding it across the counter toward the proprietor.

Stoop-shouldered and arthritic, Captain Jim picked up the sheet and held it out as far as his arms could stretch, peering down his nose and attempting to read the print.

“Hire help?” The older man practically shouted the question, his voice as diminished as his eyesight.

Throughout Simpkins General Store, the other customers halted their browsing of wares. The two fellows sitting on stools on either side of the pool table, topped with a checkerboard paused in their game.

Irritation prickled Felicity. Why did she have to live in a small town where people knew everything about everyone? She wanted to glare and tell folks to mind their own business, but she stifled the urge. This was, she needed everyone to know she was looking for help. In fact, the more people who knew about her advertisement, the better.

She flattened her skirt—a fancy emerald color that made her red hair and brown eyes stand out—then she leaned in and read her own handwriting. “Needed: A man who can come out to the homestead once a day to tend to the livestock, chop wood, haul water, and other labor as needed. Wage: One dollar a day.”

With a whistle of surprise, Captain Jim handed the sheet back to her. “That there’s some good money.”

One dollar a day was above the going rate. But both Charity and Paul had insisted she offer at least that amount. No doubt her older sisters were guilty that she’d been left bearing all the responsibilities of their household and boardinghouse by herself while they enjoyed marital bliss with their husbands for most of their lives.

Regardless, the gold mine they'd inherited from their uncle was producing well, and they could afford to pay a generous wage. The issue wasn't the issue. The issue was that Felicity hadn't wanted to hire a man. Had wanted to prove she could get along fine without her sisters.

But after Patience had visited three days ago and found her unconscious on the kitchen floor, Felicity hadn't been able to say no to a plan to hire him, especially after Doctor Steele had examined her and attributed the episode to exhaustion.

isement  
ie store  
here at the store." Captain Jim whistled again. "I'd offer to do it myself if I wasn't so busy here at the store."

nd held  
empting  
coiled hair. Underneath her chin, she tightened the wide velvet ribbon of her hat—which was more of a petite hat set upon the mounds of her fashionable, curled hair. "Thank you, Mr. Simpkins. You're very kind to say so."

hearing  
snort. A man several feet down the counter, reading a newspaper, gave a snort. A snort that belonged to only one person: the annoying Philip B.

ed their  
a barrel  
forehead. He was leaning against the counter on both elbows, the sheet of newspaper spread out in front of him. His wavy blond hair hung rakishly over his forehead, as it normally did. And his profile was as cocky and handsome as always. Not that she cared how cocky and handsome he was. It was simply the fact that any living creature would acknowledge.

ll town  
around  
ie truth  
ie more  
humorous? He was browsing an article, a smirk on his lips. Was he looking for something that was causing his mirth? Or did he find her predictions humorous?

hair and  
writing  
tend to  
es: One  
with hers. He tilted his head, giving her full view of his lean features, sharp and perfectly proportioned—slender nose, prominent chin covered in scruffy hair, well-defined cheekbones. All chiseled out of smooth mountain granite.

His eyes, the color of a hot spring mirroring a blue morning sky, met hers. He held her gaze as if he could see straight inside her. Then he winked and dropped his attention back to the article in front of him.

to her.  
'atience  
ers felt  
nstead  
ie loves  
gave her. Ugh. How dare he wink at her like she was his little sister. Or a girl who was enthralled with him. She hated when he did that, as though she assumed she was ready to throw herself at him at the least bit of attention.

She'd tried to make it quite clear over the past month of knowing him that she had no interest in him. But he clearly hadn't gotten the message. Likely, he was ignoring it.

le was Even though he was no longer watching her, she tossed a glare  
money anyway. Her situation was no winking matter. It was actually quite  
anyone. Via telegrams, Charity had given her only one week to find help. If she  
hire someone by the week's end, Charity intended to close  
nscious boardinghouse for the winter and move Felicity into town.

re help, Felicity wasn't necessarily attached to their homestead, and she'd  
sode tonecessary. But she'd already rented two rooms to the Kellers, and the  
couple had no place else to go. Not with how ill Mr. Keller was.

so busy Of course, her sisters hadn't been pleased to hear about the new bo

Even though they'd operated the Courtney Boardinghouse for the pa  
bonnet and had rented rooms to plenty of people, Charity and Patience hadn't  
ionably her taking in anyone because of all the responsibilities that entailed.

they'd told her not to have boarders until Charity and Hudson returned  
e a soft spring and instituted their plans to provide a safe residence for  
erg. homeless women.

wsprint However, when Mrs. Keller had arrived with her sick husband in t  
ver his of a wagon a couple of weeks ago, Felicity hadn't been able to tur  
ome as away. And now, after getting to know them, she couldn't fathom clo  
imply at the boardinghouse, not when the Kellers so desperately needed her hel

"Yes, indeed." Felicity spoke again, this time so that hopefully ev  
reading in the store could hear her. "I expect I'll need someone to do a co  
icament hours of work per day. Likely not much more than that."

She could handle everything else for herself. In fact, the exhaustion  
arp and past week had happened because she hadn't been sleeping well, not l  
iff, and the workload was too much.

. But no amount of arguing with Charity or Patience had convince  
locked otherwise.

Then he Now here she was—attempting to hire help.

She moved away from the counter and let her gaze sweep o  
giggly various people still watching her. "If you know of anyone who m  
ough he interested, please have them visit me at the boardinghouse to disc  
ition he matter further."

"*Anyone* isn't very specific." Philip's comment was casual and co  
im that a hint of his foreign accent. She didn't know much about where he wa  
e. More He hadn't spoken about home or his family during the dinners they'd  
together at Mrs. Bancroft's last month, when she'd been working

at him wealthy woman's companion. In fact, Philip's English was so good t  
serious. sometimes forgot he was a foreigner.

e didn't He read his newspaper a moment longer before glancing up. "I gu  
up them means I can apply for the position."

"I'm only choosing men. Not children."

move if His grin kicked up on one side, making him too good-looking. Ag  
ie older was only stating the obvious—common knowledge accepted far and n

She knew she ought to feel ashamed of herself for saying such rude  
arders. to Philip, but she couldn't seem to help herself—hadn't been able to si  
ast year moment she'd met him.

wanted "Maybe you should consider me anyway." His lopsided grin was  
In fact, irresistible.

d in the Thankfully, she'd become proficient at not letting it affect her. "  
r poor, Mr. Berg. I really do need someone who is actually interested in worki

His grin rose higher. "Yes, I can see how that would be a problem,  
he back She could feel a smile of her own fighting for release, and she sh  
n them that he wouldn't be able to see it. "Good day, Mr. Berg. I wish you  
sing up luck finding employment where all you're required to do is play."

p. "I do like to play." He pushed up from the counter until he was s  
veryone at least a head taller than her petite frame. His black coat stretched ac  
uple of shoulders, hugging his upper body way too closely. "But it's muc  
pleasurable when I have someone to join in my escapades." His  
n of the dropped low and took on the rumbly quality that never failed to suck  
because from the room and make it harder for her to breathe.

No. She dragged in a breath and tried not to let it quiver. Philip B  
d them arrogant, impulsive, spoiled, a womanizer . . . She had to keep addin  
list of all the things she didn't like about him to prevent herself from  
in to his charm.

ver the She forced her feet to start across the room, tossing him a  
ight be comment. "Check with the circus. You might find some monkeys wi  
uss the play with you."

His laughter burst out, loud and boisterous.

ntained She resisted the urge to turn around and watch him. She knew th  
is from. his head thrown back and his face alight with humor, his appeal woul  
l shared strong to ignore.

as the Only after she stepped outside into the chilly October morning did



hat sheher smile break free, and then only briefly. She gathered her cloak tight and she stopped at the billboard beside the door, where people posted comess that events and advertisements like hers. Carefully, she extracted two pins from her reticule and began to tack up her help-wanted notice.

She also planned to visit several other stores and hotels to ensure her word spread. Surely there was a nice fellow, perhaps a miner, who had a spare bit of time that he could devote to assisting her every day.

“Felicity,” called a man’s voice from down the boardwalk behind her. She didn’t have to turn to know who it was. Weston Oakley. He was the latest in a string of suitors who’d pursued her since she and her sister almost moved to Fairplay the previous year. Weston had been trying to convince her to marry him all autumn, especially when she and Patience had almost moved to the homestead.

“I can’t,” she said. “She’d tried to dissuade him. But he hadn’t stopped asking.”  
“Then,” she said, “She ought to give him some credit for his persistence, and yet she ought to encourage him. If only she could be as rude to him and make as much same cutting comments that she did with Philip. But Weston was too good for that.”

Instead, she fidgeted with the pins in the advertisement, even as the wind rustled the paper and threatened to wrest it loose. Though the day was sunny, a hint of winter was most definitely in the air.

She cast a glance to the mountain peaks to the west of Fairplay. The rocky tops had snow yet. Neither did the range that ran along the side of the South Park basin to the east. But it wouldn’t be long before the mountains were covered with the first pristine layer. The snow would make the passes difficult to traverse and would eventually trap them in the high country until spring.

Perhaps *trap* was a harsh way to describe the feeling that had come over her since parting Felicity last winter—one that she was dreading again. But she didn’t want to think of the idea that she was stuck in Fairplay. She didn’t want to be stuck anywhere.

“Blast it all, Felicity.” Weston had stopped beside her, pushed up the collar of his black Stetson, and was staring at the advertisement with a look of handsomeness a woman could ever ask for, with his strong features and blue hair and eyes.

She moved the pin again, but the wind flapped at the opposite corner of the advertisement.

ghter as “If you needed help, you should’ve just told me.” Weston towered  
community her, all brawn and muscles not only from ranching his small spread  
is from north of town but also because of the heavy lifting he did at his mill  
the length of the South Platte River running through his land, he’d do  
that the for himself by building a water-generated sawmill and gristmill. His  
l a little had allowed him to buy up land around town and develop it by const  
both homes and businesses.

er. For a man of not more than twenty-seven years of age, he’d done  
was the himself over the past eight years of living in Fairplay. The only th  
ers had hadn’t accomplished was finding himself a wife. And not for want of  
nce her The poor fellow had tried the matrimonial catalogs and had  
ost lost advertisements in newspapers with the hope of getting a wife. But non  
relationships had blossomed into marriage.

And now he had his heart set on her.

e didn’t She stared straight ahead, unable to meet Weston’s gaze and the h  
ake the to be in his eyes. “You’re so busy, Weston. I didn’t want to trouble yo  
nice fore excuse was only part of the truth.

“I ain’t never too busy for you, sweetheart.”

ie wind The other truth was that she didn’t want to let him do anything  
ay was that might make her feel obligated to marry him. “I’m hiring someo  
couple hours a day. That’s all.”

None of “Whoa, now. You’ve got to be careful and can’t be hiring any lo  
ie other No telling if it’ll bite.”

efore a At just that moment—of course—Philip sauntered outside, tugg  
r would bowler over his unruly blond locks. At the sight of Weston standing  
1 in the her, he stopped and his brows rose. “Miss Courtney, I didn’t realize yo  
hiring a dog. If so, then I’m afraid I’m most definitely off your  
ne over possibilities.”

like the “Are you sure about that?” The words were out before she cou  
ere. them.

he brim Philip shrugged nonchalantly, but his eyes were alight again. “I d  
all the many similarities to a dog. I am loyal and loving and friendly. I enjoy  
nd dark affection, especially giving kisses.”

Kisses? Was he insinuating that he wanted to kiss her?

orner of He couldn’t be.

His attention flitted to her mouth and then away.

l above Oh, he most certainly was. Her stomach took a jump off a cliff, fall to the dizzying spin, a sensation she didn't understand or want to feel.

s. With When his grin kicked up, as though he knew exactly his effect upon her, she braced her shoulders. "From what I remember, dog kisses are simple profits and smelly."

trusting Weston's gaze shot back and forth between her and Philip, his furrowing as they always did whenever she interacted with Philip. It was well for her as too kind and straightforward to delve into the word games she was playing with Philip. But he'd remarked in private that he didn't trust Philip and his effort, like it when she talked to him.

placed Fortunately for Weston, she didn't like talking with Philip either at the end of history or to keep the conversations to rare occasions.

"Are you hiring this fella?" Weston started to reach for her hand, but she slipped it into the crook of his arm as he'd done in the past.

hurt sure But today, with Philip watching her, she edged past Weston so that she was facing both men. Both made imposing figures—one dark-haired and tough, the other fair-haired and refined. "I don't need you to question hiring practices."

for her "Then you are hiring him?" Weston's jaw hardened.

one for a "Yes, I do believe she is." Philip's jaw seemed to flex too, and Weston's gaze in a bold, almost authoritative manner, one that proved the dog had a much stronger temperament than he allowed people to see.

"I'll go over each day to help her," Weston insisted.

ing his "She doesn't want your help."

, beside "And she wants yours?"

ou were "Yes."

list of "No." Felicity had to salvage the situation before the two men started a fistfight. While the attention from men had been flattering when she had stopped moved to Fairplay, now at times, it felt stifling.

With the lack of single women in the high country, she knew the best way to stop all the unwanted ardor was to accept Weston's proposal. If she got lots of married, then she'd no longer be sought after. And nineteen years old was too young for marriage. Plenty of women were wedded by her age.

So why couldn't she just accept Weston's proposal? Even though he'd recently built a nice home on his land, he'd offered to come live on his homestead with her after they got married so that she could continue to

lling in the home to those in need. He'd told her he didn't care where they lived as long as they were together—said he wouldn't mind riding out to his place on her, every day for work.

lobbying A wavering dizziness clouded her mind, and she pressed a glove against her forehead to keep her balance. "Thank you for your comment," she said to Weston. But I need you to trust me that I'll be careful about who I hire.

Weston He opened his mouth as though he wanted to protest. Then he closed it, and his jaw shut.

and didn't She waited for Philip to make another comment, to say something sarcastic or to jest. But he remained silent too.

and tried With a nod at them both, she turned and strode down the boardwalk.

The truth was, she wasn't ready to settle down. She wanted the freedom to experience life, have adventures, and see more of the world. For a woman like her, that was nearly an impossible dream. But she wasn't ready to give it up yet. Especially not for a man.

ed and  
ion my

he held  
d Philip

tarted a  
d first

est way  
she got  
wasn't

gh he'd  
at the  
to open

the home to those in need. He'd told her he didn't care where they lived as long as they were together—said he wouldn't mind riding out to his property every day for work.

A wavering dizziness clouded her mind, and she pressed a gloved hand against her forehead to keep her balance. “Thank you for your concern, Weston. But I need you to trust me that I'll be careful about who I hire.”

He opened his mouth as though he wanted to protest. Then he clamped his jaw shut.

She waited for Philip to make another comment, to say something sarcastic or to jest. But he remained silent too.

With a nod at them both, she turned and strode down the boardwalk.

The truth was, she wasn't ready to settle down. She wanted the freedom to experience life, have adventures, and see more of the world. For a simple woman like her, that was nearly an impossible dream. But she wasn't ready to give it up yet. Especially not for a man.

## 2

Philip couldn't stop himself from watching Felicity Courtney stride. With the way her hips swayed and with how the bustle highlighted her backside, his muscles tightened with the need to wrap his hand around her tiny waist and pull her close. She was a fine, fine woman.

But such a fine, fine woman was off-limits to him. Entirely off-limits completely.

"I ain't a fool." Weston Oakley hadn't moved from beside him on the boardwalk. "I can tell you got a big hankering for Felicity."

Hankering? Philip fumbled to translate the meaning of such a word in his native tongue, but he couldn't decipher it. Even so, he could read just about anything in every language. And it was clear Weston coveted Felicity all for himself and didn't want anyone else to pay her any heed.

A sarcastic rebuttal easily formed, one in which he reminded Weston that Felicity had a sharp mind of her own and could easily pick the better man. But Philip bit back his words, something he'd learned to do often over the past months of running and hiding in America.

Ahead, Felicity entered another establishment and disappeared from sight. His last look at her. Ever.

"Just stay away from her." Weston's words echoed with a menacing growl. "Do y'hear?"

Philip rubbed his jaw, the thick layer of stubble so different than his clean-shaven style. But then again, so many things about his life were different now. Maybe always would be. Or at least until Gustaf decided to stop hunting him down and trying to assassinate him.

As much as he'd enjoyed sparring with Felicity during his weeks in South Park, he had no business doing so. He'd chastised himself at least a dozen times to cease such flirtations. But there was something about her confidence, her feistiness, her forthright manner, her quick wit—that he liked immensely. And he hadn't been able to keep from admiring her, the same way he couldn't seem to be able to stop himself from watching her just now.

Weston rested both hands on the handles of his revolvers, holstered on his gun belt. Even if Weston acted tough, Philip was a good judge of character and knew the fellow wouldn't harm a bedbug if he could help it.

"I'm aiming to marry Felicity." Weston spoke as if the deed were already done.

"I do believe you shall accomplish it." Philip glanced at his bags and sitting outside the livery, awaiting the stagecoach. Declan's bags were piled next to his, and the young man stood a few feet away from the livery, speaking with the livery owner.

Weston was studying the bags now too, his brows rising. "You're from this town?"

"Yes." Philip's gaze lingered on his camera box and the tripod beside it. He'd photographed many places in and around Fairplay and South Park in an effort to document his travels. But an unfinished feeling nagged him. Had he missed?

Weston cleared his throat. "Well, reckon I oughta let you get to it."

Philip allowed himself to meet Weston's gaze. "Take good care of her. She's a treasure." A treasure? Where had that thought come from? And had he spoken it aloud?

"I will." Weston touched the brim of his hat in farewell and then turned away, dismissing him and forgetting about him all in one move.

And that's exactly what he wanted, wasn't it? For people to dismiss him and forget about him? It was the safest course of action for him and for even the most menacing of his enemies.

His spine prickled with that familiar feeling he was being followed. He surveyed Main Street with the many businesses that lined both sides. Their false fronts made them appear larger than they really were—a common practice in most of the small Western towns he'd visited.

At midday, a few older men loitered about. Several women were congregated outside a shop. Their children were likely in school, at the brick building one street over. And most men were at their places of employment.

As far as Philip could tell, no one was specifically paying him attention—not even Weston, especially now that he'd clarified that he had no designs on Felicity.

He narrowed his gaze on the hotel across the street and studied

d in his windows of the second-floor rooms. Just because he couldn't see a character threatening, it didn't mean an assassin hadn't caught up to him. Gustaf had hired only the best to track him down and eliminate him.

almost Which was why he had to leave the South Park valley. After six weeks of being here, he'd already overstayed. Even if he had moved location to a more packed Healing Springs Inn, southwest of town, to Hotel Windsor in Fairplains, the guests were still been in the area too long.

baggage, Over the past year, he and Declan had usually only stayed a few weeks, maybe a month if they'd really enjoyed the location. Apparently, they'd been leaving South Park the best. And of course, there was the tiny fact that he had a girl, Felicity Courtney.

aside it. Yes, he'd liked her from the first moment he'd sat across from her at a table in one of Mrs. Bancroft's parties. But he'd also known since the outset of his life that what he had to stay clear of female companionship, that his situation was precarious to involve anyone. Even Declan had agreed they shouldn't spend an extended time with any one woman who might later be able to identify him as one of her. Philip.

and why Thus, they'd kept their dalliances short. Or at least, they'd tried to. Expelling a taut breath, he stepped off the boardwalk and started walking. He strode the dusty street toward the livery. "When is the stagecoach departing?"

Declan nodded at the livery owner before turning back toward the street. "An hour. Long enough to get a last meal at the Hotel Windsor. I'll get everyone one more of those delicious hand pies." With his dashing, boyish smile, he looked like a man who had just won the lottery.

Declan looked more like he was eighteen instead of twenty-four. His features were similar to Philip's, but he had a rounder face and deeper-set eyes.

ed both They'd met at Cambridge, and Declan had easily become one of his friends. They were, as friends. The fun-loving American had gone home with him the summer before their graduation and had been there when Philip's entire world had come crashing down.

newer At the time, Gustaf had been king of Lapland for approximately a decade after their father's passing, and Philip hadn't been aware of the trouble his older brother had been causing. But it hadn't taken long after his return to Lapland to discover Gustaf had dissolved the modern bicameral parliament that their father had established. Not only had he disbanded parliament, he'd dismissed the prime minister as well as the cabinet.

ied the Gustaf had also begun imprisoning his political opponents and



anyone dissidents to his regime. Worst of all, he'd locked up a group of poor folk who'd protested his callous disregard of their fishing rights, and he'd executed several to make an example of them.

Weeks of rumors had spread. Numerous politicians, including the prime minister, had approached Philip about taking the throne in Gustaf's place. No one had said they were planning a coup to overthrow Gustaf, but it was clear that people were dissatisfied with Gustaf's heavy-handed methods and his disregard for the needs of the common people. His wasteful spending and attempts at raising taxes had made him even more unpopular.

Philip had been home less than a month when Gustaf had learned of the secretive meetings taking place to oust him and make Philip king. Gustaf's reaction had been less than pleased. He'd hired an assassin to travel and kill Philip in his bedchamber.

And that's when the prime minister and other officials had advised Philip to go into hiding, at least until the rebellion had the chance to gain ground and support. Once the rebels found a way to overthrow Gustaf, the leading government officials planned to call Philip home as the next king of Lapland. But of course, Gustaf didn't want that to happen and had continued his efforts to remove the threat Philip posed.

"What do you say?" Declan waggled his eyebrows. "One last meal, then?" "Certainly. Why not." Philip had grown weary of American fare and from the start of his journey. But Declan had an easy way about him that made him the perfect traveling companion, always willing to try new things and live simply.

Declan was well aware of the danger involved in traveling with his best friend, but his friend had insisted on accompanying him anyway, helping him navigate through America and proving to be a lively and interesting companion.

Only this morning, Declan had realized he'd run out of funds. A year ago, he'd left a well-to-do Eastern family with several homes and many servants. His family had telegraphed his parents, who were more than willing to continue to support him, but they'd sent the money to a bank in Denver rather than Fairplay, just in case anyone was surveying Declan's family for ties to Philip.

Now, with the need to go to the bank in Denver, they really had no reason to delay their departure from Fairplay.

Whenever Philip ran low on funds, he didn't need to say anything. An envelope addressed to him with more cash always showed up at his residence. It was uncanny. But he accepted the money gratefully.

With a happy whistle, Declan started across the street toward Windsor, and Philip fell into step beside him. As nonchalantly as possible, he researched for any sign that someone was spying on him. But the spine-tingling feeling of being watched was gone. If anyone had been there, they would not have noticed.

Not for the first time since he'd fled from his country, the doubts of the traitor haunted him. Had he done the right thing in siding with parliament against the king? Should he have supported his brother instead? Could he have worked to influence Gustaf to do better and be a fairer king, as they had been before them?

Declan opened the door of the hotel and held it for Philip. Even though Philip had urged Declan not to show him preferential treatment, he hadn't been able to toss aside the manners and formalities entirely.

Philip breathed in the waft of chicken stew—a common meal at the hotel—continued—and started through the hallway only to find himself face-to-face with Courtney. Again.

“He hadn't anticipated seeing her in Simpkins General Store earlier this morning. He almost went in to read the newspaper that came up from Denver, always searching for news about his country and his brother. But as usual, there hadn't been anything.

He actually hadn't seen Felicity as often as he would have liked over the past three weeks since she'd left Mrs. Bancroft's and returned to her home, appearing only occasionally around town and at church. One time he'd purposefully set up his camera on the road leading to her home so that he'd be sure to encounter her. Okay, maybe he'd done it twice.

But this second meeting in a day was more than he could have hoped for. Not that he'd been hoping to see her again. But he wouldn't complain about having another chance to take in her stunning features, so delicate yet so strong at the same time. Her skin was creamy, contrasting with her dark auburn hair. And her eyes . . . the brown was as luxurious as the softest sable.

He could admit that she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on. Since he was leaving so soon, there was no harm in acknowledging

ing. Ansuch a thing now, was there?

at his “Miss Courtney.” He eyed her with a quirked brow. “If you want me, you could just ask me instead of manufacturing all of these accidental Hotelmeetings.”

ible, he She released a low scoffing sound, one that never failed to rubbinglinghim and stir the insatiable need to banter with her. “Why, Mr. Berg. I no longerrealize you were so desperate for work that you had to follow me around.

She fisted a hand on her waist, outlining the gentle curve of her hip and rose tolength of her thigh.

and the If he were a mutt, his tongue would be hanging out and he’d be begging for her. No, he wasn’t ashamed to admit it. She was every man’s dream. Her fatherit was no wonder that Weston Oakley and most of the single male population of Colorado drooled over her.

though The problem was that Weston couldn’t handle Felicity’s sharp mind. Declanspunk. She needed someone who could dole out the boldness in the same measure while also being able to temper her spirit without destroying it.

ie hotel The dozen or so round tables were filled with customers—mostly Felicitytaking their noon meal. The hum of voices was low, so that the clinking of silverware against porcelain rang out. All eyes seemed to be upon Felicity—hadAnd him.

arching Their sparring was no secret.

it’s been Others seemed to find as much entertainment in watching them spar as they did in riling her up. “Just admit it, Miss Courtney. All along you’ve been looking for a way to get me out to your boardinghouse so you can have some—al to yourself.”

ully set A lovely shade of pink infused her cheeks at his insinuation. Although he never crossed the line into impropriety, he guessed this was toeing it a little too closely.

ed for. She lifted her chin, and her eyes flashed with a spark he relished. “Mr. Berg, if I need a doormat, have no fear, I’ll call upon you to provide your services.”

ier rich How did she always have such witty replies? He loved it and couldn’t hold back his smile of appreciation.

She pressed her pretty lips together in self-satisfaction. Then she stepped to pass by him. Except that she wobbled, and her hand fluttered against the wall. At the same time, she closed her eyes but wavered again.

Something was wrong. Suddenly all mirth fled from him, and he  
to hireout to steady her. When she didn't resist, unease shot through him.

As she opened her eyes and glanced up at him, her expression fill  
vulnerability. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm so dizzy. And

Before he could respond, her eyes rolled back, and she began to co  
His reflexes were quick, and he managed to scoop her up so that  
round." cradling her against his chest. "Felicity?" he called to her gently, urger

Around him, men had jumped up from their tables, their faces m  
the surprise and concern he felt.

Beside him, Declan was already opening the hotel door. "We shou  
m. Andher to the doctor's office. The sign in the window says the doctor's in."

"Quite right. The doctor. That's what she needs." Philip hurried c  
carrying her as carefully as he could.

Her head lolled against his shoulder and then tipped back, reveal  
e same pale face and dark circles under her eyes.

What was wrong with her?

With a knot tightening his stomach, he strode down the street tow  
lank of small, weathered building with a white sign above the door that said *D  
Felicity. Office*. Another sign, this one painted brightly, hung in the window a  
the names of the two doctors: *Dr. Astrid Steele and Dr. Logan Steele*.

Philip found it somewhat unusual that a town as sparsely popul  
s Philip Fairplay had two doctors, including a female physician. But he  
ve been opposed to women becoming educated and using their God-given tal  
ave mesame as men. In fact, he'd approved his father's efforts to open univer  
women.

Felicity stirred in Philip's arms, her lashes rising. "I'm fin  
time he whispered. "Just tired. That's all."

Fine? Just tired? Philip couldn't keep a snort from escaping.

"Last time this happened, I was back on my feet in no time."

He halted in front of the door. "Last time?"

She nodded almost wearily, then closed her eyes again. "I just nee  
ouldn't more sleep."

"How many people have you known to pass out when they're tired

"Hmmm . . ." Her soft thinking sound drew his attention to her m  
l to her gently rounded lips, to her smooth cheeks, to the elegant curve of h  
and jaw . . .

reached What was he doing? He couldn't get distracted by the feel of her |  
his arms or the way she smelled faintly of strawberries and cream. "Or  
ed withthere's another condition you're suffering from that needs  
tired." investigating."

llapse. Her eyes flew open, suddenly wide and filled with worry. "Do yo  
he wasso?"

itly. "Yes."

irrorring She held his gaze, likely needing to know he was serious and not  
this time. He kept his expression grave. As he carried her through th  
ild takeand into the empty waiting room, she didn't protest.

" A tall, distinguished doctor guided him into an office. As Philip  
outside,placed Felicity on the examining table, he debated offering to stay  
side. He wanted to hear what the doctor had to say about her condit  
ing herwhy she was fainting. But he had no ties to Felicity that gave him any  
insist, and so he retreated into the waiting room and took a seat.

Declan lowered himself into the chair beside him.

ward the Philip may have once been too spoiled to consider the needs  
doctor'sfriends, but the trials and hardships of the past year had opened his e  
and hadtaught him much. Philip knew Declan would do anything he asked,  
that meant staying in Fairplay and delaying their move to Denver.

ated as But he didn't want to ask that of Declan. The young man had c  
wasn'tmuch for him—had followed him each step of the journey, supporti  
ents theencouraging him, and hadn't complained once.

sities to Philip sat straight, his backbone stiff. "I don't feel right leaving Fe  
her condition, especially without any help at her boardinghouse."

e," she "Are you planning to stay and help her?"

"Perhaps." He wasn't entirely sure what he intended to do. All h  
was that he couldn't walk away while she was in this condition and in  
help. "Regardless, I want you to go to the hotel and have that last ha  
Then leave on the stage today."

d to get Declan shook his head. "No, I couldn't—"

"I insist. You've been looking forward to visiting Denver, and yo  
?" the replenishment of funds you've been needing."

outh, to "I don't mind waiting for you."

ier chin "I'll tarry here another day or two, make sure Felicity is situated, a  
I'll head down to Denver and meet up with you."

body in     Declan studied his face as though trying to read his emotions, but he may be had learned long ago how to keep his feelings concealed and put up with it further front.

“You’re sure?” Declan glanced around the waiting room and then out the back street, making sure no one was privy to their conversation.

“A couple more days won’t hurt me.” At least, he prayed it would. Besides, Felicity wouldn’t want him around once she was feeling better. For now, however, while she was weak, he could accompany her back to the boardinghouse and then ride into town to personally hire a fellow to give her a hand with the workload. If he had to, he’d go door to door until he found someone.

by her     He had to assist her in the matter because doing so was decent and honorable. Not because she was special to him.

right to     Declan dropped his voice. “It’s been obvious you like her since the day you met her, but—”

“Obvious?” Philip released a scoffing laugh that came out too loud for him. “That’s not true.”

yes and     “Oh, come on. Your attraction to her has wound so tight I’ve just been waiting for it to snap.”

“We can’t be around each other without sparring.”

alone so     “Sparring with plenty of sparks.”

ing and     “I’ve engaged in a little harmless flirtation. That’s all.”

Declan clamped a hand on Philip’s shoulder. “Deny it all you want, but Felicity in that won’t make it go away.”

Philip couldn’t deny he found Felicity attractive. But he had no intention toward her. None. He wouldn’t allow himself to consider any woman he knew. Not when he was in so much danger and on the run for his life.

need of     Even if he hadn’t been in such danger, he was a prince with many obligations and didn’t have the option to pursue a woman of his own choosing. Lapland law stipulated that royal matches had to be made and approved by a majority of members of parliament. Gustaf’s wife had already been carefully selected by a committee tasked with the purpose of finding a suitable match.

And the committee had started the process of looking for a wife for Philip. While they would consult him over their final choices, Philip had grand plans, knowing what would be expected of him and hadn’t questioned it.

Yes, he liked Felicity. The attraction was *tight*. Declan wasn’t wi

t Philip either score. But Philip had kept his feelings for her under control, had his best this best to hold her at arm's length. For her safety. And because he wanted to lead her on only to break her heart.

1 to the He'd had one such relationship while at Cambridge, and in the end he'd had to sever the ties, the parting of ways had been so hurtful.

g better. "Nothing has developed between Felicity and myself over the past few weeks." He spoke earnestly, needing to reassure himself as much as to give her "And nothing will happen in a couple of days."

e found "I'm sure you're right." Declan stood, a knowing glint in his eyes. Philip rose too. "I'll make sure she's taken care of and then be done right way."

the day Grinning, Declan started toward the door. "I'll be on the first stage out tomorrow morning." "Sure you will." Declan opened the door and stepped out.

d. "No, "You'll see." His friend gave a mock salute before disappearing outside. Unsettled, Philip lowered himself back into the chair. The logical, practical part of his brain told him to rush after Declan and leave today.

st been But with a glance toward the closed door of the examining room, his heartbeat stuttered a protest. If he was perfectly honest with himself, he had to admit he'd already had a difficult time tearing himself away from Felicity, but and Fairplay when she'd been doing well and managing fine. He had been delaying, kept telling himself he needed a few more photos. If he had known about Declan's dwindling finances, he might have stayed longer.

in now. How could he possibly leave her now that she wasn't doing so well? How could he possibly leave her now that she wasn't doing so well? Managing fine? There was no way. Not until he was certain she would be well looked after during his absence.

is own His absence? As if his going away would only be temporary. A temporary absence and intended to someday return. He almost snorted at the notion. Once he had been Fairplay, he'd never be back, and he'd never see Felicity Courtney again. He couldn't pretend otherwise.

Philip. With a mental shake, he forced himself to replay the litany of advice he had given himself all along: Felicity was simply a pretty distraction that had helped to take his mind off his troubles for a short while. But she was long gone on all she was. A fleeting encounter.

ad done      He would depart—soon—and that was all there was to it.  
e didn't

l, when  
ful and

re past  
Declan.

on my

rational

om, his  
he had  
Felicity  
'd kept  
not for

well or  
ould be

as if he  
he left  
ain. He

ce he'd  
on, one  
it that's



He would depart—soon—and that was all there was to it.

### 3

“I can walk just fine now, Mr. Berg.” Felicity squirmed against Philip as he carried her from the wagon to her house. But the moment she moved, she was all too aware of the hard wall of his body shielding her, the muscular arms holding her up underneath her backside, and the closeness of his chest against her cheek and forehead.

“The physician said you are to stay off your feet today.” His words were as firm now as they’d been in town when he’d carried her to the wagon. He helped her onto the bench.

“Dr. Steele’s advice is just that. Advice.” Felicity didn’t want to admit how tired and dizzy she still was for fear that Philip would go and tell Patience. If Patience found out about another spell, she’d insist on moving over to the Trout Creek Ranch with her. Or she’d come and stay with Felicity, sacrificing being with her new husband and daughter.

Philip started up the front steps. “Advice is meant to be followed.”

“Only if you agree with the advice. Which I do not.”

“I do. You need to rest today and sleep well tonight.”

“I have too much to do to sit around.” Someone had to take care of the livestock and provide a meal and draw water for the Kellers. And she had to do the cleaning and laundry and the hundred and one other chores. There were still a few last root vegetables that needed to be harvested and stored in the cellar. And more firewood to be chopped in preparation for the winter.

Philip crossed the front porch and somehow managed to open the door and enter without disturbing her in the least. Once inside, he paused a moment in the room. Felicity knew she had nothing for which to be embarrassed. She kept the place immaculate. Even so, Philip and Declan were wealthy, and she was, probably from a different social class altogether. And though her home was well furnished, nothing was fancy or opulent. The place was actually quite simple and decorated with all of Patience’s many creations.

He started toward a grouping of furniture on one side of the front

opposite the long dining room table. As he stopped beside the sofa, he hesitated.

She was too mortified by the whole affair to look at his face or his eyes, unwilling to see the humor that might be lurking there. Even though he'd been serious all throughout the doctor's visit and the ride back to the boardinghouse, she guessed it was only a matter of time before he'd find something to tease her about.

"If I deposit you onto the sofa, you must promise to stay there until my help arrives."

"And if I don't promise you?"

"Then I shall sit with you and make sure you do."

"I doubt you have the patience to play nursemaid to me."

"Test me." His voice dropped low by her ear. "I dare you."

Her stomach did a series of strange flips. If there was one thing she'd learned about Philip Berg, it was that he was adventurous and afraid of nothing, not even a little. Including her.

"Very well." She would simply pretend to rest until he left. Besides, her help wouldn't be arriving—at least, not that she anticipated, since she had no solid inquiries regarding her advertisement.

Philip started to lower her but then halted. "I can tell you're only saying what you think I want to hear. But that strategy won't work with me."

She expelled an exasperated breath. "Put me down, Philip." The first time she spoke his Christian name, she mentally slapped herself at the information. Hopefully, he wouldn't pick up on it.

His lips quirked into a smirk. "So we are finally calling each other by our given names, Felicity?"

Of course he wouldn't let the mistake pass him by. Of course he'd make a big deal out of it, especially since she'd insisted on calling him by his proper name even after he'd given her leave to use his first name instead. She'd never had one of their first dinners.

"Put me down, *Mr. Berg*."

"Too late. You already called me Philip, and you cannot take it back."

"I am taking it back."

He didn't move but held her poised above the sofa. His breath was pressed against her cheek and ear. "Felicity. Felicity. Felicity."

His words brushed gently across her skin, and each mention of her name

sofa, he—especially with the slight accent that dragged her name out on his tongue—flipped her stomach end over end.

into his “You must call me Miss Courtney.” Her voice lacked power, though conviction. Because she was tired, not because she was falling under the spell.

He found He finally lowered her to the sofa, placing her on the cushions with as much care as though she were a breakable crystal vase. As he released her, he reached for the quilted blanket on the back of the sofa and began to tuck it over her.

She knew she ought to protest such tender ministrations. But as his hands cut to her, they also seemed to cut right through her, slicing her open, and every last drop of air escaped, and she had no way to form the words of objection.

When she’d He tucked the edges of the quilt around her before straightening up, he peered down at her, his eyes a shade of blue that was too mesmerizing. A blond strand fell across his forehead—the strand that always annoyed her, hired for combing back. His jaw flexed, drawing her attention to the chiseled edge of his jaw and the scruffiness of his stubble.

Ugh. He really was too good-looking, especially standing above her in her house and looking at her with concern.

She tried to frown at him. “Don’t be so nice to me.”

His brows rose. “Has it become a crime to be nice?”

“I like you better when you’re not so serious.”

“You like me.”

A grin worked at the corner of her lips. “Absolutely not.”

“You just said so.”

There. She breathed easier. They were back on more familiar ground. “I suppose you’re here to torment me?”

“Yes, exactly.” He bent and tucked the blanket around her tightly. “Here to torment you by making sure you stay off your feet.”

“Don’t you have someplace else you need to be?”

“I’ve postponed leaving town until tomorrow.”

“You’re leaving?” Her question tumbled out before she could stop it. A warm pulse tumbled right along with it.

“Do I detect a note of sadness in your question, *Felicity*?” Her name suddenly took on a twinkle.

anguish— Irritation welled up, mostly at herself for giving him any ammunition against her. “There’s no sadness, *Mr. Berg*. Only curiosity.”  
“You’re hoping I’ll tell you where I’m going so that you can follow me?”

His response was so ludicrous she could only roll her eyes and scoff. “Since you insist on knowing, I can tell you I’ll be staying in Denver, a few weeks.”

She shouldn’t have been surprised he was moving on. He and Declan made it clear all along that they were only in South Park for a short time. They’d come to see the sights, hike the mountains, and experience the country. Philip was an amateur photographer as well and had been taking pictures every place he visited.

She could admit she envied their ability to travel the country, though she could go wherever they wanted, even this remote little town. Of course, The Healing Springs Inn, with the hot spring, probably had enticed them to the area. And apparently Declan’s family also had a connection to Mrs. Berg—something about the older lady being a godparent to one of Declan’s parents, which was another reason the two had stopped in South Park.

Whatever the case, Philip had hinted often enough over the past few years that his life was back in his country, that he had no choice but to return at the end of his travels, that he had obligations and didn’t have the freedom to go off on his own.

Philip took a tentative step back from the sofa and eyed the door, as if he was anxious to escape the house and leave the high country at the very moment.

“Please, don’t let me keep you from your next exciting destination,” he said. “I know that he’d revealed his plans, she finally understood why Declan had been standing in front of the livery next to a stack of bags, including his camera equipment. They’d been readying to leave.”

Had Philip planned to say goodbye to her? Or had he intended to leave town without even a distant farewell?

Why did she care at all?

“Declan is going on ahead.” Philip stuffed his hands into his pockets, his shoulders suddenly stiff. “But I decided to stay to make sure you go home adequately.”

His statement sounded a little bit like an embarrassed confession.

ition to wanted to tease him, knew he'd tease her if their roles were reversed. a reason she couldn't explain, his admission filled her with a low afterpleasure. He'd put off leaving in order to help her. That was one of the things anyone had ever done for her.

ff. She ought to thank him.

er for a She fidgeted with a loose thread on the blanket covering her, a give voice to the gratitude for fear he'd hear her pleasure.

lan had "Miss Courtney?" The timid call of Mrs. Keller came from the stair rt time. The waif of a woman moved soundlessly in her slippers and he highseemed to be taking Felicity by surprise. She stood on the middle step, taking her robe at midday. Her gray hair was flattened on one side, and creases lined her cheek.

at they Felicity didn't blame the woman for sleeping whenever she could, course midday. She was up at all hours of the day and night caring for her h 1 to the and never seemed to get any good length of sleep.

ancroft Felicity pushed herself up to her elbows and immediately fought a reclan's dizzy wave. "How is Mr. Keller?"

"He's awake." Mrs. Keller clutched her robe closed, her tired eye weeks Philip warily. "I was coming to get the warm water for his bed bath."

n at the Felicity released a tired groan and tried to sit up, but Philip was to veerside in the next instant, gently easing her back down. "No. You're no anywhere." His voice had that note of authority that came out from almost time. It wasn't bossy. Rather, it was an unquestioning assumption t at that would do as he'd declared. The firmness of his tone was matched determination in his eyes.

." Now "Is something wrong?" Mrs. Keller's soft voice wavered.

id been Felicity wanted to stand up and declare that she was perfectly Philip's Mrs. Keller had enough to worry about with her husband's care and need the burden of Felicity's health issues upon her too.

o leave Before she could figure out how to answer, Philip was already pr an explanation. "Miss Courtney has fainted twice this week. The ph believes she needs more rest as well as more help here at the boardingl

rets, his Still halfway up the stairway, Mrs. Keller shook her head sadly. ' it homemy fault. I never should have agreed to let you take a shift with my h each night."

on. She Philip's brows shot up, and his gaze pinned Felicity. "What

But for duration of such shifts?”

strange Felicity glared back, unwilling to let Philip intimidate her. “I’m d  
e nicest to give Mrs. Keller time to sleep.”

“I realize that. But how long are you awake?”

Mrs. Keller wavered before clutching the rail. “Felicity has bee  
frail to than gracious to allow me four hours of uninterrupted sleep.”

Philip’s expression didn’t have a trace of humor, was as deadly ser  
rwell. Felicity had ever seen it. “So exactly how much sleep are you getting?  
always She tried to calculate, but she honestly couldn’t remember. Her d  
, still in nights had become so jumbled that she didn’t know anymore. Regardl  
blankethad to get up and fetch water for the Kellers. Mr. Keller had bed so  
needed bathing every day, open wounds that would fester if not taken  
even at properly.

usband She swung her legs over the edge of the sofa.

Philip made a dangerous growly sound. Then he lifted her feet  
gainst a ground and swung them back on the cushions.

“Philip, stop. I have work that can’t wait.” Ugh. She’d done it  
es upon Used his given name.

He wrapped the blanket snugly around her legs. Hopefully he v  
s at her caught up making her a prisoner inside the quilt and hadn’t heard her  
it going me a list of what needs to be done, and I’ll do it.”

time to “There’s too much.”

hat she “I’ll be the judge of that.”

by the “I didn’t think you liked to work. And even if you did, you p  
wouldn’t know how to complete the tasks.”

He straightened, and the slant of his brows warned her not to move  
alright. “I might surprise you with how much I’ve learned to do this past  
l didn’t traveling.”

“You will definitely surprise me.” Oh, the magnetic pull of the  
oviding eyes. They were like lassos wrapping around her every time, cinchi  
ysician and dragging her toward him.

ouse.” “Good.” His voice took on a mirthful ring. “Now give me your list  
“This is me try it.”

usband She sighed, too tired to fight him. “We need at least two buckets o:

The stove needs to be fueled and water set to heat. The horse needs t  
is the The wood needs chopping. And I should get something simmering for

soon, perhaps make some bread.”

“That sounds easy enough.”

“Easy?” She released a half laugh. “Only in your dreams.”

“So you’re dreaming about me now, are you?” He flashed a smile no more—one that definitely would have her dreaming about him. Not that she would admit anything of the sort to him.

“I’m dreaming about how I can get you to go away.” That wasn’t true, but she didn’t say so.

And as his smile widened, it was clear he knew she was bluffing.

Mrs. Keller hadn’t moved from her spot on the step and had been watching their interaction with ever-widening eyes. As though recognizing the same, Philip gave her one of his charming smiles. “If you manage to get Felicity doesn’t get up from the sofa while I’m working, I promise I’ll bring you water for your husband ready first.”

She nodded and glanced at Felicity. “I’ll do my best.”

“At the very least, you can let me know if she arises from the sofa while I’m outside. Then I can administer my own special form of discipline to her.”

Special form of discipline? Tingles raced over Felicity’s skin. She’d get up at least once just to see what he had in mind.

As his gaze locked with hers, he seemed to read the rebellion within her. “Give up and his eyes lit. “Don’t you dare lift a finger from the sofa.”

He was taunting her. But she couldn’t keep from loving it. She lifted her fingers one at a time and taunted him right back.

With mock sternness, he folded his arms. “Guess you’re asking me if I’m probably aren’t you?”

“I’m actually really scared and trembling in fear of what you’ll do to me again.” He chuckled and then crossed to the door. With his hand on the knob, he paused and tossed another comment to Mrs. Keller. “Also, keep track of how many times she refers to me as Philip, will you?”

With that, he winked at Felicity and exited the house.

As his footsteps faded, she couldn’t stop herself from grinning like a schoolgirl. Her body relaxed into the sofa, and her eyelids suddenly felt weighted by boulders. How long had it been since someone had taken care of her? Had he helped carry her burdens?

It had been too long.

Now finally, with Philip there, somehow she sensed she was alright. She wasn’t alone anymore. And that was all she needed to know to fall



deep sleep.

le at her  
it she'd

rue.

d been  
gnizing  
ke sure  
get the

a while  
ater.”  
Maybe

hin her,

fted her

; for it,

to me.”  
nob, he  
of how

e a silly  
nly felt  
care of

ght, that  
ll into a

deep sleep.

## 4

Philip brought the wagon to a stop near the barn. From the corner of his eye he waited for the front door to open and for Felicity to storm out, determined to know why he'd returned.

The evening was growing dark, and the low glow in a window told him the lantern had been lit. But the boardinghouse was as quiet now as it had been a couple of hours ago when he'd ridden into town.

Was she still asleep? He hoped so.

All afternoon, he'd hauled water, chopped wood, fed the livestock, and tended to other needs around the place. Every time he'd come inside the house he'd expected her to be bustling about and order him to leave. But ever since he'd left her she'd remained asleep on the sofa right where he'd left her.

Finally, when the afternoon had grown late and he'd had no more time to stay, he'd made a list of items that she needed—feed for the chickens, grain for the horse, kerosene for lanterns, a new bucket for hauling water, and several other essentials he'd noticed were low. He'd told himself he'd go into town, purchase the things for her, and then do his best to locate the woman she needed.

But as he'd stood outside the store and started loading the wagon with the supplies, his gut had cinched with protest at the thought of approaching any one of the dozens of men now arriving in town after the day spent working on the ranch or ranching.

He didn't want to hire a strange fellow to ride out to the boardinghouse and work for Felicity. Instead, he'd rather find someone reputable, respectable, and preferably someone who wouldn't drop down on one knee and propose marriage to Felicity the first time he saw her.

He'd made a few half-hearted inquiries but then had gone to the store in Windsor and located his bags and belongings in the lobby where Dec had stowed them, likely assuming he'd stay there another night. But instead of taking the bags up to a room, Philip had carried them to the wagon and promptly driven back to the boardinghouse.

As he descended from the wagon seat, he watched the house again. Still no sign of Felicity.

He rounded the wagon and pulled out his camera case and the What was she going to say when she saw his bags and belongings? His brown eyes would flash, and her pert lips would purse together, then release her fury upon him.

his eye, She wouldn't want him there.

standing It had been one thing for him to deliver her back to her house and him a fainting episode. And she'd only protested a little when he'd insisted on helping her so that she could rest.

been a But she hadn't agreed to letting him stay there for the night. He doubted she ever would.

ck, and So then, what, exactly, was he doing at the boardinghouse instead of taking a room in the hotel?

le, he'd He still hadn't been able to make sense of his actions. Not even a quiet mile back. The only thing that came to mind was that he was thinking about her and wanted to make sure she got enough sleep overnight.

y time, Whatever she'd been doing to help her boarders had been noble and

reason Mrs. Keller looked frazzled and worn and in desperate need of assistance.

lickens, But Felicity couldn't miss so much sleep night after night and still function.

ter, and That had become obvious. At least to him.

he help As he lifted out the rest of his bags and set them on the ground, he caught upon the aspen leaves in their gold finery, showcased by the fire and oranges that hovered over the western range, causing the sky to glow and reminding him of the majestic mountains of his homeland.

with all His heart gave a thud of longing for the land of his birth, the country he loved, and the many people he'd left behind—including his mother, his sister Estelle, many cousins, and friends. After close to twelve months being gone, the ache of missing them hadn't gone away. At times it stung a little. But sometimes—like now—his chest reverberated with the memory

o Hotel of all he'd lost. And it hurt with the reality that his brother—his own brother—had wanted to murder him.

lan had Although only two years apart in age, he and Gustaf had never been close. They'd been sent to different boarding schools and later to different universities. Even so, they were brothers, and that had to count for something, didn't it?

Of course he could understand Gustaf feeling betrayed, undermined by so many countrymen asking for him to resign so that Philip could be king in his stead. Even so, Philip had never imagined his brother would attempt her assassination.

Assassination.

Philip surveyed the dark corners of the homestead, the hills, and the woodland beyond the house. Was the assassin out there even now, standing on waiting to strike? He could only hope against hope that Gustaf had gone on trying to kill him.

And he thought of running and hiding. If only he could simply pack up everything and return home.

Instead of that, the truth was, Philip had never aspired to be king. In fact, while growing up, he'd played his role as the second son well, never offending his brother, always deferring, always staying in Gustaf's good graces.

He hadn't sought out the conflict, still didn't want it. But his duty to the country swelled within him stronger than his familial bond. His country needed a king who put the people first, who cared about the common prosperity over his own, who was willing to sacrifice his needs for the nation. Gustaf wouldn't aspire to be that kind of king, then he left Philip no choice but to take his place and do it in his stead.

Whatever the case, he was still here in Fairplay when he should have been on his way for a new hiding place. And now he was at the Courtney Boardinghouse, the last place he ought to be. Not only was he potentially bringing danger to Felicity's doorstep, but he was throwing himself into a tempting situation.

He expelled a sigh. He was throwing himself into a tempting situation, a beautiful red-headed temptation.

He expelled a sigh.

Yes, this was the last place he should have come.

He glanced at his stuff, at the wagon bed, then at the house.

He'd stay just one night and take the shift with Mr. Keller so that Mrs. Keller and Felicity could catch up on their sleep. In the morning he'd go back to town and find a hired hand for her. This time he'd do it no matter how much he didn't want to. Then he'd leave as he'd planned. He had no other alternative.

With fresh resolve, he tended to the horse and did a few last outside things. By the time he'd finished, darkness had completely fallen, and he

ed, and hauled his bags to the house. At the front door, he paused and could not knock. But at the silence on the other side, he quietly let himself in.

His gaze went immediately to the sofa.

But Felicity was still lying where he'd left her. She'd turned to her side and the covers had come loose and hung down onto the floor, her skirt around her legs. But otherwise, her eyes were closed, and her chest rose and fell in the rhythm of deep sleep.

As he set down his bags, the soft pad of Mrs. Keller's feet resounded up the stairway. Still clutching the same robe, her gray hair as disheveled as earlier, she came halfway down and watched him warily. He supposed he had every right to question why he was there the same way he was questioning himself.

"I'll take Felicity's shift with your husband tonight." He spoke as quickly as possible so that he didn't disturb Felicity. Thankfully, she didn't stir.

Mrs. Keller opened her mouth as though to protest, but he spoke firmly to her. "If you'll show me what to do, I'm sure I shall be an adequate substitute." He knew nothing about nursing. But he'd also known nothing about surviving on his own before he'd run away from home. At the best of them. In school and university, he'd always had servants and bodyguards to assist with him. He'd never had to dress himself, cook a meal, or even saddle his own horse.

During his travels, he'd grown self-sufficient and rather liked the satisfaction of not having to rely on others for everything. He and Dec used to stay in some rustic and humble places—places where he'd had to sleep on the ground, cook or go hungry, chop wood or freeze.

If he could learn all that, he could surely tend to a sick man.

Mrs. Keller's expression held indecision.

"We need to give Felicity a break tonight." He spoke the words having no trouble insisting on having his way, especially in this regard.

Her shoulders finally fell. "He can't be left alone for more than a few minutes at a time."

He waited for her to explain her husband's condition.

Instead, she nodded toward the door that led into the dark hallway. "Felicity usually provides warm broth and other liquid food that I can give him."

His own stomach chose that moment to rumble with hunger. "Thank you. I'll do what I can find and bring something up."

considered “I’m not sure if Felicity—”

“Give me a few moments.” He didn’t wait for her to agree to his plan; instead gathered the lamp and crossed into the kitchen.

It was as tidy and clean as the rest of the house, with a large cast-iron stove in one corner, a worktable at the center, a sink near the back door, and shelves and pantry cabinets that seemed well stocked.

After stoking the embers in the stove, he soon had a blaze and heated a pot, which appeared to contain chicken broth. He rummaged through a cabinet to find canned beans, salt pork, and half a loaf of bread. While he couldn’t cook anything fancy, he was able to manage with the few items and putting together a plate for Mrs. Keller along with a bowl of the broth. Mrs. Keller met him at the top of the steps and thanked him quietly offering gratefully.

When Philip had finished his own simple fare, he set aside a plate for himself and a warmer for Felicity before washing the dishes. As the chill of the late October night began to seep into the house, he added fuel to the stove in the parlor, about room and covered Felicity with another blanket before making his way upstairs to the Kellers’ room.

The air was warm and musty and had a lingering scent of urine. Keller lay motionless in the center of the bed. The lantern on the table illuminated ashen skin, a skeletal body, and a nearly bald head. Keller had few thin tendrils of silver hair.

He was propped up by several pillows, high enough that Mrs. Keller could spoon sips of broth between his lips. The chair beside the bed, could spoon sips of broth between his lips; though Mr. Keller’s body appeared to be flaccid and useless, his eyes were bright and alive, and as they landed upon Philip, they widened.

“Good evening, Mr. Keller.” Philip tipped his head to acknowledge the older man.

He seemed to try to nod in return, but he’d obviously lost most of his bodily functions. From apoplexy or what some doctors referred to as a stroke?

The chest of drawers on the opposite wall was covered with bottles and give to medicines and herbal remedies. A chamber pot in the corner was over half empty. And a basin of water on the floor also needed dumping. A small I’ll see smaller bowl on the bedside table held a suction-like item.

Whatever ailed the man, he was clearly ill and in great need of assistance.

“I came to introduce myself.” Philip crossed to the bed so that the lantern shone on him more directly.

At his approach, Mr. Keller took him in, studying Philip’s face in the past iron before dropping to the length of him. When his sights returned to the floor, and a moment later, there was recognition in the man’s eyes: excitement.

Philip began Philip took a small step back. This man couldn’t possibly know anything about him or his past. No one else had during the months of travel. Of course, Philip had grown out his hair and left his face covered in pepper and grime. And he’d attired himself in the simple wool trousers and wool shirt worn by working men, hoping to blend in.

Mr. Keller stared at him with ever-widening eyes. Then he opened his mouth as though to say something, but only a gurgle came out.

Mrs. Keller paused in scooping up another spoonful of broth and turned her gaze sharply upon Philip. “My husband seems to think he knows you.”

Mr. Keller blinked, as if to agree with his wife’s pronouncement. His wayman might not be able to move or talk, but his mind was apparently strong. As was his eyesight. Even so, surely the fellow didn’t know

Mr. Prince Carl Philip Glucksberg of the small Scandinavian nation of Lapland. “I’m sorry, sir. But you’re likely mistaking me for someone else.”

Mr. Keller’s eyes didn’t move from Philip’s face. Instead, they remained fixed there, a sense of awe and wonder and even respect shining in the man’s eyes.

Perhaps the man had once seen his father. Philip did resemble his father in appearance. In fact, his father’s portrait from his youth was nearly identical to Philip’s.

Mrs. Keller watched her husband’s face as though she could read his thoughts and interpret them. Then she looked at Philip again. “He still has all his faculties, Mr. Berg. And if he believes he knows you, then I have no reason to doubt him.”

Philip hesitated. There would be no harm in revealing himself to the man who couldn’t speak. But in doing so, he’d also reveal himself to the man who might eventually tell Felicity. The more people who knew his name, the more risk there was in word spreading regarding his real identity, and the more danger would flock to him faster than vultures to a carcass.

Not only that, but he rather liked being anonymous and having



he light treat him normally instead of ingratiating themselves or using him for what they could gain. That was one of the reasons why he'd agreed to intensely accompanying him—because he was one of his only friends who Philip's enamored by the fact that he was a prince.

s. And Philip offered Mr. Keller a tight smile and a nod. "I hope you'll let me if we don't say anything more about whether or not you recognize anything. It's best for all of us if we don't."

ing. Of Mr. Keller continued to study him, his eyes remaining expressive and perpetual conveying a great deal more than Philip had realized was possible. When the older man finally blinked, Philip took that to mean he was acquiescing.

Philip's suggestion to put the matter of identities aside.

ned his Philip allowed himself a relieved breath before offering a wider smile.

"Now, Mr. Keller, I'd like to provide your wife some respite. Would you mind terribly if I sit with you for a while?"

ou." Immediately Mr. Keller's eyes lit up again with both delight and content. The And Philip had no doubt the man knew who he was.

tly still As he took the vacated seat and listened to Mrs. Keller's instructions, he was determined to suction out mucus if Mr. Keller should begin to choke, Philip decided. He'd best to pretend he was no one special, just as he had all along. But when

Keller's adoring gaze upon him, it was hard to ignore the fact that he remained prince of a nation and that staying in this simple place to be with his wife and children was far from the destiny he'd been born to fulfill.

s father  
identical

ead his  
has all  
ave no

this old  
to Mrs.  
ew, the  
nd then

people

treat him normally instead of ingratiating themselves or using him for what they could gain. That was one of the reasons why he'd agreed to Declan accompanying him—because he was one of his only friends who wasn't enamored by the fact that he was a prince.

Philip offered Mr. Keller a tight smile and a nod. "I hope you'll forgive me if we don't say anything more about whether or not you recognize me. It's best for all of us if we don't."

Mr. Keller continued to study him, his eyes remaining expressive and conveying a great deal more than Philip had realized was possible. When the older man finally blinked, Philip took that to mean he was acquiescing to Philip's suggestion to put the matter of identities aside.

Philip allowed himself a relieved breath before offering a wider smile. "Now, Mr. Keller, I'd like to provide your wife some respite. Would you mind terribly if I sit with you for a while?"

Immediately Mr. Keller's eyes lit up again with both delight and wonder. And Philip had no doubt the man knew who he was.

As he took the vacated seat and listened to Mrs. Keller's instructions on how to suction out mucus if Mr. Keller should begin to choke, Philip did his best to pretend he was no one special, just as he had all along. But with Mr. Keller's adoring gaze upon him, it was hard to ignore the fact that he was the prince of a nation and that staying in this simple place to be with Felicity Courtney was far from the destiny he'd been born to fulfill.

Philip didn't sleep a minute all night long. He spent most of the dark with Mr. Keller. When he wasn't spooning in broth or suctioning phlegm, he read to the man from one of the tomes stacked in a pile beside the bed.

Of course, Mr. Keller had chosen the one that was written in Dan's official language of Lapland. And when Philip easily began to read from the novel in his native tongue, Mr. Keller's eyes seemed to smile in satisfaction.

Mrs. Keller had stumbled into the room midway through the night, yawning and rubbing her eyes, intending to start her usual vigil. But Philip had insisted that she continue to rest, that he and Mr. Keller were doing along fabulously.

The older woman had stared at her husband, who seemed happy and content, before responding with a sob—one that had contained gratitude and relief. Then she'd returned to the bed in the adjacent room and fallen back asleep.

When she'd bustled in at dawn with her hair combed and wearing a clean skirt and blouse, Philip guessed he'd given her the best gift anyone had ever given her in a long time—a full night's sleep. She'd thanked him quietly, since Mr. Keller had finally dozed off.

Perhaps his aid of the Kellers had begun because he'd wanted to see Felicity. But after spending the time with Mr. Keller, he wished that he could do more for the poor man and his wife, who were suffering more than most.

His admiration for Felicity had only increased. She'd given them a new home in a moment of their direst need. And she'd sacrificed herself—the point of becoming ill—to bring them some relief.

As the first rays of light broke through the darkness, he sank into a wingback chair next to the sofa where she was still slumbering. He needed to go out and tend to the livestock, haul in more water, and prepare a simple meal.

But for a few minutes, he rewarded himself with the forbidden luxury

staring at Felicity's beautiful face. With her long lashes resting against pale cheeks and her features relaxed and peaceful, he simply wanted to have her in. Her hair had come loose and now spread out around her in long waves.

His fingers twitched with the need to test those waves, to let himself sink in and simply bask in the richness. Once finished with her hair—if he finished—he'd let himself explore every line of her face, starting with her dainty chin and then her lips.

Her lips. The soft curves, the tiny creases, the delicate dip of her upper lip, the slight parting that beckoned him to taste and explore.

For a moment, his lungs forgot how to work.

She was stunning, even in her sleep. How was it possible for one person to be so exquisite?

He sat forward, reached out a hand to her cheek, needing to feel her skin. He paused. If he started something between them, he wouldn't be able to stop. And what if he woke her? What would she do? Let him finish getting his hands off of touching her? Or would she sit up and slap his hand away?

No. He couldn't—wouldn't—touch her.

He released a sharp breath, then fell back into his chair, clasping his hands on the arm rests. This wasn't the first time he'd been tempted to touch her, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Regardless, he had to refrain. Keller was leaving in a few hours, would never see her again, and didn't want to develop up any feelings that shouldn't be.

Doing so would be selfish of him. Very selfish.

He'd reminded himself of that time after time over recent weeks.

He watched her again, the way the blankets molded to her body, the way her arms had captured the blankets, the outline of her long legs. He'd learned so much about her since meeting her, but now, after seeing her here and learning more about her without her even realizing it, he could almost see himself falling in love with her. It was ludicrous. But Felicity Courtenay was unlike any other woman he'd ever met.

And he'd known plenty of women over the years. Wherever he'd traveled, women had always made themselves available to him, all because of his status as a prince. Of course, he and Declan had women show them affection during the course of their travels too. They were, after all, decently handsome-looking, single, wealthy men.

inst her But that was one of the first things he'd liked about Felicity—she  
o drinksought him out or gawked or fawned over him. He suspected that  
g, thickshe'd known he was a prince, she still wouldn't have ogled him or c  
how she interacted. Even so, he didn't want her to find out, wanted th  
elf sinkmemories together to remain untainted by such a discovery.

he ever Maybe he needed to go now, before she awoke, before she real  
at herwas still there and interfering in her business.

Reclining his head, he allowed himself to sink into the cushions  
r upperchair. The truth was, he wanted to see her awake one last time before

And he relished witnessing her being peeved at him for staying. In f  
prospect of a flirtatious spat with her sent his pulse spurting wit  
womanenergy.

He closed his eyes. He'd rest for a short while, then start on the n  
her, butchores and bide his time until he finally forced himself to ride away.  
to stop.

, his fill



Felicity awoke with a start, her eyes flying open. Where was she?

ing his She could tell that she wasn't in her bed in her room off the kitch  
o touchface was resting against velvet, her legs were cramped, and her feet l  
ain. Heagainst an armrest.

it to stir She was on the sofa. Pushing up to her elbows, she grabbed  
blankets as they slid off her body and threatened to fall onto the floor.

A flood of memories came back—those of Philip driving her  
boardinghouse and carrying her inside. He'd placed her upon the s  
he wayordered her to stay there, threatening special discipline if she didn't co

liked so At the time she'd been too weary to consider what kind of  
nd afterdiscipline he had in mind, but now her mind filled with the possi  
st fancyparticularly those that involved him carrying her just as he had befo  
ey wasthis time pinning her wrists together and then bending in, grazing her  
and chin.

d gone, The fantasy was so forbidden and unexpected that she flushed.  
of hisdidn't matter. Philip didn't matter. He was gone from her life.

ttention He'd never really been in her life to begin with. Just a handsome  
/ good-the periphery.

She hadn't blinked, trying to put him from her mind and focus on what needed to be done. The soft light filtering in the windows was like that of morning, but it couldn't be. If she'd slept most of the afternoon, then it had to be evening. It had to be dusk.

Time to get up and finish all the work that Philip hadn't been able to do. As nice as it had been for him to offer to help, she suspected that a man in a class wouldn't know how to manage even half of what she'd listed.

Even so, he'd been right to require her to rest. She'd needed it. As he left, she could feel the energy coursing through her in a way it hadn't for a long time. She sat up and swung her legs over. In the same instant, her arm brushed against the chair beside her and the man in it. Philip.

She froze.

His eyes were closed, and his head rested against the wing portion of the chair. With mussed hair, more errant strands than normal falling into his eyes, he was breathing deeply, as though he was slumbering.

Why was he sleeping? In her house? In her chair? And why had he come back to town yet?

Whatever the reason, she wavered on the edge of the couch, uncertain whether to poke his arm and wake him up so that he could be on his feet, or whether she ought to let him sleep for a little while.

At the faint throat clearing on the stairs, Felicity's gaze shot to the door. Keller only to freeze again at the sight of the woman properly groomed, appearing fresher than she had in a long time, if ever.

Mrs. Keller pressed a finger to her lips and nodded at Philip. They glanced up the stairs as though to beckon Felicity upstairs where they could speak without disturbing him.

Felicity almost stood and announced that she refused to give Philip special treatment. But as she glanced out the window, her thoughts crashed to a halt. It was most definitely morning. Though the sun seemed hidden behind clouds, the brightness was too steady to be anything but daylight.

Did that mean she'd slept all of yesterday afternoon, evening, and night? What time was it now?

Her gaze swung to the small clock on the wall above the sideboard. It was after nine o'clock in the morning.

Ugh. How had she slept so long? She couldn't remember ever sleeping so long.

ended to many hours before.

ng. But Mrs. Keller cocked her head toward the upstairs again, and then close to Felicity complied. She followed the older woman up until they were outside Mr. Keller's bedroom, where she could keep an eye on him.

e to do. He seemed to be resting peacefully.

n of his "What happened?" Felicity asked.

"Philip did all of the chores yesterday." Mrs. Keller's whisper was now, with admiration. "He even made me supper."

while. "Supper? Philip?"

ttention "Yes. Then he stayed with my husband all night and let me sleep."

A strange shiver coursed over Felicity's arms, causing goosebumps all night long.

n of the "Mr. Keller adores him."

his face, Adores was quite a strong word. Especially in regard to Philip.

"I do believe Mr. Keller recognizes Philip, perhaps from his home town. She peeked into the room at her husband, as watchful as always for signs

he might be choking. "Mr. Keller emigrated before Philip's lifetime. I'm certain perhaps he recognizes a family resemblance in Philip to an old friend."

way, or Felicity had already learned from Mrs. Keller that her husband had emigrated from Lapland, a Scandinavian country, many years ago. That

to Mrs. had met and married not long after Mr. Keller's arrival in Boston, and they'd lived before Mr. Keller had gotten gold fever. They'd moved

west, first to California and then, in more recent years, to Colorado. When she hadn't found much gold, but they'd enjoyed their traveling . . . until

they could Keller had suffered an apoplexy.

Without children to turn to for help, Mrs. Keller had been doing her best to help royal to take care of her husband and manage their small home in Alma. But when the funds had run low, she'd finally sold their home and land and had to bear arrangements to move to Denver. They'd come to Fairplay to the C. King but Boardinghouse instead.

Felicity was glad the couple could find refuge with her. She truly hoped for a good night's sleep. But she clearly hadn't counted on her body giving out in protest to the

sleep. "If possible, we should allow Philip to rest," Mrs. Keller whispered. "Philip was such a dear."

ping so It was clear that Philip had easily won over the older couple. I

charming when he put his mind to it—she could give him that. A Paris timewanted to let him win her over too. He had stayed and helped. What are justman would do that? Especially for an invalid like Mr. Keller.

His kindness was jarring her heart loose, and now it tumbled around her chest. But she couldn't let it fall, not for Philip Berg. No matter how handsome he'd been over the past day, he was still a wealthy man who was accustomed to playing with the hearts of women. A wealthy man who'd flirted with women for his own amusement. A wealthy man who would take what he wanted and then discard her once the conquest was over.

And the biggest obstacle of them all: he was moving on. He would leave her behind. "Thean insignificant and unimportant woman like her behind. Because he doesn't need her. Not when he had other women waiting for him at the end of his journey—women who belonged to his class, women who fit into the mold of women likely chosen for him by his parents.

reland." Yes, she knew how such people in the upper class truly viewed women thatlike her. She'd already had firsthand experience with rejection. In 1891. Butyear of living in Pennsylvania, a group of wealthy young women who she'd believed to be friends had betrayed her. And the results had hurt, enough that she'd been more than ready to leave Pennsylvania when Charity and the twosuggested they move to the homestead they'd inherited from their uncle, where Felicity had thought being a companion to the wealthy Mrs. Bancroft would be different—that maybe she'd earn some respect in the community. Theyespecially with her sister Charity's marriage to a rich Eastern man.

til Mr. While working for Mrs. Bancroft, she had quickly realized the way the lady viewed her as a project, a lump of clay that she'd hoped to fashion into something better. The older woman had seemed to find pleasure in pointing out all of Felicity's flaws, making her feel more deficient than she had ever felt. Whatever the case, she'd learned once again that she didn't belong to another social class and that she couldn't aspire to more.

Philip Berg was not the kind of man she was interested in. Not even the least. She would do better with a solid and steady man like Weston Oakes. Just not now . . .

"So, you'll allow him to sleep a little while longer?" Mrs. Keller asked. "He . . . " "Yes, of course." It was the least she could do to repay him.

Felicity returned to the front room quietly to find that he was still sleeping. He was as heavily as before. Even if he wasn't the type of man she was interested in.



t of hershe couldn't keep from pausing and letting herself admire him. She wa  
kind ofminer examining the mother lode, greedy for every inch of him spraw  
in the chair, his long legs stretched out, his arms crossed, his jaw soft  
und herslumber, and his long lashes dark against his cheeks.

ow nice At the sight of his bags and camera equipment by the door, her hea  
stomedan extra beat. He must have gone back into town at some point yester  
with herretrieved his belongings. But surely he didn't intend to stay beyond toc  
ted andhe?

Even if he did linger an extra day or two, he was just passing thro  
d leavehis grand traveling adventures. She couldn't forget that. Absolutely co  
e didn'tPhilip Berg would walk out of her life, and she was determined  
l of hiswouldn't walk out carrying her heart with him.  
his life,

women  
her last  
n she'd  
igh that  
ity had  
e.  
ancroft  
munity,

wealthy  
ion into  
ointing  
before.  
fit into

t in the  
kley.

sked.

leeping  
sted in,

she couldn't keep from pausing and letting herself admire him. She was like a miner examining the mother lode, greedy for every inch of him sprawled out in the chair, his long legs stretched out, his arms crossed, his jaw softened in slumber, and his long lashes dark against his cheeks.

At the sight of his bags and camera equipment by the door, her heart gave an extra beat. He must have gone back into town at some point yesterday and retrieved his belongings. But surely he didn't intend to stay beyond today, did he?

Even if he did linger an extra day or two, he was just passing through in his grand traveling adventures. She couldn't forget that. Absolutely couldn't. Philip Berg would walk out of her life, and she was determined that he wouldn't walk out carrying her heart with him.

## 6

The kitchen was one place Felicity never felt the pressure to be perfect.

She blew the liquid on the spoon to cool it and then tasted it. The tomatoes, peppers, basil, and oregano burst on her tongue. She'd learned to make the Italian sauce from Mr. Rosetti, who operated a small restaurant in town. Felicity had easily bonded with the man over their love of cooking.

She leaned against the counter and took a bigger sip. This time she closed her eyes and groaned. "Oh, baby, you're so good."

"I love when you talk about me like that." Philip's voice from the doorway was low and gravelly.

Her eyes shot open to find him leaning casually against the doorframe, his eyelids half lowered, his gaze emanating a heat she didn't understand but which caused her cheeks to warm. His hair was messy, as if he'd hastily combed his fingers through it, and his clothes were rumpled.

Even so, he looked as delicious as the sauce, especially with how close his eyes were and the way they were trained upon her mouth. It was almost as if he were wondering if she could taste him the same way she had the liquid on the spoon.

Taste him? She shook her head. What kind of hussy was she turning out to be? "I'm not talking about you, Mr. Berg, and you know it."

His lips inched up into a crooked smile. "I could have sworn your nickname for me is *baby*. If not, I won't object if you want to call me that instead of Philip."

"You won't hear either from my lips."

"From your lips?" His gaze again riveted to her mouth. "I like how you are about discussing your lips and what you'd like to do with them."

Philip Berg was awake and back to his usual war of words and woe, but she had a bit of havoc in her life.

"There is nothing I'm doing with my lips except scolding you." She knew now that they were talking about lips, she couldn't stop herself from thinking about his lips. What would it be like to have those lips touch hers?

He started toward her with a devilish gleam in his eyes.

Against her will, anticipation shimmied inside her.

“I’ll take a scolding from you any day. Let’s hear it.”

“Hear what?” She backed up into the stove but then stopped at the heat blazing from inside.

“The scolding you’d like to give me. I can hardly wait.” He was closing in on her.

She had to find a way to stop him and this interaction. Now. Before she said or did something she’d regret. “You’re a scoundrel, Mr. Berg.”

Couldn’t she think of anything better than that?

With a mental slap, she spun to face the bubbling pot on the stove and breathed in the aroma of the sauce as she busied herself stirring.

When he halted behind her, close enough for her to hear his breath stirring slowed to a crawl and her body tightened, feeling his presence were already touching her.

What was he doing?

“Are you giving out tastes?” The whisper brushed near her ear and

Oh, dear heavens. Her eyes closed involuntarily. Delectable heat along every nerve ending—nerve endings that wanted his whisper

breath to keep on caressing her. Everything about this man affected her more than she wanted it to, much more than she dared to admit. He made

her feel alive and excited and slightly off-kilter, as if she never knew what to expect from him.

And she liked it.

With a huff, she started stirring again. Why? Why couldn’t she figure out the way about Weston Oakley? A man who cherished her and considered her equal and wanted her to be a part of his life. A man who cared for her and wanted to rearrange his life to be with her. A man who desired her so much he wouldn’t leave her the first opportunity he had.

She sidled away from the stove and away from Philip’s mesmerizing presence. As she took a step away from him, she realized she’d talked to him with a spoon with her and now it was dripping onto the floor. Regardless, she

held it out like a weapon, needing him to keep his distance so that she could look at her head.

“The only taste you’ll get is at supper.”

His gaze raked her mouth. “I’ll take it.”

“A taste of the sauce, and nothing more.”

His eyes widened with fake innocence. “You’re not planning to cook pasta to go with the sauce?”

She couldn’t keep her smile back any longer. “You’re too much.”

He held open his arms, drawing attention to his broad chest that was fast against the buttons of his shirt. “This”—he waved a hand toward her—“is never too much.”

She could agree that he had the kind of body and face no one would tire of looking at. But she wouldn’t say so to him. He was already powerful enough and didn’t need her adding to his arrogance.

She had to bring the conversation under her control. She moved to the worktable, which was littered with the remains of the vegetables, herbs she’d chopped. “Thank you for all that you’ve done to help.”

“You’re welcome.” His voice held a seriousness and sincerity she expected.

She gathered up a handful of peelings and leafy tops and dropped them into a compost bucket. “I was surprised to wake up and find you still here.”

“I was glad I could help.”

“The sleep was just what Mrs. Keller and I both needed.”

“Good. I hadn’t thought about that.” His tone was laced with teasing. “He’s simply enjoying spending time with Mr. Keller. He’s a nice fellow.”

She swept more leftovers into the bucket. “He’s a very smart man, but he can’t express himself.”

“It’s clear he’s attempting to make the most of his life.” He crossed to the opposite side of the worktable and began to gather up the bowls and silverware she’d used in making the garlic bread now rising in a warren on the stove.

“It was kind of you to spend the entire night. You’ll be tired later.”

“Not me. A few hours of slumber in an uncomfortable and too-small room has made me into a new person.”

She smiled as she swiped up a dishrag and began to wipe the counter. “And thank you for taking care of the chores yesterday and last night. I’d appreciate that too.”

“Of course. I’m always happy when I can make a woman’s dream come true.” He winked.

And there he was, his annoying self again. “I admit, I was surprised.”

discover you were capable of completing any chores, especially anything that would require you to use your muscles.” She would have liked to have seen him chopping wood. All his brawn would have been a magnificent sight to behold.

He strained himself. He carried the dirty dishes to the sink. “So, you’re thinking about your own muscles?”

“No, of course not.” She had been, but she snorted and changed the subject. “I suppose you’re anxious to leave just as soon as you can?”

He huffed up. “I’m surprised you haven’t kicked me out the front door yet.”

He’d avoided answering her question. Why? Did he want to stay? He didn’t have the heart to kick you out when you were sleeping peacefully and comfortably.”

This time he didn’t acknowledge her effort at teasing, not with a grin or laugh. Instead, he rolled up his shirt sleeves, almost as if he didn’t quite know what to say.

The more the silence dragged, the tighter her chest drew.

He pushed his sleeves past his elbows, then reached for a kettle on the stove and dumped warm water into the sink and over the dishes. He then picked up the bar of soap at the back of the sink and began to lather a dish. “I couldn’t stand aside and watch him any longer. She huffed and then turned toward him.”

Before he could move out of reach, she snatched the soap from his hand.

He paused, the soapy dishrag poised above the first bowl. She almost saw his mind at work trying to figure out what she was up to. He didn’t have a clue, he began scrubbing.

She lunged for the dishrag.

As though he’d been anticipating her move, he lifted the dripping dishrag over their heads.

She jumped for it, latched onto the bottom, and started to draw it across the counter.

He extended his hand higher, moving it out of her grasp.

“Give me the rag.” She hopped again, clasped his arm, and tried to pull it down.

He watched her useless effort and quirked a brow. “If you want to see my strong arms, all you need to do is ask. I’ll gladly allow it.”

Her hand spread over the solidness of his upper arm. She couldn’t get her fingers to fit around his entire bicep. Even so, she released a scoffing

ing that “For a second, I thought I was holding on to a baby goat—”

en him With a grin, he flexed, the muscles popping even more.

ight to He was all strength and sinew with no baby goat in sight. Her  
betrayed her with the need to linger, to relish the ripple of his muscles  
out myshe wanted to maintain any dignity, she had to keep a clear head  
dropped her hand and stood back, clutching the bar of soap. “You’re  
ged thego.”

His gaze snapped to her, surprise filling his eyes.

She fisted her hands on her hips and glared at him. She didn’t wa  
tay? “I doing her dishes and then walking out her door. He could leave no  
ing soshe’d take care of the dishes all on her own.

He didn’t lower the dishrag, still held it above his head, water d  
nod orslowly to the floor. “What if I’m not ready to go yet?”

e didn’t Why wouldn’t he be ready? It was past the noon hour. He’d need  
into town, secure his passage for the stagecoach, and make sure he was  
last ride out for the night. If he missed today, he’d only leave tomorrow

on the His eyes held hers and this time contained no mirth. The blue was  
then heard serious as a deep well. “I’ll help you again tonight, stay with Mr.  
rag, shelet you and Mrs. Keller sleep.”

strode “Why?” She lifted her chin, not caring that her tone was dem  
“What difference will one more night make?”

hand. He opened his mouth to respond, but for once, he didn’t say a  
e couldwitty or playful or seductive. He clamped his lips closed and drop  
Clearlydishrag into the sink before taking a step back. “I shall ride into town  
if I can finish finding you the help you need.”

“I can take care of that myself.”

rag up “I know.” His voice grew solemn. “But I’d like to do it. If you’l  
me.”

way. She wanted to tell him no. To ride away and never come back  
something about the way he stood stiffly, almost sadly, gave her pause

drag it Was he reluctant to leave?

Her heart gave an extra thud at the prospect, but then just as quick  
feel myforced her pulse to beat at the regular pace. “Mr. Berg, I don’t want  
delay on account of me any longer.”

get her “I’m the one dragging my feet in leaving.” The admission was s  
sound.his eyes warm.

This time when her heart sputtered faster, she allowed it. For all those seconds. Then she reined it in with a hard jerk. "You shouldn't stay, no fingers you know it's only postponing the inevitable."

But if He hesitated, then gave a curt nod. "You really do need the help. She When I'm making my traveling arrangements, I'll do some checking free to and see if anyone is interested in your advertisement."

He was being sincere. She could be sincere too, couldn't she? you. If you want to take the wagon, I can walk into town later to get it for you tomorrow and retrieve it."

Now, and "No, I'll locate someone to drive it back." He rubbed his hand over his scruff on his jaw, looked everywhere in the kitchen but at her. Finally he shot a glance at her. "You're someone special, Felicity Courtney. A man I've been privileged to meet you."

What to get She wanted to find something to say in farewell, words about coming back on the visit again, or writing her a letter, or not forgetting about her. But she couldn't get them back. What was the use in encouraging any future communication as dark as the night? "Goodbye, Mr. Berg." It was best to keep this parting short and simple. Keller, point.

She placed the soap back on the sink. Then she picked up the wooden spoon she'd been using to stir the sauce and returned to the pot on low heat on the back of the stovetop. She circled the spoon inside unseeingly, her mind anything envisioning Philip sleeping on the chair beside her this morning, so she kept the looking.

and see Behind her, she could feel him watching her, perhaps even waiting for her to turn around and face him one more time. But she refrained from stirring, rooted to the spot in front of the stove.

Will allow After achingly long seconds, she heard him plod out of the kitchen and headed up the stairs, and although she couldn't hear his conversation with her. But Kellers, she guessed he was telling them goodbye. When his foot descended, she held her breath, waiting for him to enter the kitchen and see her with her again, perhaps tell her he'd changed his mind and intend to stay. Only, she remain.

you to But his steps veered toward the front door.

Her spoon grew idle in the thickening sauce. She could hear him softly and likely picking up his bags, then he opened the door, stepped outside, and closed it behind him, quietly, with only a click.



of three She leaned the spoon against the rim of the pot, pivoted, and  
ot whentoward the doorway. She wanted to chase after him and say a real go  
maybe give him a hug, maybe thank him again for his help the p  
p here.night. But she grabbed onto the worktable to halt herself.

around A moment later, as the wagon creaked and rumbled on its way p  
house, she refused to look out the window at Philip passing by. Finally  
“Thankthe sound of the wagon faded into the distance, she walked into th  
oday orroom and plopped down onto the sofa with a huff of frustration.

Good riddance. She was glad Philip Berg was finally out of her lif  
ver theput her on edge since the very first moment she’d seen him at the  
ally, hedinner together at Mrs. Bancroft’s, although she could admit hi  
nd I’veremarks and banter had been a welcome relief from the usual  
conversations.

ning to As she stared out the window—certainly not with the hope that sh  
she bithim returning—her attention snagged upon a square item sitting bes  
n? door.

l to the It couldn’t be.

She stood and crossed to it.

wooden Oh, but it was.

heat at She knelt beside the box, slipped the metal clip loose, then ca  
er mindopened the lid. There, inside a case of black velvet, sat his camera.

o good- She fingered the wooden top, the folded leather bellows, and th  
lens.

, for her Her gaze swept over the area by the door. It was empty. He’c  
nd kepteverything else, including the tripod.

So how had he forgotten this?

ien. He Her heart pattered with a sudden thrill. Did that mean he’d have t  
with theback for it? And if he did, what would she say or do differently?

notsteps “No.” She whispered the word harshly.

d speak She flipped the camera case lid closed, secured the hook in pla  
ided tothen stood.

She didn’t want a man in her life right now. And if she did, she w  
want one who came back for a camera. She’d want a man who came b  
i pause,her.

de, and

started  
goodbye,  
previous

past the  
y, when  
the front

he. He'd  
their first  
so witty  
boring

he'd see  
side the

carefully

when the

had taken

to come

ce, and

couldn't  
back for

## 7

Philip rolled the wagon to a stop in front of the sawmill. The gray overhead had begun to spit rain, and the temperature was quickly dropping.

He'd spent the better part of the afternoon searching for a hired hand for Felicity, but he hadn't liked any of the men he'd interviewed. Not a one.

As a result, he'd been left with no other choice but to ride out to Oakley's spread and ask him to go over each day and help Felicity. Philip didn't think the fellow was right for a woman like Felicity, he was the best option. He was kind and considerate and cared enough about her that he wouldn't take advantage of her.

Even so, as Philip studied first the sawmill and then the grain mill upriver, he couldn't stop jealousy from slicing through him. The mill was neat and organized, both tall wooden buildings in good repair, the wagons lined up in an orderly fashion, mill hands working diligently, heavy loads of cut timber or bags of milled grain into the waiting wagons.

Had he hoped for worse? That Weston's businesses would be ramshackle and rundown? That he'd have an excuse not to involve Weston in Felicity's life after all?

The tall, dark-haired man wasn't in sight—not around the mills or down the tree-lined lane that led to what appeared to be a fairly new house that had to be Weston's. Of course, it was nothing like the palatial residence his family lived in, but it was a fine home for the high country—two stories with a wrap-around porch, painted a light yellow, with plenty of windows. Behind it sat a decent-sized barn and large paddock with a pair of horses and steers.

A dog lying on the porch lifted its head at the sight of Philip, but he must have decided he wasn't a threat and rested his head back on outstretched front legs.

If Weston wasn't available, Philip would have no choice but to ride home with his mission to hire help for Felicity unfulfilled. And then he'd be obliged

return to her boardinghouse for another night. He couldn't in conscience leave her to fend for herself a moment longer than she had.

The problem was, Felicity was right about his leaving. If he went and kept dragging his feet, he was only postponing the unavoidable decision—if not for Denver, then for someplace else after that.

To make matters worse, the longer he stayed, the more he risked her into danger. Any association with him had to remain short and superficial. That was what he'd been trying for all along. But so with her, it hadn't been enough.

With a sigh, he hopped down from the wagon, the ground beginning to grow slushy with the rain that was now falling harder and contained thick with ice. He approached an older fellow who had the look of someone in charge. After inquiring about Weston, he learned the boss had ridden back to a new mill he'd recently purchased in a nearby mining town and would be back until tomorrow.

Philip instructed the mill worker to pass along a message—the message returning, Weston needed to start helping at Felicity's boardinghouse. Philip hopped back up onto his wagon, his mind made up. He had no choice but to stay one more night with Felicity.

He veered the wagon south, his heart suddenly lighter. Another day wouldn't cause any trouble in the scope of things. Declan would be without him.

After riding only a short distance away from the mills, the rain was falling with increased intensity . . . and it started to freeze over everywhere, covering the trees, brush, and wagon road.

His garments, already damp, quickly became saturated, chilling his bones. A sheen of ice soon slicked over his hat and coat and his gloves. He could hardly bend his fingers to hold on to the reins. The old horse slipped and slid, and the wagon twisted back and forth.

Finally, after nearly falling, the horse stopped and refused to budge. The clouds hung low in the sky and continued to pour out a mixture of rain and ice with no sign of stopping. As Philip descended from the wagon, his feet touched the ground, he slipped and almost landed on his backside. His quick reflexes and grabbing on to the wagon kept him from going completely over.

The barren wilderness spread all around—the foothills covered in

1 gooddried grass, brown shrubs, and a few trees that had lost their leaves already clouds obscured the mountain peaks and seemed to be rolling in ever stormy and dark and loaded with more precipitation.

nt back He'd be better off heading directly for Felicity's boardinghouse parture than going into town first. He didn't know the distance that remained, needed to push forward.

putting He inched his way toward the front of the gelding. He had no choice shallow to lead the creature on foot. As he grabbed onto the horse's bit and g me how the lead line, he used both to stabilize himself even as more ice pelted

After long moments of coaxing, he managed to get the horse moving again, but the pace was slow and unsteady.

re sting An uneasiness nagged at him. If he weren't careful, he might not get one into the boardinghouse, might even end up stranded in the foothills until a storm passed through. Then again, with the cold air blowing against him, he didn't believe as wet as he was, he could easily freeze if he didn't find shelter.

At some point, the wind picked up, making his trek even more treacherous and miserable. He tried to use the gelding to block the pelting. Then tried to draw warmth from the creature. But nothing could protect him from the storm's growing intensity.

By the time he stumbled down the lane that led to the boardinghouse, he couldn't feel his fingers or toes. The rest of his flesh was numb, his eyes were nearly closed, and ice clung to the layer of hair on his cheeks.

He began He knew he needed to take the horse to the barn, where it would be safe, and out of the storm, but at the sight of the light in the front window, he could only think of one thing: warmth.

He slid on to his Sliding on the ice-covered front steps, he managed to make it up to the door. He couldn't move his arm to bang and instead thudded the gelding with his boot.

A moment later, the door opened a crack to reveal Felicity. It had been less than six hours since he'd ridden away, but at the sight of her face and features creased with wariness, he felt as though he'd been away from her for six years.

He Only He tried to get a word out, but he couldn't make his lips work. Instead, he slumped down, his head wavered, feeling as though he was about to lose consciousness.

tufts of She swung the door wide, and the wariness quickly changed to warmth.

es. Theknew you would miss me, but you didn't need to come out in a storm  
faster, me again."

He tried for a smile, but again, he was too weak.

rather "Confound it, Philip." Her voice took on a sudden edge, and she g  
, but behold of his coat and dragged him inside. "You're frozen."

The warmth of the front room surrounded him, but with his ga  
oice butstuck to his skin, he was going to need more than a warm room to th  
atheredout.

him. At her pause and glance outside past him, he shook his head, ho  
movingwarn her against going out to care for the horse. He didn't want her t  
the ice or to risk slipping and falling. Besides, he would take care of th  
make itand wagon as soon as he gained back some feeling.

ntil the But he couldn't say any of that, was too weak and cold to be coher  
im and She closed the door behind him, all the while assessing him. "We  
get you out of your frozen clothing."

more He could think of about a dozen comebacks to her statement, bu  
ing ice,he couldn't get his voice to work and had instead started to  
m fromuncontrollably.

She began to work on the buttons on his coat, but the ice was too  
use, heWith a mutter of frustration, she moved to his gloves. But they, too  
elashesfrozen and wouldn't slide off.

hin and "Hurry." She nudged him toward the kitchen, her voice taking on a  
of urgency. Somehow he managed to cross the room and move i  
be safekitchen, which was warmer than the front room. She pulled a chair up  
e couldstove, tugged him down into it, and then added more wood to the fire  
blazing inside.

and to Once the flames were crackling and sparking with renewed heat, s  
ie doorhis hands toward the fire. As the ice rapidly melted, she wiggled his  
free of the frozen glove, dropping first one and then the other to th  
ad beenbefore taking both of his hands between hers and rubbing and blow  
delicatethem.

her for He was too numb, still too frozen to appreciate her touch. All h  
think about was that he was cold—so deeply cold—that he couldn  
ead, heshaking.

She labored over his boots and socks next, peeling off the froze  
orry. "Until his red and raw feet were exposed. Like his hands, she rubbed ar

1 to see and let the heat of the fire start to bring a tingling back into his skin.

She'd already cast aside his hat at some point. And now she started to unbutton her coat, the ice on the buttons finally gone so that she could divest him of the wool that was nothing more than a slab of ice. As she tossed it aside, she paused at the buttons of his shirt.

The creases in her forehead were adorable, as were the crinkles at the corners of her eyes. Her lush lips were pursed together, as though she was holding back a blistering tongue-lashing. He wished she'd speak to him, but he was hoping to want to hear her voice, could think of nothing better than listening to her tirade from her.

His teeth were still chattering, and now his fingers and toes tingled with shards of pain.

She started to back away from his shirt.

"Do it." His voice came out hoarse.

Her startled gaze met his, and a flush filled her cheeks. She returned to him, fingers to his top button but hesitated.

"You have to . . . even though it will be . . . impossible to keep your hands off me . . ." The words were raspy, but he hoped she could hear him teasing and realize he was trying to lighten the mood.

Her lips curved just slightly. "Yes, at this moment I can hardly think of anything but wanting to run my fingers over your icy flesh. It's so enticing, even at my worst."

"I know . . . I am enticing, even at my worst."

She fumbled with the first few buttons but then made quick work of the last several.

"You're good at that." His voice came out more clearly. "Maybe I should have you do it more often."

She finished the last one, then stood back and glared at him, fists clenched in anger. "I liked it better when you were too frozen to talk."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, believe me, I did."

His face was thawing, and the life was beginning to rush through his veins. He could feel his relief at having made it to safety coupled with the relief at seeing her stop again. How had he believed he could ride away from her and never see her again?

She wrestled with his wet, stiff shirt sleeve, trying to drag it down her arm. He couldn't keep from simply staring and watching her.

Her red hair was coiled up elegantly with a strand loose on either side of her face. She was still wearing the white blouse and plain skirt that she had worn in the kitchen earlier, but the collar of the shirt was now unbuttoned, sheung open, revealing her long, graceful neck.

Her cheeks were flushing more with every passing moment that she attempted to extract him from his clothing. From embarrassment or from the heat that was emanating from the stove?

She was finally able to get one sleeve off and stood back. “There.” He glanced down at the other half of his shirt, still frozen and clinging to his body. “You’re not nearly done. After the shirt, you have to take care of the pants.”

She gasped and then lightly smacked him in the chest. “Absolutely not.” He chuckled, but it ended on a cough.

“I would say the cold has addled your brain, but it was already addled before this.” He laughed again, but this time erupted into a fit of coughing, his body still working to thaw out too.

At the sound of his hacking, she returned to his second sleeve and began sliding it off with the same effort she’d used on the other, until she was free and wearing only an undershirt—which was wet and clung to his skin.

She disappeared into the little room off the kitchen that she used as a bedroom and came out a moment later, her arms piled with blankets. “Your hands thawed yet?”

He wiggled his fingers and winced at the pain. “Slowly.” “How did you get caught out in the storm?” She draped one blanket over his shoulders, then knelt in front of him with another and began wrapping it around his feet.

The question seemed innocent enough, but something in her tone told her the answer was important to her. “I rode out to see Weston Oakley.”

She paused and narrowed her eyes at him. “Why?” “How could he tell her about his failed efforts to locate her help in coming across as a deranged lunatic? He wasn’t sure it was possible. He spent most of the afternoon trying to find a fellow to fill your advertisement.”

She sat back on her heels. “Most of the afternoon?” “And I couldn’t find anyone I liked.” “I find it difficult to believe that after an entire afternoon you could



side offind anyone.”

e’d had “Not one.”

ied and “Maybe you were being too picky.”

“Of course I was being picky. I don’t think you should have just hat shecoming out here and helping.”

rom the “You do know I can fend for myself?” She rose to her feet and fis hands on her hips.

He shrugged. “I abhor the thought that you would need to fe ing to anyone. Thus, I decided Weston is the best choice.”

off my She opened her mouth as if to say something in protest. Then she and clamped her lips closed. From everything Philip had witness not.” seemed to like Weston, but she wasn’t enamored with him. If rumo true, Weston had already proposed numerous times. And she’d turn led.” down every single time.

s lungs Weston clearly wasn’t deterred and would probably wear her out his asking so that eventually she’d marry him. Maybe she knew it. d set tothat was why she wasn’t offering more of an objection to his plan he wasWeston help her.

is body “I drove out to the mills to ask Weston to start coming by every c he wasn’t there.”

ed as a “I don’t want to bother Weston.”

s. “Are “Believe me, that man wants to be *bothered* by you.” Every man to be *bothered* by Felicity Courtney.

She shoved Philip again, this time his arm, and he had the urge to of theher hand and drag her down on his lap, pull her in, and then taste t blanketflush in her cheeks before bending lower and tasting her neck and e little bit of collarbone showing where her blouse was unbuttoned.

old him Just the prospect sent warmth through his veins to his fingers and t “So after you left Weston’s mills, why didn’t you go to Fairpla closer. You could have made it there without freezing off every single withoutyour limbs.”

‘I spent He hugged the blanket closer, his wet undershirt making him shiv ” you want the truth?” He couldn’t keep his voice from dropping a nc seriousness.

She grew stiff, as though afraid of his answer. “Yes, of course. i couldn’tonly the truth.” The wariness from a short while ago was back

countenance.

Did he dare admit that he'd wanted to see her again? Why not? really must know, I came because I couldn't bear the thought of you anyonewithout help for a single night."

"Oh." She barely breathed the word.

sted her "And I wanted the chance to see you one more time."

As soon as the words were out, the flames within the stove see and offburst higher, making the room hot and the tension crackle. He'd said v shouldn't have, but for a reason he didn't understand, he couldn't e haltedhimself regret it.

ed, she And what about her? What did she think of his bold confession?

rs were She narrowed her eyes. "So you didn't return because you ed himsomething?"

"Is this a trick question?"

with all "No."

Maybe "I forgot to kiss you goodbye?"

to have "Did you?"

His attention locked onto her lips. "Yes. And I'd like to rectify th lay, butnow." Indeed, he would. Very much so. But he was well enough ve banter to know that saying and doing were two different things. Ar though he was teasing her about kissing, he wouldn't actually go t wantedwith it.

She just shook her head while a smile hovered over her lips—a sm o swipemade him want to scoop her up and let his fingers trace her lips.

he rosy "What else did you forget?" she persisted.

ven the "You?" Melting ice dripped off his hair onto the blanket.

"Of your belongings?" Her tone filled with false exasperation.

oes. He catalogued his bags that were still in the back of the wagon.

ay? It'sshe was still testing him. "Since I keep failing your quiz, why don't y e one ofme what I forgot."

"Then you really don't know?" Her brown eyes brimmed with th er. "Dointensity that he found too enticing.

ite with He'd already made a fool of himself. Why stop now? "I didn't anything, Felicity. I wish I had—then I'd have a noble excuse for bei I preferinstead of the simple fact that I wanted to see you again."

in her She was quiet for several heartbeats. "You shouldn't have come."

“I know. But I’m glad I did anyway.”

“If you This time her smile came out in full force, lighting up her eyes and making him momentarily breathless. He’d passed her test and made her happy. And that was something he wanted to keep on doing.

She reached for her cloak on a peg near the back door, then tossed it over her shoulder, giving her a saucy look. “Now that you’re half undressed, you won’t be able to come from going outside and taking care of the horse and wagon.”

what he The humor drained away.

t make With a smug smile, she opened the back door, and a gust of icy air blew inside.

He lunged toward her. “I’ll be warmed up in a moment and will do what I can for you.” She was already stepping out and closing the door behind her.

He reached for his shirt where she’d dropped it on the floor. It was stiff with cold and ice.

The door banged open again, and she poked her head inside, her face now red and her eyes flashing. “If you dare step a foot outside, I will throw you back your camera.”

at right “My camera?”

ursed in “You left it here.” It was her turn to wink at him as he so often did. And she did so with slow exaggeration before wrestling the door open through again.

As soon as she was gone, he lowered himself into the chair. He smiled and laughed. Felicity was unlike any other woman he’d ever known, never to speak her mind, put him in his place, and dole out to him the same amount of teasing that he gave her.

If he searched the whole world over, he knew he’d never find a woman like her. In fact, he *had* traveled much of the world and had never met anyone who compared with Felicity Courtney.

you tell Was there a way he could keep her in his life? Was it possible someday—after he was no longer running for his life—he could reach a normal life with her?

He hadn’t wanted to consider the possibility of Felicity being forgotten in the future. He hadn’t wanted to raise false hopes between them. And he never wanted to contemplate any relationship when he didn’t know if he’d live tomorrow.

But with everything he’d given up, maybe he could allow himself to

wishful dream—the dream where he made it out of his nightmare and  
could be with Felicity again.

Maybe it was a reckless dream—one he'd eventually regret. But for  
he wanted to enjoy a last evening with her before he had to go.

and him a  
stop me

by wind

it—”

was still

cheeks  
n't give

lid with  
closed

then he  
r afraid  
measure

another  
ver met

ole that  
connect

in his  
hadn't  
ive past

his one

wishful dream—the dream where he made it out of his nightmare alive and could be with Felicity again.

Maybe it was a reckless dream—one he'd eventually regret. But for now, he wanted to enjoy a last evening with her before he had to go.

## 8

Felicity lit the last candle on the dining room table, then stood back and admired her beautiful meal. A serving bowl with the homemade pasta sauce sat beside the basket of garlic bread. On the opposite side of the table, she'd placed a salad of greens with radishes, carrots, and pears. She'd also baked an apple pie earlier in the afternoon and had given it a prominent position on the table.

Not to impress Philip. Why would she want to do that?

Philip had offered to take a plate of the meal to Mrs. Keller who had gone up to his room to change.

The firm thud of footsteps overhead made Felicity tingle with awe at the thought of Philip's presence. He was here. Really here. And he had a room of his own which made his visit seem even more official.

She still couldn't believe it and pinched herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

After she'd returned from taking care of Stan and the wagon driver had carried Philip's bags into the house against his adamant protest that he would do it later. The ice on the grass and gravel had made maneuvering difficult and in attempting to walk only the short distance to the barn and back she had nearly fallen a dozen times. How had Philip gone several miles?

She'd scolded Philip thoroughly for daring such a trek. Thankfully, the fire remained by the stove, thawing out little by little. Now that he had his belongings—which had mostly stayed dry in his canvas bag—she could change his clothing while she set the table for supper.

She eyed the candles. Did they make the meal look too romantic? She didn't want Philip to think she was interested in him, because she wasn't. Even though he'd admitted to coming back simply to see her and not to take a camera. In fact, he hadn't even realized he'd left his camera behind.

A thin ribbon of delight wove through her again, as it had when she had probed him earlier. His arrival was because of her and no other reason.

He was turning out to be an honest man, one full of integrity. In a

he was kind and thoughtful. What other man would spend an entire afternoon trying to locate help for her? Weston certainly hadn't. To be fair, Weston offered to come for himself. But still, Philip had taken the time to speak to the men, interview them, and try to find someone reliable for her.

At the heavy pattering of steps in the hallway nearing the stairwell, she combed a hand over loose hairs before brushing at her simple blouse and skirt at her skirt. She'd already taken off her apron and stowed it in the back of the closet. Part of her wished she'd donned one of the elegant dresses that Charlotte had left behind for her. She wore them for trips into town. But whenever she was working around the homestead, she donned the plain clothing that she'd grown up wearing.

Although she could appreciate the values and simple faith of the Quakers, she hadn't lamented when her parents had broken away from the community. She'd been ready to experience more of the world. That she'd been eager for friendship with the wealthy young ladies who had included her in their activities during that last year in Pennsylvania. But when the friendship had turned out to be a disaster, Felicity had learned a great deal about what life was like outside the Quaker society.

She'd also learned a great deal while living as Mrs. Bancroft's companion. Even if the time had been difficult and the woman had been somewhat demeaning, Felicity had enjoyed all the things that had once been forbidden—music, dancing, games, parties, and fancy clothing. Especially the fancy clothing. She hadn't gotten to travel with Mrs. Bancroft the way she'd wanted, but she'd met interesting people from other places around the world. Philip.

Now, as Philip loped down the stairs in dry garments, a warm pulse pulsed through her—one charged with strange energy. His blond hair was dark from being damp, but he'd combed it back into lazy waves. He'd worn wool trousers and thick socks. His shirt was a warm flannel and not the immaculate white dress shirts he'd worn to the dinner parties at Bancroft's.

He'd always been incredibly handsome in his evening attire. Even his casual, shoeless version of him was even better.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, he slanted a grin at her, tilted her and the world around her. He had such a devilishly handsome smile.

He paused and rubbed his hands together, unable to conceal a shiver.

noon “Are you still cold?” She crossed to the stove by the sofa, intention had add more fuel and take the chill out of the air—a chill that the gustiness continued to push in through every crack of the house. It had been less than two hours since his arrival, but the darkness of evening had fallen, she brought with it dropping temperatures.

and then Before she could toss more wood into the stove, he stepped into the kitchen, and grabbed her arm. “I’m just fine. And I don’t want you behaving like my servant any longer.”

she was Her attention fixed on his long fingers easily encompassing her wrist, she’d pulled her back. “I’m not your servant.”

“I should think not.” His thumb brushed against her pulse, which quaked, suddenly thrumming against her skin loud and fast, as if wanting to break free.

It’s why Oh, dear heavens. She began to tug away from him before she could, but he had irrationally and did something stupid like throw himself at her, pressed his body against hers, and wrap her arms around him.

That deal He released her hand only to capture it again and situate it in the crook of his arm. “You’re a lady and should have a whole castle full of servants at your beck and call.”

It had been “Castle full?” She tried not to think about how good his muscles felt against her fingertips. “I take it you live in a castle with an army of servants?” She wasn’t sure why she was more curious about him tonight. Maybe it was the prospect of a candlelit dinner. Maybe it was the fact that he would be here instead of on his way to Denver. Maybe it was the intimate meal ahead of them, just the two of them.

she sputtered Whatever it was, she wanted to know more about this man.

air was He led her to the table as regally as if they really were a lord and lady living in a castle. As he pulled out her chair and helped her push it in, she waited almost breathlessly for him to take his spot across from her.

at Mrs. As he sat down, she watched him expectantly. “Well?”

“The meal looks stunning.” He swept his gaze over everything, but his appreciation lighting his eyes.

“You’re ignoring my question.”

one that “The question about whether or not I’m happy to see you again?” he smiled, unfolded his napkin and laid it in his lap. “You needn’t fish for compliments so blatantly.”



ding to She scooted the pasta bowl toward him so that he'd dish up his  
ig windfirst. Exactly how happy was he to see her again? She wanted to ask,  
ss thancouldn't, or he'd have the advantage over her. And she couldn't allow  
en andsuppose the question you should be asking is whether I'm happy to see

In the middle of dipping the fork into the pasta, he paused. "How  
er wayyou not be happy to see my adorable face again?"

; as my "Adorable?" She glanced around the room as though looking  
someone. "Did you bring Declan with you this time?"

rist and His grin played upon his lips as he heaped a mound of pasta and  
upon his plate. "Just admit I'm more adorable than Declan."

ch was She paused and pretended to think about it. Then she shrugged pl  
o break"You're right. I usually reserve the word adorable for describing baby  
and newborn bunnies. But I guess it applies to you too."

e acted For a short while as they ate, they kept the banter flying, neith  
er bodyletting it drop. The exchange, as usual, invigorated her and sent secre  
whispering to every region of her body, bringing her to life. Time w  
rook ofalways made her feel alive, but she never quite understood why.

ants at His eyes seemed alive too. Thankfully his frozenness had meltec  
and he was moving and talking and carrying on just as he normally did

les felt "Thank you for this exquisite meal." He swallowed a last bite. "Th  
vants?"kind of you to make it especially for me, in the event I returned."

e it was "Yes, of course, I plan all my meals around fickle guests."

as here "If not for me, then why else would you go to so much trouble?"

ad with "I wanted something special for Mrs. Keller." She savored the  
flavors of the sauce that had blended and cooked all afternoon, fill  
house even now with its tantalizing aroma.

nd lady "So I rank below Mrs. Keller in how special I am?"

in, she "Only truly special people get any ranking in my list."

"Then obviously I'm truly special."

"No. You have to be humble."

rything, "I'm very humble."

She quirked a brow at him.

He gave her a lopsided grin that easily tore down all her defens  
n?" Hethat she had many up. Even so, she had a strange longing to move  
limentstheir bantering and find out more about him. "Since you're so humble,  
about your humble origins."

serving     He sopped up sauce into a piece of the garlic bread. For a moment but she remained silent, almost as though he was contemplating ignoring her that. “Finally, he popped the piece of bread in his mouth, chewed it, then she said to you.” “Let’s make a deal. Every time I divulge a piece of my background, you could do the same.”

              “I ask you one question, then you get to reciprocate with a question for your own. Five questions only. We give each other straight and honest answers. No avoidance allowed.”

d sauce     “Are there any limits to the queries?” he asked.

              “Do you want limits?” She had nothing to hide, but that didn’t matter fully. The same was true of him.

r chicks     “Why don’t we give each other the ability to pass on one question?”

              “I won’t need that, but if you do, then I’ll agree to it.”

ner one     “We’ll see about that.” He leaned back in his chair, the can’t thrill dancing over his prominent features and highlighting his fair hair that with him finally dried. It was mussed and hung over his forehead. The light-blue of his eyes were rimmed with darker blue that pulled her in and threatened to knock her off her feet like a tidal wave.

l.            “Do you want the honor of asking the first question? Or would you rather let that was me to go first?” Her pulse swirled erratically, even though she didn’t want to.

              He gave a brief regal bow of his head. “My lady, as a gentleman, I would do nothing less than allow you the privilege of beginning the inquisition.”

strong     “Inquisition? Is that how you see this?”

ing the     “Yes.” He smiled almost wickedly. “Now my turn.”

              “I thought you were allowing me to go first.”

              “You did.”

              “I did not.”

              “You asked me if I saw the questions as an inquisition, and I said yes.”

              She scoffed. “You’re cheating, Mr. Berg. Clearly you have something to hide, or you wouldn’t shirk your fair share of questions.”

              He held his arms open wide as though he had nothing to hide. “I have nothing to hide—no secrets—nothing yours. Ask away.”

beyond     She’d never tire of the easy way they could relate to one another. She would tell me Philip here tonight all to herself—with Mr. and Mrs. Keller in the background above, likely listening to every word of their conversation. Nevertheless,

ment, he needed to go deeper with him. Wanted to know more, needed to know  
r again. She tapped at her lip. If she only had four questions left, then she  
rugged. make them count. “Tell me all about your family, your parents, s  
ou have grandparents, anyone else important to you.”

“That’s not a question. That’s a command.”

stion of With an exasperated sigh, she rolled her eyes. “What is your fami  
honest including your parents, siblings, grandparents, and anyone else impo  
you?”

He hesitated only a little before telling her that his dad had passe  
ean the two years ago of a lung disease. He mentioned an older brother Gust  
had gotten married a year or so past, but didn’t seem keen on discuss  
” fellow, and she got the impression that perhaps a rift existed between t

Philip was much more eager to talk about his younger sister Estel  
dleight was eighteen and sounded as spirited as he was. He seemed to have a  
hat had relationship with his mother and grandmother and regarded both c  
e fleckshighly.

ened to His question to her was very much the same—an inquiry into her

He listened attentively as she shared about the death of their par  
rou like influenza, and about her two sisters: Charity, who’d married J  
want it Vanderwater a few months ago and was residing with him in the Ea  
the spring, and then Patience, who’d recently wedded an English ger  
can dorancher, Spencer Wolcott, and moved to his ranch.

The third and fourth questions were similar in nature—question  
their childhoods and faith and family bonds and what it had be  
growing up in their homes. Again, Philip answered seriously but he  
when it came to discussing his brother. But she learned a little more at  
growing up in Lapland and had the sense from the way he descri  
travels and life that he’d most definitely had a privileged upbringing  
res.” wealthy family.

hing to When it came time for the fifth question, Felicity took her t  
thinking of what she most wanted to know about Philip. And one q  
‘I’m all nagged her more than any other.

He leaned back in his chair across the dining room table and sippe  
she had of coffee she’d percolated, his eyes upon her, half filled with misch  
e room half serious. “What is the last secret you want to squeeze from me toni  
ess, she The wind rattled the windowpanes and whistled in the stovepipe

more. what she'd been able to tell when she'd gotten up to make the coffee had to Philip refueled the stoves and checked on the Kellers, the ice had to melt, snow, which was now falling quite heavily.

"Hmmm . . ." She took a drink from her own cup of strong, black coffee.

Even as she searched her mind for a last good question, she kept reminding herself of the need to know more about what he wanted from his future, particularly if he had plans for marriage. But if she asked, he would be sure to tell her about having ulterior motives, possibly even accuse her of wanting to get rid of herself.

"Come now, ask me whatever you're dying to know." Over the rim of the cup, his gaze lingered almost languidly on her features. There was nothing in his gaze that was inappropriate or that even showed desire, but something nonetheless. It felt like a tug against her stomach, low and familiar. She ignored the feeling and forced the last question. "What have your relationships with women both now and in the past been like?"

As expected, a slow grin worked its way up his lips. "You're trying to find out if I like you?"

"No. I already know you like me." She blew on the hot liquid in her mug and took a tiny sip.

He drank too, letting his gaze stay locked with hers. He didn't deny denying her, but neither did he acknowledge that what she'd said was true.

"So?" she persisted.

"Are you certain you'd like to use your last question on my relationship history?"

"Yes."

He set his mug down. "How far back do you want me to go?"

"To the beginning."

One of his brows shot up. "To the girl I kissed when I was a lad of sixteen?"

Did she really want to hear about all the women he'd had over the years? No doubt he'd consorted with many, especially since both charm and wit were as second nature to him as breathing. Actually listening to him recall the many women he'd kissed or slept with wouldn't be a pleasurable way to spend any amount of time.

"Start with your most serious relationship."

He hesitated, as though thinking back on his life. He finally placed his mug down and traced the rim. "I'll admit, I've spent time with

e whilewomen.”

ned to “Many?” The word rankled her. “Can you quantify? Does that  
dozen? Or a hundred?”

brew. He laughed lightly. “I like women, but believe it or not, I  
turningobsessed.”

icularly “So, twelve?”

ase her “Perhaps.”

him for She wasn’t sure why she wanted to know so badly. But a strang  
drove her. “And did you love any of those twelve?”

n of his “This sounds like a sixth question.”

hing in “It’s part of number five—what have those relationships been like?

she felt He swished the coffee in his mug. “Most have been dallianc  
not. nothing more.”

ve your “Most?”

“There was a woman I met in England while I was in scho  
ying toeventually I had to bring an end to our relationship.”

“Why?”

er mug “That’s definitely a sixth question. And even if it’s not, I’m pas  
it.”

bother “She decided you were too stubborn and arrogant?”

true. “Something like that.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes.

What had happened? Had the woman broken his heart? “Anc  
ionshipyou’ve been traveling? Have any other women caught your eye beside

The smile turned genuine again. “No one can compare to you.”

His flattery always made her stomach flutter. “Did you leave a s  
broken hearts in every town you stayed in?” The question was out bef  
could keep herself from speaking it. But once it was, every nerve of h  
ten?” perked to attention, waiting for his answer. She wanted him to ans  
years?seriously.

l appeal He studied her face, and thankfully didn’t jest. “This trip hasn  
attle offabout enjoying and spending time with women.”

way to For a strange reason, his answer seemed to steal inside and sooth  
of her angst. “I find that hard to believe about you and Declan.”

“You’re the first woman I’ve met who made me not want to leave.”

ced his His quiet statement left her suddenly breathless. She waited for  
manyfollow up with a teasing comment or some other mirthful jab.

But he focused on his coffee mug and took a long slurp.

mean a Did he mean what he'd said? That he didn't want to leave? Delight cascaded up her back.

'm not "Time for my fifth question." He set his mug down, then swiped of garlic bread left in the nearly empty basket. "Or maybe I should seven, and eight too?"

ge need "I already told you that all of my questions were related."

Even though he didn't smile this time, his eyes crinkled at the corners were filled with warmth. "Then mine will all be related too."

"Fine."

"Why are you staying here in Fairplay?"

es and The question caught her off guard. From his tone, she knew asking her a deep question, one that had more to do with what she wanted of life than where she lived.

ol, but "Is running this boardinghouse really what you want to do with life?" He spoke kindly, enough that she could sense that he cared, wasn't asking merely to be polite.

sing on Silently, she mulled over her responses. She wanted to be honest with him. But what could she tell him about her plans for her life when she didn't even know for herself? Yes, she'd longed for the ability to travel, see new sights, and meet new people.

l while But she also loved her family and couldn't abandon their plans and dreams for a better future. "For now, I'm obligated to be here and make sure things run smoothly."

tring of "Until when?"

ore she Why was he asking? "My sister Charity is planning to return home in the spring, and at that point she and her husband are hoping to transfer her boardinghouse into a bigger home, one that would provide a place of refuge for poor, homeless, and frightened women in need."

't been "And you want to help your sister with this project?"

"Of course."

ie some One of his brows quirked. "Really?"

"Someone has to be here to manage the place until Charity gets back."

He was quiet for a moment, studying her intently.

him to "Fine. I love Colorado. And I love Fairplay. But I admit, I have been restless here."

Finally, he sat back in his chair and nodded, as if she'd given him the gentle answer he was waiting to hear.

At the sudden clatter on the front porch, she stood abruptly.

He rose too, his revolver out and pointed toward the door. His body got rigid, and his eyes narrowed, almost as if he expected someone to be barging in. He began inching toward the door and motioned toward her and said, "Stay back."

"Why?"

At another loud banging, he shot her a warning glare, then pointed his finger to his lips.

"What?" she whispered. "Are you worried someone is waiting to get in?"

"We have to be careful."

Careful of what? She wanted to scoff, to tell him he was overreacting. That most likely a shutter had come loose. But as he drew closer to the door, the intensity of each step told her he was afraid of something out there. That he

lost with  
she didn't  
see new

lost hopes  
are that

in the  
room the  
refuge

click."

grown

Finally, he sat back in his chair and nodded, as if she'd given him the answer he was waiting to hear.

At the sudden clatter on the front porch, she stood abruptly.

He rose too, his revolver out and pointed toward the door. His body was rigid, and his eyes narrowed, almost as if he expected someone to come barging in. He began inching toward the door and motioned toward her. "Stay back."

"Why?"

At another loud banging, he shot her a warning glare, then pressed a finger to his lips.

"What?" she whispered. "Are you worried someone is waiting to get us?"

"We have to be careful."

Careful of what? She wanted to scoff, to tell him he was overreacting, that most likely a shutter had come loose. But as he drew closer to the door, the intensity of each step told her he was afraid of something out there.



## 9

He should have stayed far away from Felicity. And now because selfishness and stupidity, he'd brought danger right to her doorstep.

"Don't come any closer," he whispered to Felicity, who was sitting near the table where they'd been enjoying coffee. The remains of the meal sat in discarded piles—empty plates, silverware, serving platters, an apple pie with a couple of slices missing.

No doubt the assassin had tracked him to the boardinghouse. A dark, stormy night would be the perfect time to show up—when he would not be expecting it.

Carefully, he turned the door handle and then began to inch it open.

A gust of frigid wind blew against it, thrusting it wide and sending a flurry of snow into the house. For a moment the snow was blowing too hard to see outside. But as he stepped farther out, the light from the front window illuminated the darkness.

No one was in sight. But a tin pail had blown onto the porch—or it had already been there. As another gust swept across the porch, it rattled the pail hard against the clapboards.

The sound was similar to what had disturbed them at the table. If that noise only been the pail? Was there no one lurking outside nearby waiting to jump out and stab him?

The vision of the night he'd almost been killed rushed back.

He'd been lying in his bed trying to sleep. But he'd been restless all day because of an argument he'd had earlier in the day with Gustaf over the rumors of Philip's return. His brother had been enraged to learn that Philip was growing in popularity since his return from Cambridge, so much so that people were starting to suggest he should be king instead of Gustaf. In a final parting shot, Philip had stopped his yelling and grown deadly calm before saying, "You will never be king. I shall make sure of that."

Philip had finally climbed out of bed to work in his darkroom—where he'd converted so that he had the ability to develop his photographs.

whenever it suited him.

Not long after he'd begun to coat the negatives with a varnish to their surface, he'd heard the door to his chambers creak open. With time having been so late, he'd been wary and had peeked out through a slit. When a man creep inside, his face masked and a dagger in hand.

of his It had only taken Philip a second to know what was happening. Gustaf was carrying through on his veiled threat. Thankfully, he'd locked the darkroom door, as he often did to prevent anyone from accidentally coming in and exposing his photographs too soon.

The masked man had waited for a short while in the shadows of the bedchamber, likely intending to stab him when he exited the closet. Philip had clattered around and whistled and acted as though he didn't know a murderer was lurking so close. Finally, near dawn, with the coming of light and the awakening of the servants, the assassin had left.

Philip had wasted no time in sneaking from the royal palace and had arranged a secret meeting with the prime minister and others of parliament who wanted to overthrow Gustaf. They'd debated for hours how to proceed. During their deliberations, they'd received news that Gustaf had learned of Philip's whereabouts and was sending a contingency of royal armed guards to arrest him on charges of treason.

Philip hadn't had any choice but to flee. And he'd been doing so since. He didn't know exactly how people were keeping tabs on him, but there were times he suspected that the prime minister or another member of parliament had sent a bodyguard to watch him from a distance. Other times he suspected the assassin was the one watching him and waiting to strike.

Whatever the case, he couldn't be too careful, especially now that he was with Felicity one more night.

He stepped onto the porch and shuddered. The temperatures had cooled drastically from earlier in the day. And from what he could tell in the shadows emanating onto the front yard, several inches or more of snow had accumulated, covering the ice.

He made his way carefully through the dusting of snow and ice on the porch and retrieved the pail. As he turned and started back to the door, he blew out a frustrated breath at the sight of Felicity standing in the doorway, the interior light spilling over her and revealing her in

glorious beauty.

protect If an assassin was lurking in the yard somewhere with a rifle, she' he hour an easy target.

to see a "Go back in." He glowered at her as he started toward the door.

She retreated, but not before glowering back.

g—that As he stepped inside and bolted the door behind him, he set the ked his the door, then crossed his arms. "Do you ever listen to anyone?"

opening "I listen to sane people instead of crazy ones who are acting as tho homestead is being attacked by a pack of hungry wolves instead of of his pail." She nodded at the bucket, the snow and ice melting from it and f et. But a puddle on the floor.

had no His sense of humor was gone. The moment was too grave for with the resort to his usual teasing. If only he could tell her the truth. Then she' t. why he was worried about being there. She'd know why he had t e. He'd tomorrow.

liament He was like a bomb waiting to explode. And when he did, he roceed anyone close to him.

rned of He rubbed his hand down his scruffy jaw and tried to expel the ards to that had turned his body as rigid as ice. It didn't work. He wouldn't re he had the chance to go out and make sure no one was there.

so ever He crossed the room and headed into the kitchen, where his co . There gloves and boots had been drying by the stove.

iber of Her footsteps rushed after him. "Where are you going?"

r times, "I'm heading out to the barn to feed the livestock." He swiped up l way lay and began to stuff his arms in the sleeves, even though they were still damp. "And I'll make sure everything looks okay for the night."

he was She reached for her coat on the peg beside the door. "I'll go with y

His hand darted out and caught hers. This time, he met her ga lropped hoped he could convey his seriousness. "Let me do this tonight for you

ne light She stilled and glanced at his fingers encircling hers.

fallen, "Please." He spoke the word softly. At the same time, he brus index finger across the back of her hand. It was a gentle but intimate on the one he knew he had no right to.

oor, he She studied his hold a moment longer before looking up at him, h ie open filled with all kinds of emotions he wanted to explore, except that he all her have the time. Even if he'd had time, he knew no good could come of

feelings between them.

But obviously his touch, even a brief one, seemed to have some effect upon her. He wasn't above utilizing it to protect her whenever necessary. Like now.

He brushed his finger down one of her fingers, then up the next and down another, tracing them.

She inhaled softly.

He finished tracing the final two fingers before linking his pinky with hers. He wasn't playing fair, but he didn't care. "Stay here with the lantern and I'll be back inside soon."

The brown of her eyes had turned darker than a moonless night, inviting him to lose himself there.

Oh yes, he wanted to lose himself with Felicity Courtney, both on a moonless night, with or without the sun or moon. But he swallowed hard, pushing his desire down. "Promise me?"

"Fine." The word was short, as though she could barely get it out.

He pulled his hand away from hers and finished bundling up.

She watched him as though she was imagining his touch all over her body. And as he tugged on his boots and hat and gloves, he could feel her eyes on him as if they were her hands.

When he exited with a lantern in his hand, he didn't dodge the blowing snow that slapped at him. Instead, he lifted his head into the wind and took the punishment for grazing her fingers so intimately.

Already the attraction between him and Felicity was strong. His coat couldn't add to it and make her harder to resist. He had to remain a slightly gentleman and keep proper boundaries at all times. No more gentle grazing of her hand, even in an emergency.

The lantern light sputtered in the wind and went out almost immediately and darkness closed in all around. The ground was still slick with snow.

The wind slithered beneath his coat and his skin, froze his cheeks and nose and prickled his fingers, reminding him of how close he'd come to freezing earlier in the day.

After trudging forward against the blowing wind for what felt like an eternity, a nagging fear crept in. Had he overshot the barn? Was he wandering the wrong direction altogether?

He darted a look over his shoulder and glimpsed the faint light emanating from the house. Then he forced himself to keep going. Next time, he'd

a rope with him and attach it to the house and barn so that, after the effect Felicity would have a way to guide herself during any more storm necessary. He heard tales of how much snow fell at times in the high country. And he didn't want her getting lost in the dark and wandering around, unable to reach the next, and the house.

Finally he bumped into a post, which he guessed was part of the gate. He used the fence to guide himself to the barn door, and then once inside he lit the lantern.

The cats and goats and chickens and even the lone gelding greeted him obviously relieved to see him. He gave them all plenty of feed. The troughs were full, and even though it was cold outside, the barn had a certain warmth from all the creatures huddled inside.

After scouring the corners of the barn and as much of the surrounding area as he could without the lantern blowing out, he tried to reassure himself that no one was there, that he was fine for one more night. Then he took a couple of ropes and tied them together before fastening one end to the post and starting back to the house.

The wind and snow wrestled against him, as if to keep him away from the windows. But he pressed forward, the glow from the windows guiding him, and he went back. When he reached the cellar, he ran out of rope and had to tie the rope to his face to hold the cellar door. But thankfully, the back entrance to the house was only a dozen paces away, and he used the side of the house to guide him there.

As he pushed the door open and stumbled inside, Felicity was wiping her hands on a rag, the dinner dishes mostly washed, only a pan left in the sink. He was covered in a layer of snow and half frozen—not nearly as cold as earlier, but stiff nonetheless.

She reached for the top button of his coat. “How was the pack of wolves waiting to tear down our house?”

“They’re vicious. I fought them away with my bare hands.” He tried to smile.

She cocked her head as though she could see through his humor. “I guess you deserve another cup of coffee and a second slice of pie for your bravery.”

“Why, yes, actually I do. I’m glad you agree.” The banter came back again. And it was a safer place for their conversation—a place where they wouldn’t have to worry about growing too close.

he left, Her fingers flew down his coat, and before he knew it, she was kissing him. He'dhim free, shaking off the layer of snow. Within minutes, he disposed of the trash, he didn'touter garb, had a cup of coffee to warm his hands, and was eating a return to a piece of pie.

He stood at the center worktable and savored the moment as she finished cleaning up their supper. He purposefully kept the conversation light on his side, as he wiped down the sauce splatters on the stove, he tucked away his knife and washed it down with the coffee.

He told him, If only he could have many more such evenings in his life, he'd be a waterhappy man. Even as the thought came, he rapidly banished it. "I know you're retainedyou're scheming."

"You do?" One of her brows rose.

He sounded "Yes, you tempted me this morning with the scent of the sauce on himself bread, giving me no choice but to come back for the meal tonight."

He indicated a "Oh, so you battled the ice and the freezing rain so that you could be barnmy cooking?"

"Exactly."

He said from "You told me you came because you couldn't force yourself to bring him Fairplay without seeing me one more time. But all along, you came to the end of food."

He only a "I did." He used his finger to get a last dollop of the cinnamon sauce on his plate. As he stuck his finger in his mouth, she paused in polishing her iron stovetop to watch him. He had a sudden need to go slow and to show of licking all his fingers and gauging her reaction as he did so. He could asrefrained.

Even so, as he finished cleaning off his finger, her eyes grew wide and her cheeks flushed. For all of her wit and the attention she got from men, she was clearly an innocent. And that thought pleased him more than it should.

"With the storm outside, it's a good thing you have a big, strong man around." "Then I am around."

He said to her "A big, strong man?" She scanned the room with faux innocence. "Where?"

He said easily He chuckled. "Just admit it. You're glad I'm here." He resisted the temptation to swipe his finger across the pie plate again, and instead, set the dish on the worktable.

tugging “And why should I be glad?”

l of his “I can chop wood for you.”

second She gathered up a couple of misshapen pieces from the wood bin. to be the one to inform you, but my five-year-old self could chop wood finished than this.”

iter. As “You’re brutal.” He laid a hand over his heart, feigning a wound.

ast bite She dropped the logs back onto the pile he’d cut that morning. T brushed the dust and wood chips from her hand. “I’ll admit, your st d die acut pieces are better than nothing.”

w what “Is that your way of thanking me for replenishing the wood box? the way the storm was raging outside, he was glad he’d taken the bring in the fuel before it became drenched with rain and ice.

and the “It might be.”

“If it isn’t, I know another way you can thank me.” The flirtatious ld tastewere out before he could stop them.

In the process of draping a damp towel over the edge of the si paused. For several irregular beats of his heart, the howl of the wind o leaverattle of the house echoed in the kitchen.

for the He was tempted to grin and tap at his lips so that she knew exact kind of thank-you he wanted. But again, he forced himself to swal uce leftdesire for her and instead kept the conversation from getting too intima

ing the “Don’t you want to know how?” he persisted.

make a “No.” Her expression turned adorably sassy. “I can already gues But hey you have in mind.”

“You can?”

e and a “Yes, because you’re a shameless ladies’ man.”

arnered “I thought we already determined at dinner that I’m not intere n more anyone else but you.” His words came out light and teasing, and he ho tone masked just how interested he was in her. In fact, his intere ng mangrowing larger and more life-sized every moment he was with her.

“I’m the apple pie of the day.” Her retort was tart. “I’m sure you’ll ocence.new favorite flavor soon enough.”

“I can’t imagine ever getting tired of apple pie.” This time his cc he urgecame out low and full of suggestion, and the second it did, he wanted t on thehis forehead.

She just shook her head, her lips pursed even as the flush remained

cheeks.

He made himself smile casually, but deep in his gut, heat was smoldering. At a soft thump overhead, he forced his gaze to the ceiling. "I thought it would be better time for Mrs. Keller to have a break. I'll go sit with Mr. Keller for a while."

"I can do it."

He started toward the door that led into the front sitting room. "When she gives the two of you one more night's break."

She didn't respond right away, but her footsteps followed after him. She was thinking about how they were in the same position as the previous time. "With that their time together was short? That all too soon, she'd be back to time to disrupted sleep at night?"

At the bottom of the steps, he paused and looked back at her. She stood in the kitchen doorway, the lantern glow outlining her, making her look like an angel radiating heavenly light. The overwhelming urge prodded him back and he gently brushed his lips to hers. A tiny kiss. Soft, short, and sweet. She was all.

No. He couldn't. Not now. And not anytime.

Even if someday he could wrestle himself free of Gustaf's threats, would she be someone parliament would consider for his wife? A young, beautiful American without any prominent family ties, no political influence, no impressive lineage. She had some wealth, but certainly nothing that would make her an advantageous match in the eyes of those who would be determined to do what for him.

He couldn't let himself fall for her. And he certainly couldn't give her a reason to fall for him.

"Get a good night's sleep. Please." Then without waiting for a response, he hurried up the stairs before he changed his mind and went to bed. He had to get to bed.

Best was

I find a

comment  
to palm

d in her



cheeks.

He made himself smile casually, but deep in his gut, heat was smoldering.

At a soft thump overhead, he forced his gaze to the ceiling. "I think it's time for Mrs. Keller to have a break. I'll go sit with Mr. Keller for a while."

"I can do it."

He started toward the door that led into the front sitting room. "Let me give the two of you one more night's break."

She didn't respond right away, but her footsteps followed after him. Was she thinking about how they were in the same position as the previous night? That their time together was short? That all too soon, she'd be back to having disrupted sleep at night?

At the bottom of the steps, he paused and looked back at her. She stood in the kitchen door, the lantern glow outlining her, making her look like an angel radiating heavenly light. The overwhelming urge prodded him to go back and gently brush his lips to hers. A tiny kiss. Soft, short, and sweet. That was all.

No. He couldn't. Not now. And not anytime.

Even if someday he could wrestle himself free of Gustaf's threats, would she be someone parliament would consider for his wife? A young, beautiful American without any prominent family ties, no political influence, and no impressive lineage. She had some wealth, but certainly nothing that would make her an advantageous match in the eyes of those who would be deciding for him.

He couldn't let himself fall for her. And he certainly couldn't give her reason to fall for him.

"Get a good night's sleep. Please." Then without waiting for her response, he hurried up the stairs before he changed his mind and went back to her.

The howling of the wind woke Felicity. And the frigidness of the air.

She burrowed under the heavy layer of blankets covering her, not wanting to face the coldness. For a moment, she hovered between waking and sleeping, but at the clank of the stove door in the kitchen, she sat up.

Darkness permeated the room. Was it nearing dawn?

She gathered up the mound of blankets and draped them around her. She perched on the edge of her bed and searched for her bedroom slippers. She stuffed her feet in, the chill already turning her toes to ice.

She dragged herself and the covers up, threw open her door, and at the sight of a dark outline in front of the stove. The embers illuminated a man's body. Philip's.

"Good morning." His voice rumbled low.

The sound of it did strange things to her insides, fanning heat and desire, warmth to her limbs and cheeks. Thankfully, it didn't cause the same reaction she'd had to him last night when he'd grazed her hand, when she'd been almost incoherent in the midst of the sensations he'd awakened inside her.

"Good morning." Her reply came out husky and embarrassed. He said nothing more.

"How did you sleep?" He added wood shavings and bark to the embers.

"I didn't wake up once."

"Good." He used the poker to stir the embers so that the newest wood would catch fire.

"How about you? Did you get any sleep?"

"A night or two without sleep won't hurt me." Philip straightened and studied her. Though she couldn't see his expression, she could feel him taking in her tousled hair, the hem of her nightgown showing beneath the blankets, her bare ankles, and the slippers.

She felt suddenly breathless and tugged the blankets around her more securely. "So you stayed up all night?"

"It went fast. I enjoyed reading to Mr. Keller."

“He’s a sweet man.” Philip sitting beside Mr. Keller’s bed all night was one of the kindest and noblest things she’d ever known a man to do. So many men—or women—would be willing to make such a sacrifice for a stranger.

The wind took that moment to rattle the windowpanes as if it intended to shake them loose altogether. A whistle of wind also blew through the stovepipe, the cold air almost dousing the flames.

Philip grabbed another handful of fuel and began to layer the sticks carefully over the fire. He had on his coat—likely to ward off the chill—underneath, his shirt was untucked in the front, some of the top buttons undone, and one of his suspenders dangled by his trousers.

The glow of the kindling revealed the stubble on his jaw, dark and thicker than yesterday. His hair fell forward, practically hanging in his eyes. And his lips were set in a stubborn line, as if he were daring the wind to stop his efforts to keep the fire going.

He looked so good she just wanted to stand there all day and stare at him. Maybe she would . . .

He smirked at her over his shoulder, clearly sensing her appreciation, fascination or both.

Ugh. She gave herself a mental shake. She had to keep her feelings under control. She was a strong woman and didn’t need a man in her life. She had to keep reminding herself of that.

Besides, he had to be tired and deserved to rest, not do all the chores after being up all night. She started toward him. “Here. Let me take over starting the fire. You go lie down and sleep.”

He didn’t budge from where he was layering the sticks. “Sorry, but you’re concerned about me.”

“No more or less concerned than I would be with any other guest,” he reached his side and then picked up a larger limb from the wood box.

“Admit you’re worried about me taxing myself.”

She added her log to the now crackling flames and stood beside him, basking in the warmth of the growing fire.

He bumped her arm with his playfully. “Go ahead.”

“Fine. You’ve been so decent and kind that I don’t want you to feel obligated to do any more than you already have.” In the darkness of the room, in the cozy glow of the stove, it was all too easy to spill the truth.

ght was He stood silently, as if her sincerity had taken him off guard. “I do lo. Notobligated in the least, Felicity. I’m honestly quite relieved I’m here t e for ayou.” His words held sincerity too.

She liked his humor, his wit, and his playfulness. But she liked w nded towas serious too, like now. She could sense his shift and wanted to har igh thethe moment for as long as possible. How could she do that except by down her guard and being serious in return? “I admit I’m relieved you piecestoo. I appreciate your help.”

ill—but He focused on the flames. “I wish there was a way that we coul buttonsnurse to help the Kellers.”

“A nurse?”

ker and “Or at least someone who can provide care and perhaps even has ic is eyes.how to make the quality of his life better.”

to defy Her mind began to whirl at the possibilities. It really was a good i would benefit the Kellers. But would her sisters allow her to sper at him.money on such an endeavor? And even if they did, would she be able a nurse who would be willing to move to Fairplay and live aisal orboardinghouse?

“While I’m in Denver,” he said quietly, as though reading her n s undercan make some inquiries.”

she had Yes, he was leaving. She didn’t need the reminder. And yet, she c fault him for bringing it up. He was only being kind to make such a es—not“Do you think we really could find someone?”

care of “I shall surely try.” He reached for another log and added it to the f “Thank you, Philip.”

ids like He straightened, then nudged her arm with his again. “If you c calling me Philip, I might keep doing nice things for you.”

st.” She “If that’s all it takes to have you at my beck and call, then I’ll de agree to it.”

“You have me at your beck and call even if you do nothing at all.”

le him, “That’s good to know.” Even though his tone hinted at playfulness contained the same sincerity as before, and it melted her heart just a l more.

to feel “In fact, I’m going out right now to check on the animals—”

redawn “You can’t.”

“I’ve done so previously, and you found no fault with my wc

n't feel you?"

o assist "I'm not questioning your ability. I'm insisting that you go to bed  
me handle the livestock."

hen he "No." His tone turned hard and stubborn the same way it had la  
ig on to when he'd so valiantly defended them from the pail on the porch.

r letting "I've been doing it every day since Patience moved out. And I'll c  
're here long after you're gone."

"Hopefully Weston can ride over later today to check on you and  
I'll hire a wench with the evening chores." Philip rubbed his hands together in front  
of the flames.

Was this a purposeful name drop—similar to his mention of Den  
leas for a gain remind her of his imminent departure?

If so, it was working.

dea and As Philip prepared to go outside, she twisted free a scarf from  
id their near the kitchen door. As she extended it to him, he leaned down and  
to find his slow smile giving her silent permission to wrap it around his neck  
at the herself.

She hesitated. Doing so seemed like such a wifelike task. But no  
mind, "If she'd offered, she couldn't take the scarf back, could she?"

Avoiding his lively gaze, she tossed the scarf first one way around  
couldn't neck and then the other, doing her best not to touch him, although her  
n offer twitched with the need to comb through his hair.

As she finished, she hugged the blankets to her body again.

flames. "I suppose now you'll want to kiss my cheek?" He held his face  
sideways, giving her full access to his cheek.

continue "With all the hair growing there, I'd rather kiss a cactus." That  
true. She imagined the scruff was bristly and rough to the touch, but for  
definitely reason the prospect of letting her fingers glide over all that bristly rou  
sent a tremor through her belly.

"I guarantee that once you get a taste of me, you won't go back to  
, it also anything or anyone else ever again." With that, he winked at her.

little bit She just shook her head, even as a flush spread through her.  
actually only kissed one suitor before. On the very same night he'd kissed  
her and left her sitting alone in the drawing room of her friend's home in  
Pennsylvania. She'd thought he'd cared for her. But she'd simply  
work, did pretty face and an easy conquest. And the young ladies she'd believe

her friends had been waiting in the hallway, laughing at her for how long and how she'd been.

She'd never let any other suitor kiss her since. In fact, she'd resolved last night wouldn't let another man kiss her unless he made a commitment to her. Even then, she guessed she wouldn't really be ready to kiss anyone.

Thankfully, Philip was already on his way to the door and hadn't needed help to analyze her reaction to his playful request. He had to yank for several seconds before the door finally opened, then only by inches, but it was enough that a shower of snow blew inside.

The drift against the door tumbled down onto the kitchen floor. In the darkness still hovered over the yard, it was easy to see that the snow was falling heavily and that many inches had accumulated overnight.

The trip to the barn would be difficult in the blowing and cold. She waited, especially with so much to wade through. "Maybe you should wait until morning light to venture out?"

The moment he stepped outside, the wind snuffed out the light from the lantern.

"Philip, wait." She moved into the doorway, cold, dry snow swirling around him against her, attempting to wrest the blankets from her grip.

Only a foot from the door, he stopped. "You can't resist kissing me, can you, after all?"

"It's going to be difficult to find the barn." He could very well get lost in the snow and darkness pushed him off course. That very thing had happened to Patience last winter. Thankfully, her sister had the wherewithal to turn around and come back to the house. "The animals can survive for some longer without attention."

Philip nodded ahead. "I fastened a rope last night, one that leads from the house out to the barn. I'll be alright."

She peered into the darkness, searching for the line. She did nothing, and as he disappeared into a cloud of blowing snow, she could only hope. She'd pray he'd make it there quickly, without any mishaps.

She closed the door, and as she swept up the snow, she couldn't help but feel a bubble of hope from rising inside. What if the weather remained too cold today for Philip to depart? What if he had to stay another whole day? What if he were trapped in the high country all winter?

gullible It was only the end of October, too soon for winter to settle in full weather would warm up enough to melt the snow in and around Fairpl  
ved shewhat about in the higher elevations? In the mountain passes? Would t  
o marryclosed now due to the treacherous conditions?

ne until As she started making breakfast—eggs, bacon, and flap jack  
/ife. couldn't keep her mind from spinning with the possibility of him livin  
stoppedboardinghouse and taking the job as the hired hand.

ral hard Some people might not think such a living arrangement was prope  
enoughshe was a single woman and he was a single man. But the Kellers we  
as chaperones, weren't they?

Though As the light of dawn began to show through the blowing and  
vas stillsnow, she took breakfast and broth up to the Kellers. Their woodt  
beginning to run low, so she filled it, taking from the woodbins in the  
lirting,and front room. Even then, the room upstairs had turned frigid—like  
it untilhow hard the wind was still blowing.

If the storm continued for much longer, she would have to c  
t in himoving Mr. Keller downstairs into the front room, perhaps having hi  
on the sofa temporarily.

swirling Daylight continued to break, but Philip didn't return.

Felicity began pacing the length of the kitchen, stopping every mi  
y cheekso to scrape away the ice on the window and peer out toward the barn  
see more of the blowing and swirling white.

t lost if After what seemed hours, her pulse was beating too thunderously  
almostto sit back and wait any longer. She bundled up in her coat and hat. Sh  
ewithalstarted pulling on her boots when the kitchen door slammed open and  
a whilestepped inside, his arms loaded with wood.

He'd covered his face with her scarf so only his eyes were showi  
rom theeyebrows were coated in snow and ice, and his coat and clothin  
covered too. He dumped the wood, then began to back out of the doc

n't seehe intended to return into the storm. His gaze snagged on her, and he s  
ild only For a moment, he fumbled to close the door, kicking the wood ou  
way and pushing against the force of the wind. When he had it shut  
keep ahe spun, yanked down the scarf, and scowled at her. "Where do yo  
stormy you're going?"

Dr what "You've been gone so long I thought you'd gotten lost."

"Did you stop to think that if I was lost, you might not be able to f

ly. Theand that you'd end up lost too?" His voice was testy.

ay. But "Did you stop to think that if something happened to you out  
hose bewouldn't be able to sit in here and do nothing?"

He pinned her with his blue eyes, which had turned from the usu  
cs—sheand playful shade to dark and serious. "I'm fine, Felicity. I had to br  
g at theice on the trough. And then I chopped more wood."

"How was I to know that?"

r, since "You have to trust me."

re there "But—"

"We have mountains with snow and blizzards in my country to  
driftingknow." He shed one of his gloves.

oin was "But don't you have servants who take care of you?"

kitchen "I can take care of myself." He took a step closer. Before she kne  
ly fromhe was doing, he lifted his hand to her cheek and drew a gentle line al  
jaw.

onsider Her breath snagged sharply in her chest. The touch was as lig  
n sleepdusting of sugar sprinkles, but it sent enormous waves of awareness t  
part of her body. Her instant reaction to him was as intense as it had b  
night when he'd grazed each of her fingers so languidly. It seemed

inute orher insides, like low heat melting butter and drizzling it around her boc  
only to The deliciousness only made her want another caress, made he  
more of something she couldn't name.

for her His fingertips lingered at the edge of her jaw. And his gaze had fo  
e'd justas delicate but searing as his touch. "Promise you'll stay here ins  
l Philiphouse and not come out?" His voice was so soft and pleading t

wouldn't have been able to resist him even if she'd wanted to—wh  
ng. Hisdidn't.

g were She nodded.

or, as if "Say it." He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

topped. She closed her eyes at the sweet heat of the touch.

t of the "Promise me."

finally, "I promise." She wasn't sure exactly what he was asking of her, b  
u thinkhis fingers upon her, she couldn't think, couldn't resist, couldn't do a  
except what he asked.

He let his hand fall away and took a step back.

find me Her eyes flew open to find him tugging on his glove and readyin



back out. As he opened the door, he nodded at her. "I'll be back with  
there, Iwood shortly."

She couldn't think of a response. Instead, she watched mutely  
al lightclosed the door behind himself and disappeared.

Once he was gone, she sagged against the center worktable. All  
she'd been able to admit he was a good-looking man. She hadn't wa  
like him, hadn't wanted to become one more woman—among a st  
many—to walk in and out of his life. So she'd tried hard to kee  
allowing any attraction to spring to life inside her.

How was it that within just two days and a couple of innocent t  
the attraction had not only sprung up but had developed into a full  
living and breathing force?

Maybe it would have been better for Philip to leave yesterday after  
ong hereven today. Because she wasn't sure how her heart would be able t  
him or even if she wanted to try.

ht as a  
o every  
een last  
to melt  
ly.  
er want

llowed,  
ide the  
hat she  
ich she

ut with  
nything

g to go

back out. As he opened the door, he nodded at her. “I’ll be back with more wood shortly.”

She couldn’t think of a response. Instead, she watched mutely as he closed the door behind himself and disappeared.

Once he was gone, she sagged against the center worktable. All along, she’d been able to admit he was a good-looking man. She hadn’t wanted to like him, hadn’t wanted to become one more woman—among a string of many—to walk in and out of his life. So she’d tried hard to keep from allowing any attraction to spring to life inside her.

How was it that within just two days and a couple of innocent touches, the attraction had not only sprung up but had developed into a full-grown living and breathing force?

Maybe it would have been better for Philip to leave yesterday after all. Or even today. Because she wasn’t sure how her heart would be able to resist him or even if she wanted to try.

He wasn't leaving today. That much was certain.

Philip peered through the spot he'd scraped in the frosted front window. Beyond the porch, the wind continued to gust, causing drifts as deep as several feet in some places. Not only that, but the blowing snow was so thick that when he'd been out in it earlier in the day, he'd hardly been able to get his hand outstretched in front of him, clinging to the rope that led back to the barn.

"Looks like you're officially stuck with me one more night." He pulled the lacy curtain fall and turned to face Felicity where she sat in a chair beside Keller, who was lying on the sofa. Mrs. Keller reclined in the other window chair, her crochet hook weaving up and down through her colorful patterned yarn.

They'd decided to bring the Kellers down into the front room since the upstairs had become so cold that the water in the wash basin had frozen.

In spite of the chill, Philip had slept for the past several hours up in one of the rooms. But even with a heavy layer of blankets, the frigid wind finally awoken him and driven him out of bed.

Now crowded together in the front room and with the stove pump heat, they were staying warm enough. At least for the short term.

He hadn't wanted to worry Felicity, but there weren't many logs stacked under the lean-to by the barn. That morning, he'd chopped up half of what was there and brought it inside. But with how cold it was, he'd been using the fuel faster than expected, which was partly why he'd supported bringing the Kellers downstairs for the duration of the storm—they would only need to keep two stoves fueled—the front room and the kitchen—rather than three.

He guessed they had enough to keep them fueled through the end of the day, but not for the coming night. At some point, he was going to have to head out and actually cut down a tree. Or perhaps find a windfall and bring it back to the lean-to. Hopefully he'd be able to find something that

saturated from all the rain and ice that had fallen before changing to snow.

“You are rather hard to put up with.” Felicity shot a glance his way, holding Mr. Keller’s hand between both of hers, blowing on it once in a while as if to warm it.

After the past night of staying awake and listening to Philip rant, Mr. Keller had dozed most of the day. But at the moment, his eyes were open and as knowing as always. They communicated, as they had all along, that Mr. Keller knew who he was—a prince of Lapland and part of the royal lineage.

Thankfully, the older man couldn’t divulge that information to anyone. As Felicity squeezed Mr. Keller’s hand, the older man seemed to squeeze her hand in return. But nothing about his body worked from his shoulders down to his toes. And although he’d lost function of some muscles in his face, at least he still had the ability to intake liquids.

“But I suppose we can try to endure one more night with you,” Mr. Keller offered.

Mrs. Keller paused in her crocheting and glanced overhead, the wind rattling the house as if it might tear it apart. “It might be more than one night.”

That was what he was afraid of.

As if hearing his thoughts, Felicity cast him a sideways glance. “\Vhat about the snow, what will you do if you can’t get out of the high country in the spring?”

“Guess I’ll have to stay and get married.” He kept his tone light and teasing, but even as he said the words, something inside him flared at the prospect of doing that very thing with Felicity. He never would. It was entirely implausible. But still . . . a part of him wished he were free to do whatever way he wanted without worrying about the repercussions.

Felicity was shaking her head. “I don’t know if Mrs. Bancroft will accept your proposal. But maybe if you increase your charm, you’ll eventually convince her.”

He grinned. “I think we both know there isn’t any amount of charm in the world that could make her into a nicer person.”

“You’re right. She’ll most certainly reject you and devastate you. It would be safer to remain single.”

“Safer single?” He lifted his brows. “Hibernating alone might be safer, but it’s certainly not as pleasurable as having a beautiful woman with r

low. She ducked her head and fidgeted with Mr. Keller's blanket, her eyes while flushing.

Mr. and Mrs. Keller were now both watching him, their eyes aligned in a shared interest, as if he were performing a rendition of a Beethoven symphony. He supposed the banter with Felicity was entertaining. At least, it was for them.

But what if she was right? What if he was in the high country? The thought had pinged around his head already over the course of the afternoon, leaving him with an ache in his temples. If he had no way to try to get out, would that mean an assassin would have no way to get in? From his assuming the assassin wasn't already somewhere in the area, he decided to wait for the blizzard to pass.

After scouring the barn and other outbuildings again this morning, Felicity had seen no evidence that anyone else was near the homestead. As long as the blizzard lasted and the snow made traveling difficult, they were safe. He could breathe easier and let himself relax a little. And perhaps he would permit himself to enjoy the extra day or two he would get to spend with Felicity.

Could he throw away caution for now and simply relish the present? With all the trouble he wanted to try. If he really was getting a much-needed reprieve from his brother's threats, why not make the most of the time?

With a new sense of resolve, he crossed to his camera box where he had placed it next to the sideboard. "I have the perfect way for us to spend the afternoon."

He flipped open the lid of the case and lifted out the bulky camera. He kicked the legs open on the tripod and situated the camera at the best positioning it so that the lens was pointed at Felicity.

She was watching him and was as absolutely stunning as always. Her eyes were wide and framed by her long lashes and her lips parted as though she intended to trade more quips with him. He wanted to keep the lens on her and memorize every curve and line and freckle on her face.

But he stepped away from his camera so that he didn't do something that would humiliate himself, like walk over to her, draw her up into his arms, and place kisses all over her face. "We'll turn the sitting room into a study. For your safety, I'll take photographs of everyone."

Her lips quirked knowingly. "So that you have my picture to talk

cheeks you when you leave?"

"Of course I want your picture. But you have to know I won't ne  
ght with remember you, since you are unforgettable."

y. Mrs. Keller smiled at his compliment, as if he'd paid it to her ins  
was to Felicity. And although Felicity didn't respond, her lips curled up into  
smile.

y until "Now, ladies." He waved his hand with a flourish. "Go don yo  
urse of best gowns and prepare yourself for the finest portrait you'll eve  
way to taken."

hat was They both stood in a flutter of excitement, and Mrs. Keller pat  
up and hair. "I haven't had a photograph taken since our wedding day."

Felicity brushed a few strands of her hair back too. "I haven't eve  
g, he'd photograph."

; as the In the process of securing the camera to the tripod, Philip straig  
afe. He "Never one?"

e could "Never one."

nd with "Then we must most certainly rectify that today. I shall take a d  
you."

t? She laughed lightly, the sound tinged with delight. "I'm sure one  
re from sufficient."

"Not for me." He didn't bother to hide his desire but let it rumble  
Felicity voice.

pass the She just shook her head and started toward her bedroom off the kit  
Mrs. Keller hesitated at the bottom of the steps.

era. He He offered her a smile. "I'll watch Mr. Keller while you take yo  
center, getting pretty."

"Thank you, Philip." She started up the first step, then stopp  
with her glanced over her shoulder at him. "Mr. Keller was always generous v  
igh she compliments toward me the way you are with Felicity."

her and Their gazes shifted to the older man on the sofa, his eyes clos  
expression peaceful in sleep. "I can tell he still loves you by the way h  
hing to at you."

nd start She nodded and dropped her gaze shyly. "Don't ever stop telling  
lio, and how much she means to you. Do it every day for her whole life, as n  
you're able."

ke with He could only watch in silence as Mrs. Keller raced up the stairv

didn't have the heart to tell her that he wouldn't be in Felicity's future, and it didn't even have a right to compliment her in the present.

So why was he paying attention to her and flirting as if there was something special about her? Why wasn't he taking more care with his words? And his words were a little fuller. He'd grazed her cheek this morning to stop her from going outside. He'd touched her fingers last night, he'd told himself he wouldn't use their mutual attraction to his advantage. But it was so hard to refrain . . .

Since their first meeting, their banter had been harmless and in good nature—at least on his part. But over the past couple of days, something had changed and become more serious, and he wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because she'd collapsed in front of his eyes. Maybe it was because he'd learned that she had a way of deeply caring she was to sacrifice her health for the Kellers. Maybe it was because the storm had forced them into proximity. Maybe it was because they'd gotten to know each other in a way they hadn't been able to do at the end of Mrs. Bancroft's dinner parties.

Whatever it was, he didn't want to lead her to believe they could have a close relationship, only to end up hurting her. Yes, she was a strong woman, but she didn't take him too seriously most of the time. But surely she was strong enough to handle everything he was, if he was reading her correctly—and he was confident that he was.

He rested his head against his camera, the war inside him raging. He should have left Fairplay several weeks ago when he'd originally planned to stay. He shouldn't have allowed himself to stay. But he'd been too enamored and too weak to tear himself away. And he still couldn't.

He lifted his head and glanced toward the door and the layer of snow that had blown underneath and was now crusted to the floor. He couldn't go anywhere, not anytime soon. And the honest truth—the deep, gut-wrenching truth: now that he was here with her, he was not only relieved to be on her side during this dangerous storm, but he didn't want to be anywhere else.

All the while he finished setting up his camera and the dry place looked strengthened his resolve to treat Felicity as a friend and nothing more.

Mrs. Keller returned in a lovely gown, they tended to Mr. Keller, such as to kiss Felicity's mouth and repositioning him. All the while, the older man's eyes were much as once left his wife and were filled with both love and adoration.

As Philip helped to situate Mrs. Keller in a chair, he couldn't keep his eyes away. He noticed how she seemed to grow more beautiful under her husband's

that admiration, almost as if he were the fertilizer and water and sunshine that she needed.

Philip focused the lens, slipped in the dry plate, then draped the cloth over his head. As he readied to take Mrs. Keller's picture, he sensed Felicity's presence before he heard her footsteps. He had the camera power pull out from underneath the dark linen. But he held himself steady, forced himself to pay attention to Mrs. Keller.

Only after he'd made sure he had a perfect shot of her did he flip the camera shifted up and emerge. He couldn't keep himself from seeking out Felicity because he looked anywhere else.

She stood just inside the door.

At the sight of her, his jaw dropped open.

He'd seen her in her fanciest gowns during the dinners at Mrs. Barton, but she'd never worn this particular one. It was a dark purple with a perfect fit that showed off her curves to perfection. The bustle on the back highlighted her womanly figure too, as did the sleekness of the bodice. She'd piled her hair into a fashionable twist at the top of her head, leaving her graceful neck entirely exposed. Adorned by a simple gold necklace and fairly delicate gold earrings, she had an understated elegance.

She held herself with poise, and yet, from the slight tilt of her head, she seemed to be waiting for him to comment on her appearance.

But what could he say that wouldn't turn him into a milk-sop? With her, he certainly couldn't tell her how he really felt—that she was the most remarkable woman he'd ever met and that he wanted to stare at her all day, all night, now that forever.

"It's too much, isn't it?" She finally spoke, her tone edged with embarrassment.

He managed to close his mouth. "You're perfect." The words came out with so much awe that he should have been embarrassed himself except that he was rarely embarrassed about anything.

She offered him a small smile.

He needed to see that smile grow large, wanted to give her something she never smiled about all the time. "You're so perfect you will probably bring the camera with how pretty you are."

Yes, he was turning into a milk-sop. But he didn't care, because he'd hoped his eyes would widen, just the way he'd hoped.



that she Mrs. Keller was standing beside her husband and was holding his hand. She wiped liquid from his chin. "She looks like a princess."

the black Mr. Keller's eyes brightened, as if his wife had voiced his sentiment. Princess? Philip took her in again, this time more objectively, seeing the way the people of Lapland would. He could envision her sitting at dinner with his family and friends at the long, polished table set to perfection.

He could picture her dancing with him in the ballroom, her lush brocade gown draped only on him. He could imagine strolling together in the gardens outside the ballroom with her arm tucked into his. And he could definitely envision bending down and kissing her in the moonlight.

Everyone would likely agree with Mr. and Mrs. Keller's assessment. Felicity indeed looked the part of a princess. But would having the look and appearance of royalty be enough? Or would everyone condemn her for being a commoner and a foreigner?

And would it really matter what anyone thought? If Gustaf returned, Philip might never be able to return to Lapland. He might have to live in obscurity for the rest of his life. Could he do that here? With her?

He approached her, bowed formally, then held out his arm. "May I have the honor, madam, to accompany you?"

The smile that was on her lips finally reached her eyes. "Yes, your highness."

That was the proper form of address for a prince. Philip hadn't heard it in over a year. Only from Declan once in a while when they were in private.

Not that he wanted Felicity to use his royal address. But he had a sudden strange longing for her to know about the real him and not the pretend version that he'd had to project.

But what was the point in telling her? What would it accomplish? It would only risk her treating him differently—or at least viewing him differently. He didn't want her bowing and deferring and hallowing him the way his subjects in his country did. In fact, he'd rather liked the casual way he was able to interact with average people—something that never happened in Lapland.

Knowing Felicity as he did, he doubted a revelation of his being a prince would change how she treated him. She was authentic, and from what

hand as witnessed of her during her time at Mrs. Bancroft's, she didn't treat differently based on their wealth and status or lack thereof. She was respectful and kind to all.

He finished escorting her with the pomp that came easily from years of practice, then he helped to seat her. While he readied a new plate, she fidgeted with her skirt and repositioned herself first one way, then another, asking Mrs. Keller for advice on what looked the best.

As the lens focused in on her face, he let himself simply stare, taking in every minute detail from the sweeping arch of her eyebrows to the high smooth cheekbone to the curl caressing her cheek—just the view that his fingers itched to do.

Only when she stared directly at the lens and quirked a brow over her shoulder to realize he'd been pressed against his camera for an abnormally long time did he move.

He pulled back and straightened, trying to appear nonchalant. But Mrs. Keller was watching him with an amused expression, as if she was beginning to understand just how obsessed he was with Felicity. "You will be stunning any way you sit." He pretended to adjust the bellows. Maybe taking photographs of her hadn't been his best idea.

By now, he already having a difficult time keeping his eyes and thoughts concerning Felicity. And staring at her through his camera lens may help matters.

But he couldn't stop now. Even if she was unforgettable, he wanted to take back with him. In fact, he desperately wanted them. Pictures of a beautiful American woman would be appropriate to keep around, especially once he was engaged. He didn't care that if anyone saw the prints, they'd assume less than noble reasons for having them.

The truth was growing clearer with every passing moment—he couldn't imagine himself with any woman other than Felicity. But the other truth was that he couldn't imagine how he'd be able to have a life with her. Not by subjecting her to danger or disapproval. Or both.

'd been  
ended in

a prince  
at he'd

witnessed of her during her time at Mrs. Bancroft's, she didn't treat people differently based on their wealth and status or lack thereof. She was respectful and kind to all.

He finished escorting her with the pomp that came easily from years of practice, then he helped to seat her. While he readied a new plate, she fidgeted with her skirt and repositioned herself first one way, then another, asking Mrs. Keller for advice on what looked the best.

As the lens focused in on her face, he let himself simply stare at her, taking in every minute detail from the sweeping arch of her eyebrows and the high smooth cheekbone to the curl caressing her cheek—just the way his fingers itched to do.

Only when she stared directly at the lens and quirked a brow did he realize he'd been pressed against his camera for an abnormally long time.

He pulled back and straightened, trying to appear nonchalant.

But Mrs. Keller was watching him with an amused expression, as though she was beginning to understand just how obsessed he was with Felicity.

"You will be stunning any way you sit." He pretended to adjust the bellows. Maybe taking photographs of her hadn't been his best idea. He was already having a difficult time keeping his eyes and thoughts in line concerning Felicity. And staring at her through his camera lens wasn't helping matters.

But he couldn't stop now. Even if she was unforgettable, he wanted the photographs to take back with him. In fact, he desperately wanted them. He didn't care that pictures of a beautiful American woman wouldn't be appropriate to keep around, especially once he was engaged. He didn't care that if anyone saw the prints, they'd assume less than noble reasons for his having them.

The truth was growing clearer with every passing moment—he couldn't imagine himself with any woman other than Felicity. But the other truth was that he couldn't imagine how he'd be able to have a life with her. Not without subjecting her to danger or disapproval. Or both.

Felicity couldn't stop shivering. A draft circled around her pallet and her blanket and coat. In addition, the floorboards themselves had cooled through the cracks so that she couldn't get comfortable.

Her gaze darted to the sofa and the stack of blankets piled over Keller. They'd covered him with almost every blanket in the house, already difficult enough to keep him warm, but with the shortage of wood, the situation was growing dire.

And while Felicity didn't begrudge the dear man one single blanket, he hadn't been able to sleep much, especially as the temperature continued to drop dangerously low. She didn't have a thermometer to know exactly how cold it was outside, but the water remaining in the sink in the kitchen had frozen, and she had the water in the washbasin beside the back door.

If they'd been able to fuel the kitchen stove, the extra warmth would have driven off some of the chill. But during the last hours of daylight, Philip braved the blizzard to seek out more wood. He'd even managed to chop wood near the edge of the yard and had dragged it into the barn to cut into usable pieces only to find that it was too wet to be of any use. It had smoked and sizzled without providing much-needed heat.

They'd made the decision to conserve the few logs they had left, so, they'd agreed to congregate in the front room for the night and use the stove there.

The flame in the lantern on the sofa table gave Mrs. Keller enough light to monitor her husband's condition, but it didn't disturb Felicity as she tried to sleep.

If only she could sleep . . .

Not only was the shivering preventing her slumber, but she was worried about Philip, who'd gone out again to scavenge for more wood.

She prayed he'd be able to find some that hadn't been drenched and frozen. If he didn't, she wasn't sure what they would do. Start moving furniture?

At the moment, she was half-tempted to sit up and toss in the little chair that sat in front of one of the wingback chairs. But how long would she derive warmth from a meager stool before the frigidness of the night would come back in?

Felicity pushed up to her elbow. "You're sure you don't want me to stay with Mr. Keller while you rest?"

Mrs. Keller huddled beneath layers of clothing and blankets to keep herself wide awake, dear. You try to sleep."

Felicity laid her head back down on her pillow, but at the rattle of the back door, she scrambled to her feet. Finally, Philip was back.

Her pulse rolled forward like the wheels of a train, chugging slowly and picking up speed. She pattered in her several pairs of stockings toward the kitchen door, dragging her blanket with her.

The whoosh of the arctic air greeted her first. The normally warm air was frozen, and more so with the open door. Philip was dumping a large pile of cut wood into the bin beside the stove.

"You found wood?" She shuddered down to her bones even as she stepped into her way into the kitchen toward him.

He shoved the door closed and then dropped a second armful of wood onto the floor. He was wearing her scarf again, tugged up over his nose, and his hat on his head was pulled low, so that only his eyes showed.

He dragged the scarf away from his mouth. "I chopped up the extra wood in the barn."

She hated that they'd had to resort to the destruction. But what choice did they have if they didn't want to freeze to death? "That was smart of you, better than burning the furniture, which was what I was seeing when I was contemplating."

"Then you don't mind?"

"Without more heat, I'm afraid Mr. Keller may not survive the winter." She whispered her fear, praying Mrs. Keller couldn't hear her prediction.

Philip nodded and then began to fumble at his coat, his fingers stiff and frozen.

She crossed to him and pushed his hand out of the way and helped him to assist him. Even though the kitchen was unlit, the glow from the other room provided enough light that she could find his snow-covered buttons.

le stool “I had to shovel at least three feet of snow away from the barn before I could open it.” His body radiated cold that only made her shiver more.

“Will the livestock make it?”

ie to sit “They seem to be okay.” His warm whisper bathed her forehead. “The drifts of snow are insulating at least one wall of the barn, where most of them have gathered.”

“Good.” Even so, she wouldn’t be surprised if some of the animals of the weakest or youngest—didn’t make it.

Her own fingers were stiffening with each button she touched on her woolly but frozen coat.

ard the But he waited patiently for her help, almost as if he’d run out of energy to help himself. She could only guess how exhausted he was. After sitting in the kitchen previous two nights at Mr. Keller’s bedside and only getting a few hours of sleep during the day, and now having spent part of the night chopping wood to clear the barn, he would grow ill if he wasn’t more careful. She ought to know.

ie made “I’m sorry for all that you’re having to do.” She slipped open a button and started to tug off a sleeve.

f wood “Don’t be sorry.” Weariness etched his voice, leaving no room for his usual teasing.

As a matter of fact, he’d been more serious since the photography session that afternoon.

Warmth puddled in her stomach at the remembrance of how he’d looked at her during the picture-taking. From the moment she’d stepped into the room until she’d exited again after they’d finished, he’d hardly taken his eyes off her. Even when he’d been under the black cloth and looking through the camera lens, his attention had been intense, so much that her skin felt like it were burning, and she’d almost gone after her smelling salts that night. “I’m sorry for all that you’re having to do.”

He’d taken a dozen pictures of her in a variety of poses—some standing, some smiling, some serious. He’d even convinced her to uncoil her hair for the last two pictures and let it hang down.

At the end of the session, he’d stepped out onto the front porch and hadn’t needed Mrs. Keller to smile and tell her that Philip was over the room because of her. The smolder in his eyes had already clued her in to how he viewed her.

rn door After he came in, he'd asked if he could turn her bedroom  
liver alltemporary darkroom so he could develop the pictures. She hadn't r

And while she'd busied herself in the kitchen with baking proje  
preparing the evening meal, he'd locked himself away with trays of wa  
"I thinkchemicals.

most of By the time supper was ready, they'd formed a makeshift table r  
sofa and Mrs. Keller to include her in the meal and conversation. Phi  
ls—thebeen as gracious and talkative as usual except that he hadn't been c  
teasing or lighthearted.

on his And now, with tiredness shrouding him, she guessed he'd simply r  
his limit. The hour was well past midnight. And he'd taken the bu  
nergy tokeeping them from freezing upon his shoulders.

ting the "You should get some sleep." She draped his coat over the workt  
ours ofthat hopefully it would dry.

fuel in "I will in a little bit." He was already gathering up an armful  
ow. wooden stall beams that he'd chopped into pieces small enough to fit  
the laststove.

She approached him and began to take the load from him. "I can do  
for his He halted, his tired eyes drifting across her face. "I won't be able  
until I know that you and the Kellers are safe from the cold."

session She paused in dragging a log from his hold. A deep sense of g  
welled up within her. This man was so kind, so giving, so self-sacr  
l staredHer first impressions about him being a spoiled and wealthy womani  
nto thebeen wrong. So very wrong.

his eyes For whatever reason, he gave the aura that was who he wa  
ugh hisunderneath the bluster, he was really and truly one of the nicest me  
felt asever met.

except "You might have everyone else fooled." She jabbed a finger aga  
ng. chest, his flannel shirt cold. "But I know who you really are."

sitting, "You do?" His eyes widened and panic flitted across his face.

her to "Yes." She hadn't been expecting such a reaction from him, as if  
hiding something about himself.

ch. She "Then who am I?" His tone was almost demanding.

rhated She'd meant for the interaction to be playful. But the moment  
ow he'dexactly going the way she'd planned. She hesitated. Now that she'd  
she needed to finish. After all he'd done, the least she could do was

into a her thankfulness. “You hide yourself well behind your teasing and v  
minded. I’ve seen the real you—the man who walks miles in a storm, who s  
cts and every night, who chops wood, and who won’t stop, even whe  
ter and exhausted.”

His expression softened. “I’ve been learning from you.”

near the “No, you’re already a good man and didn’t need any help in learni  
Philip had from me.”

quite as His lips tugged up. “Are you finally paying me a compliment?”

“Maybe.”

reached “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Not with how much there is to say  
rden of me.”

And the teasing was back. She smiled just a little. “Actually, I  
able so scrape hard at the bottom of the barrel to find the compliment, so ch  
because there won’t be any more.”

of the She finished helping him pick up the rest of the wood pieces, a  
into the carried them into the front sitting room. Moments later, the fire in th  
blazed out heat. And as she took her place on the pallet near the stove  
o this.” laid his blankets out on the floor across from her—after unsuccessfully  
to rest to convince Mrs. Keller to let him sit with her husband for a while.

As Philip settled in with his broad back facing her, Felicity let h  
atitude close in satisfaction. Now that Philip was nearby, her racing heart c  
ificing, and she let herself drift into a peaceful sleep.

zer had



as. But

n she’d She awoke shivering, with limbs stiff from the cold.

The room was frigid, and at the clanking of the stove, she rolled  
inst his Philip kneeling in front of the open stove door, adding fuel to low flame.

Mrs. Keller remained in her chair beside the sofa, and Mr. Keller v  
sleeping underneath the heavy stack of blankets.

he was As the fire caught on the dry barn wood, Philip leaned back and v  
the glowing flickers. After a few moments, he closed the door and p  
his gaze sweeping across her.

wasn’t “How is—our—supply?” She could barely get the words p  
started, chattering teeth.

express



wit, but “It’s adequate for now.” He frowned and dropped his attention to the blanket she’d wound around her body. “I just overslept and neglected to get more fuel.”

“I can—add it—next time.”

His jaw flexed. “Your blanket doesn’t look like it could keep you that warm.”

“Are you comparing—me to—a flea? How sweet—of you.” Before she could shift the blanket closer, she lost her grip on it, since her fingers were shaking so badly.

He released a low growl. Then before she knew what he was doing, he reached for her and dragged her toward him, his arms snaking around her.

“What are—you doing?”

He held her tight and leaned back against the wall, bunching up his shirt behind him and situating her in front of him between his outstretched arms. “I’m warming you up.”

“I don’t need—”

“Yes, you do.”

She knew she ought to protest sitting against him so closely. But she wasn’t taking charge of the situation much the same way he had the day that she’d fainted from exhaustion. How could she resist? The truth was, she was too cold to care.

He gathered up her blanket and began tucking it around her legs and arms, pinning her tightly before drawing her close against him. His arms and legs folded around her like a thick down cover. And a warmth enveloped her.

“There. How is that?” His voice rumbled near her ear.

“Better.”

“Come on. Admit it. You feel as though you’re in paradise.”

She did. But she wasn’t about to disclose that to him. “It feels more like a sunny beach on a lake in the summer.”

“Oh, so I’m a beach on a lake?”

“Or maybe a warm log on the side of a pond.”

His arms tightened, then one of his hands rubbed up and down her arm.

All coherent thought fled from her mind, as it did every time his hands grazed her. His touch was firm and the friction meant to warm her. She knew that was his intention. But suddenly all she could think about was the feeling of his hands on her skin.

to the she was sitting squarely in front of Philip, her back against his chest, her back only inches from hers. And he was touching her . . .

She leaned her head against his shoulder and relaxed into him, her back curled up, her feet tucked under one of his legs.

She loved his touch. She couldn't deny it. The memories of his touches lingered at the forefront of her mind, never far away. She'd pore over them out and reviewed them many times, always secretly wishing for his hands to caress her again.

And now, here he was, holding her. And caressing her arms.

For at least a minute, he didn't say anything. He simply rubbed her back gently.

She wanted to snuggle into him more fully, but she didn't dare. Instead she contented herself with breathing in the scent of him that lingered on his shirt—something that was between pine and woodsmoke.

She was embarrassed that Mrs. Keller, only a dozen paces away in the wingback chair, was witnessing Philip holding her in front of her. What would she think of the situation? That they were being indecent? Too far from her. Surely Mrs. Keller would understand that, under the circumstances, that she'd had driven them together.

Philip's hand slid up and down, the friction not only bringing warmth but also showering her with a cascade of emotions and sensations that she wanted to bask in for the rest of the night. Maybe she would. . . . She could stay there where she was for a while. There was nothing wrong with that, was there? He bent toward her ear. "Are you in paradise yet?"

At the hint of teasing—as if he realized how much she enjoyed his touch—she swatted his arm and tried to wiggle away.

He chuckled and tightened his hold. "Don't go anywhere."

She pushed against him again. "This isn't decent, Philip."

"We have a chaperone, Felicity."

"I'm warm enough now, *Philip*."

"You're still shivering, *Felicity*."

She was, but only a little. Even so, as his hand glided back up her arm, she closed her eyes and sighed with the pleasure that was tingling through her arm and into her torso all the way down to her toes. She was almost certain she knew like a kitten.

How could any one man have this much power at his fingertips?

his face touch could bring her so much pleasure, what would his lips be like?

As soon as the thought came, heat raced into her face. Oh, dear her legs What was wrong with her that she was imagining kissing Philip Berg?

After a few more moments, he brought both arms back around her. As his scruffy jaw scraped her skin, her lashes fell, and she drew a shuddering breath, feeling extra sensitive to his touch.

“Try to get some sleep,” he whispered.

She could only nod mutely. How would she ever be able to sleep with him so close? It would be impossible.

But as the warmth of the flames now crackling within the stove surrounded them, her eyes grew heavy, and she drifted off.

Instead,  
he held her in his

arms in the  
dark at must  
be forward?  
the storm

warmth but  
he wanted to  
stay right  
there?

his touch

her arm,  
through her  
purring

? If his

touch could bring her so much pleasure, what would his lips be like?

As soon as the thought came, heat raced into her face. Oh, dear heavens. What was wrong with her that she was imagining kissing Philip Berg?

After a few more moments, he brought both arms back around more fully. As his scruffy jaw scraped her skin, her lashes fell, and she drew in a shuddering breath, feeling extra sensitive to his touch.

“Try to get some sleep,” he whispered.

She could only nod mutely. How would she ever be able to sleep in his arms with him so close? It would be impossible.

But as the warmth of the flames now crackling within the stove settled in around them, her eyes grew heavy, and she drifted off.

Philip stirred on the floor, drawing Felicity in closer.

She didn't resist. In fact, she almost seemed loath to move from the cocoon of warmth she'd found with him.

Mrs. Keller had added fuel to the stove again at some point during the night. When her rustling had awoken him and he'd started to rise, she motioned for him to stay where he was. "Hold her for as long as you can," she'd whispered with a nostalgic smile.

He hadn't wanted Mrs. Keller to have to get out from her blarney to refuel the stove, but he also hadn't wanted to put Felicity aside, and he didn't want to break the connection he had with her.

Now, though the darkness was still heavy and broken only by the glow of the lamp on the sofa table, he guessed that dawn wasn't too far away.

They'd survived the night. And from what he could tell, the world was almost gone again.

He would need to go back to the barn and chop up more of the sticks to see them through the day.

Should he go now?

Mrs. Keller's head bobbed in her effort to stay awake and keep time with her husband.

Felicity would want him to wake her so that she could relieve the woman from her duty.

Yes, it was time. Yet he loved the feel of Felicity in his arms and the weight of her body. Her head resting against his shoulder, her hair tickling his cheek, her even breathing reminding him that he had everything he wanted right here with her. If he died today, he'd die a happy man.

Actually, at this moment, on the floor of an old house in the lonely and rugged high country of Colorado, he was happier than he ever had been in Lapland. Which begged the question—why not stay with her? Why go back at all? He could write to Gustaf and tell him that he intended to live in America and would never come back. Certainly if he did so,

would leave him alone, wouldn't he?

He could consider the possibility, couldn't he?

But what about the duty to his country? And to his people? If the suffering with Gustaf as king, then how could he abandon them when within his power to change the course of their lives for the better?

He released a tense breath. For now, all he could do was relish the moment with Felicity and not think beyond today. But that relishing mean he could give in to the desires building inside him. And certainly didn't mean he could erase the boundaries he was trying to keep with her.

She released a soft breath—almost a hum of contentment. And she tucked under her blanket and pushed back against him, as if trying to find a burrow deeper into him.

One more tiny moment with her. That's all he'd take.

He pressed his nose into her hair and drew in a sweet honey scent. It was so soft and warm and delicate. Before he could stop himself, he pressed a kiss into the back of her head, into her loose, silky hair. As if the kiss was the key, it seemed to unlock a door he'd kept tightly closed up until this moment. One that was holding back the full force of his longing. And now, it poured out—pure, raw desire unlike anything he'd known before.

He couldn't pull away from her, so instead, he kissed her head again and again, harder. His arms wrapped around her more securely, and he felt a sudden need to shift her around and find her lips so that he could kiss her thoroughly. What he wouldn't give to taste all her sweetness, to explore her mouth to discover if she was feeling the same longing that he was.

She stirred.

Was she sensing the change in him?

He'd done so well the past hours in keeping everything bolted away from her, but now the kisses to her head had undone him.

He closed his eyes and clamped his jaw, battling against his need. He couldn't have her. Not when he had nothing to offer. If he kept going, his desires take control, he'd turn into a selfish womanizer—the kind of man she'd hinted that he was. He couldn't—wouldn't—do that.

Holding himself immobile, he loosened his hold and sat back, trying to put some distance between them. But as he attempted to extricate himself from her, Gustaf turned just slightly, released a sleepy sound, and somehow her lips latched onto his.

against his neck in a sensitive spot right below his jaw.

He stilled.

From the way she remained relaxed against him, he could tell that it was mostly asleep, that she hadn't meant to brush his neck.

Even so, his skin was on fire, and the flames were spreading through his body.

"What time is it?" Her whisper grazed his skin.

This woman was going to be the end of him. "It's nearing dawn, but I started to lower his mouth back to her head. Just one more kiss of his.

That's all he'd take.

Before he could press in, she began to scramble away from him. "Poor Mrs. Keller. She needs a respite."

Somehow his self-control was gone. It had dissipated, evaporated, like mist under a hot sun. His hands had a mind of their own. She couldn't let go of her.

But as she pushed against him harder, the movement seemed to come out of his desire-laden haze. He let his arms fall away, freeing her to point—from him and then push up until she was standing.

Underneath her coat, she was wearing the simple skirt and blouse she wore the previous day. And her hair was still in a lovely chignon, albeit a little messy, with loose strands. For a moment, she held a hand against her forehead, though trying to gain her bearing.

She started toward Mrs. Keller but then stopped and glanced back over her shoulder. "I don't know how we would have survived the night without you, Philip. You've been a godsend."

He nodded mutely, unable to come up with a witty response, not with his desire blazing so hot and out of control. Yesterday, while taking pictures, he'd grown overheated and had to step out onto the porch for a few moments to cool himself down. But the heat then couldn't begin to compare to what he was feeling now.

He most definitely needed to go outside and douse himself with water. Without allowing himself to take her in again, he stood, his stiff protesting, and he made his way into the kitchen to his cold, damp clothing. He donned them and headed outside.

The first thing he noticed as he stepped into the early light of dawn was the silence. The incessant blowing had stopped, and the world

him was shrouded in a blanket of quiet white.

The second thing he realized was that the air wasn't as frigid. That the temperature was still freezing, but the bitterness was gone.

As he made his way to the barn, he didn't need to hold on to the rope. He didn't have to fight against the drifting snow. Instead, his steps were soft swooshing that was almost pleasant. As with the other times, he had to shovel the snow away from the barn door to get inside. But with the storm, he had the way cleared in no time.

He tended to the livestock, chopped another area of the barn for fuel. By the time he trudged back to the house, dawn had turned into daylight. Hints of sunshine peeking from behind the clouds.

Although a part of him was relieved that the worst weather had passed, another part of him wasn't ready for the time with Felicity to come to town and not yet. Not so soon.

From the size of the drifts, he guessed they wouldn't be safe attempting to travel until the snow melted a little. That meant he still had more time to enjoy being with her without worry of danger or without the pressure of having to leave.

As he neared the kitchen door, he paused and took in the view. The wobbly mountains and foothills covered in snow, his breath caught at the beauty, as the whitewashed world and the evergreens glistening with the ice. From the fence post draped with snow to the drifted wagon path, everything called to him. A pristine clarity that he wanted to capture with his camera.

Maybe today, after all the chores were done, he'd gather his camera and traipse around and get some photographs of the aftermath of the storm with his only if he could convince Felicity to join him in exploring the features of wonderland. There was no sense in denying the burning need to spend a few moments possible with her while he still could.

compare



in snow.

He and Felicity alternated taking care of Mr. Keller while Mrs. Keller was out. And when he wasn't tending to the older man, he was hauling wood, scrounging for dry wood. Thankfully, with the snow having stopped, he was able to locate windfall not too far from the house that was still dry enough to use.



burn.

Yes, the With the kitchen stove fueled again, Felicity made soup and bread.

Philip ate it with a cup of coffee, never more grateful for the warmth of the fire. He curled up on the sofa, and settle inside and chase away the last vestiges of chill from his bones.

Finally by mid-afternoon, when Mrs. Keller had awoken and realized she had to herself, Philip convinced Felicity to join him outside. The sun stayed out behind the clouds, but the warmth of it lingered in the air regardless.

They strapped on snowshoes, and Philip led the way to several spots of interest, and he'd wanted to photograph. With each stop, Felicity helped him set up the camera and then held the containers and lens cover while he made a sharp image of the landscape—images he would hold dearer than any of the places he'd photographed during his travels.

During their time together, it was almost as if they'd silently agreed not to talk about the future or his leaving. Instead, she asked him astute questions about the process of taking pictures as well as the development of the film. He regaled her with tales of some of his worst moments as a photographer and some of his most embarrassing mistakes.

Upon her inquiry, he told her that he'd taken up the hobby of amateur photography during his years in boarding school because he'd been denied the opportunity of He wanted to divulge that he hadn't been allowed to participate in as many of the activities as the normal students and had needed to pass the time. He'd kept it hidden.

After spending so much time with her already and not having revealed his true identity, he wasn't sure what purpose her knowing now would serve. But wasn't as if he was lying to her. He'd merely omitted information.

As they hiked, she wanted to hear more about his travels, both in the United States as well as in other parts of the world. After each place that he described, she sighed dramatically, a dreamy, faraway look filling her eyes.

He led the way back to the house through the field to the north. The air was filled with the scent of smoke above the evergreens ahead wafted into the evening sky, the air now edged with pink and lavender.

He wanted to linger and admire the beauty until darkness fell. But he needed to return and check on the Kellers as well as tend to the household chores. And even though the temperature had been moderate enough to melt the snow, he was afraid he'd kept her out too long.

He lifted one snowshoe and then the next, the footwear keeping biscuits from sinking into the deep drifts. “You should travel.” He cast her a meal to over his shoulder.

Her cheeks were rosy from the cold, her brown eyes were bright, fresh hair was radiant against the white backdrop of snow. She looked like mostly a fairy princess. Except that she leveled a stern glance at him. “Thank that excellent piece of advice. It was so wise and helpful.”

He grinned. “I am known for doling out wisdom once in a while.”

“You should do it more often. The world has been missing out.”

A deep sense of contentment welled within him. He loved being with her other quite possibly more than he loved being with anyone else.

He continued for several steps before pressing forward without conversation. “Why can’t you travel? What’s stopping you?”

“First, I’m a single woman—”

“That’s an excuse. I’ve heard of an Englishwoman by the name Isabella Bird who toured the West and the Rocky Mountains a few years by herself—without a chaperone or even a traveling companion.”

“Really?” Felicity’s question held disbelief.

“Really. Although, I’m not suggesting you do the same.” Actually, he had a thought of Felicity riding on a horse throughout the desolate wilderness.

But he alone, a sharp panic clutched at his gut. “In fact, I do think you should have a traveling companion.”

“So should my traveling companion be another woman, or should it be a man to protect me?” Her tone held sarcasm.

His mind spun with the implications of both, and neither appealed to him especially the prospect of her spending hours alone with another man. “Neither. At least, not with a man who isn’t also your husband.”

“Are you saying I’m not capable without a man?”

“No, I’m saying you’re too beautiful and would draw too much unwanted attention.”

“Who are you to say the attention is unwanted?”

He halted. With his knapsack and tripod slung over his shoulder, but they pivoted carefully.

She stopped, too, her eyes narrowed upon him.

“Do you want other men to pay attention to you?” His voice came out gruffer than he’d intended. Was he jealous of future, unnamed men?

g them might like her? If so, he had no right to be.

glance “Maybe among those men paying me attention, I’ll find a husband to travel with him.” She lifted her chin as though daring him to defy her. and her His sights dropped to her perfect lips. A shaft of desire ripped through a snowman. He wanted to close the distance between them and lavish kisses on your mouth. He’d show her that no other man could compare to him.

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts—or more likely seeing desire and realizing that he wanted to kiss her—her gaze shifted to his. She studied his lips like she did one of her baked creations after pulling it from the oven—hungrily.

If he could, he would let her sate herself with him. He’d let her taste it over and over. And then once she’d had her fill, he’d take his in return. Lips would be better than any dessert, and he’d savor every tiny corner of her curve.

He could only imagine what it would be like to travel with Felicity. Years ago, he’d never have a dull moment. Instead, when he wasn’t busy kissing senseless, they’d have fun together, laughing and teasing and helping each other to find the brighter side of life. Yet they’d also have long, meaningful conversations about important topics. And they’d argue, like a married couple, but the air would sizzle between them until he dragged her into his arms and kissed her into silence.

Why did so many of his fantasies about her involve kissing?

He swallowed the need to kiss her and was thankful the snowshoe getting too near her awkward. “I admit, I’m already jealous of the man who will be your husband.” He tried to keep his tone light.

“You should be.” She didn’t remove her gaze from his lips. “He’d have to be a good kisser—I mean traveler.” She lifted her mittened hands, her cheeks rapidly flushing, her eyes widening with mortification.

His grin kicked up. “So, you’re thinking about kissing me.”

“I was thinking about kissing my husband.” She started forward in her snowshoes, slipping past him. “Is there anything wrong with that? Or is it forbidden to me too?”

He wanted to tell her that she was forbidden from kissing anyone other than him, but his bantering about kissing was already leading him back into dangerous territory, like walking out on thin ice that was already cracking. One wrong move and he would break through and take her with him.

She was several feet in front of him, taking the lead in the hike around the house. She moved with such confidence and strength and purpose that no man would ever be worthy of marrying her? He couldn't think of anyone else. Except maybe Weston. But even he wasn't good enough. "If you ever have any thoughts of kissing me, then you must be envisioning Weston."

She released a scoffing sound.

The noise settled his nerves. "How many times has that man pounced on you? Surely by now you've thought of kissing him."

"Just because a man is interested in me doesn't mean I start thinking of ways I can get him alone and pounce on him."

"Pounce?"

"You know what I mean."

"No. Enlighten me. What would *pouncing* entail?"

"Stop."

"I'm serious. Maybe you should demonstrate. I'll allow you to do so. I'm your willing subject."

This time she laughed lightly.

His grin worked its way free again. They walked quietly until he could hold back the question burning inside him. "Why haven't you accepted her proposal yet?" The inquiry came out too seriously.

She continued on almost as if she hadn't heard him.

"Weston is a good man." He said the words that needed saying, even though he didn't want to.

"He's a very fine man."

"Very?"

"Any woman who marries him will be *very* blessed."

"And do you plan to be that woman?"

She walked several more feet before answering. "I don't know."

He wasn't sure why he was pressing the matter, except that he wanted to have a happy future. Would that be with Weston?

Holding back a sigh, he followed after her, letting the matter die and stifling the wish that she could have a happy future with him instead.

Her man  
lick into  
acking.

She was several feet in front of him, taking the lead in the hike back to the house. She moved with such confidence and strength and purpose. What man would ever be worthy of marrying her? He couldn't think of anyone. Except maybe Weston. But even he wasn't good enough. "If you're not thinking of kissing me, then you must be envisioning Weston."

She released a scoffing sound.

The noise settled his nerves. "How many times has that man proposed? Surely by now you've thought of kissing him."

"Just because a man is interested in me doesn't mean I start thinking of ways I can get him alone and pounce on him."

"Pounce?"

"You know what I mean."

"No. Enlighten me. What would *pouncing* entail?"

"Stop."

"I'm serious. Maybe you should demonstrate. I'll allow you to do so with me. I'm your willing subject."

This time she laughed lightly.

His grin worked its way free again. They walked quietly until he couldn't hold back the question burning inside him. "Why haven't you accepted his proposal yet?" The inquiry came out too seriously.

She continued on almost as if she hadn't heard him.

"Weston is a good man." He said the words that needed saying, even though he didn't want to.

"He's a very fine man."

"*Very?*"

"Any woman who marries him will be *very* blessed."

"And do you plan to be that woman?"

She walked several more feet before answering. "I don't know."

He wasn't sure why he was pressing the matter, except that he wanted her to have a happy future. Would that be with Weston?

Holding back a sigh, he followed after her, letting the matter drop and stifling the wish that she could have a happy future with him instead.

A snowball hit the kitchen window near the sink. It startled Felicity for a moment before it sent a shimmy of delight through her.

She moved away from the stove and the bread she'd just taken from the oven and peered out the window into the brightness of the sunshine just over the melting snow.

Philip stood in the middle of the backyard, his hat and gloves on his coat discarded. He was grinning and tossed another snowball, this one through the window again, the snow splattering.

She shook her head at him and pretended irritation before returning to the stove. Only then did she let her smile free as she loosened the loaf from the bread pan and placed it on the worktable to cool. A supper of stew was already simmering in the back pot, and now that the bread was done, she was free for a short while to spend time with Philip.

He called it *playing*. Already he'd thrown several other snowballs through the window, trying to get her outside to *play*. But she'd chastised him that he had too much to do and couldn't stop, even though everything within her longed to cast aside her duties and frolic with him as she had the previous days.

After their first afternoon of taking pictures, the next day they'd driven to the foothills on the other side of the river, and they'd sled on a makeshift sled that he'd made out of items he'd located in the barn. She'd never been sledding before, and of course, Philip had made the experience entirely fun and enjoyable, as he did most things.

Today, on the first day of November, the temperature was very warm, especially with the sun finally coming out and deciding to stay. Although she was glad for the warmth, she dreaded losing the drifts that had protected her from traveling.

She could admit she'd loved the past few days of isolated existence. Now she and Philip could spend endless hours together without any thought of tomorrow. But sooner or later, they would have to face what they would

when the snow melted.

Because it would melt. It already was melting. Significantly.

They might only have the rest of the day, maybe one more, before the roads around the area became passable again.

Another snowball hit the window, followed by another.

More delight rushed through her. She untied her apron and set it on the counter before calling into the other room “Mrs. Keller? I’ll be outside in a little while.”

“You go on, dear.” Mrs. Keller was sitting in the wingback chair with Mr. Keller on the sofa. They hadn’t returned upstairs, mostly because the supplies remained in short supply. But Felicity had also noticed the way the couple thrived in being around others, and she didn’t want to relegate them to isolation again.

The sofa wasn’t as comfortable and spacious as the bed, but as long as there were no other boarders, she was all too willing to let the couple stay in the front room. She’d considered giving up her room so they could have some privacy. But she couldn’t sleep upstairs near Philip. Such an arrangement wouldn’t be proper.

“Enjoy that man of yours,” Mrs. Keller called.

Felicity needed to correct the older woman. Philip wasn’t hers. She just couldn’t make herself say the words.

After all, the day was coming—likely soon—when Mrs. Keller would learn Philip wasn’t hers. The thought of his leaving filled Felicity with a strange emptiness that was turning into a chasm. A deep, dark chasm.

And she was trying not to think about it.

As another snowball pinged against the glass, she crossed to the door and peeked out. “You’re in big trouble for causing such a ruckus.”

In the process of scooping up more snow, he rose and his eyes began to dance. “Trouble? What kind of trouble am I in, and whatever will happen with me for being so naughty?”

Oh, dear heavens. She adored him more every time he bantered with her like that. In fact, his banter was addictive. She found herself seeking him out—seeking him out—at all hours of the day and night.

She opened the door wider and stepped outside. “You’ll need to come over here if you want your discipline.”

He bounded through the snow toward her.

Invisible strings seemed to exist between them, irresistibly pulling together. And as much as she wanted to touch him, needed to touch him before she tried to ignore the low, deep need. Instead, she let him approach until he stopped a foot away. Then she bent, swiped up a handful of snow, and mashed it against his face.

He stood in shocked silence, globs of snow dripping down his cheeks for aching.

Her laughter bubbled out.

He watched her for a moment. Then he lunged for her.

She was expecting it and dodged out of his grasp. She pivoted, couple holding up her skirt, she darted across the yard and away from him.

He started after her, but in the next instant he slipped and fell to his

She laughed even more, tramping in the snow as fast as her feet could long as carry her.

“That wasn’t very nice discipline,” he called after her as he held himself back to his feet.

“It’s what you deserved.”

“Maybe. But now you’re the one in trouble.” His eyes were a challenge, like a skilled hunter closing in on his prey, daring her to escape. But she warning her that he wouldn’t let her get away.

A thrill curled inside her all the way down to her toes. “I’m so frightened of you.”

“You should be scared, especially with what I have planned.” He lunged after her, but his heavier boots in the wet snow seemed to slow him down so that she had time to race farther ahead.

“You’re too slow and won’t be able to catch me.” She taunted him and grabbed a handful of snow. Taking aim, she tossed it at him.

It smacked against his chest—not hard, but enough to send slush down his flannel shirt.

He scooped up snow and, in one easy motion, made a snowball and threw it at her. The hit was gentle, but the splotch clung to her blouse. She threw it out—already throwing another before she had the wherewithal to fight him back.

“I guess this means war.” She ducked away from his missile and laughed to come one back.

“Oh yes.” He knelt and began shaping another snowball. “When will you give me what reward will you give me?”



g them “You won’t win.” She veered toward a fence post by the garden, she ducked behind.

until he “I’ll win, and I’ll expect a prize when I do.”

w, and “And if you lose—which you will—then you will owe me a prize.” She busily began making snowballs of her own, her body charged with the excitement and life she always felt when she was with him. How could being with him and playing with him—feel so freeing?

Was it that she took life so seriously most of the time? She’d been striving so hard to keep up with the workload, to be productive, and to do it all, then, put together. Something deep inside had always driven her to be better. Maybe it was the echo of her mother’s voice reminding her that she needed to strive harder. Or maybe it was her own inadequacy from past failures that would push her to try to be good enough.

Whatever the case, she hadn’t often stopped to simply enjoy life or accept her imperfections. Somehow, with Philip, she was doing that. He was showing her how to embrace the present. And he seemed to be accepting her for who she was, in spite of all her shortcomings.

At first, the snowball fight went her way. She was able to fire a snowball through his arm pits but rounds for every one of his. And since he was out in the open, she could nearly every time—until he finally stood to his full height and began to approach her, letting each hit bounce off him as if she were throwing wisps of cotton at him instead of slushy snow.

With each step he drew closer, he kept tossing snow at her, but it never landed in front of her. When he towered over her, she stopped and planted her hands on her hips. “You went easy on me and let me win, didn’t you?”

He held up his hands as though to prove his innocence. And his blue eyes, more beautiful than the cloudless sky overhead, were filled with surprise.

“Why would I do a thing like that?”

“Because you’re treating me like a fine, breakable teacup.”

“Or maybe it’s because I want to be the one to owe you a prize.” He smiled and dipped in his seductive, smooth-talking way.

It made her stomach dip too. “If I’m the winner, I get to pick the prize.”

“No. I get to give it.”

“That’s not fair. What if I don’t like my reward?”

“Oh, you’ll like it.” He did it again. Lowered his voice and made it

len andas though she were walking a high mountain trail with thinning air that  
her lightheaded.

She pushed against his chest, needing to somehow diffuse the  
e.” She pulling more magnetically with each passing moment.

energy At her light shove, he pretended to tumble backward. At the same  
time him—he latched onto her arm and pulled her with him. With a grin, he  
threw himself to fall down into the snow. And he didn’t release her, so that  
she had been found herself landing backward in a soft drift close by.

remain “This is your prize.” He began to move his arms and legs, shifting  
better in and then out. “Making snow angels.”

needed to Her backside was soaking in the wet snow, but she pushed herself  
rest that her elbows and watched him. After a moment, he gingerly crawled  
away from his spot on the ground, leaving behind an imprint—one that did,  
with all look like that of an angel.

howing “Your turn.” He waited expectantly above her.

for who She hesitated only a moment before she lowered herself back to the  
ground and began to shift her arms and legs the way he’d done. When finished  
off two inched away and then stood and examined her snow angel. Hers was  
right beside his, giving the impression that the two were holding hands—or  
at least began to. “Our guardian angels are watching over us.” He was staring down  
at the light indentations in the snow, his expression almost tender.

It truly was beautiful to see his larger imprint and her smaller one  
side by side, both looking like angels.

god and “Let’s do it again.” She tugged him toward an untouched patch of  
snow, didn’t only a few feet away. Before she could position herself, he reached  
out his hand and slipped his fingers around hers.

the eyes, Her body halted its forward momentum, and she felt as though she  
was in front of a narrow tunnel where he was the only thing she could see  
and his hand was the only thing she could focus on.

He hadn’t held her hand before. Yes, he’d tugged at her arm or guided  
her by her shoulders or poked at her playfully. But he hadn’t been purposeful  
with her for any length of time.

size.” Of course, he’d deliberately grazed her on a couple occasions. An  
occasional touch had seared into her, rendering her a quivering bundle of  
nerves.

Even though she couldn’t deny how much she liked his touch, she was  
nevertheless relieved he’d been a gentleman and hadn’t taken advantage of her  
vulnerability.

at made being snowed in together.

But now, holding her hand? What did it mean? She opened her mouth to ask a question of him, but no words came out.

He held himself precariously, starting to tip backward into the snow at the time, “Ready?”

“No—” She was too late. He was falling and taking her with him.

His fingers were surprisingly warm, even though he’d been in the snow at her. And they were strong with a hint of gentleness.

With her thoughts focused on the feel of his hand holding hers, she didn’t pay attention to where she was landing. And a moment later, she fell backward directly into him, almost squarely on top of him.

“Oomph.” He flinched at the impact.

For a second, she couldn’t fathom anything else and lay unmoving on top of him. Her whole focus was on the feel of his hand against hers, their fingers touching, his long fingers draped around hers possessively, his grip tightening.

He didn’t move or say anything either. Finally, he cleared his throat and said directly, “Umm, I guess you missed the snow.”

Something in his tone penetrated her mind. And suddenly she was aware of his solid body beneath hers—his broad chest, his sinewy arms, his long legs tangled with hers.

Ugh. Mortification swept through her at the indecency of her position. She was directly on top of him, likely cutting off his breathing.

She tried to roll off, but because of the way he was holding her so tightly, she found herself flipped over, and this time her chest—instead of her back—pressed into him.

More mortification swept through her. She was still on top of him and his time staring down at her, his face inches from hers, his wide eyes peering at her.

“Oh, dear heavens.” She tried to make herself move but didn’t manage. “I’m sorry, Philip. I didn’t mean for this to happen—”

He cut her off with a finger to her lips from his free hand.

The caress sent a needy surge through her middle. And suddenly her senses were overwhelmed with not only his hand in hers but also his mouth against her mouth. He held it there for a moment before moving it away.

“You should have warned me you wanted to tackle me instead of”

snow angels.” His tone came out teasing.

mouth to “I didn’t mean to tackle you.” Where was her wit? And why could she breathe?

he drift. “I think you did.” His lips turned up slyly.

“I wasn’t paying attention. That’s all.”

“Likely excuse—”

rowing “It’s not an excuse.”

“Just admit it. You tackled me because you want to kiss me.”

he didn’t He’d teased her about kissing before. And while those conversations she fell warmed up her insides, she had always been able to tease him back.

This time, she couldn’t find a retort. Instead, her attention dropped to his mouth. It was only inches away, his lips still curved. Firm and full. Would it be like to touch his lips the way he’d touched hers?

No, she didn’t want to kiss him. She wouldn’t even think about it. How could she grip his hand, couldn’t she? And find out exactly how those lips felt beneath her fingertips.

throat. She lifted her free hand to his face, and then before she could talk out of it, she brought her fingers down lightly against his lips.

keenly His smile disappeared.

ns, and Had she made a mistake?

She tore her attention from his mouth only to find her gaze colliding with his. The mirth was gone, and the blue was quickly darkening and his eyes widening. She wasn’t an expert on reading emotions, but she had no trouble deciphering stark desire in those dark depths.

What had she done? He’d been keeping the moment light and teasing as he always did. She should have joked back, should have laughed, but this should have rolled off like she’d been trying to do.

Instead, she’d parked on top of him as if he were a mountaintop she intended to stay for a while and have a picnic. She couldn’t. She couldn’t make it disentangle her fingers from his. That was the first place she had to be.

Then her mind would be clearer, and she’d be able to make better decisions.

She tugged at her hand, loosening it from his hold. But before she could fully extricate it all the way, he lifted it to his lips, brushing a soft kiss against her fingers and knuckles.

Her time stopped from the beginning of the world to the end.

His eyes caught hers again, refusing to let go. And this time, as

another soft kiss on her hand, her pulse halted, and all that mattered wasn't sheman. Philip Berg was everything she'd ever wanted—kindhearted, self-sacrificing, caring, decent, good, and a dozen other qualities that she couldn't find words for at the moment.

And he was also everything she'd never known she wanted—teasing, talkative, interesting, adventurous, lighthearted . . . and yet playful.

The truth was, she liked him more than she ever had any other man she had met. Dare she say she might even be falling in love with him? She was without a doubt that if he asked her to leave with him, she would want to go with him. She'd even marry him.

What? The realization hit her with a frightening force. She'd said no to every other suitor who'd proposed to her for the past year and a half. And here she was, ready to marry the one man who hadn't proposed, who hadn't mentioned a commitment to her.

He kissed her hand again, with an adoration that bordered on reverence. Then, with warm tenderness, he began to make a trail of soft kisses up her wrist.

Each brush of his lips filled her with a swirl of sensations that made her feel as if she was falling.

Yes, she was falling in love with him. Not only did she like who he was as a person, but she also was attracted to him physically. The pull toward him—especially in moments like this, where he was holding her so intimately—was overpowering. The soft brush of his mouth and the warm, full breath took her captive, made her his willing prisoner, and took away all other thoughts but needing him.

She needed him.

As if hearing her thoughts, he paused above her wrist. Something about his eyes—the seriousness, the intensity—wrapped around her and bound her even more. Did he need her the same way?

If so, what was holding him back? Even though she liked the playful side of him, there had been too many times when they'd been starting a conversation serious that he'd changed the mood with a lighthearted comment, teasing, or even a funny action. She'd begun to suspect it was his way of deflecting attention, not letting himself grow too attached to her.

But why? What was wrong with her that he didn't want to get

Wasn't she good enough for a man like him?

And what about now? What if he pulled away again? Maybe she had to make it very clear that she cared about him. If she bent in and

kiss against his lips, then he'd have no doubts about how she felt . . .

Yet, after allowing that disastrous kiss a few years ago with his friend's brother, she'd kept her vow not to let another suitor kiss

course, in this case, if *she* began the kiss—instead of the suitor—then she'd technically wouldn't be breaking her vow, would she? She'd be in charge, the one giving the kiss. Not him.

As his open mouth connected with her throbbing pulse, she swooned.

Before she could talk herself out of her resolve, she tugged her hair from his and, in the same motion, spanned the distance between them. Closing her eyes, she grazed her lips against his.

He stilled.

She wasn't knowledgeable about kissing. Her first and last kiss had been short and sloppy.

Even so, she let her lips linger against Philip's, the softness and the way he grazed her.

He didn't press in, but neither did he pull away. Was that a good sign? His lips were slightly open, and she let hers open, too, as she nudged her mouth against his, wanting more from the kiss, wanting more from him. At the same time, a tremor of fear stole through her.

Yes, she'd sensed his desire, had seen it in his eyes. But that didn't mean he wanted to kiss her.

She hesitated. Ugh. What was she doing? She'd made a mistake . . .

She started to break away, but before she could, his hand looped around her neck, holding her in place, and then he chased after her lips and completely took possession of them.

He'd clearly been holding himself back for whatever reason. And he moved urgently, pressing in, meshing his lips with hers, a hint of desperation getting his kisses. He was like the medieval knight she'd imagined himself charging forward and capturing her. His plundering stirred her appetite for more of him, so that she wanted nothing more than to feel his body against hers.

It was a wanton thought, but the longing was keen. And she gli

hands over his perfectly sculpted chest, letting her fingers skim his chest, which was all too accessible since his shirt was wet and plastered to his skin. His hand at her neck threaded into her hair, which had come loose at some point during their playing. His other hand shifted to her hip, his fingers bestplaying and tugging her more directly on top of him, almost as if he needed her. Offfeeling the need to be closer to her too. In the same moment, the rhythm of her mouth turned more urgent and pulsed with need.

taking She couldn't breathe, and she couldn't hold back a soft moan.

"Felicity?" The call penetrated the haze of passion that surrounded her. Beneath her, Philip stirred and clearly had heard the voice. But he was too passionate, too fervent, too consuming for her to break away. He would not have made any move to bring the kiss to an end either.

"Felicity? What is going on here?" This time the voice was directly behind her, and it roused her from the blissful dream she was living in. One in which she and Philip were the only people who existed in the entire world.

Even though she didn't want to awaken, and even though she didn't want to stop, there was something in the newcomer's tone that drew her back to reality. Was it shock?

She'd been the one to start the kiss, and now she had to utilize someone else to finish it. She had to tear her lips from Philip's. She had to close her eyes and return to the real world. But try as she might to force herself away from him, she couldn't.

"I can't believe this." The person's shadow fell across them along with a wagonload of censure.

The voice didn't belong to Mrs. Keller. And it didn't even belong to her sister, Patience. Instead, it was deep and manly.

With a final lingering kiss, Philip tugged against her lips in a way that made her nearly lose her mind. Then he broke from her, shifted his head, and now he smiled up at the man. "Hello, Weston."

operation  
n to be,  
:tite for  
against

ded her

hands over his perfectly sculpted chest, letting her fingers skim his flesh, which was all too accessible since his shirt was wet and plastered to him.

His hand at her neck threaded into her hair, which had come loose at some point during their playing. His other hand shifted to her hip, his fingers splaying and tugging her more directly on top of him, almost as if he was feeling the need to be closer to her too. In the same moment, the rhythm of his mouth turned more urgent and pulsed with need.

She couldn't breathe, and she couldn't hold back a soft moan.

"Felicity?" The call penetrated the haze of passion that surrounded her.

Beneath her, Philip stirred and clearly had heard the voice. But his kiss was too passionate, too fervent, too consuming for her to break away. And he made no move to bring the kiss to an end either.

"Felicity? What is going on here?" This time the voice was almost directly behind her, and it roused her from the blissful dream she'd been living in. One in which she and Philip were the only people who existed in the entire world.

Even though she didn't want to awaken, and even though she didn't want to stop, there was something in the newcomer's tone that drew her back to reality. Was it shock?

She'd been the one to start the kiss, and now she had to utilize control and be the one to finish it. She had to tear her lips from Philip's. She had to open her eyes and return to the real world. But try as she might to force herself away from him, she couldn't.

"I can't believe this." The person's shadow fell across them along with a wagonload of censure.

The voice didn't belong to Mrs. Keller. And it didn't even belong to her sister, Patience. Instead, it was deep and manly.

With a final lingering kiss, Philip tugged against her lips in a way that made her nearly lose her mind. Then he broke from her, shifted his head, and smiled up at the man. "Hello, Weston."



The sun blinded Philip as he peered up at Weston Oakley, standing behind him and Felicity.

Philip knew he should've pulled away from Felicity and ended the kiss the first time he'd heard Weston call out her name. But something had kept him from doing so—something hot and possessive, something that wanted to prove Felicity belonged to him.

The need to do so was unreasonable. Because Felicity didn't belong to him—couldn't belong to him—and needed to belong to Weston.

So why had he continued the kiss? And why was he now making an effort to extricate himself from her?

Felicity didn't move from on top of him either. She seemed incapable of moving, as if in a stupor. Instead, she rested with her full weight pressing in, her face just inches from his, her exhalations heavy against his mouth. With her lips swollen and her chest rising and falling against his, desire continued to flow through his blood.

He hadn't expected his kisses upon her hand to lead to this passionate moment. He'd only meant for a brief moment of tenderness between them, the way they'd had on a couple of other occasions.

But she'd taken him by surprise when, instead of rolling away from him, she'd bent in and touched her lips lightly to his. When she'd held him there, he'd known her move hadn't been accidental, that she'd purposely initiated the kiss.

For a second or two, he hadn't known what to do, hadn't wanted to go any further. Instead, he'd intended to keep the relationship between them from getting too serious, as he always did. Yet, with her lips against his, sweetly and gently, she'd swept him into a world of such pure bliss that his body had responded with a powerful urge, one that he'd been fighting against all along and could no longer resist.

The truth was, he'd been denying himself since meeting her. Though he'd used incredible willpower—had tried to hold himself back, tried to control

himself he didn't care, tried to keep the barriers he'd erected—he'd not been able to ignore the sharp yearning to have this beautiful woman for himself.

Need had welled up within him so forcefully that he'd lost his self-reason. All his work to keep a tight rein on his emotions and protect himself from himself flew from his mind. He'd hesitated only a moment before greedily taking her offering, not wanting her to get away, not ready to release him before he had the chance to thoroughly explore her with a kiss. He'd rationalized that one kiss wouldn't harm either of them. On the other hand, a kiss . . .

But he should have known it wouldn't be one small kiss. Not a long time past weeks of stuffing all his feelings for her into a compartment at the back of his mind. Instead, his feelings had come rushing out, crashing over him and enveloping him.

The cold snow against his back had soaked his clothing and shouldered his flesh. And yet his body was hot, and his breath was still hot in his chest with need still coursing through his blood.

Weston had taken off his hat and jabbed his hand into his dark hair. He was glowering down at Philip as if he intended to yank him to his feet and begin using him as a bullseye for target practice.

Wait. Weston was *here*.

Philip shifted his head to Weston's horse a dozen paces away.

That meant the snow had melted enough that a horse could get to him. Maybe not easily, but transportation was possible.

In fact, all throughout the day and even during their snowball fights and snow-angel making, a nagging in his conscience had told him that he was delaying unnecessarily, that he could probably go today. At the very least, he had to make an effort to ride into town.

The truth was, the few days of being marooned at the boardinghouse were over.

Philip kept his grin in place and crossed his arms behind his head. "Of course. I'll be glad to stop by and finally check on Felicity as I requested of you."

Weston's scowl deepened. "What are you doing here in Fairplay if you supposed to be long gone?"

"It's a good thing I didn't leave. Someone had to be available to make sure Felicity survive the storm, especially since you didn't come check on her."

no longer His accusation was a low blow. The storm had been too dangerous for anyone to venture out. Even so, Philip couldn't stop himself from ripping the man.

in the presence of "Whoa now. I set out to her place several times." Weston's gaze fell on Felicity, who still hadn't budged from where she was sprawled over him before. "But couldn't make it more than a dozen steps before having to turn back on her to As though finally hearing Weston's voice, Felicity glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes rounded at the sight of him, and she began to scramble for Philip. She pushed up, her face flushing and mortification filling her.

Whatever trance he'd held over her with his touch and his kissing, she awoke after the waking up from it and realizing the indecency of their situation.

He needed to move, needed to stand up, needed to help her. Moments later, when he had to admit to Weston that the kissing had been a fluke.

It hadn't meant anything and that it wouldn't happen again.

That was the truth. The kissing had been innocent, and there was no heavy innuendo going on. But even though the words pressed for release, he swallowed them, that strange need swelling up to prove Felicity was not a fair. He no other man's. It was an irrational thought, but he couldn't shake it.

Weston, ever chivalrous, reached out and carefully assisted Felicity on her feet, eyes radiating hurt and betrayal. "Has Philip been staying here the whole time?"

Felicity hesitated then nodded. "He arrived just as the storm was swirling around. covered in ice and half frozen. I couldn't send him away."

"Couldn't? Or wouldn't?"

"It was too dangerous. Too icy. We didn't expect one night to turn out like this." "He was five."

"You shoulda left." Weston quickly shifted the blame and glared at Philip, which was fine with him. He'd rather have Weston angry at him than at Felicity.

"I took you for a gentleman of honor," Weston continued. "Reckless. "Nice wrong, and you're nothin' more than a scoundrel and a scallywag. If you hurt Felicity, so help me, I'll send you out of town in a casket."

"Nothing has happened between us, Weston." Felicity's cheeks redden—flushed—from embarrassment or the pleasure of the kiss?

Philip mentally slapped himself. It didn't matter if she'd liked the look on her face. "at least, it shouldn't matter."

ous for “I assure you,” Felicity continued earnestly, “nothing like this  
ling uphappened before today—before now. Philip has been a true gentleman  
entire time that he’s been here.”

shifted “I ain’t a blind man.” Weston’s voice was unrelentingly hard. “  
er him.what I saw makes things plenty clear that this fella ain’t a gentleman.”  
ick.” Philip reclined and crossed his legs at his ankles now too. “And

ver her assure you that one of the top behaviors of any true gentleman is k  
able offhow to kiss well.” It wasn’t, but he had to say something to def  
er eyes.tension. “And I have no doubt that if the situation had been revers  
he waswould have taken Felicity’s offer of a kiss just as readily as I did.”

*Felicity’s offer of a kiss.* The words hung in the air.

re than Weston seemed to make sense of what Philip had insinuate  
That itFelicity had been the one to start the kiss, not him. His dark eyes sho  
and filled with hurt. Was he thinking of how long he’d pursued her b  
nothingshe’d never once initiated a kiss?

Philip Philip hoped so and was ashamed to admit it.

his and Felicity squirmed and stared down at her wet boots.

Weston took a step back. “I can see plain as day that my help ain’t  
y to herhere. Reckon I’ll hop on out of the way.”

ere this Felicity held her hand toward him. “Weston, wait. Please let me ex

“I don’t need an explanation, sweetheart. Clear as an empty v  
starting,bottle you don’t want me. I’m just a fool for letting myself have  
cramp as long as I did.”

“You weren’t a fool.”

irn into “Yep, reckon I let my hankering get the best of me.”

“You’re a good man—”

again at Weston slapped his hat back on his head. “If I’m so blasted goo  
im thanwhy weren’t you able to start caring about me in all the months I’ve  
trying to get my loop around you, but you could start caring about thi  
n I wasfella in no time at all?”

you’ve Weston’s question was a good one, and Philip wanted to hear Fe  
answer. He settled back, his arms still behind his head, even though th  
mainedwas starting to penetrate past his desire and make him feel the cold.

Felicity opened her mouth to respond but then stopped.

kiss. Or Weston waited, his eyes fairly pleading with Felicity to answer h  
make the situation go away and be alright.

his has      But after another moment, she lowered her head. “I’m sorry, Weston  
nan the      What was she apologizing for? Was she telling Weston she was so  
                 she couldn’t care about him? That things wouldn’t be able to w  
Reckonbetween them?

                 Whatever it was, Weston didn’t like it. He shook his head, then sp  
l I alsowalked toward his horse, whose reins were hanging loose, as if  
nowingdismounted.

use the      How much of their kissing had Weston witnessed as he’d come  
ed, youdown the lane? No doubt he’d spotted them lying together in the back  
                 he’d neared the house and stomped right over. How could he have mis  
passion and the fervor?

d—that      For the briefest of moments, Philip couldn’t keep from gloating.  
t to herthe distress that was quickly filling Felicity’s face as she watched  
out howwalk off, a sliver of guilt pricked him. He shouldn’t be happy that  
                 was finally cutting things off with Weston—which was what she was  
wasn’t it? He ought to be feeling some contrition for being the cause  
parting. If only he could manufacture remorse . . .

needed      Felicity started after Weston, her damp skirt tangling in her legs as  
                 attempting to trip her. Philip half hoped the tangling would keep he  
plain.” going. Weston wouldn’t be able to resist her with her damp blouse pl  
vhiskeyto her skin and her red hair hanging loose.

Cupid’s      Even soggy and wet, Felicity had never looked more beautiful.

                 Philip wanted to stand up, race after her, pull her back into his arms  
kiss her again until she forgot all about Weston. When finished with  
                 wanted to soothe all her problems, tell her everything would be alrig  
that in the end he’d be with her. But the reality of the situation pinned  
d, then the ground. He had no right to her. And he had no right to interfere  
re beenrelationship with Weston.

s fancy      Philip finally pushed himself up to a sitting position, the we  
                 responsibility prodding him to rectify the situation. He ought to g  
Felicity’s Weston and assure him Felicity would still learn to care for him  
ie snowremained patient. He’d make sure Weston knew Felicity wasn’t rea  
                 that he’d made a mistake in kissing her and would never do it agai  
whatever was happening between them was fleeting and coming to an

aim and      Weston represented permanence, safety, and stability. All the  
Felicity needed. All the things Philip was not.

on.” She trailed after the fellow, slipping and sliding in the snow. But  
orry that had already mounted and was jerking on the reins in his haste to ge  
ork out. No doubt he was not only angry but embarrassed. Hopefully, once h  
time to think about the situation, he’d realize he had no competition fr  
oun and other man in the high country, not even Philip. And once Philip left,  
hastily would realize it too.

As Weston trotted down the lane away from the house, Felicity  
e riding rigidly watching him. He didn’t turn back around, and when he disap  
yard as from sight, she hung her head and slowly walked toward the front  
sed the house. A moment later, the door banged closed.

The door banged closed inside of Philip too. Weston hadn’t been t  
But at No, Philip had been the fool. He’d let himself feel things for Felicity  
Weston no business feeling.

Felicity He stood, brushing off the slush that clung to his trousers. He  
s doing, meant to make a mess of things for Felicity. But that’s what he’d c  
of their being with her.

Of course, he didn’t regret that he’d come to her farm that day of  
though storm and had been with her during the fuel shortage to help her surv  
er from shuddered at what might have happened if he hadn’t been there.

astered But it was time for him to go. As hard as it would be, he had  
dallying. He had to leave before it became impossible to do so.

ns, and  
that, he  
ght, and  
l him to  
e in her

ight of  
go after  
n if he  
lly his,  
n. That  
end.  
things

She trailed after the fellow, slipping and sliding in the snow. But Weston had already mounted and was jerking on the reins in his haste to get away. No doubt he was not only angry but embarrassed. Hopefully, once he'd had time to think about the situation, he'd realize he had no competition from any other man in the high country, not even Philip. And once Philip left, Felicity would realize it too.

As Weston trotted down the lane away from the house, Felicity stood rigidly watching him. He didn't turn back around, and when he disappeared from sight, she hung her head and slowly walked toward the front of the house. A moment later, the door banged closed.

The door banged closed inside of Philip too. Weston hadn't been the fool. No, Philip had been the fool. He'd let himself feel things for Felicity he had no business feeling.

He stood, brushing off the slush that clung to his trousers. He hadn't meant to make a mess of things for Felicity. But that's what he'd done by being with her.

Of course, he didn't regret that he'd come to her farm that day of the ice storm and had been with her during the fuel shortage to help her survive. He shuddered at what might have happened if he hadn't been there.

But it was time for him to go. As hard as it would be, he had to stop dallying. He had to leave before it became impossible to do so.

Felicity's stomach churned. It had ever since Weston had ridden away had only gotten worse when Philip had silently entered the house, as to his room, changed his clothing, and ridden away too.

Where had he gone? And why had he left without an explanation?

She glanced out the front window and down the lane, now completely melted under the warmth of the afternoon sunshine.

Her heart trembled at the thought that he was riding to town and plans to leave. Or maybe he'd gone after Weston to try to keep him from spreading rumors about her indiscretion.

She turned away from the window and paced through the sitting room. A chair next to the sofa, Mrs. Keller watched her with raised brows. Mrs. Keller, during one of the rare times he was awake, followed her with his eyes.

Felicity was relieved Mrs. Keller wasn't a busybody and had the discretion not to bring up anything about the situation with Philip. Of course, the woman had likely heard Weston arrive on his horse. She'd probably veered out the window as he'd approached the front door but then veered toward the backyard. Even if Mrs. Keller didn't know about the kiss, she could guess that Weston hadn't been pleased to find Philip at the boardinghouse.

"I'll go check on supper." Felicity spoke the words to no one in particular as she headed into the kitchen. But even as she crossed to the stove, lifted the lid, and sniffed the soup, her mind couldn't register what kind of soup it was or any of the scents emanating from it. In fact, the past couple of hours had been such a blur that Felicity couldn't remember what she'd cut up and put in the pot, and she didn't care.

She set the lid back in place, stepped over to the worktable, and pulled out a loaf of bread she'd made earlier in the day, which seemed a lifetime ago.

Pressing a hand against her forehead, she blew out a taut breath. "What have I done?"

She didn't need to ask. She already knew. She'd kissed Philip Bei



she'd allowed Weston Oakley to ride away, essentially putting an end to courting her.

She hated hurting Weston. But now he knew they weren't meant to be together. And if she'd harbored any thoughts—even slim—about a relationship with Weston, she no longer did. She'd thought she wasn't ready for a relationship with any man. But maybe she'd just needed the right man.

And it ended almost making a man from a woman. In vs. Mr. curious

Even so, she never would have believed she could be so bold as to kiss him. It had been unexpected and unplanned.

She released a long sigh and started pacing the length of the kitchen. Whatever the case, what was done was done. And now she had to deal with the repercussions.

What had Philip thought of their kiss? What did it mean to him? She'd wanted to ask him, wanted to tell him she was falling in love with him, wanted to beg him not to leave. But at the same time, she didn't want to pressure him. She certainly didn't want to coerce him into staying with her here in Fairplay. He didn't have to agree to marry her or anything serious. But would he consider staying for the winter and seeing how their relationship developed?

After kissing her the way he had, he had to be feeling some of the things she was. It had to be more than just physical attraction for him. He liked her and wanted to be with her too.

Or was that just wishful thinking?

She paused in front of the door to her bedroom that was off the kitchen. It was still Philip's makeshift darkroom. He'd given her a tour short of setting up the room, showing her the various stages of photographic development. He'd even let her try her hand at developing one of the prints of the snowy landscape.

Now as she opened the door a sliver, she let her eyes adjust to the darkness of the room, the lone window covered by a black cloth. Chemicals and trays and plates and lines of drying paper still filled the room.

He'd shown her the pictures from the rest of his travels in the United States—photographs from Oregon, Washington, California, Nevada, and Utah. He had some from the western part of Colorado before he'd ventured into South Park.

After Denver, he didn't have plans for where they would go. Possibly St. Louis. Maybe New Orleans. Even Florida for the duration of the winter.

d to his She couldn't deny that she envied the ease with which Philip and could travel. They not only had the financial capability to do so, but it to beneeded no chaperone, could move with ease, and had few worries. If c me daylogistics were simpler for a single woman. And if only she were brav ly for athe Englishwoman who'd traveled on her own.

Even if she were braver, she'd never leave the Kellers to fe initiate themselves. They—and others like them—were the reason she had the boardinghouse open.

n. At the faint clapping of horse hooves on the path leading to the ho to liveheart gave an extra thud. Philip was home.

Home? She shook her head. This wasn't his home. And yet it was easy to pretend that it was, especially with how well he'd fit into ve withduring his stay. Not only had he helped share the burden of want to responsibilities, but his presence had become such a natural part with her existence that she wasn't sure how she could go back to living witho us likethere.

w their She closed the door to the bedroom. Then she smoothed her hai tucking the stray strands into the knot before straightening the clean ie sameblouse she'd changed into after he'd left for town.

Surely Should she run out and greet him and blurt out how she felt abo and ask him to stay? A part of her wanted to throw caution aside spontaneous, the way Philip sometimes was. But the other part of he chen. It tightly to the security that came from being controlled and caref ly aftercautious.

tograph As the plodding of the horse drew nearer, she rushed to the sto picturesbegan to stir the soup, needing something to occupy her hands and to p

Philip that she hadn't been obsessing over him—over them—the enti to thehe'd been gone, even though she had been.

h. The The horse halted in front of the house instead of continuing on room. barn. Did he intend to go out again?

United Her spoon came to a halt. Or maybe he was planning to lea la, andboardinghouse tonight and move back into town. With the Kellers enturedthere, she and Philip certainly weren't alone and living in sin. But the were sure to abound, just as they had for Charity and Hudson—espec ibly St. Weston said anything about seeing them kissing.

r. It probably would be for the best if Philip lived in Fairplay for the

DeclanHe could court her in a proper fashion, visiting in the evenings. Or sh  
ut theysee him when she rode into town.

only the As footsteps tapped up the porch steps, she made her way into th  
er, likeroom. Mr. and Mrs. Keller were both waiting for her expectantly, ar

Keller offered her an encouraging smile.

end for At a soft, almost timid knock against the door, Felicity halted r  
to keepthrough the room. Such tapping didn't belong to Philip. When he kno  
which wasn't often—his was harder and more demanding.

use, her Felicity crossed the final distance, hoping she was wrong—that

Philip after all, that he was simply knocking lightly so that he didn't  
; all toothe Kellers. But as she swung open the door, she wasn't surprised  
her lifesomeone else.

all the A petite woman stood on the porch holding a toddler on her hip  
of hergreen eyes met Felicity's shyly amidst a delicately-boned face surrou  
out himlight-brown hair that was braided beneath a simple bonnet.

The woman studied Felicity's face with interest. "Miss Courtney?"  
r back, "Yes, I am she."

and dry The toddler, a little boy who didn't seem older than two, lifted h  
off his mother's shoulder to peer at Felicity with curiosity too. He  
out himsame light-brown hair, only a shade fairer, and it was as straight and w  
and bestraw.

r clung The woman reached into her coat pocket and removed a folded p  
ful andpaper. As she began to open it up, Felicity recognized the informatio  
front. It was the advertisement for help that she'd posted around town.

ive and "I saw the notice before the storm, but I wasn't able to ride o  
rove totoday." The woman spoke softly. "I hope I'm not too late to apply f  
re timeposition."

Felicity couldn't keep from giving the woman a once-over, taking  
t to thegloves, thick cloak, and the fine gown, which was a little wo  
bedraggled but still fashionable. Even though she was smaller in si  
ave theseemed healthy and strong—if carrying her toddler was any indication

s being Even so, the advertisement was specifically for a man. The notice  
rumorsin bold print: *A man who can come out to the boardinghouse once a  
cially iftend to the livestock, chop wood, haul water, and other labor as neede*

Felicity glanced behind the woman to find a fine horse with  
winter.saddlebags, as well as a carpetbag secured behind the saddle. "I haven

he could take the position. But as you can see from my advertisement, I'm looking for a man."

From the front "I can do the work of a man." She spoke the words quickly, as if she had rehearsed them. "I'm quite good at tending to livestock, chopping wood, hauling water, and any other work that needs to be done."

In the midway Maybe the woman hadn't just rehearsed what she planned to say—she'd also memorized the advertisement. A quiet desperation seeped into the woman's body as she waited for Felicity's pronouncement.

It was The fact was, Felicity didn't know if she would need the help anyway. If Philip stayed in the area, then he'd be more than willing to assist as he had seen just as he'd been doing. "I'm sorry, Mrs. . . .?"

She glanced over her shoulder, then dropped her voice. "Mrs. Serena Taylor." She had a Southern accent.

Guided by Felicity scanned the homestead yard and the lane leading back to the house. Was someone chasing after Mrs. Taylor? Was she in some kind of trouble?

Or maybe she was simply struggling to support her child without a husband. Felicity stepped outside and closed the door. "What about your husband, Mrs. Taylor? Is he looking for work too?"

Had she Her gaze shot to her son, who had returned his head to her side as before she lowered her voice to a whisper. "My husband is . . . deceased."

When Mrs. Taylor stumbled over the word and then didn't meet Felicity's gaze, it was all too easy to see that the woman was hiding something.

And on the Felicity was tempted to confront her about it. She valued truth and forthrightness for herself and expected it in others. And yet, as Mrs. Taylor gently brushed a kiss against her son's forehead, compassion stirred in Felicity for this pretty young woman and her child.

What if Mrs. Taylor was facing some sort of difficulty with her husband? Or if the man truly was gone, then perhaps she'd come upon hard times and a job might be her last option.

And she Felicity pressed her lips together to keep from asking more questions. If the woman was in a crisis, then she was exactly the kind of person she hoped to help at their boardinghouse.

Every day to The truth was, they'd always been generous with those who were in need. They'd allowed people to live there, even when they couldn't pay their rent.

And on time, even when it took weeks for them to be able to afford the honorarium. Even though Charity and Patience wouldn't approve of having

ing for a boarder, surely they would understand that she couldn't turn this away, just as she hadn't been able to turn away the Kellers.

if she'd Mrs. Taylor hefted her little boy and then squared her shoulders, realize I'm not what you were expecting, Miss Courtney. But please give a chance. I promise you won't be disappointed."

-maybe Again, Felicity scanned the woman's garments as well as her maid. Everything about them, even the leather bag on the back of the horse, spoke of wealth and privilege. Something had obviously happened to change her fortune. And now she was clearly at the mercy of strangers who needed survival.

"Where have you been staying?"

Taylor. As if sensing Felicity's hesitancy, Mrs. Taylor continued. "Take a room for a bit, and so I have been living at one of the hotels for the past week in town. At the mention of his name, the boy lifted his head and peered up at her. Danger? mother.

band. She pressed a kiss against the boy's forehead before turning her eyes upon Felicity again. "I guarantee, if you hire me for a dollar a day, I will do everything you ask of me and more."

oulder "Mrs. Taylor, I believe you will, but—"

eased." "Please." The woman's voice dropped with a note of panic. "Please, Felicity, I won't regret it."

Felicity wanted to reach out and squeeze the woman's hand to reassure her that she had nothing to worry about, but she couldn't make that promise. "I would like to hire you to help at the boardinghouse, but would you consider other terms?"

"Yes, of course." The response fell from the woman's lips and was loaded with relief.

es. This "Instead of a dollar a day—"

"Then seventy-five cents a day." Her demand was soft, and she smiled as she spoke it. "The hotel charges me fifty cents a day for my room, and we can survive with twenty-five cents for food."

Felicity could relate to the despair of living so meagerly. She'd had that need on more than one occasion. And the uncertainty and fears were difficult to live with, more so than the lack of provisions.

ie. "I'm not communicating well, Mrs. Taylor." Felicity smiled. "I'm hoping you'd be willing to live here at the boardinghouse in exchange for my services."

womanroom and board as well as compensation for your work.”

Mrs. Taylor drew in a shaky breath as if preparing to argue more, but she stopped and stared at Felicity, her eyes widening and filling with tears. “I’ll do it.”

“Don’t you want to hear the nature of your work before you agree to the child’s terms?”

She spoke “I’ll do anything, and if I don’t know how to do it, I promise I’ll learn. I’m a quick learner.”

“I’m hoping you might be willing to consider helping to nurse one of the boarders who is an invalid.” Felicity briefly explained the situation to Mrs. Kellers, and before she could finish, Mrs. Taylor’s eyes were again bright with tears, and some spilled over. “The work sounds absolutely perfect. You’re sure my son won’t be a bother.”

“I actually believe your son will be a blessing to Mr. Keller. He’ll enjoy having more company.”

Mrs. Taylor’s expression radiated relief and a measure of happiness. “You’re the kindest, sweetest woman I have ever met, Miss Courtney—

“Call me Felicity.”

“Then please, call me Serena.”

“You clearly haven’t met my sisters if you think I’m the kindest, sweetest woman, because I can’t even begin to compare with them.”

Serena smiled through her tears. “I do hope I have the opportunity to meet them too.”

As Felicity led Serena inside, she explained more about her sisters and their new marriages and living situations. She introduced her to the landlady, who then helped her bring in her meager possessions and situated her in the bedroom upstairs.

Tate clung to Serena and hardly let his mother put him down for a moment before clamoring to be picked up again.

“He’s just shy.” Serena tenderly combed her son’s hair back from his forehead and kissed his cheek as they returned to the front room. “Once he gets used to do chance to get used to everyone, he’ll be fine.”

“I’m sure he will.” Mrs. Keller smiled at the little boy, her eyes sparkling with the delight of having the mother and son staying at the boardinghouse.

Before Felicity could say anything else, the pounding of more hooves wrenched her attention away from the new boarder toward the

window and the sight of Philip riding down the lane.

out then He had his bowler pulled low, shadowing his face so that she could not read his expression. Was he happy to be back? Was he eager to be here again?

Her pulse began to tick faster, as though time itself was speeding up, urging her to go out and be with him. “Mrs. Keller, would you mind coming over with Serena and explaining Mr. Keller’s care to her?” She was moving toward the door and didn’t wait for a response before exiting my house onto the porch.

Philip had already passed by and was nearing the barn, likely to be tending to the gelding. Serena’s horse, still tied to the hitching post in front of the barn, needed to be cared for. If Felicity took the horse to the barn, she’d be able to speak with Philip without everyone else being able to listen to their conversation.

But what should she talk to him about? Did she really dare to broach their kiss and ask him what it meant to him? He was an open person, usually afraid to discuss important topics. Surely he’d be willing to talk about their future.

She made quick work of guiding Serena’s horse to the barn. The afternoon sun would soon fade into evening, and the day would be over.

Would it be one of Philip’s last at the boardinghouse, or could they figure out a way to make it one of his first?

As she neared the open entrance of the barn, the contrast between the bright sunshine outside and the shadows inside prevented her from seeing Philip, but she could hear the jangle of the stirrups as he unbuckled the third from the gelding.

Since they’d lost the horse stalls when he’d chopped up the wood for the minute he stood out in the open haymow. At her appearance, he paused a second before continuing with taking off the saddle. “You didn’t get my face off me earlier and had to come out and pounce on me again?”

His voice was light and teasing, but the topic was anything but light. She couldn’t make herself banter about it, not even if she tried.

She guided her horse to where the second horse stall used to stand. She tied the lead line to a remaining hook in the wall.

“I take it we have company?” He lifted the saddle off the gelding.

She did the same. As they each groomed the horses, she told him

Serena and Tate and how she'd hired the young woman to help take care of the horses. For a short while, they conversed normally, as if nothing had happened between them earlier in the day, as if they hadn't shared that altering kiss and heated passion, and as if Weston hadn't seen it all.

Finally, as she hung up the bristly brush and Philip leaned the pail against the wall after replenishing the troughs, she leveled a look at her already the two horses. "We need to talk."

One of his brows quirked. "And what have we been doing so far? Each other the silent treatment?"

She pressed her hands onto her hips, mostly to stop them from trembling. "We have to talk about what happened earlier today."

"What happened?"

"You know."

"Why don't you demonstrate again to remind me."

"Stop."

His grin made an appearance, and the light danced in his eyes, making him as handsome and appealing as always. Oh, dear heavens. Why did his smile have to be so devastating, almost seductive? Because suddenly, watching his mouth, she couldn't think of anything else but how his lips felt against hers earlier. And indeed, they'd been against hers in the future intimate of ways—hard and hot and heavy.

Her stomach quivered with the need to feel his lips that way again. "I won't object if you want to do it all again." His voice dropped and his eyes also dropped to her mouth.

Yes, she'd demonstrate in a heartbeat, but she had to stay strong, could give in to the desire . . . at least, not until she clarified the nature of her relationship and his intentions toward her.

Her mind scrambled to find the right words to say, the right words to tell him how she felt, the right words to ask him to be with her.

Even though he didn't take a step toward her, she could sense a shift in his mood, that he was finally growing more serious, that he wanted something too. Except that from the wrinkle of determination that began to form in his brow, she suspected she might not like what he had to say.

"Philip . . ." She forced out his name, but the rest of her words clung about the back of her throat like a logjam on the creek.



care of “Felicity, I’ve made plans to go. I have to.”

ing had *No.* The silent word screamed inside of her.

he life- “It’s the only way—”

“I love you.” The words pushed past all the obstructions—the only  
tchforkthat could truly encapsulate all that he meant to her, all that she want  
im pastall that he needed to know before he finalized his plans.

Giving

mbling.

making

did his

only, in

lips had

the most

a notch,

couldn’t

of their

s to tell

shift in

l to say

that was

he had

gged at

“Felicity, I’ve made plans to go. I have to.”

*No.* The silent word screamed inside of her.

“It’s the only way—”

“I love you.” The words pushed past all the obstructions—the only words that could truly encapsulate all that he meant to her, all that she wanted, and all that he needed to know before he finalized his plans.

Had he heard her correctly? Surely she hadn't just said what he thought he had.

But from the way she was watching him, her brown eyes wide and vulnerable—and oh so beautiful—he knew he hadn't misunderstood.

Felicity loved him. She'd not only spoken the words, but her gaze was filled with her love.

He didn't merit it, not when he'd been such a scoundrel earlier than taking advantage of her and kissing her. He deserved her wrath and more than anything else.

"I vowed to myself that I wouldn't let another man kiss me unless that he was the one I wanted to be with." She hugged her arms across her chest as if suddenly cold. "And you're the one I want to be with."

He swiped off his hat and jabbed his hand into his hair. This conversation was rapidly changing from bad to worse. How could he say anything in response to her revelations without hurting her completely?

That was exactly what he'd been afraid of all along—why he'd left Fairplay, why he'd been hesitant about getting too close to her and now it had happened. She'd declared her love and all but proposed marriage.

Everything within him wanted to grab her into his arms and tell her that he was the one he wanted to be with too. He could no longer deny that, though he'd been trying so hard.

When he'd ridden into town earlier, he'd seriously considered the possibility of sending Gustaf a notice that he wanted to cut his ties with the royal family. His blood had been heated, his body still on fire, and his heart filled with need for only Felicity. He'd realized that all he really wanted all that truly mattered was her.

But when he'd arrived in town, a telegram had awaited him. An anonymous, Philip had known it was from the prime minister. All it had said was: *The end is near.*

Of course, he'd burned the slip of paper. But the words had burned

chest ever since. The end was near. A battle might be going on at that moment in Lapland, and he wouldn't have word yet.

And if Gustaf were overthrown by rioters and rebels, and par called Philip home, what would he do then? He wouldn't be able to them. Not after they'd made so concerted an effort to oust Gustaf. N ght she men had fought and possibly lost their lives for the cause of freedom de and have a monarch who submitted to the government instead of trying away with it.

Philip pressed his fingers to his throbbing temples and avoided loc ze was Felicity. The simple truth was that he couldn't walk away from his oday in and his duties. Not after doing his best over the past months to stay al disdain avoid the assassin. And he couldn't promise Felicity a future with Lapland, especially since he didn't know what awaited him. His l future, his purpose—all of it was still so uncertain.

And then there was the constant threat of danger . . .

I knew He'd seen a shadowy figure lounging in the hotel doorway across oss her the post office. The bulky shape of the body, broad shoulders, and ersion face had been similar to the man who'd been trailing him before hing in although Philip hadn't been able to see the man's face, his skin had p with the realization that someone knew where he was.

Ever since that moment, the urgency inside had been mounti tried to needed to leave Fairplay and take the peril far from Felicity. er. And

But according to Mr. McLaughlin, the fellow who ran the livery a rriage. track of the stagecoach schedule, there probably wouldn't be any her she stagecoaches or teamsters coming and going over the high mountain it, even anytime soon, maybe not even until spring.

If he wanted to get to Denver, he'd have to brave the passes on gain the with as much of his belongings as he could carry on his saddle. Eve vith the Mr. McLaughlin recommended waiting a few more days to give the is heart chance to melt. ted and

"Well . . .?" Felicity's voice hinted at hurt.

"I don't know what to say." He couldn't tell her he loved her in re lthough He had no right to utter such a declaration. Not now, when he was ad said position to offer her anything but trouble.

Her eyes glinted. Were they filling with tears?

He loathed himself for upsetting her.

his very “Your not knowing what to say speaks clearly enough.” She stalked toward the barn door.

liament He couldn’t let her walk away like this. He had to try to make t to deny little better. But how?

ot after His thoughts tumbled about like a ship in a storm, his stomach and to Was it finally time to tell her the truth about his situation? If he did so g to do she’d understand his choice to go wasn’t an easy one.

“Felicity, wait.”

oking at She didn’t slow her steps.

country He stalked after her, needing to stop her before she exited and th ive and the privacy of the moment. His long legs easily caught up to her, him in grabbed her arm, bringing her to a halt.

ife, his Without turning to face him, she sniffled.

She *was* crying.

Self-loathing stirred in him again. “I’m sorry—”

ss from “Don’t apologize. I don’t want to hear it.” She wrenched to free square from him.

e. And He held her fast. “I wish I could throw away my future a orickled responsibilities and stay here with you. I really do. But I can’t because . . .”

ng. He Did he really dare tell her? He hadn’t told anyone else during hi trip. And neither had Declan.

nd kept But what harm could come of revealing his identity now? Whi y more were alone. When he was getting ready to leave.

l passes “I don’t want to hear your excuses, Philip.” Her voice wobbled. “ just let me go.” She reached up and swiped at her cheek, brushing a horsetear.

in then, “It’s not really an excuse.” He wanted to lighten the moment, wis snow a could make her smile. But maybe she’d forgive him more quickly knew the truth. He took a deep breath and then let the words rush out. prince.”

sponse. She stilled, but she didn’t turn.

n’t in a Just in case his first statement hadn’t been clear enough, he said i “I’m Prince Carl Philip Glucksberg, second son of Gustaf Albert Gluc the sovereign of the nation of Lapland.” Actually the *former* sovereign This time she did spin, and her eyes were wide.

un and He loosened his hold on her arm but couldn't make himself let go  
What was she feeling at his revelation? Curiosity? Awe? Respect?

hings a He'd grown up with those kinds of reactions whenever he was in  
country where people didn't recognize him. Whenever he or one  
roiling friends spoke up about his royalty, the nature of every relationship cl  
, surely People always treated him differently because of his royal status, and  
never liked that.

Hopefully his relationship with Felicity wouldn't change. He didn't  
to lose the easy way they interacted together.

ey lost "You're a prince?" She seemed to find her tongue and gave him  
and he over as if that would solve this new riddle. When she tugged free of his  
and stepped back, he didn't go after her.

"Yes, I give you my word."

"Your word?" Her eyes narrowed. "If you really are a prince, then  
been lying to me about who you are all this time. So what value  
herself word?"

"My word is still solid—"

nd my "How can I trust anything you say now?"

't . . . This wasn't the reaction he'd been expecting—certainly wasn't one  
ever gotten before. Then again, nothing about Felicity was like anything  
s entire ever known.

"You lied to me." She crossed her arms as if daring him to defy her.  
le they "I didn't set out to deceive you. I simply withheld that piece  
information."

'Please, "That's lying by omission, and it's still lying."

away a "But it wasn't intentional."

"So you were planning to leave without telling me the truth."

shed he "I haven't told anyone during my travels. Only Declan knows. And  
' if she it to stay that way."

"I'm a Her eyelashes were still damp from when he'd made her cry  
minutes ago. But her eyes had begun to flash . . . with anger. "I'm not  
anyone, Philip."

t again. "I realize that."

ksberg, "You should have trusted me."

. "I do trust you."

"Then why didn't you say something sooner?"

of her. He shrugged. "My situation is complicated and dangerous. My father, who is now king of Lapland, wants me dead, has hired an assassin to kill me. I don't want to put you in harm's way by association with me."

of his "Don't you think I can handle complicated and dangerous?"  
changed. What could he say to that? She was a strong woman and wasn't afraid of many things. She was capable of handling much responsibility—had done so by taking on the management of the boardinghouse by herself as well as caring for the Kellers and now a new boarder. So what had prevented him from saying something about his identity sooner? She deserved the truth from a man who had once held her in his arms.

his hold But as much as he wanted to give her a truthful answer, he couldn't pinpoint why he'd held back. "I don't know, Felicity. I guess I just didn't plan on leaving, didn't think we'd ever see each other again once you've gone."

is your "The attraction between us? It means nothing to you?" Her voice was low and was again tinged with hurt.

"It does mean something—"

"Just not enough to have an honest conversation about whether there's any chance of us being together."

ng he'd "That's not fair." Frustration began to nag him.

She watched him for a moment, clearly waiting for him to have an honest conversation now.

iece of He sighed. "The truth is that I don't know if I'll live until tomorrow or next week. And so I haven't been able to plan my future."

"If the future is so uncertain, then shouldn't we make the most of the day that we have left?" Her tone took on a pleading note. "Why not just another moment?"

l I need Was she right? "It's not as easy as that for me. With the unrest in the country, it's possible I may someday assume the role of king."

a few The afternoon sunshine slanted through the barn door, and it cast a glow over her, highlighting the striking color of her hair, turning it a beautiful copper. It contrasted her pale skin and enriched the brown of her eyes. Her smile was exquisite, like the rarest of precious jewels.

The light also made the turmoil in her eyes all too clear. "So you're not necessarily rejecting me because of the danger. You're doing so because you're not sure if I'll fit in with your life if you become king."

brother, “The law requires a prince to marry whomever parliament chooses  
ly, and I Her shoulders deflated, and a coolness began to creep into her expression.  
Had he just agreed that he was rejecting her? Because he wasn’t.  
that didn’t come out right—”

fraid of “It came out loud and clear enough for me.” Her tone was clipped  
proven along, I knew you planned on leaving. I was the fool to ever believe  
well as change your mind, that maybe I was more than a diversion.”

ed him “And you were—”

th from “I should have known I was nothing more than a poor girl with  
background who could never be good enough for you.”

ouldn’t She spun on her heels, and before he could say anything else or bl  
always path, she stalked out of the barn.

e I was He started after her, a strange desperation settling inside. But at the  
of a wagon slogging to a stop in the yard, he guessed his ride had arrived.  
dipped the wagon from the livery that he’d arranged to come pick him up and  
him to town so that he wouldn’t have to impose on Felicity any longer.

He couldn’t follow her outside and finish the conversation in  
there’s Instead, he had half a mind to chase after her and drag her back into town  
and tell her to forget everything he’d said, to forget any worries about the  
future, that all he wanted was the present moment with her.

ve that If he were truly free to choose what he wanted for the future, to choose  
own course, he suspected his decision would be easy. He would stop to  
rrow or make himself leave Felicity and would give in to the need to stay with  
forever.

of every But the fact was, he wasn’t free to decide his own future or pick his  
wastewife. If he suggested Felicity, what advantage would she have that he  
leverage? He’d have to find a way to present her to parliament so that  
t in my would find favor with her.

And if they told him no?

ascaded He shuddered to think of how disappointed he would be. And if  
rnished rejected and hurt now, the rejection and hurt then would only be worse.  
es. She couldn’t do that to her. Couldn’t put her through such pain.

With a half groan of frustration, he combed his fingers roughly through  
i’re no his hair before slamming his hat back down.

because As difficult as this moment was, he had to stick with his original  
leave and sever the ties. It would be best for both of them if he didn’t



.” the moment any longer.

ession.

“Wait,

ed. “All

e you’d

a poor

ock her

e sound

rived—

id drive

.

public.

he barn

out the

hart his

ying to

with her

his own

e could

at they

she felt

rse. He

through

plan to

prolong

the moment any longer.

Philip was gone. Good riddance.

Felicity scrubbed his shirt over the corrugated washboard, letting force pummel the garment the way she wanted to pummel him. When she'd been cleaning his room, she'd found the discarded shirt tangled under the bedsheets.

Now, while outside laundering sheets and towels and a week's worth of clothing that belonged to both her and the Kellers, she wasn't sure why she was taking the time with his shirt.

"I should burn it." She held up the offending object, a tailored white shirt he'd worn at times to dinner parties at Mrs. Bancroft's. She stretched it to arm's length and examined it for any spots that needed extra soap. The ache of pain in her chest brought swift sobs to her throat and the sting of tears to her eyes.

"No," she whispered fiercely. "I won't cry."

She hadn't cried when he'd packed his belongings yesterday. She hadn't cried when he'd ridden away in the wagon from the livery. And she hadn't cried when she'd spent the rest of the day with the Kellers and Serena Tate without him. Even though she'd felt his absence keenly, she'd been too angry to mourn his going.

And she'd been too busy, first with a visit from Patience and her husband Spencer and his little girl Evangeline, who'd been worried about her during the storm.

Then she'd spent the remainder of the day rearranging the bedroom. With Serena's efficient help, they'd moved the Kellers' belongings into the hallway off the kitchen. They'd all agreed Mr. Keller should still spend part of his day and evening in the front room, where he could enjoy everyone's company.

Serena had helped Felicity clean the bedrooms, carry up her belongings, and get situated. The young woman had been hardworking and eager to help. Though Tate hardly let her out of his sight and clung to her skirt most

time, he was well-behaved.

Of course, Philip had said goodbye to the Kellers before leaving. The couple had known he would no longer be staying at the boardinghouse. At his departure, thankfully, Mrs. Keller hadn't spoken about his absence. Although Felicity had felt her inquisitive gaze upon her from time to time,

Felicity had held her emotions at bay . . . until she'd crawled into the bed Philip had used during the times he'd actually slept. And then she'd inhaled his pine and woodsmoke scent filling her nostrils and nothing left to think about but thoughts of him, the tears had come.

She hadn't wanted to cry over him, but the pain of losing him had invaded every part of her heart.

She straightened, pressed her fist into her lower back, and kneaded her sore muscles. The midday sunshine was warming her so that she'd begin to perspire, and the grass was soggy around the backyard where the snow had melted. All traces of the snow angels they'd made yesterday were gone, only remnants of the drifts remained to show that there had been a storm.

A stab of tears to her eyes. "Why did I have to let myself care about someone who didn't love me?" Her question was swallowed up by the flapping of the sheets and the garments she'd already washed that were blowing on the clothesline.

Philip's revelation that he was a prince had shocked her. But then she'd thought about it, the more she'd been able to see the princely side of him—the regal way he'd held himself at times, the authority he wielded, even a privileged outlook on life, as if the world was his for the taking.

Maybe she'd once aspired to better her station and improve herself. But she'd been put in her place often enough—especially most recently by her husband, Bancroft—that she'd resigned herself to being a simple woman with a simple life.

But Philip wasn't simple. He wasn't merely a wealthy gentleman traveling at his leisure, and he wasn't just from a different country or culture. He was from a different world altogether—a world she couldn't understand or aspire to. He was way beyond her. Untouchable, unreachable, and unattainable.

And now that she knew who he really was, she understood just how foolish she'd been to assume that they could ever be together. She'd been a complete idiot of herself professing her love, giving him everything she had, and telling him that she wanted to be with him when a relationship

prince was impossible.

Of course, she wouldn't have allowed herself to get carried away by him. Since she knew his identity. But he'd known. He'd still flirted with her endlessly. In his absence, he'd let her kiss him. He'd even hinted he wanted more with her. But in the end, he hadn't wanted her enough to love her in return.

— He should have said something sooner or established boundaries, with boundaries . . . Not that he hadn't tried to set boundaries. She'd sense his restraint and his carefulness. Even so, he should have trusted her sooner.

It revealed who he really was. Maybe then they could have at least parted as friends.

"Why couldn't I be satisfied with a nice, normal man like Oakley?" This time she spoke her question louder, unable to hold back her anger toward herself for being so foolish. "He would have loved me if he had married me."

At the clearing of a throat behind her, Felicity spun to find Serena Tate standing only a few feet away. "I'm sorry." Serena cast her eyes downward as though she expected a chastisement.

Tate had fisted her skirt and was leaning into her, his eyes haunted.

As with every time Felicity interacted with the young mother and her friends, she sensed that Serena's story was complicated and tragic. Maybe someday the woman would feel comfortable revealing it. But until then, Felicity would be patient.

"I'd like to finish the rest of the laundry for you." Serena nodded at the items that remained in a basket next to the washtub.

Mrs. Philip's wet shirt still dripped from Felicity's hand, and she was simple to hide it behind her back, the evidence of how much she was missing him, though he'd been gone for less than twenty-four hours.

Was he already on his way to Denver? Or would he have to stay in the area for a few more days?

Her sights locked on the Tarryall Mountain Range and Kenosha Mountains to the east with their bright, snowy tops. They were still covered, like the treacherous for travel. But if the warm temperatures continued, he might be able to find a way out of the high country soon.

He'd mentioned the danger that he was in, that his brother was trying to assassinate him. And although he hadn't specifically said so, she guessed that was why he'd taken a different name and was keeping his identity hidden.

so that he could stay out of his brother's clutches. Maybe that was part of the reason he'd never stayed long in any one place during his travels as well, and he'd been anxious to leave South Park.

It was in the morning that Serena picked up the bar of soap in the grass. "Will you show me how to do the laundry? I'd like to learn. Then you'll be free to ride into town on a better errand."

He used his hand for her errand. Felicity draped Philip's shirt over the nearest post and clothesline, not bothering to pass it through the wringer. "Yes, I am a bit slow on several pantry items." Although, she couldn't remember which items.

She certainly wasn't going into town simply to find out what had happened to Weston Philip. But while she was there, she could discreetly inquire about her brother. Couldn't she?

After instructing Serena on how to use the washboard and the wringer,

Felicity rushed inside to change and make herself more presentable for her errand into Fairplay. She chose her favorite emerald skirt and blouse and her favorite gazebo bonnet—but not for Philip's sake, and certainly not because he'd commented on how pretty she looked in it on several occasions.

Even so, as she rode through the thick mud and the many puddles in her son's town and down Main Street, she hoped Philip would spot her and realize how much he liked her. Not that such an acknowledgement would do either of them any good. They would still go their separate ways. But at least he would see the image of her at her best with him.

After parking and making her way down the boardwalk to Sierra's

General Store, she tried not to be too obvious as she searched for a sign that would lead her to Philip somewhere. Maybe he'd be inside the store reading the newspaper, even though he so often had been over recent weeks.

What news had he been searching for? News of his homeland? News of his brother?

But as she entered the store and ordered her items, she didn't catch a glimpse of him anywhere. Had he already left town?

"And how are the passes?" she asked Captain Jim, trying to keep her voice nonchalant. "Has anyone dared to traverse them yet?"

"No, Mr. Berg ain't left town yet." Captain Jim's loud voice rang through the store.

Felicity snorted. "Well, that's too bad." She tamped down her disappointment—mortification at how easily the store owner had read her need for Philip.

t of the was hoping he was long gone by now.”

nd why “Don’t think you’re gonna get rid of that fella so easily.” Capt. finished packaging the sugar she didn’t really need. “Not when he’s how to off every man from having you so that he can keep you for himself.”

on your The store had grown silent—so silent Felicity guessed every patrol hear the wild thumping of her heart. “That’s nonsense.”

tion of “Ain’t nonsense at all. Had lots of fellas wanting to take that job advertised for, but he warned every single one of them to stay away.”

h ones. At the revelation, her stomach melted into a slushy puddle just like some of snow. No doubt the store owner was exaggerating, but she soaked up his words about Philip like the earth soaking up the melting snow.

After paying and offering her thanks, she made small talk with the drifter, women, catching up on how everyone had weathered the storm. Most of a trip was dallying to see if Philip would arrive. But after lingering longer than watching respectable, she headed out and started down the boardwalk toward the mented wagon.

She wasn’t ready for her time in town to be over. Maybe she should go into her solicitor. Or perhaps she’d go to the bank and take out the money she’d need to pay Serena for her work.

either of “Miss Courtney?” At the call of her name from the walkway between the shops, she paused. In the shadows of the snowy-muddy path stood a man wearing a cloak and flat black hat pulled low. He’d been in the store moments ago—or at least she thought she’d glimpsed him.

sign of “May I help you?” Had his voice contained a tinge of a foreign accent, as an accent that sounded similar to Philip’s?

“Philip has asked me to come and get you.”

Of his Yes, he did have an accent. Perhaps he was a companion traveling with Philip. More likely a servant, because a prince wouldn’t travel with a manservant, would he?

“He’d like to speak a few more words with you,” the man said. “If you’re agreeable.”

A few more words? Felicity’s heart gave an extra beat. After having carried all night and all day to think on their relationship, had Philip changed his mind about wanting to be with her?

vn her “Come this way.” The man waved his hand in the direction of the end of the walkway. “He’s just around the corner.”

Felicity took a step then hesitated. Something didn't feel quite right about the man. About his claim that Philip was waiting.

"After you." He waved her ahead of him.

She took another step, then two, before stopping. "Tell Philip if he would like to talk, he can visit me at the boardinghouse."

Should she extend an invitation for dinner? Surely the Kellers would love to see him again.

The man glanced past her toward Main Street, then in the next instant before she could move, he thrust a long, sharp knife against her chest.

She released a startled half scream.

At her slight sound, he dug the tip through her cloak, pricking her. "Make another sound. If you do, the next cut will be deeper."

She could feel the warmth of blood beginning to soak into her dress. Suddenly she knew this stranger wasn't taking her to Philip. He had something much more sinister in mind.

His hand clamped about her arm, and he forced her toward the alley. They rounded the corner, of course there was no sign of Philip. Instead, the fellow picked up his pace and thrust her toward a waiting horse and wagon.

Both fear and dread raced through her, and she began to drag her feet. She had to fight back now, couldn't go anywhere with this stranger. If she fell a mangled, she might never return.

Before she could grab his arm and try to dodge the knife, he thrust something else at her—a rag with the stench of a chemical saturating the air. He clamped it against her nose and mouth so that she could hardly breathe.

The world began to spin around her. Whatever was on the rag was making her weak and lightheaded. If she didn't get away from him, she was going to faint.

"Don't worry." The man's low voice taunted near her ear. "You'll have your reunion with Philip. Just not the way you planned."

Before she could make sense of his words, blackness hovered near her. She fought against it, against her captor. But in the next instant, the man had disappeared.

He had left her in the alley at



Felicity took a step then hesitated. Something didn't feel quite right. About the man. About his claim that Philip was waiting.

"After you." He waved her ahead of him.

She took another step, then two, before stopping. "Tell Philip if he would like to talk, he can visit me at the boardinghouse."

Should she extend an invitation for dinner? Surely the Kellers would love to see him again.

The man glanced past her toward Main Street, then in the next instant, before she could move, he thrust a long, sharp knife against her chest.

She released a startled half scream.

At her slight sound, he dug the tip through her cloak, pricking her. "Don't make another sound. If you do, the next cut will be deeper."

She could feel the warmth of blood beginning to soak into her bodice. Suddenly she knew this stranger wasn't taking her to Philip. He had something much more sinister in mind.

His hand clamped about her arm, and he forced her toward the alley. As they rounded the corner, of course there was no sign of Philip. Instead, the fellow picked up his pace and thrust her toward a waiting horse and wagon.

Both fear and dread raced through her, and she began to drag her steps. She had to fight back now, couldn't go anywhere with this stranger. If she did, she might never return.

Before she could grab his arm and try to dodge the knife, he shoved something else at her—a rag with the stench of a chemical saturating it. He clamped it against her nose and mouth so that she could hardly breathe.

The world began to spin around her. Whatever was on the rag was making her weak and lightheaded. If she didn't get away from him, she was going to faint.

"Don't worry." The man's low voice taunted near her ear. "You'll get your reunion with Philip. Just not the way you planned."

Before she could make sense of his words, blackness hovered nearer. She fought against it, against her captor. But in the next instant, the world disappeared.

He couldn't go visit Felicity. Couldn't. Wouldn't.

Philip placed his camera box and tripod down on the bed of his room along with the bag of all the other equipment. The afternoon photographing at one of the local ranches had occupied his time but taken his mind off Felicity.

Nothing had taken his mind off her. Not since the moment he'd been away from the boardinghouse yesterday.

His stomach growled, reminding him he'd already skipped the noon meal and couldn't miss supper—not with the waft of chicken and dumpling from the dining room all the way to the second floor of Hotel Windsor.

Even though he still didn't feel like eating, he paced to the door. He needed sustenance, but he also didn't want anything or anyone but Felicity. He paused with his hand on the doorknob.

"What am I doing?" The question slipped out and contained all the thoughts of losing her. Not only that, but he could still see the tears on her lashes, feel the pain in her voice, and see the hurt in her eyes when she'd said she'd be good enough for him.

The truth was, *he'd* never be good enough for *her*. Not only was he a scoundrel for deceiving her about his identity, but she was pure and innocent and kindhearted in a way he'd never been. And she cared about other people more than she cared about herself, while he was selfish.

He rubbed a hand down his mouth and chin to hold back the tears from coming out of himself. He had a duty to his country—one he wouldn't neglect. But he also had a duty to himself too, didn't he? Didn't he deserve some voice in his future and in his happiness?

The concept was difficult to fathom, especially after the many years he'd lived to please his father and country. He'd loved and admired his father. The king had been a hard and demanding man and had shown little affection. Nevertheless, Philip had tried to be adequate and make his father proud.

Gustaf, on the other hand, had always resented their father a

surrounded himself with friends and advisors who stirred up doubt and arrogance. Gustaf's rebellious ways had only contributed to Philip's desire to be all the more compliant. He'd learned to be lighthearted to ease the tensions and problems that arose with Gustaf and his parents.

In trying to make everyone else happy and smooth over the problems, had he lost the ability to look out for his own needs? Like the need to have the woman he loved?

is hotel  
room of  
hadn't  
ridden  
He groaned and leaned his head against the door. Yes, he loved her. He'd been trying to deny it all this time, but he'd started falling in love with her the first moment he'd laid eyes on her, when she'd taken the seat at the table from him at Mrs. Bancroft's and had responded to one of his flirtations with a sassy comment.

on meal  
s rising  
door. He  
her. He  
A rushing waterfall of need plummeted through his chest, nearly bringing him to his knees. He needed her in his life, couldn't imagine a future without her in it. In fact, he didn't want to go another day without seeing or talking to her.

agonies, heartache  
d never  
as he a  
innocent  
rs more  
urses at  
he also  
e in his  
Was there a way to pursue the woman he loved and still maintain his loyalty to his country? He couldn't ride away from her without trying to find a way to be with her—one in which he still obeyed the laws of his country regarding marriage. He also had the option of negotiating with parliament.

Maybe it was time to stop trying to please everyone and once in a while stand up for something that was important to him. And she was important. She was the most important person in his life.

He straightened and pressed a fist against the ache in his chest. He wanted to go tell her of his feelings, his love, his hope to find a way to be together without giving up everything. He wasn't sure how anything could ever work out between them since he couldn't abandon his country and she wouldn't abandon her boardinghouse. But even if they couldn't be together now, he wanted her assurance that someday they could be reunited.

If she'd still have him . . . He didn't deserve her love for riding away from her yesterday. But he'd do whatever he could to earn it back.

He threw open the door to his hotel room and stalked out, remembering to close the door behind him. Hope, anticipation, excitement made his steps light and quick as he raced down the stairway.

He'd ride out to the boardinghouse, fall onto his knees as dramatically as he could, and beg her to forgive him for being such an idiot. He'd do whatever it took.

ots and should have done yesterday—tell her he loved her and that he had for-  
esire to time. And then together, they'd discuss the future. So much was ur-  
tension about what would happen in the days and weeks to come in Lapland, v-  
brother and the state of the kingship. But he wouldn't sacrifice having  
ms, had couldn't.

ave the With new energy and his hunger forgotten, he descended into the  
hallway. The haze of cigar smoke enveloped him in the dim light  
Felicity evening. Laughter and conversation and the clinking of dishes echoed  
ve with the dining room, filled with the mostly male population staying at the l-  
t across Philip passed by without a glance, his focus on the door and the  
of his find a horse at the livery that he could use for riding out  
boardinghouse.

uckling “Oh, Mr. Berg.” Mr. Fehling's call came from the dining room.  
without Philip didn't slow his footsteps, didn't want to waste another minu-  
lking to even another second—in returning to Felicity and pleading with her  
even though Mr. Fehling was a kind hotel proprietor, he was quite the  
duty to Usually, Philip didn't mind and had spent many an evening with Dec-  
olution Mr. Fehling, smoking cigars and having lively discussions.

age but “Wait, Philip.” Mr. Fehling's voice held a note of concern.  
Philip halted in front of the door and turned just as the heavys  
a while lumbered into the hallway, his shiny forehead and receding h-  
portant, perspiring. He held a coffee pot in one hand, was rarely without it.

“I tried to catch your attention when you entered a little bit ago  
e had to Fehling began to dig in the front pocket of his stained apron. “But you  
together, those stairs before I could manage a word.”

n them, “You'll have to excuse me, sir. I'm in a hurry tonight.”  
lon the Mr. Fehling fished in his pocket a moment longer before pullin-  
ted the folded paper. “Some fella stopped by and insisted I give this to you.  
was urgent, that you'd want it tonight.”

g away Urgent? Philip's pattering pulse tripped over itself. “What's the ur-  
Has something happened to Felicity?”

barely “Sorry, Mr. Berg.” Mr. Fehling handed him the slip with a s-  
itements smile. “I admit, I tried reading it, but the message is written in a  
language.”

cally as “Probably Danish, my natural tongue.” Philip took the paper  
what he growing anticipation. What if it was the news he'd been waiting for fi-

... a longprime minister? So far, all their communication had been private and certainsecretive. But if the prime minister was being open with their exchange with his that had to mean the rebellion was over and Gustaf was out of power. Her. He He slipped open the half sheet to find a brief, neatly penned

Danish: *I have her. If you want to save her, you must hand yourself in wideme at the abandoned Hawthorne Mine. Alone.*

... of the “No.” The whisper came out strangled, and his blood turned to lead. He didn’t need an explanation to know the note was referring to Felicity. The hotel. He also didn’t need an explanation to know the note was from the assassin. He need to been trailing him during his travels.

... to the This was his worst nightmare coming true.

As the horror spread through him, he tried to clear his mind so he could think. He had to do something to save her. Had to find a way to get her out—without bringing her more harm.

... er. And At the prospect of her suffering in any way, his gut churned with the thought to be sick.

lan and “What’s wrong, Mr. Berg?” Mr. Fehling took a step toward him, catching his forehead. “Bad news?”

Philip nodded. The note said he had to go alone. But should he at least let Mr. Fehling about the kidnapping? Maybe the local sheriff? What was unclear was why the assassin hadn’t just taken him prisoner and had captured Felicity to use as ransom.

... o.” Mr. He had no guarantee that, even if he handed himself over, the killer would let Felicity free. What would stop the assassin from doing away with both?

“I have to go and take care of something.” Philip peered past the window at the front of the hotel. He didn’t know how far Hawthorne was. Said it was from Fairplay, but he’d heard it was abandoned and guessed several miles to the west in the foothills. The evening sky was already dark. By the time he reached the mine, night would have settled, making the rescue of Felicity all that much more dangerous.

... heepish The fear and desperation inside prodded him to leave. Who knew how much time he’d already let elapse since the assassin had left the note who knew what he’d done to Felicity by now?

... with a Yet as much as Philip wanted to rush out and try to rescue Felicity, he suspected the assassin was laying a trap for him and that he had to

ite and cautiously or he wouldn't be able to help Felicity. Before leaving, he  
es, then find out more about Hawthorne Mine. Then he'd have an easier  
navigating once he got there. "Mr. Fehling, you know most of the  
note in Fairplay and in the surrounding area, don't you?"

over to "Do I?" His voice rose with a note of pride. "Of course I do. I've  
here longer than almost anyone else and know everyone."

ice. He "Then maybe you can help me. I need to speak to any miners who  
And he have once worked at the old, abandoned Hawthorne Mine."

who'd Mr. Fehling, still holding his pot of coffee, pressed a hand to his  
squishing his flesh as he stared straight ahead, deep in thought.

After a moment, he released his chin and snapped his fingers. "I know  
that he two fellas. One lives in town and the other works as a cowhand at Up  
free her Ranch." The hotel proprietor gave Philip their names and where to look  
them at this time of the night, indicating that one or both would be  
he need taverns in town.

With his heart thudding with urgent need, Philip crossed to the door.  
concern wasn't sure how he'd find Felicity and free her, but all he knew was  
had to do something—that he couldn't let her get in the middle of this  
east tell with his brother.

at was As he exited, he nodded his thanks to Mr. Fehling. "If I'm not back  
instead hotel within two hours, send the sheriff out to find me at Hawthorne Mine."

He'd probably be dead. But he prayed that at the very least, Felicity  
r would be alive and safe.

h them

e dusty

e Mine

it was

turning

ing his

ow how

e? And

her, he

o move

cautiously or he wouldn't be able to help Felicity. Before leaving, he had to find out more about Hawthorne Mine. Then he'd have an easier time navigating once he got there. "Mr. Fehling, you know most of the men in Fairplay and in the surrounding area, don't you?"

"Do I?" His voice rose with a note of pride. "Of course I do. I've lived here longer than almost anyone else and know everyone."

"Then maybe you can help me. I need to speak to any miners who may have once worked at the old, abandoned Hawthorne Mine."

Mr. Fehling, still holding his pot of coffee, pressed a hand to his chin, squishing his flesh as he stared straight ahead, deep in thought.

After a moment, he released his chin and snapped his fingers. "I know of two fellas. One lives in town and the other works as a cowhand at Updegraff Ranch." The hotel proprietor gave Philip their names and where to look for them at this time of the night, indicating that one or both would be at the taverns in town.

With his heart thudding with urgent need, Philip crossed to the door. He wasn't sure how he'd find Felicity and free her, but all he knew was that he had to do something—that he couldn't let her get in the middle of this war with his brother.

As he exited, he nodded his thanks to Mr. Fehling. "If I'm not back at the hotel within two hours, send the sheriff out to find me at Hawthorne Mine."

He'd probably be dead. But he prayed that at the very least, Felicity would be alive and safe.

Felicity awoke with a pounding headache. As she drew in a breath of air, her eyes flew open, and she found herself in a cavern of some sort. A lantern placed on a rocky ledge above her. The light illuminated the granite ceiling and rough walls on either side. Ahead, steel tracks led down a long passageway that disappeared into darkness. On her opposite side, metal tracks ran to another black chasm.

Where was she? A mine?

At the trickle of water behind her, she shifted to find thin threads of water running down the wall and forming a narrow creek beside the tracks.

She had to be in a mine. What other place could it be? But why was she here?

Her thoughts raced back to the trip she'd made to town out of her mind to see Philip again. In her last waking moments after she'd walked out of the store, what had happened? Had someone really threatened her with a gun and then forced her to walk toward a wagon?

Yes, there had been a man with a foreign accent. At first, she'd thought he was someone with Philip. But she'd clearly been wrong. The man's intentions toward Philip were less than honorable.

Was he the assassin Philip had mentioned? The one his brother had mentioned after him? If so, what was he doing with her?

She didn't have to think long to figure that out. In fact, she didn't think at any time. If the assassin had been in the General Store and had heard Philip and Jim blathering on about how much Philip liked her, the man had probably captured her to lure Philip down into the mine after her.

Once Philip was here in the mine, the assassin would be able to track him down and kill him.

Even if Philip didn't love her and didn't want to be with her, he was so noble and caring not to come after her once he learned of her plight. He wasn't the sort of man who would leave her to rot while he left to save himself . . . unfortunately . . .



She really wished at this moment that he was that sort of man who wouldn't attempt to rescue her. But she expected that as soon as he got the assassin had her, he'd rush out and put himself into life-threatening danger to help her.

In fact, he was probably already on his way.

f musty She glanced around again. The assassin wasn't anywhere in sight, lit by that didn't mean he wasn't lurking somewhere nearby.

l a low She tugged on her arms, which were bound behind her at the wrists, down a she tried to move her legs only to find that they, too, were tied together. At least her mouth wasn't gagged.

But maybe that was intentional. Maybe once Philip arrived and calling for her, the assassin hoped she'd respond, drawing him toward

of water Obviously, as an assassin, he would be a trained and experienced man. He wouldn't leave room for any mistakes and had probably plotted out every detail.

was she Except that he didn't know her. He didn't know how much she needed Philip. And he didn't know what lengths she'd go to in order to protect

t of the She was no damsel in distress. She was a strong woman who carried a knife whatever she set her mind to. And that meant her first order of business was to free herself from her binding. If she wasn't lying there tied up and helpless when Philip arrived, then the assassin wouldn't be able to lure him in.

man's She dug her fingers into the gravel behind her. Surely with a sharp blade she could saw through her binding. If she did so quietly enough, maybe the assassin wouldn't find out.

it need With nothing sharp enough beneath her, she inched down the tracks. Captain fingers connected with a lone rusty nail, and for a short while she rubbed against the rope, but at the odd angle, she didn't make much progress.

robably As a sense of urgency settled inside her, she wiggled farther from her original spot, combing the gravel as she went. To her side, her gaze scanned on a section of the tracks where the metal had been torn away, leaving a gap . . . and a jagged edge.

was too She rapidly positioned her wrists and the rope over the knifelike fragment of metal and began to saw.

The metal sliced into her arm, and she sucked in a breath at the pain as it raced up her flesh. With blood running down her arm and onto her wrist,

and skin grew slick, but she continued to slice at the rope, this time sawing not news and meticulously, knowing she could hurt herself badly if she was not being careful.

When the rope was frayed almost to the end, she wrestled the fibers until it snapped. With her hands free, she examined her cut. It was deep and still bleeding profusely. As quietly as she could, she ripped part of her petticoat, tied it around the wound, then began working on freeing herself. Then she wasn't sure how much time had elapsed during her efforts to free herself. But she guessed the assassin would be checking on her soon. She had to position herself where he'd left her and wrap the rope around her feet so that she still appeared to be bound.

As she began to scramble toward the area where she'd first awoken, she stopped short at the sight of blood covering the gravel near the broken bottle. She'd obviously bled all over everything, and if the assassin could see it, he'd notice the blood. He'd be too proficient to miss it.

She dragged her fingers across the gravel, trying to cover the spots. The clean-up job wasn't perfect, but she'd have to pray that in the low light of the tunnel, the assassin wouldn't notice anything.

At the crunch of footsteps and a light that seemed to be coming from nearby, she lay down the way she'd been when she'd awoken and wrapped the rope around her ankles as tightly as possible, then slipped her hands behind her back out of sight. With her eyes closed, she pretended to be asleep, breathing slowly and rhythmically.

Even with her eyes closed, she could sense the brightening of the tunnel when the newcomer stepped into it. He seemed to be holding the lantern. He was likely examining her.

Anger wrestled around her insides more than fear—anger that her brother was trying to kill him, anger that he'd had to run for his life from her that after surviving this long he was in danger because of her.

No, she wouldn't let anything happen to him tonight.

Letting her anger fuel her, she put on the best performance she could. She prayed she looked as innocent and gullible as she had when he'd approached her. She needed to convince him that she wasn't a threat, that she had nothing to fear from her.

But the truth was, he had everything to fear, because she intended to protect the man she loved, even if she had to put herself in danger to do

slowly She still loved Philip and probably always would. But she was be-  
weren'tto understand why he'd always been making plans to leave Fairpla  
he'd sometimes even seemed in a hurry to go. Because he'd been c  
nal partdanger and hadn't wanted to bring her—or anyone else near him—i  
eep andturmoil of his life.

of her Well, once they were both free of the assassin—yes, she was bei  
feet. her sister Charity and thinking optimistically in the situation—she w  
to cuttry to convince Philip to stay. Wouldn't even encourage it. Instead  
r againpush him out of town and on his way just as soon as he could go so th  
pe backstay out of reach of his brother.

Would he have to keep running and hiding his whole life?  
en, she Poor Philip. What a lonely and dangerous existence that would be.  
en rail. Her captor assessed her and the passageway for several long s  
ie nearThen the light began to fade with the retreating footsteps. Even after  
gone, she waited, unmoving.

ots. Her Finally she pushed up, took her bindings off, and stood. She gues  
ting of assassin was keeping an eye on the entrance, lying in wait for Philip t  
an appearance.

from a She'd never be able to sneak past him and leave the mine. Her onl  
woken,option was to hide.

ped her She turned and assessed the tunnel first one way and then the other  
ed to be The far end of the tunnel didn't seem quite as dark. Was that the di  
of the entrance? Perhaps radiance from the moon and stars was brighte  
e tunnelThat made sense. If Philip entered there, he'd see her on the track an  
item uprushing toward her only to have the assassin step out of the side tun  
block him.

Philip's She'd have to go the opposite way.

, anger She didn't know much about mines, but from the cobwebs and d  
broken rail, she guessed the area she was in was no longer in use  
likely, the entire mine was old and abandoned. If she started wa  
ld. Shearound, she might encounter old tunnels that could cave in, loose r  
'd firstbeams, even unmarked shafts that she could fall into.

that he She would have to be careful, but she could do it. For Philip.  
wasn't lying there tied up and helpless when Philip arrived, then the a  
ided towouldn't be able to lure him in and kill him.

o so. Creeping forward as silently as possible, she started down th

ginnintoward the unknown. As she reached the dark edges, she slowed her st  
y, why At a sound behind her, she glanced over her shoulder to find that t  
lodgingwith the flat black hat and cloak had stepped out of his hiding spot ag  
into thelooked at the empty spot where she'd been and then cursed. Even tho  
profanity was in a different language, it was still clear enough.

ing like She darted forward, and her pulse sped with the need to get aw  
ouldn'tdisappear into the darkness before he noticed her.

l, she'd More cursing sounded behind her.

at he'd She picked up her pace.

A second later, he shouted, the call following her.

He'd spotted her.

With an urgency born of desperation, she raced faster, praying sh  
econds.either outrun him or find a place to hide before he caught her.

he was

sed the  
o make

ly other

.  
irection  
ning it.  
d come  
nel and

ust and  
. More  
ndering  
ocks or

. If she  
ssassin

e track

toward the unknown. As she reached the dark edges, she slowed her steps.

At a sound behind her, she glanced over her shoulder to find that the man with the flat black hat and cloak had stepped out of his hiding spot again. He looked at the empty spot where she'd been and then cursed. Even though the profanity was in a different language, it was still clear enough.

She darted forward, and her pulse sped with the need to get away and disappear into the darkness before he noticed her.

More cursing sounded behind her.

She picked up her pace.

A second later, he shouted, the call following her.

He'd spotted her.

With an urgency born of desperation, she raced faster, praying she could either outrun him or find a place to hide before he caught her.

At a distant bang, Philip's body tensed.

Was it the crash of rocks or mining tools? Hopefully it wasn't the a gun. Please, not a gun.

Philip tried to crawl faster on his hands and knees, but he had to low, his broad shoulders scraping the sides of the tunnel and slowi down.

The fellow he'd spoken to in town had assured him the back e would lead into the main drifts. But so far, after crawling for at hundred feet, he hadn't come across any other passageways.

He maneuvered the lantern ahead of him, the flame low to avoid c attention until he was close enough to Felicity to protect her.

He'd considered going in without light, but the old miner had in that he would get lost without it. Additionally, with the light he cou the map the fellow had drawn for him, showing him how to cross ove front entrance of the mine.

The assassin was likely waiting by the main mine opening with F someplace where Philip would see her and be unable to resist going her.

Obviously the assassin had been in Fairplay for some time, at lea before the storm had closed the passes. He could have struck earlier have attempted to capture him instead of Felicity. Could have slipped hotel room at night and slit his throat.

So why hadn't the killer done any of those things? Philip hadn't be to work out the answers during the ride to the mine. Instead, panic h building so that now it had developed not only a home but an ent inside him.

Maybe he should have gone to the sheriff right away and round group to rescue Felicity instead of coming alone. He'd just been to that if he showed up with help, the assassin would carry through on hi to harm Felicity. And Philip couldn't take the chance of anything e

happening to her. This was already terrible enough.

With a huff of frustration, he wormed his way forward. He had to get to the main entrance and reach Felicity before the assassin grew tired of waiting for him to arrive and began to suspect that he was up to something.

Gradually the ceiling began to rise, and soon he was able to walk through the tunnel over. The way was fairly clear with a rock pile or two he had to navigate around, just as the old miner had warned.

At another bang, this time closer, he halted. The sound was definitely a gunshot.

What could it mean? Was the assassin shooting at someone?

His heart thudded with a burst of alarm at the prospect of the possibility of being fired at Felicity.

The lantern light cast a glow ahead on what appeared to be an intersecting tunnel. Philip held up the map and tried to determine his location. Which way was the tunnel he needed to turn into so that he could make his way toward the main entrance?

The slap of footsteps was drawing closer from the intersecting tunnel. He set the lantern down, stuffed the map into his shirt, and unholstered his revolver. Then he flattened himself against the wall, the ceiling finally high enough that he didn't have to slouch so far.

A figure raced into the intersection of the two tunnels. He had a momentary glimpse the hair to know it was Felicity. Before she could run to the other side, he snaked out his arm and caught hold of her, dragging her out of the line of the assassin's fire.

She gasped and might have screamed, but he cupped a hand over her mouth and in the same motion drew her against him.

"It's me," he whispered.

In the middle of struggling, she froze. Her eyes widened.

At the oncoming footsteps, he released her, pushed her behind him, and lifted his gun.

She sidled behind him near his back. Her breathing was labored. From the blood stains on her coat, she'd clearly sustained injuries.

He didn't have time to question her. He had to stop her pursuer.

Drawing in a steadying breath, he peeked around the corner. A man was about fifty feet away, his frame difficult to see in the darkness. Even if he was there, Philip pointed his revolver and took a shot.

The footsteps halted, a gunshot resounded in return, and an instant of hurry a bullet whizzed past him.

He pushed Felicity away from him down the passageway he traversed. "Go. There's a back way in and out of the mine."

Felicity didn't budge but clutched his coat. "I'm not leaving you."

"Do it." He didn't care that his voice was harsh.

"No." Her whisper was stubborn.

He peeked around the corner again. The assassin wasn't in sight. Had he gone?

Philip pulled back. Could they make a run for the exit? How far they get before the assassin was on their trail? They would be out in the street with no place to hide.

He had to at least make Felicity leave. Then he could battle it out with the assassin.

His revolver held six rounds. Now that he'd fired one, he only had five left. And of course, he hadn't taken the time to go back to his room for more cartridges.

The assassin likely had more than one gun, extra ammunition, a cache of other weapons to use against him. And no doubt he was a very good and experienced fighter, so that even in hand-to-hand combat, he wouldn't stand a chance.

"You get a head start," Philip whispered, trying for another tactic. Felicity. "Take my horse and ride back to town and bring out help." He never had to get her to go on without him so that she made it out. Even if he died, at least he'd be able to die in peace knowing she got away.

He could feel her loosen her hold on his coat, as if she was considering his proposition.

Slowly, cautiously, he started to poke his head out to gauge whether the assassin had gone. But as soon as he did, a gunshot fired, and he jerked back as a bullet pinged against the tunnel wall near his head.

With only his lantern giving off faint light, he darted a glance to see the assassin in what appeared to be an alcove of some sort—one that was about a dozen paces away. Not far.

Philip took aim and shot again. But the assassin was clearly skilled. He dropped out of sight before the bullet could get near him.



It later a "Please, Felicity." He didn't care that his whisper sounded desperate that he was begging her. He needed her to go before it was too late.

She'd just "I won't make it back to town in time," she whispered. "We have to find of another way to outsmart him."

without "There is no other way." He guessed he could hold out in this standstill a short while. But what then? "You have to go. Now."

"Give yourself up, Your Highness," the voice called in Danish. "Hand yourself over willingly, I shall allow the young woman to go."

Where Philip knew he shouldn't contemplate doing as the man asked, but what other choice did he have?

She would "What did he say?" Felicity whispered.

He open Philip didn't want to tell her. She'd only protest.

"Do you give me your word that you'll leave her unharmed?" he responded in Danish, not wanting Felicity to be part of his negotiations.

"I vow it," came the reply. "She was only a means to draw you here. I had five As before, Philip didn't understand why the assassin was going for more trouble to bring him to the mine when he could have killed him somewhere else."

and a She nudged him from behind. "What's happening?"

skilled "I'm giving myself over to him."

Philip "You can't." This time her whisper was harsh. "I won't let you."

"It's too late. I've already agreed to it so long as he allows you to live."

ic with She started to tug him backward. "We'll make a run for it together."

He had He resisted her pull. "It's too dangerous. The tunnel has no place to hide. It won't, at cover."

"At least you'll have a chance to escape and possibly live."

Considering "He'll shoot me in the back and then kill you next. If I turn myself over, at least I can guarantee that the woman I love will live."

Here the "Love?" Her whisper rose with disbelief.

He'd back He hadn't meant to make his declaration of love to her in the bowels of the mine with an assassin shooting at them from around the corner. But she didn't make it out of the mine alive, now she would know the truth. "I was a fool not to tell you yesterday. Because the truth is, I love you more than my own life."

led and "Hand yourself over, Your Highness," the assassin called again in Danish. "It's the only way."

erate or “I’m saying goodbye,” Philip whispered to her. At least, that was what  
was trying to do.

to think In the low lantern light, he studied her face one last time. Even when  
face streaked with dirt and her hair tangled with cobwebs, she took his  
doff for away.

“I won’t let you do it.” Tears welled up in her beautiful eyes.  
“If you Before he could talk himself out of it, he bent down and captured her  
He took her with a passionate force—one that didn’t hold anything but  
ut what contained every ounce of his love so that she would know with certainty  
loved her more than anything or anyone.

She responded with desperation, pressing into him, meeting his kiss  
giving back to him in the same measure, her mouth melding and melting  
Philip and telling him that she loved him in return.

As he started to pull away, she clung to him. “Please,” she whispered  
e.” against his lips. “Please don’t leave me.”

He didn’t want to be apart from her. In fact, if by some miracle  
neplacesurvived the assassin’s scheming, he wouldn’t let Felicity out of his  
ever again.

“Take this and be safe.” He thrust his revolver into her hand. Then  
she could stop him, he released her, broke away, and stepped into the  
intersection so that the assassin could see him.

“No!” Her cry echoed in the hollow tunnel, but thankfully she  
.” follow him.

to take “Go, Felicity. Go now!”

Tears began coursing down her cheeks as she took a step away.

He let himself take one last look before facing the assassin who’d  
If in, at out of the alcove where he’d been hiding, his gun aimed at Philip’s head.

“You vowed you would let her go.” Philip held up his hands to show  
he was no longer armed.

“She means nothing to me.” The fellow was donned in a simple cloth  
ut if he a black felt hat and approached cautiously.

I was a She meant everything to Philip. From the corner of his eyes, he could  
han my her slowly creeping backward away from him. He wanted her to run, to  
far away as possible before the assassin killed him. Not only did he want  
gain in keep her from witnessing the deed, but he also wanted her to be well  
harm’s way, just in case the assassin changed his mind.

what he      Could he distract, possibly delay, the assassin and give her more time  
with herof.      “Take me someplace else to kill me.” It was the only thing he could  
s breath      The assassin was closing in on him, his gun unswerving. “Now that  
er lips.      have handed yourself over to me, I cannot risk you getting away. Now  
ack butthe mine?      how long I have been hunting you.”

er lips.      *Hunting.* The word sent a chill up Philip’s spine. “Why bring me  
ack butthe mine?      Why not kill me on the streets of Fairplay?”

ainty he      “You have been too closely guarded. But here, with the woman you  
at risk, you will do as I say, even if your guard tries to rescue you.”

iss and      His guard? Maybe he had a bodyguard after all, watching out for him  
inglingkeeping him safe. But what could the bodyguard do now to stop him  
giving his life to save Felicity’s? Nothing. And the assassin knew it.

ispered      The fellow stopped a foot away and rammed the barrel of the rifle  
into Philip’s forehead.

acle he      Up so close, he could finally see the man’s features. He was stock  
is sightclean-shaven and looked like an average fellow on the street. Perhaps  
was intentional so that he’d be able to blend in and sneak up on his prey  
beforeonly thing about him that was unnatural was the deadly glint in his eyes  
nto thehe was taking pleasure in this moment right before the kill.

“Have you any last words you would like me to deliver to the king?”  
e didn’t      “Tell him that I forgive him.” In spite of everything, Philip could not  
bitterness and unforgiveness with him to the grave. “And tell him  
good king.”

“He already is a good king.” The assassin settled his finger on the trigger  
slipped“and now he will be even better without a usurper in his way.”

art.      At the click of the hammer, Philip closed his eyes and waited for the  
ow thatthat would tear through him and end his life. Strangely, he wasn’t afraid  
only thing he regretted was that Felicity would have to witness this carnage  
oak andwould be a terrible memory that she would have for a long time. He  
eventually she would recover and go on to find love with another man.

ould see      In the next instant a gun blasted, followed by a second blast, and he  
o get aswaited for the pain and then the oblivion.

want to      But nothing happened . . . except for silence. Was he already in pain  
l out ofIf so, why was the air still musty and cold? And why could he hear the  
of water running off the walls?

me? The assassin's barrel was no longer against his head.

ld think Philip cracked open an eye to find that the fellow had taken a step

He was holding his shooting arm, and the sleeve of his coat was turning  
hat youwith blood beneath his fingers. His eyes were wide and unseeing. He  
ot afterwavered, as if he was about to topple over.

Had Felicity shot him?

here to Philip turned to find Felicity only ten feet away with his revolver  
at the assassin. She glanced from the gun to the wound and then back, and  
ou lovehand began to shake. Even so, she didn't lower the weapon but kept it  
at the assassin.

him and Was there a chance he and Felicity could escape now while the assassin  
m fromwas wounded?

With a surge of renewed energy, Philip grabbed the assassin's arm and  
evolverbanged it against the wall. The revolver slipped from the man's grasp  
clattered to the ground.

ky and Philip swiped it up and then pointed it at the fellow.

aps that But before he could pull the trigger and disable the assassin even  
ey. Thethe man wavered again, fell forward, and landed face-first on the floor  
es, as ifwith a bullet hole in the back of his head.

Where had that shot come from? Certainly not Felicity. She hadn't  
?" at an angle to do that. And the shot was too precise, the work of someone  
n't takewho was an excellent marksman.

to be a Philip peered down the passageway to find a shadowy figure lurking  
alcove, his gun out and pointed his way. By the bulky body, hefty shoulders  
trigger.and square face, Philip recognized him as the man he'd seen trailing  
from time to time, giving him the prickles of unease.

he blast Rapidly, Philip shifted his revolver and aimed it at the newcomer.  
id. Thecome any closer or I'll shoot."

rime. It

e hoped

l Philip

radise?

e trickle

The assassin's barrel was no longer against his head.

Philip cracked open an eye to find that the fellow had taken a step back. He was holding his shooting arm, and the sleeve of his coat was turning dark with blood beneath his fingers. His eyes were wide and unseeing. And he wavered, as if he was about to topple over.

Had Felicity shot him?

Philip turned to find Felicity only ten feet away with his revolver pointed at the assassin. She glanced from the gun to the wound and then back, and her hand began to shake. Even so, she didn't lower the weapon but kept it aimed at the assassin.

Was there a chance he and Felicity could escape now while the assassin was wounded?

With a surge of renewed energy, Philip grabbed the assassin's arm and banged it against the wall. The revolver slipped from the man's grip and clattered to the ground.

Philip swiped it up and then pointed it at the fellow.

But before he could pull the trigger and disable the assassin even further, the man wavered again, fell forward, and landed face-first on the ground, with a bullet hole in the back of his head.

Where had that shot come from? Certainly not Felicity. She hadn't been at an angle to do that. And the shot was too precise, the work of someone who was an excellent marksman.

Philip peered down the passageway to find a shadowy figure lurking in an alcove, his gun out and pointed his way. By the bulky body, hefty shoulders, and square face, Philip recognized him as the man he'd seen trailing him from time to time, giving him the prickles of unease.

Rapidly, Philip shifted his revolver and aimed it at the newcomer. "Don't come any closer or I'll shoot."

She'd shot and injured a man.

Unable to control her shaking, Felicity stared at the assassin lying on the ground. She'd injured his arm holding out the gun, intending to disable him. And she had.

But someone else had followed them into the tunnels and had been waiting for one to kill him.

In front of her, Philip raised his gun, then peeked out into the narrow passageway, just as he had before with the other man.

Felicity drew in a taut breath. Was another assassin on Philip? Would the danger never end?

If they ever got free from the mine and the threats, she resolved to send Philip far away from Fairplay. He had to hide in another someplace new where he could be safe for a little while.

She only had to picture the assassin with the gun pointed against Philip's forehead to feel a fresh surge of resolve. Even though she'd been trying to escape the way Philip had wanted, she hadn't been able to make her move very fast.

When the assassin had stepped closer to Philip into the intersection, she had frozen. Her only thought had been that she had to do something to protect Philip, that she couldn't just stand helplessly by while he was murdered. Shooting the assassin in the arm had seemed like the logical choice.

The lantern Philip had brought with him into the tunnel sat where he had abandoned it moments ago. The flame still flickered enough to see the outline of his jaw and a new determination to survive.

A voice called out in Danish.

Yes, the man had to be another assassin. How many were there?

She crept closer to Philip and readied her revolver. Maybe if they could take the man together, they'd be able to wound him enough that they could escape away.

Philip replied in Danish, and the two went back and forth

conversation for a minute or more.

Finally, Philip gently pushed her hand with the revolver down, let his hand rest on her shoulder at the same time. “He’s been my bodyguard for the duration of my stay in your country.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Yes. I’ve seen him at times and thought he was my assassin. But when he showed up, he was keeping watch over me instead.”

“What if he’s just saying it?” She couldn’t loosen her grip on the revolver, couldn’t shake the fear that something bad still might happen to her. Philip.

“He believes the assassin finally tracked me to Fairplay the day after the storm, but he didn’t show himself around town until yesterday, when the snow began to melt. Since the assassin couldn’t get past the bodyguard, he figured out a way to manipulate me into doing what he asked.”

“By kidnapping me?”

“Kidnapping the woman I love.” Philip’s voice turned husky with emotion as he pried the gun from her fingers.

She hadn’t just imagined the words. He really had spoken them.

Philip’s hands were shaking. She wanted to throw herself into his arms and kiss him again, but she forced herself to stay where she was. She couldn’t encourage Philip, couldn’t make him leave as soon as possible. Even if this assassin was dead, another could be more—likely would be more.

“I was wrong to think we could be together.” She spoke before she could lose her courage. “You won’t be safe in Fairplay any longer and need to hide in a new place.”

He stuffed both of their guns in his belt, then took her hands. “Tonight, when I thought I would lose you, I realized that I never want to spend another day without you by my side.”

Her body tensed with breathless need for him in return. She didn’t want to think about not being with him tomorrow or the next day, much less the months on end. Maybe never. But if that was what it took to keep him safe, she’d do it. She’d do it his way, then she had to put aside her selfish needs. “The danger—” He touched her lips with a finger. That was all it took for every thought to leave her head . . . except thoughts about his finger, which was now resting on her lip.

Oh, dear heavens. She couldn’t let herself get carried away with

obsession with his touch. Not here. Not now.

His lips began to quirk up on one side, almost as if he knew the end she had upon her. Almost as if he'd done it on purpose to silence her. She wanted to say something witty in return or touch him back, but her mind wouldn't work.

"We'll discuss our future later. For now, I want to return to town and let the doctor take a look at your wounds."

When he began to guide her toward the entrance, she didn't resist. The bodyguard had already disposed of the assassin's body. She didn't ask questions she didn't want to know. All she cared about was that Philip was alive and well . . . and somehow, she had to keep him that way.

The bodyguard, a man by the name of Sven, brought Philip's horse around to the front entrance of the mine. He was quick to serve, respectful, and deferred to Philip in all things. He even bowed toward Philip on occasion. Philip accepted the special treatment, clearly accustomed to it.

Carrying a lantern, Sven led the way during the ride out of the mine, through the overgrown gorge, down the mountain, and back into the foothills. Felicity sat in the saddle in front of Philip. With his arms surrounding her and his hands on her chest pressed against her, she could almost believe everything would be fine. Since the medical clinic was closed, Philip took her straight to the doctor's mansion, set on the edge of town. Both doctors, Astrid and Dr. Jensen, were home, and they tended to her wounds. When finished, Philip drove her to the lost wagon while she rode his horse out to the boardinghouse, with Sven following the way once again.

Even though the chill and darkness of night had settled, Mrs. Kelton stayed in his room. Serena rushed outside at the first sight of her, worried because she wanted to go home so long without a word.

She started to explain all that had happened but then stopped abruptly. She didn't want to look at Philip for guidance on how much to reveal. Even though she had already forgiven him for deceiving her about his identity, she was beginning to wonder out of curiosity to understand why he'd done it. After just one day, she'd almost discovered the truth—"that he was a prince. How would she have kept his secret for weeks?"

She let Philip tell the story about her kidnapping so that he could speak as much or as little as he wanted about all that had transpired.

When the hour finally grew late, Philip insisted on staying at the boardinghouse with her for the night. She didn't protest. After everything that



happened, somehow the boardinghouse felt safer than town, even though it wasn't necessarily true.

Philip offered to watch Mr. Keller for the first shift of the night so Mrs. Keller could sleep on the sofa. And as Philip situated himself behind the older man with a book in hand, Sven pulled up a chair in the kitchen and repositioned it outside the bedroom door.

When Felicity finally crawled under her covers, she was too tired to stay up. Her eyes opened. She hugged her covers around her, gratitude swelling in her heart. Philip was safe and back at the boardinghouse where he belonged. But was it where he belonged? And would she have the strength to help him on his way tomorrow as she knew she needed to?

she  
saw  
Philip on  
it.

narrow,  
Felicity sat  
is solid  
is okay.  
to the  
Logan,  
over her  
leading

Keller and  
'd been

quietly and  
though she'd  
beginning  
closed

share as

at the  
what had

happened, somehow the boardinghouse felt safer than town, even though that wasn't necessarily true.

Philip offered to watch Mr. Keller for the first shift of the night so that Mrs. Keller could sleep on the sofa. And as Philip situated himself beside the older man with a book in hand, Sven pulled up a chair in the kitchen and positioned it outside the bedroom door.

When Felicity finally crawled under her covers, she was too tired to keep her eyes open. She hugged her covers around her, gratitude swelling in her heart. Philip was safe and back at the boardinghouse where he belonged.

But was it where he belonged? And would she have the strength to send him on his way tomorrow as she knew she needed to?

Three days. Philip had sent the transatlantic telegram to the prime minister three days ago. And he hadn't heard back.

He'd been hoping for a return telegram from the prime minister and parliament with their thoughts about his plans. Although he wanted to lead the government and the law, he couldn't be bound so tightly in the man who he chose for his wife.

With or without their approval, he was moving forward. If so, Gustaf was no longer king and parliament rejected him for his decision, he was confident his younger sister Estelle could take the leadership, especially if he stood by her side and assisted her.

He paused in chopping wood to wipe perspiration from his forehead. The morning sunshine as beautiful as always in the high mountain country. Though the November air was crisp, the sky was as blue as a summer day.

He would miss this place with its wide openness and the mountains surrounding it.

But today he was leaving. During a trip into town the previous afternoon with Sven, he'd learned the snow in the passes had finally melted enough for horses and riders to cross over. The way was wet and even slick in places, but the few travelers who'd made it up from Denver proved it was doable.

Yes, he was leaving today. And he was taking Felicity with him. She didn't know it yet.

He drew in a breath, his nostrils filling with the scent of damp soil and ground and grass still soggy from the melted snow. The air was also filled with the smell of freshly cut wood.

Sven had done most of the chopping, but Philip had wanted to do his share too, in making sure the boardinghouse would be well taken care of come winter. And now that the pile under the lean-to was double- and triple-stacked, there would be more than plenty.

He and Sven had also rebuilt the stalls in the barn, had stocked them with plenty of hay and feed for the livestock, and had even made repairs to the

the house in places where the storm had taken a toll.

Sven had made it clear that he didn't want Philip helping, always to do everything for him and treating him like the royalty he was. What was a big problem when they were still trying to keep his status as an undercover.

minister With how difficult it was for Sven to pretend a prince of Lapland was an ordinary fellow, Philip better understood why the prime minister and instructed Sven not to interact with Philip at all but to remain anonymous.

respect As it was, even now Sven was gathering the pieces that Philip chopped and added them to the piles under the lean-to. The burly matter of constant presence at his side, and the lack of privacy and freedom had gotten used to again, especially because it had allowed him no time with Felicity.

especially Strangely, neither the Kellers nor Serena had seemed perturbed by his presence. They hadn't asked for an explanation for why the big fellow was there or where he'd come from. And if they thought Sven's behavior was strange, they didn't show it.

head, the Sven held out his hand for the ax. "You're getting hot and sweaty today. Can't have that today, can you?"

rugged "You're right." Philip handed Sven the ax and took a step away from the chopping block. He dusted off his finest navy-blue trousers and then grabbed his matching blue coat from where he'd draped it over the lean-to railings. Sven was at his side in the next instant, helping him don the coat. Philip bit back a sigh and a rebuke. Nothing he said could deter Sven from coming to his every whim.

she just As Sven lifted the coat and settled it on Philip's shoulders, Philip pulled the pocket watch from his vest and flipped open the case.

oil, the It was half past nine. Time to put into motion his carefully laid plans. Philip laid plans he'd spent yesterday afternoon initiating.

o laden As though reading Philip's thoughts, Sven raised a brow. "Ready?" Philip spoke in English, reserving Danish for the times when he wanted to communicate privately.

his part, Philip patted the inner pocket of his coat and nodded. "I'm ready." So, his pulse rushed forward with a mixture of anticipation and determination.

ver the At the squeak of the front door, Philip started across the yard. He was right on time.

triple-

the loft  
pairs to

As he neared the front porch, she was already descending in the rushing gown she'd worn the afternoon that he'd taken her portrait and which was asked her to wear again today. Her hair, in all its fiery glory, was coiled in the princely chignon that showed off her neck, just the way he liked it.

He bounded the last few steps and offered her his arm gallantly. "It was just a lady." He bowed with a flourish. "You look as ravishing as always."

After had Mrs. Keller and Serena with her little boy stood on the porch waiting for them. Felicity, pleased smiles upon their faces.

His lip was Although he wanted to wrap his arms around Felicity and kiss her, but he was in oblivion, he'd exerted incredible patience over the past few days. Just a moment longer. That's what he'd been telling himself to hold back.

He alone The wagon was waiting in front of the house, the old gelding hitched and ready to go. And of course, Sven had his horse saddled and intended to accompany them.

Now was "Why won't you tell me where we're going?" Felicity asked as he turned toward the wagon, her hand tucked into the crook of his arm.

"It's a surprise, and by definition of a surprise, you aren't supposed to know." You know.

"What if I don't want it to be a surprise?" Her brown eyes rounded with anticipation, and the slight curl of her lips hinted at just how much she'd been enjoying his scheming.

He patted his camera case and tripod as he passed by the back of the wagon. Philip had already used the excuse that he wanted to get more photographs today, particularly one of them together. But he'd refrained from telling her the location of the pictures. And he didn't intend to tell her until the wagon pulled there.

"I'll give you one clue. You get to spend the morning with an incredible man—the handsome man."

"I do?" She feigned innocence. "Then I'll look forward to meeting you." Sven He grinned and prayed he'd get a lifetime of such banter with her.

He intended to The trip to town was filled with more of her teasing questions. As the wagon rolled down Main Street, his heart began to thud harder, and his palms were damp. "Even damp." He could admit, he was a little nervous.

What if she didn't agree to his plans?

Felicity Over the past three days since the kidnapping, she'd been urging him to go to some place new and hide. She was afraid Gustaf had hired more than

purple assassin. But Sven had assured them he'd only ever seen the one. So that he'd privately informed him that it wouldn't be long before Gustaf hired a man led into especially once he realized he was no longer receiving communication from his man.

My. "My That meant they had a blessed reprieve from the threat of death, the urgency of leaving Fairplay had diminished.

watching Even so, Felicity was worried. Philip didn't blame her after what she'd experienced. But he'd asked her not to talk about their parting ways with her instead to simply enjoy the extra few days they had together.

at a little She'd agreed, but he'd still seen the hint of sadness in her eyes and he'd caught her looking at him with tears in her eyes on a couple of occasions and though she was already bracing herself for his departure.

decided to Except that he'd meant his resolve. He didn't intend to part ways with her . . . ever.

led her As the wagon rolled to a stop, Felicity glanced around. "We're leaving our pictures taken in town?"

posed to "Is there something wrong with that?"

She peered around at the boardwalks caked with dried mud, the streets with street still filled with puddles, and the gray, weathered buildings with their false fronts. Fairplay itself wasn't a beautiful or picturesque town, but because of the mountains in the distance on every side, he'd grown attached to the town. Or maybe he liked the town because of the woman he'd met there.

graphs Whatever the case, he helped her down from the wagon, then walked along beside her down the boardwalk with Sven only a few paces behind.

they were "Are you ready for the greatest day of your life?" He tried to talk to a flock of birds attempting to take flight inside him.

credibly She quirked a brow. "Greatest day?"

"It will be the greatest day for me, if you say yes." He stopped.

him." "And what exactly am I saying yes to?"

He opened the door that was next to them. The church door. "Say yes to me as they marry me."

As they grew

him to  
man one

assassin. But Sven had assured them he'd only ever seen the one. Sven had privately informed him that it wouldn't be long before Gustaf hired another, especially once he realized he was no longer receiving communication from his man.

That meant they had a blessed reprieve from the threat of death, and the urgency of leaving Fairplay had diminished.

Even so, Felicity was worried. Philip didn't blame her after what she'd experienced. But he'd asked her not to talk about their parting ways yet and instead to simply enjoy the extra few days they had together.

She'd agreed, but he'd still seen the hint of sadness in her eyes and had caught her looking at him with tears in her eyes on a couple of occasions, as though she was already bracing herself for his departure.

Except that he'd meant his resolve. He didn't intend to part ways with her . . . ever.

As the wagon rolled to a stop, Felicity glanced around. "We're getting our pictures taken in town?"

"Is there something wrong with that?"

She peered around at the boardwalks caked with dried mud, the rutted street still filled with puddles, and the gray, weathered buildings with their false fronts. Fairplay itself wasn't a beautiful or picturesque town, but with the mountains in the distance on every side, he'd grown attached to the place. Or maybe he liked the town because of the woman he'd met there.

Whatever the case, he helped her down from the wagon, then strolled alongside her down the boardwalk with Sven only a few paces behind.

"Are you ready for the greatest day of your life?" He tried to tame the flock of birds attempting to take flight inside him.

She quirked a brow. "Greatest day?"

"It will be the greatest day for me, if you say yes." He stopped.

"And what exactly am I saying yes to?"

He opened the door that was next to them. The church door. "Say yes to marrying me."

Marry Philip?

Felicity drew in a sharp breath.

Was Philip proposing?

As if hearing her unasked question, in the next instant, he was leaning himself to his knee in front of her, still holding one of her hands. He looked up at her, his smile growing and his eyes crinkling at the corners. “I want to marry you, Felicity. And I want you to come with me wherever I go, wherever I live, with me always.”

With her free hand, she pinched herself. Was this a dream?

At a movement behind them inside the church, she sucked in a sharp breath. Charity and Patience and their husbands were beaming at her from the altar. In front of them stood Father Zieber, his prayer book open, two candelabras lit, and a smile upon his face.

After three months apart from Charity, Felicity wanted to rush into the church and give her sister a hug. A dozen questions also clamored for answers. Topmost among them was why Charity was back in Fairport, and when had she arrived.

But with Philip on his knee in front of her, his handsome face filled with expectation and his blue eyes brimming with love, she cast aside all other questions and focused on the man she loved.

“Please say yes to marrying me,” he said again, “and make me the happiest man on earth.”

The word *yes* pushed for release, but she bit it back. He was a prince, and he’d already once told her that he didn’t have the freedom to choose his own wife without the input of his government. But she couldn’t very well say no here. Not with everyone looking on.

“I thought you couldn’t,” she whispered. “What about the law?”

“I don’t care,” he whispered in return. “I sent a telegram. I asked for their support but told them I intended to marry the woman I love regardless.”

“What if they decide to punish you for it?” She wasn’t sure



government could punish a prince. Would they take away his title? Expel him from the country? Force him into exile?

“I am still willing to do my duty if the day should come that they would force me to become—” Still on his knees, he cast a sideways glance toward the onlookers in the church.

She knew he was referring to the kingship if Gustaf was deposed. They had talked about it more over the past few days together, and Philip had explained all that had transpired with Gustaf, the populace’s dissatisfaction, the growing turmoil. He’d also told her about the laws and regulations of the elected governing body, all of which Gustaf had ignored as he’d taken control of the country.

After their conversations, she wholeheartedly supported Philip’s decision to take the kingship and serve his country. “I don’t want to be the cause of not fulfilling your destiny.”

“You won’t be.” He dropped his voice again so that no one could overhear their conversation. “I assured the prime minister I shall still be my country’s humble servant in any capacity but shall do so with you by my side.”

“And what was the reply?”

“He hasn’t responded.” He lifted her hand to his lips and placed a kiss there.

Although the touch was light, the tenderness, the adoration, and the promises he had promised much more to come—a promise that she wasn’t sure she wanted to accept. Not because she didn’t want all he was offering but because she loved him too much to hold him back from his future.

“I want to marry you here today. Now.” His voice was raspy with wanting. “Because I can’t bear the thought of spending a single second of my life away from you.”

She couldn’t imagine it either, but she had to be sure he knew the consequences of such a decision, that he might forfeit becoming the next king because of her. He’d already told her he’d never wished to take the throne, never planned on it, and never sought after it. But he’d also explained that he’d always known it was a possibility that he would take the throne if something ever happened to Gustaf. He’d just never expected that he would fight to take the kingship from Gustaf in order to give it to him.

“Are you sure you want to risk so much for me?”

“I’ve never been more certain about anything. Someone wise or

ban himme that if the future is so uncertain, then we should make the most of  
day we have left. And that's what I want to do."

want me "Someone wise? Or someone *very, very* wise?"

and their The blue of his eyes brightened with mirth. "Someone not only *very*  
wise but also *very, very* beautiful."

They'd "Then I suppose we really must do as she suggested."

plained "I agree."

and the She could feel the worry from the past few days slipping slowly  
and theShe was under no illusion the future would be easy. It would likely be  
controlhardships, especially if Gustaf sent another assassin after Philip. And

was ever able to travel to Lapland with Philip, life in a new land would  
need tocustoms would be difficult. She'd have much to learn and many adjust

of you But if Philip could learn all he had over the past year of his tra  
surely she could rise to the challenge and do the same.

ld hear He brushed his thumb across her ring finger. "So, will you make  
country'sgreatest day of my life by marrying me?"

"First you have to do one thing." She tugged at him to bring him up

"One thing?" His voice turned low and seductive as he rose.  
a gentleexactly do you have in mind?" His attention fixed upon her lips.

"What do you think it is?"

e desire "I know what I'm hoping it is."

is ready "You might be right." She tipped her face up, giving him access to

use she At the same time, he bent and lightly brushed his nose against  
"Should I give it a try and see if I am?"

y with "You may as well." With each teasing quip, her heart was g  
id morelighter.

As he gently plied at her lips, the kiss captivated her, as each  
ew thetouches did. And hundreds of sensations swirled through her so that s  
pland'safraid that if she breathed, she'd release a groan instead.

oe king, She wanted to languidly devour his mouth in return, but with ev  
ed howlooking on, she dragged in a deep inhale of him, then forced herself to  
irone ifthe kiss.

country His mouth hovered near hers, his breathing shallow and heated an  
with need. "Ready?" His voice was rumbly as he ran his hand down l  
and wrapped his fingers through hers.

ice told She was definitely ready, but she couldn't get the word out p

of every breathlessness. Instead, she nodded and took her place at his side. They stepped into the small church and allowed him to lead her down the aisle to become his bride.

Charity and Patience stood beside their handsome husbands, and they were radiating happiness, both of them more beautiful than she remembered. Was that what the love of a good man could do? Could a woman flourish so that she became even more beautiful?

She didn't know how Philip had been able to make all the arrangements full off for the wedding and find a way for her sisters to both be there—especially if she was Charity—but her heart swelled with gladness that they could be present with new witnesses as she pledged her life to the man she loved.

"Thank you," she whispered to him as they reached the front of the church, Philip having arranged all this.

"You're welcome." He cocked his head, a gleam in his eyes—this time he told her he'd loved surprising her and that he'd relish doing so again.

She cocked her head in return and hoped he could read the expression in her eyes—one that said she'd never tire of it.

Wherever life might take them next, this was where she wanted to be. She held his side holding his hand. She prayed that she would have a lifetime to love him. And a lifetime to show him just how much he'd captivated her, body and spirit.

growing

of his  
she was

everyone  
release

d filled  
her arm

ast her

breathlessness. Instead, she nodded and took her place at his side. Then she stepped into the small church and allowed him to lead her down the aisle to become his bride.

Charity and Patience stood beside their handsome husbands, and they were radiating happiness, both of them more beautiful than she'd remembered. Was that what the love of a good man could do? Make a woman flourish so that she became even more beautiful?

She didn't know how Philip had been able to make all the arrangements for the wedding and find a way for her sisters to both be there—especially Charity—but her heart swelled with gladness that they could be present to witness her pledging her life to the man she loved.

“Thank you,” she whispered to him as they reached the front. “For arranging all this.”

“You're welcome.” He cocked his head, a gleam in his eyes—one that told her he'd loved surprising her and that he'd relish doing so again and again.

She cocked her head in return and hoped he could read the expression in her eyes—one that said she'd never tire of it.

Wherever life might take them next, this was where she wanted to be—by his side holding his hand. She prayed that she would have a lifetime to do so. And a lifetime to show him just how much he'd captivated her, body, soul, and spirit.

“I now pronounce that they be man and wife together. In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

As Father Zieber spoke the last words of the ceremony, Philip welled with both relief and joy. The ring he’d purchased and had in his pocket was now on Felicity’s finger, the ceremony was complete, and he had witnesses to their union in the sight of God and man, including the priest. Nothing could separate them now.

As Felicity peered up at him, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright. And her lips were so soft and pliable that he ached with the need to kiss her again.

Father Zieber took a step back and closed his prayer book. He smiled. “I can see that you’d like to kiss your bride, Philip.”

“Guess I’ve never been good at being subtle.”

The guests laughed lightly, and Felicity only flushed all the more.

He wasn’t ashamed of how much he wanted her. In fact, he intended to revel in how much he wanted her and make sure she knew it every day.

He lowered his head. This time, he planned to lose himself in the kiss and he didn’t care who was watching. But as his lips tasted the sweetness of hers, the back door of the church banged open with enough force to shake the walls.

Sven was already charging toward the door, his revolver out and aiming at the intruder.

Captain Jim hunched in the doorway, hopped back, and lifted both hands in the air, his eyes widening. “I didn’t do it. I swear!”

Sven lowered his revolver and stuffed it back into his holster, pretending to straighten his shirt and coat as though he hadn’t just been shot at someone at gunpoint.

Captain Jim held out two folded slips of paper. “These just came in the post office. Reckon since Philip—Mr. Berg’s—been waiting on it

thought I'd deliver them on my way back to the store."

Sven, already halfway down the aisle, finished crossing toward Philip and Jim. With a glare, he snatched up the telegrams almost as if the post office owner had committed a crime by holding them.

Captain Jim raised his hand, clearly intimidated by Sven—another reason why the prime minister had been wise to have Sven stay as covert as possible over the past year. The burly man was about as subtle as a moose in a party.

Sven walked both telegrams over to Philip, not taking the slightest notice of them. He wouldn't. His sense of honor was too strong.

Captain Jim didn't move from his spot in the doorway, was watching Sven. Philip with a strange quirk to his brow.

As Philip took the telegrams, Sven met his gaze evenly, knowing what was at stake. He gave a nod, one of encouragement.

Even so, Philip's stomach clenched. Old insecurities welled up to the surface when he saw war inside, especially the need to please everyone. Although there was no compromise and listening to all sides on a matter, his marriage to Felicity was final. He'd never change it, not from any amount of pressure.

Hesitating but a moment more, he unfolded the first telegram. The message was short and simple: *Sven's investigation of new wife re-authorized. Majority has voted to accept her.*

Sven's investigation?

The bodyguard's granite expression didn't change, not even a flicker. Now wasn't the time or place to question the man, but clearly he'd had more communication with the prime minister than he'd let on.

"What did they say?" Felicity asked breathlessly.

"They've accepted you." The relief at their decision hit Philip the moment he spoke the words. Yes, he'd been willing to defy his government's laws, but he could admit that, deep inside, he'd wanted them to accept Felicity and see what a beautiful and special person she was the same as she had before.

She launched against him and hugged him tightly. His arms wrapped around her in response, and he breathed her in. Somehow she'd become the air he needed. Without her, he'd wither and die.

"Your Royal Majesty," Sven said. "You really should read the telegram."

At the formal title of address, Felicity's sisters and brothers-in-law  
Captain to whisper among themselves. Father Zieber's brows rose above  
or store eyes. And Captain Jim watched the whole interaction with curiosity. I  
older man already read the telegram? Was he waiting for an explanati  
reason Sven's words finally penetrated. He hadn't said *Royal Highness*:  
possibly said *Royal Majesty*.

at a tea Before Philip could protest, the bodyguard lowered to one knee,  
his head, and said in a booming voice, "Long live King Carl Philip!"

peek at The murmuring around him turned into questions and confusion.

With pounding heart, Philip opened the second telegram. It was as  
atching and yet as profound as the first: *Gustaf is dead. Long live King Carl Pl*

In the next moment, Sven shifted and bowed toward Felicity. "Lo  
all that Queen Felicity."

Felicity cupped a hand over her mouth to capture a gasp. But her e  
o wage Philip's, full of questions.

is value He nodded.

Felicity She wavered, grabbed on to the nearest pew. And in the next  
Sven was gently helping her sit down. Her sisters crowded around, h  
n. The her and bombarding her with a thousand questions. And he was left  
ceived. their husbands, Hudson and Spencer.

Thankfully the two men didn't seem to make much ado about hi  
status. He answered their queries as best he could, still reeling fr  
twitch. knowledge that in an instant, he'd gone from prince to king of his cour  
been in The deep love of his country and desire to rule it well swelled with  
and he was suddenly anxious to return and begin the hard work of he  
fractured nation.

noment As Felicity hugged with her sisters again, she finally turned t  
and the holding back, her expression guarded. "What do you think of everythin

accept "I think I'm ready to go home." It was the truth, and he couldn't de  
way he Sven nodded, his expression pleased but solemn. "Your Majes  
prime minister wants you to return with all haste."

rapped Felicity hugged her arms over her chest as if to ward off a chil  
me the boardinghouse needs someone to manage it—"

"Hudson and I will take care of everything." Charity, who had th  
second red hair as Felicity, spoke reassuringly. "We'd already made the dec  
return early. In fact, we'd traveled as far as Denver when the snowstor

Charity, now tucked against her husband, smiled up at him. He didn't smile in return, but his eyes softened and filled with adoration. The fellow was clearly madly in love with his wife.

Charity turned her gaze back on Felicity. "When Philip showed up, he'd managed to track us down and telegram us two days ago about the wedding plans, we knew we had to find a way to make it over Kenosha Pass, and we did. When we met Philip yesterday evening, we gave him our full support."

Upon receiving the telegram about the plans to marry Felicity, Philip had launched an investigation. Apparently the fellow's money could buy whatever information he desired, and he'd been able to uncover Philip's identity. Thankfully, Hudson and Charity had kept their discovery private. Felicity studied her sister's face. "But I don't know if I'll fit in—"

"If anyone can rise to the challenge, it's you." Patience, who was as outspoken but equally beautiful with her blond hair and blue eyes, scooped Felicity's arm and smiled gently at her. Patience's husband had looked around her too, as if he couldn't quite get his fill of her.

Philip had the feeling he was going to like his new brothers-in-law. At the very least he could empathize with how besotted they each were with their wives. Because he felt the same way with Felicity.

Patience kissed Felicity's cheek. "You go and live your life as royally as those adventures you've always dreamed about."

Felicity nodded, but doubts flitted across her delicate features. Was she already regretting her decision to marry him?

Philip bent and scooped her up into his arms, holding her captive. He was determined to carry her back to Lapland if he had to.

Her eyes rounded. "What are you doing?"

"I am taking captive what's mine."

Even as she began to shake her head in protest, her arms wrapped around his neck. "You can't take me. I'm not good enough to be queen—"

He cut off her doubts the best way he knew how. He covered her mouth, ravishing her lips and showing her exactly how *good enough* she was. "The him. He may have *taken* her captive, but she had captivated him totally. He was hers. Always.

Only Father Zieber's throat-clearing and the guffaws of his brother-in-law kept him from losing himself in the kiss.

As he pulled back just slightly, her breath and heat and skin temperature hit."



Hudson to keep going, but he forced himself to speak as earnestly as he could. "Not good enough to be king, but that won't stop me from doing the very best I can. That's all anyone will expect of me. And that's all they'll expect of me how you."

"Wedding. Although her cheeks were flushed, her eyes radiated earnestness and were you sure?"

"Port." "I am very sure." He tenderly traced her jawline with his knuckles. Hudson the other hand, will have many expectations of you."

"Get him." Her lips lifted in the beginning of a smile. "Not as many as I will expect of your father's true you."

"Date." A thrill rushed through him. "Name one."

Her fingers at the back of his neck sank into his hair and drew his head as soft-down to hers. "You must kiss me as frequently as possible."

"Squeezed." "I think I can do that, especially since that was one of my expectations for this army you."

Her lips grazing his widened into a full smile. "Then prove it."

"At the." And he did.

th their

id have

Was she

against

around

mouth,

was for

illy and

hers-in-

ted him

to keep going, but he forced himself to speak as earnestly as he could. "I'm not good enough to be king, but that won't stop me from doing the very best I can. That's all anyone will expect of me. And that's all they'll expect of you."

Although her cheeks were flushed, her eyes radiated earnestness. "Are you sure?"

"I am very sure." He tenderly traced her jawline with his knuckles. "I, on the other hand, will have many expectations of you."

Her lips lifted in the beginning of a smile. "Not as many as I will have of you."

A thrill rushed through him. "Name one."

Her fingers at the back of his neck sank into his hair and drew his head down to hers. "You must kiss me as frequently as possible."

"I think I can do that, especially since that was one of my expectations of you."

Her lips grazing his widened into a full smile. "Then prove it."

And he did.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you, Readers, for taking another trip to the Colorado high country with my Colorado Cowgirl series and *Captivated by the Cowgirl*. I hope you enjoyed the secret royal storyline just as much as I enjoyed writing it. I always love reading about royalty and decided to have a prince (of a made up country!) make an appearance this time.

Again, I want to take a second to thank the many people who made this series (and this book) possible. Dear Rel, what would I do without you? You're not only my assistant but also my friend, and I'm eternally grateful for you.

Many, many thanks to Roseanna White my cover designer, especially for this cover. Thank you for putting up with our delays as we finagled getting the perfect image! Also, many, many thanks to my editor, Donovan for polishing my books into true gems.

Thank you to all my beta readers who are on my First Readers team. I am supremely thankful for your keen eyes in catching all those last line typos. Many hugs and much thanks to Zanese, Edward, Carrie, Staci, and Jessica for helping me with this fourth book in the series.

Finally, thank you, Readers, for all your support and encouragement on the lookout for Weston's story, which is coming soon! After his heartache, he deserves a happily ever after, don't you think? You'll get to meet his family and all his siblings (who, as it turns out, are demanding their own stories be told, so watch for a new western series in 2024!).

To stay up to date on all my books, visit my website at [jodyhedlund.com](http://jodyhedlund.com). Or join my Facebook Reader Room at [facebook.com/groups/jodyhedlundreaderroom](https://facebook.com/groups/jodyhedlundreaderroom).

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you, Readers, for taking another trip to the Colorado high country with my Colorado Cowgirl series and *Captivated by the Cowgirl*. I hope you enjoyed the secret royal storyline just as much as I enjoyed writing it. I always love reading about royalty and decided to have a prince (of a totally made up country!) make an appearance this time.

Again, I want to take a second to thank the many people who made this series (and this book) possible. Dear Rel, what would I do without you?! You're not only my assistant but also my friend, and I'm eternally grateful for you.

Many, many thanks to Roseanna White my cover designer, especially on this cover. Thank you for putting up with our delays as we finagled over getting the perfect image! Also, many, many thanks to my editor Katie Donovan for polishing my books into true gems.

Thank you to all my beta readers who are on my First Readers team! I am supremely thankful for your keen eyes in catching all those last lingering typos. Many hugs and much thanks to Zanese, Edward, Carrie, Stacey, and Jessica for helping me with this fourth book in the series.

Finally, thank you, Readers, for all your support and encouragement! Be on the lookout for Weston's story, which is coming soon! After his heartache, he deserves a happily ever after, don't you think? You'll get to meet his big family and all his siblings (who, as it turns out, are demanding that their stories be told, so watch for a new western series in 2024!).

To stay up to date on all my books, visit my website at [jodyhedlund.com](http://jodyhedlund.com). Or join my Facebook Reader Room at [facebook.com/groups/jodyhedlundsreaderroom](https://facebook.com/groups/jodyhedlundsreaderroom).



Jody Hedlund is the bestselling author of more than forty novels and winner of numerous awards. Jody lives in Michigan with her husband, family, and five spoiled cats. She writes sweet historical romance with plenty of sizzle.



Jody Hedlund is the bestselling author of more than forty novels and is the winner of numerous awards. Jody lives in Michigan with her husband, busy family, and five spoiled cats. She writes sweet historical romances with plenty of sizzle.

A complete list of my novels can be found at [jodyhedlund.com](http://jodyhedlund.com).

Would you like to know when my next book is available? You can sign up for my [newsletter](#), become my friend on [Goodreads](#), like me on [Facebook](#) or follow me on [Twitter](#).

The more reviews a book has, the more likely other readers are to find it. If you have a minute, please leave a rating or review. I appreciate all reviews, whether positive or negative.

A complete list of my novels can be found at [jodyhedlund.com](http://jodyhedlund.com).

Would you like to know when my next book is available? You can sign up for my [newsletter](#), become my friend on [Goodreads](#), like me on [Facebook](#), or follow me on [Twitter](#).

The more reviews a book has, the more likely other readers are to find it. If you have a minute, please leave a rating or review. I appreciate all reviews, whether positive or negative.