

A woman with dark hair, wearing a long-sleeved, light blue, floor-length dress with a full skirt, stands in a field. The background features trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of orange, red, and yellow under a soft, hazy sky. The woman is looking slightly to her right with a gentle expression.

PATRICIA  
PACJAC  
CARROLL

A GROOM  
*for*  
WILLOW

*The*  
BLIZZARD  
BRIDES  
*15*

## **A Groom for Willow**

**Willow Frazier** is still reeling from the loss of her father and fiancé, Robert. Though she and Robert weren't married, and few knew of their secret engagement, but their love had been very real to her. With all the widows and loss in Last Chance, Nebraska, few took her heartache seriously.

With her father's loss, she also lost control of the ranch. Uncle Bert and Aunt Aggie came from Wisconsin to *take care* of her and the ranch. Willow felt that they only wanted her ranch.

**Seth Thomas** enjoyed working for Trish and Ben Harper, but he wanted a place of his own. He'd grown up with the idea that he wouldn't live to see thirty. So, time was ticking, and he needed to hurry, find a wife, and start a family.

**A Groom for Willow**

(The Blizzard Brides Book 30)

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**Author Patricia PacJac Carroll**

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# **A Groom for Willow**

**The Blizzard Bride Series**

# Book 30

By

**Patricia PacJac Carroll**



# Chapter 1

Willow Frazier sat on the swing under the old oak tree and looked out across the prairie. Far away and to the north of her farm, her daddy and fiancé died in the great blizzard that plundered the small town of Last Chance and stole most of her men.

It happened over a year ago, but the sorrow still left her breathless and empty at times. Many of the widows were remarried, and life was going on, but for her—

“Willow! Collect the eggs. I’m going into town to sell them?” Aunt Aggie’s shrill voice cut through Willow’s thoughts. Not that she didn’t like her aunt, but sometimes it was all too much to feel like a stranger in her own home.

“Yes, ma’am.” She jumped out of the swing and made her way to the coop. Clucks greeted her as she opened the door and then latched it behind her. “Look at you pretties. Have you made a lot of eggs for me today?”

A little red hen, her favorite, came to her and pecked at her shoe. Reaching in her pocket, Willow pulled out a handful of feed and threw it about the yard. Then she took a small pile for the hen at her foot. “Just for you, Red.”

Inside the hen house, she collected the eggs in her apron pockets and then carefully left the chicken coop. When she entered the kitchen, Willow shivered from the tension in the room. Uncle Bert and Aunt Aggie must have had one of their many fights.

Cruel words that they batted against one another. The year that they'd been here, Willow had played the peacemaker between them. At least, she tried. The War between the States had nothing on these two.

“Here are the eggs. The hens worked extra hard for you this morning.” Willow set the eggs in the basket that Aunt Aggie used to carry eggs to the store and sell.

Her aunt came in from the den. The red dots on her cheeks meant there had been a loud fight moments ago. Willow felt sorry for her. She'd not had any children. Not even a stillborn or miscarriage.

More than once, she'd heard Bert throw the heartbreaking word, barren, at Aggie. Maybe if they'd had a child, they wouldn't be against one another. Then there were times when she'd see Bert hug Aggie and knew that they loved one another.

Willow felt sorry for Aggie. When they were in town, and she'd catch Aggie looking at other women and their babies, she could see the desire on her aunt's face. That they had no children, Bert held against his wife. Willow wondered how he couldn't know that it takes two. On more than one occasion, Daddy had butchered a bull because the cows didn't calve.

She kept out of their fights. At least, if they were at each other, they weren't bothering her. They were never mean to her, but she sometimes felt that Aggie resented her. All her years growing up, Willow had known the love of her mother and father. Even after her mother died of a fever, Willow's father had showered her with twice the love before.

Now, they were both gone. Father had put in his will that his brother and wife would come and take care of Willow if she wasn't of age. Now, her aunt and uncle had taken over her home and the farm.

They worked hard, but that they believed the farm was now theirs was no secret. Yet, Willow had read the will and had to admit that her father had given them the farm to watch over her. Pastor Collins had read it, and with sad eyes, he'd explained that Bert had the rights to the farm. He explained that daughters get married and leave home to live with their husbands. If there had been a son, the farm would have gone to him.

Maybe it was the time of year and the memories of last year and all the loss, but Willow was missing Robert. He went on the hunting trip to ask her father for her hand in marriage. Yes, they were young, but their love was pure and true. At least, at the time, Willow had thought it was.

Willow feared she'd had her one true love, and there would be no one else for her. Life was going to be a long, lonely road. She prayed that the Lord would release her from the sorrow and the love she still felt for Robert. But so far, it still remained. Willow loved a man that was gone, and it made her feel as barren as Aunt Aggie.

No one knew of her sorrow. Robert had drifted into town six months before the blizzard, and Daddy had hired him to work the farm. Willow had fallen in love with him in a month. Robert took a little longer. At times, she wondered if he didn't love the farm more than her, but he had been sweet with her.

Daddy had warned her that she'd let her heart go to him too soon. Maybe he was right. Now, she'd never know.

Willow left the farmhouse and went back to the swing. Sometimes, when the wind was but a caress of a breeze, she could feel Robert pushing her on the swing like he did so many nights after dinner.

He didn't have a family. They were all gone. It seems she filled his need for family, and she loved him.

After the blizzard, she attended countless funerals. Her father's and Robert's. But no one commented on her sorrow of losing her true love. To be fair, no one knew. Maybe her father if Robert had gotten up the nerve to ask him before the snow.

Pastor Collins spent his days helping the widows find new husbands. There were letters from men who wanted a new chance at life. No one offered Willow any. She was too young for most of the men who came to Last Chance.

Even now, she was too young for most of the eligible men. She kicked her feet and swung high. After Uncle Bert and Aunt Aggie came, Willow had no one and no place. She wanted to jump out at the highest point and fly away.

“Hey, girl? Where are your parents?”

She looked at the road to a young man who sat on a striking bay horse. She thought she'd seen him around town a time or two. Then Willow remembered that he'd called her girl as if she were a child.

She stopped the swing and walked to him. Suddenly aware of her worn, plain dress and that her hair was a mess,

she was embarrassed. To cover her shortcomings, she bristled at him. "I'm not a girl. What do you need?"

He grinned. He was a handsome young man. Pleasant smile if not a bit mischievous, and with his sandy brown hair and bright blue eyes, he was quite handsome.

"You look like a girl to me." He dismounted and stood before her. His eyes twinkled as he took hold of one of her braids. "Boys don't wear ribbons in their hair."

She pulled away from him and slapped his hand. "My name is Willow Frazier."

He nodded. "Nice to meet you. I've seen you in town."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"What is your name?"

"Seth Thomas. I work for the Harpers. I came by to see if your father was ready for the team of horses he wanted."

Willow shrugged. "His name is Bert, and he's my uncle, not my father. You'll have to ask him." She lied a little. She'd heard Uncle Bert talk about getting the team just this morning, but this boy was just too proud of himself.

Seth took off his hat and wiped his brow. "It's hot and almost October. I could use a glass of water."

Any other man or person, and she'd have jumped up to serve him, but there was something arrogant and all-knowing about this man. Boy really. He couldn't be more than twenty.

"Aunt Aggie is in the house. Go knock on the door." Willow didn't feel charitable to him, and she sure wasn't going

to bow to his every wish.

He looked at her and shook his head. “Whew, you are a feisty little girl. Your daddy should take you over his knee and paddle your behind.”

Willow drew in a shocked breath. “You are insolent and rude.” She glared at him. “My daddy died in the blizzard. I’m nearly eighteen, so I’m far from being a little girl.” Choking up, she stopped. She couldn’t let him see the tears.

He lowered his head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” Seth shuffled a foot in the dirt and then led his horse to the hitching post and tied him up. “Stay away from the bay. He’s only green broke.”

He shook his head at her and then knocked on the door.

Aunt Aggie invited him inside but took the time to give Willow a displeased look.

Willow didn’t care. She wasn’t their slave, and she owed this Seth Thomas nothing. She went to the horse and let him smell her hand. She knew Aunt Aggie would be feeding him a piece of pie along with some lemonade.

Daddy had promised her a horse as soon as he had the money. He never did have the funds. She could ride, though. For as long as she could remember, she was riding the farm horses.

The big bay looked at her with kind eyes.

She rubbed his head. “I bet you’re fast.” Willow darted a quick glance to the door, took the reins, and then climbed into the saddle. Someday, she was going to leave this place.

Willow was tired of being treated like a child. She'd had a man who loved her. That ought to count for something.

She rode the horse down the drive. She should turn the horse and go back, but there was a whole world beyond the fence that she wanted to see. If only. Why was her life stuck in the if onlys? If only she had the money. If only Daddy hadn't died. If only Robert wasn't dead.

She patted the horse. "We better get back. Your owner didn't act like he'd appreciate my taking you for a ride." She tapped him with her heel, and the horse took off. Willow had to hang on but enjoyed the wind rushing in her face.

Willow was almost back to the house when Seth walked out the door and hollered at her. At the same time, a rabbit bolted and ran under the bay's feet. The horse went straight up in the air and down hard, bucking into Aggie's garden.

Along about where her aunt's prized tomatoes were, the horse zigged, Willow zagged, and they parted company. Willow plopped down on the tomatoes that Aggie had saved to take to the store.

She was on her feet wiping smashed tomatoes from her dress when Seth reached her with Aggie not far behind.

"What did you do? I told you not to get near my horse." His eyes were narrowed, his face red, and his voice hissing with anger.

"He's a perfectly fine horse. The rabbit scared him."

"I told you not to get near him." Seth grabbed for her.

She slapped his hand away. "There is no harm done."

“No harm done!” Aggie had joined them. “Look at my garden and my prized tomatoes.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Aggie—”

Seth held the horse’s reins and walked him to the drive. “I told her to stay away from the horse.”

“The girl is horse crazy.” Aggie brushed tomatoes from Willow’s backside. “Go in the house and change.” Her look and voice softened. “You are all right, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Willow felt her pride bruised and in a heap, but the rest of her was fine.

She left Aggie and went to the road where Seth was standing. “I didn’t hurt him. He’s a wonderful horse.”

Seth was trying to hide a chuckle behind his hand. “Maybe you learned a lesson.”

She glared at him. “Maybe I don’t want to be taught a lesson by a boy.”

He bristled. “Maybe you don’t know a man when you see one, girl.”

“I’ve seen men, and you are not a man. I bet you don’t even shave.”

He rubbed his chin. “I do when it needs it. My pa told me we had Indian blood in us, so we don’t make a lot of beard.”

“Excuses. How old are you? I bet you’re not even twenty.”

He took her by the shoulders. “I turned twenty last week.”



Willow wanted to answer with a sharp retort, but as soon as he put his hands on her, it was as if her tongue was tied, and she couldn't think straight. Finally, she looked him in the eye. "How much?"

Taken aback by her question, Seth shook his head. "How much what?"

"For the horse. I take it you sell horses." She smiled. Now, he was the one who looked confused.

"Oh, yeah. He's not for sale. He's mine." He stared at her, but his anger was gone.

"Well, if you have any more where he came from, I might be interested." She kept her head up and walked toward the house but groaned when she thought of the tomato splotches that must be on the back of her dress. There was nothing to do but keep her head up and walk with her shoulders back. She wasn't afraid of anyone.

## Chapter 2

Seth stared after the girl. He grinned. Woman as she wanted to be called. Yet, he understood. It was hard to push over that bar people set over you as a child to become an adult. Seth had been on his own for some time.

Still, people looked at him as a boy. Maybe he looked young, but he'd lived a hard life. His pa had put it in his head that Seth wouldn't live past thirty. That meant he had a lifetime of living to pack into the next ten years.

He'd been thinking of finding a wife. He shook his head and mounted the bay. That girl. When he put his hands on her shoulders, he'd meant to paddle her, but as soon as he touched her, bolts of lightning had shot through him.

Seth headed back to the Harper's farm, but he had to admit, his mind was clouded by that girl. Willow Frazier, she'd said her name was. He might need to remember that. He rode back to the Harper Farm. Suddenly the mare he'd caught came to his mind. She was far from being broken, but he knew she'd be a good fit for Willow.

"I don't owe that uppity little girl anything." Seth laughed after he said the high-sounding words. Yeah, he was going to go back and work with that mare. That girl, Willow, had caught his attention.

She wasn't like the other girls he'd met. The others he'd met were shy wall flowers that were content to wait for

someone else to make things happen. Willow wanted to ride his horse, and she did.

While he was still mad at her for doing it, he did admire her spunk. Then again, he wasn't sure that was what he wanted in a wife. Life would be far easier with a meek and mild woman beside him.

Willow would fight him on every turn. Not to mention she was too young. He needed a woman who knew what life was about. Feeling the clock ticking, Seth decided he'd better look for an older woman. Most of the men in his family died before they were thirty.

Oh, not from disease necessarily, there was Frank who died from the cholera, but most found trouble and met their fate. That and the feud with the Carradine family.

Seth tried to keep on the good side of the Lord, but he had a problem with turning the other cheek. He'd left Missouri after a fight with Seneca Carradine. Seth had covered his trail and didn't think his nemesis was after him. Still, Seth spent time looking behind him even now.

Working on the Harper farm had been good to keep him out of town and trouble. Ben was a good man and spent time sharing about the Lord. Yet, despite the good job, Seth was ready to strike out on his own.

He'd staked out an abandoned farm ten miles from Last Chance. After getting paid this week and with what he made on the team of horses, he had enough to put down on it. The house was a mess with holes in the floor and roof. Fences were broken. The barn was the sturdiest building, but he'd stayed in worse.

He planned to keep his job at the Harper Farm if they'd have him. On the side, he trained horses. Ben let him use the barn and corrals for the few horses that Seth brought in. He paid Ben for the use of his farm even though Ben said there was no need. One thing his pa had taught him was to owe no one.

Thinking of horses, Ben thought of the team of draft horses that he planned to take to Bert Frazier tomorrow. With a grin, he thought about Willow. He wouldn't mind seeing that spunky gal again.

He put up his horse and took care of the animals. After the fire at Ben's barn, it had taken them quite a while to rebuild it, but it was exactly what was needed. Even to have the insulated room for Seth to stay in. He even had a wood-burning stove to keep warm in the winter and cook his own meals.

Many days, he rode on over to the Ben and Trish's house for a meal, but today, he wanted to be alone to think about his future. He knew that the town had sent out letters to try and get men to come to Last Chance to marry the widows, but why couldn't he send a letter for a bride?

It was only a matter of time before Seneca Carradine found him, and when he did, one of them would be dead. Seth hoped he could find a wife and buy his land before his enemy showed up.

He opened a can of beans and heated them up for dinner. Sitting back in his chair, he looked outside. It was fall, but they'd had an Indian Summer. Seth had used the warm

weather to catch the mare from a herd of wild horses not far from Harper's farm.

They ran up across the plains and all the way to Chimney Rock. That's where he'd first spotted the mare. She was a sandy red and the same color as the rocky spire. He called her Sandy Rose.

The horse was as sweet as her name. For a wild animal, she tamed down quickly. Seth wondered if she hadn't gotten loose from one of the farms around here, but she wasn't branded and therefore free for the taking.

He thought about Willow and that proud look on her face when she rode the bay back to the house. She had looked as if she owned the world.

He laughed at the image of her falling in the tomatoes, but she was a good rider. He wouldn't have trusted the bay to many people. He nodded to himself. "Maybe I'll surprise that girl someday."

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Willow set the table. It wasn't that her aunt and uncle were bad or mean to her, but they'd taken over her father's farm and shoved her out of the ownership. Not that they had said as much, but she didn't get to make any of the decisions.

Uncle Bert was buying a pair of draft animals to help with the plowing and harvest. But why would he buy them now, just before winter? Daddy would have never been so foolish, and he'd have waited until before spring.

Now, they would have to feed the big beasts all winter. That couldn't be a wise use of the money he'd made off the

harvest. That should be her money. She sighed and placed the napkins on the table.

Aunt Aggie liked everything just so. A far cry from the way she and Daddy had done things. Mama had been gone four years when the blizzard took Daddy and Robert from her. Pastor Collins had been quick to find her aunt and uncle, and they had been just as quick to come to Nebraska from Wisconsin.

They'd not said much about what happened in Wisconsin, but Willow got the idea they'd run into hard luck and were happy to leave. Daddy really didn't talk about his brother, but he had told Pastor Collins that if anything happened to him to write to them to take care of her.

Uncle Bert was nice enough to her and even spoiled her a little when she wanted something from the store. Aunt Aggie was stricter. But Willow thought it was because she never had any children. She wasn't that old and could even have a baby now, but every month, Willow would see the disappointment on her face.

Sometimes, life was so hard. After the blizzard, she was surprised the land hadn't flooded with all the tears shed. So many women lost their husbands. Some women died too and left orphans.

She looked at Aunt Aggie and wondered if she wouldn't be happier if she didn't welcome an orphan or two into her home. The woman needed a baby to care for. Willow could see it in her eyes.

Life just didn't seem to be fair. Good people died young. Barren women cried for a baby while other women

dropped babies like kittens and didn't care a lick about them.

“Bert, come and sit down. Dinner is ready.” Aggie placed the biscuits in the center of the table and sat down.

Willow took her hand. They always prayed before a meal, thanking the Lord for the food and blessings. Sighing, she offered up a silent prayer for Bert and Aggie. That if at all possible, the Lord would give them a baby. As for herself, Willow was out of prayers. The blizzard had taken everything from her that she cared about.

## Chapter 3

Seth was up early and had the team of draft horses brushed and ready to go to their new owner. He glanced at the mare and thought about taking her to Willow, but she was still green broke.

Willow had proven she could ride, but Seth didn't want to be responsible for her on an untested animal. Besides, he didn't know her, and she was just a kid. He chuckled as he could imagine her bristle at such an accusation.

If Seth hadn't been on his own for three years, people would accuse him of being too young. But being on your own strengthened a person, and Seth was stronger for all the hardship he'd gone through.

Confidence, that's what his father had drilled into him. "Son, whether you're right or wrong, put your head up and shoulders back, and most will go along with you." Father and his sayings, for all the man's wisdom, he'd been put in an early grave by one of the Carradines.

It didn't matter which one. They were all guilty. Most of all, Seneca. Yet, his father spent his dying breath telling Seth to go west and don't look back. Seth could still remember his father pulling him close and the whispered words that still haunted him. "Let it end here."

Seth had done just that, but Seneca hadn't. The man had confronted him the next week. It seems that Seth's father



had gotten a shot off and hit Seneca's father. The man died, and Seneca was after Seth.

After a fight resulted in Seneca going to jail, Seth left the county and traveled to St. Louis where he saw the preacher's ad for men to go to Last Chance. Feeling as if it was his last chance, he left that week for Nebraska. So far, he'd not heard from Seneca.

The draft horse nearest him, the one Seth had named Bob, stomped his foot and nudged Seth's shoulder.

"Hungry, are you?" Seth patted the large horse's neck. "All right. Let me get your bucket." Sending the two to Bert Frazier would save Seth quite a bit in feed. He was lucky to unload the pair this time of year, but Bert was excited to get them.

Seth had bought the pair from a man who was giving up and going east before winter set in. They were unruly, half-starved, and unwanted. Seth had seen past their problems and purchased them for relatively nothing.

Now, they were gentle as lambs so that a child could master them. Seth had a way with horses, most animals, really. Trish and Ben were helping him learn to trust people. They were good friends.

Checking the sun, he went ahead and saddled the bay. He wanted to deliver the team and then go on into town to settle up with the land office. It might be next year before he could quit the Harper farm and work on his land.

He went into his room in the barn and pushed open a board to take out his savings. He counted the money and

grinned. He had enough. Besides, it wasn't likely anyone was interested in buying the farm this time of year.

It was close enough to the Harper farm to ride to after his chores were done. He'd talked it over with Trish and Ben, and they were more than supportive.

After a final tug on the girth, Seth gathered the lead rope to the team and mounted the bay. "Let's go, boys. I've got land to buy."

The day was a continuation of the warm weather from last week. Winter was sulking around and waiting for a chance, but Seth was going to make use of the good days while he could.

He'd already checked with Ben about catching a few more of the wild horses. Seth wanted to get some ready for the spring sales. There were a few large wild horses that looked like draft animals that had either been turned loose by the wagon trains going west or from farms.

Seth planned on catching a few of them. With luck, he'd get some that weren't even wild, just lost. As he rode the big bay, Seth let his confidence shine. He was going to make something out of himself.

He wasn't going to be shot down by a Carradine before he was thirty. No sir, he'd escaped that crazy feud life that his father had succumbed to. As long as the Carradines didn't find him, he was safe and had a future.

And if he had a future, there might be room in it for a woman like Willow. Yes, she had tickled his idea to find a

wife. She liked horses and could ride, and he could tell she was a hard worker.

More than anything, it was her spunk. She wasn't about to let anyone tell her what she could and couldn't do. He hoped she would be around when he delivered the team. "Yes, sir, Bob. I want to see that girl again."

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Willow hurried through breakfast, helped Aggie with the dishes, and ran outside to finish her morning chores. Today, Seth was coming with the team for Bert. She kicked at a horse apple, sending it skittering across the ground.

It should be *her* team. It was her farm that Bert and Aggie came to take over. Yes, they were there to help her, and they had been kind and helpful. But why did the law suggest the farm go to her father's nearest male blood relative?

Pastor Collins had tried to help her, but when Uncle Bert came with the legal deed and will from her father, there was nothing else that could be done. Now that she thought about it, her aunt and uncle did include her on decisions for the farm and made sure she was well taken care of.

Still, that a woman could lose her home because her husband died, that wasn't right. Willow had read that in Wyoming, women had the right to vote. When she got married, she was making sure her husband put her name in his will and on the deed. It might not hold up legally, but at least she would feel better.

After throwing the cow her hay, Willow went out to the swing. There was a gentle breeze, and the sun was warm. It

wouldn't be long before the weather changed, but for now, she was going to enjoy it.

“There are some weeds in the cabbage patch you could get.” Aunt Abbie walked out to her garden.

The woman was tireless and frequently wore Willow out. “I was waiting for the man to bring the new team over.”

“You can wait in the garden. Grab a few good heads of cabbage while you're at it. This weekend, we'll make some sauerkraut.” Abbie smiled at her.

Happy that her aunt had smiled, Willow tried to keep her face pleasant as she considered what the house would smell like while they made the stuff. She didn't even like it. Still, she went to the garden, pulled a few weeds, and found two nice heads of cabbage.

Walking to the house, she happened to look back to the road and saw Seth coming. Willow ran into the house and put the cabbage in the sink, and then went back outside. The team was magnificent.

At least 16 hands tall with black manes and tails to set off their bay color. They were striking with the long hair on their feet and the way they strutted. They were the biggest horses she'd seen other than Mr. Gray's Percherons. She ran to the barn. “Uncle Bert, they're coming.”

He came out of the barn. “Good, good. I just got the last of the stalls cleaned out for them. How do they look, girl?”

“The best. You'll have the prettiest and strongest team in the county.” She ran outside and jumped on the corral to sit on the top rail.

Bert came out and stood beside her. “They look grand, don’t they?”

“Yes, you’ll be the desire of the farms around.”

Bert smiled at her. “I’m glad you approve. You do know that I consider this your farm too. We’re all in it together.”

Willow nodded. But deep down, she knew it wasn’t true. When she found a man to marry, she’d be expected to leave and find her own way with her husband. Bert wanted to make sure that Aunt Aggie had a secure inheritance.

But with no son old enough to take over, she would lose her right to her home just as easy as Willow had.

Seth rode up to the corral. “Here they are, Mr. Frazier. I hope you like them.”

Willow jumped down. “They are beautiful.” She put her hand to the nearest and let him sniff her. She looked into the big horse’s kind eyes and saw a gentle giant. “He’s a good horse.”

“I call him Bob. They’re both gentle and hard workers. Trained to plow and harvest. You’ll double your field, Mr. Frazier.”

“Aye, I believe I will. Thank you, Seth. Come on up to the house with me, and we’ll settle up. You’re getting a good price for the pair of them.”

“And you’re getting a good team for the price.”

Bert took the one nearest him. “Help me get them settled in the barn.”

“Will do.” Seth took Bob’s lead but stopped to grin at her. “I see you’re here in the thick of things. Don’t let Bob step on your foot.” He tapped Willow on the nose.

She wanted to slap him. Here he was treating her like a girl again. It was at that moment, that Willow looked at her dress and felt her braids. She really couldn’t blame him. She dressed as she had when she was a girl.

Willow waited until they’d taken the horses into the barn and made a mad dash for the house. There was that new dress. The pink one. She’d show Seth she wasn’t a child.

## Chapter 4

Seth followed Mr. Frazier to the house, aware that the man was going to try and get the price for the team down. It wasn't going to work. Seth could get more if he held onto them and waited until spring.

Besides, he'd been on his own long enough to know how to deal with men who wanted to talk him out of a fair price. He'd be ready when they sat down at that table. The sly old fox was about to meet with a smart young fox.

They entered the house and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Mr. Thomas, would you like a piece of cherry pie?" Mrs. Frazier smiled kindly at him.

"Sure would. I can tell you're a wonderful cook." Seth grinned and had to admit that a cherry pie would be more than welcome.

He was about to take a bite of his pie when she walked into the room. Willow. But not Willow the girl, Willow the young woman. She wore a pretty pink dress that made her dark hair shine. And that dark hair was no longer in girlish braids.

How could he have not seen what was standing before him outside? He smiled. "And who is this beautiful young woman?"

Bert turned around. "Willow, you look very nice." He looked at Seth and his brow furrowed with worry. He loudly

cleared his throat. "As I said, the team is well-matched and strong, but I did notice the chest on Bob wasn't as defined as on the other one."

Seth couldn't take his eyes from Willow. Without looking at Mr. Frazier, he nodded. "They're a stout pair. Equal in every way and worth more than the price we settled on two months ago."

Mrs. Frazier set the pie on the table and sat down. "Another piece of pie?"

"No, it's delicious, though." Seth smiled at the woman and then returned his attention to Willow. "I apologize for calling you a girl. You are grown up."

Willow smiled. "Thank you. Apology accepted."

"There's a dance in town this weekend. I'd like to take you. That is if you want to go." She nodded as if it wasn't that exciting, but Seth saw her cheeks blush. Just a hint of pink, but enough to let him know that she was interested.

"Good. I'll pick you up at three."

Mrs. Frazier put a hand on his arm. "She'll ride with us. We can meet you there. I think we'll spend the night in town and do some shopping." She gave her husband a stern look. "Right, Bert?"

Mr. Frazier nodded. "Yes, dear."

Seth grinned. Bert was a big man, and Aggie was a small woman, but she made her wishes known. He stood and put the envelope in his pocket. "Good, I'll meet you in town. I'm going to go ahead and take this money to the bank. I have



some business to conduct, but I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Miss Willow.”

“I’ll look for you.”

“Save your dances for me.”

Again, her cheeks pinked. “How many would you want?”

“I’d like the first, the last, and I think those in the middle too.” He grinned. He was making points with her. Besides, he didn’t know that many young men her age.

“Well, Mr. Thomas, I’ll have to leave a few for the other men, but I’ll save you the first and last.” She was standing now and walking him to the door.

“I hope you’ll come by again.” She held onto the door and smiled at him. She must have gotten something in her eye because she was opening and closing her eyes.

“See you tomorrow.” Seth walked onto the porch and made it down the steps. He felt strange. She was still watching. With his head up and his shoulders back, he walked to the barn to get his horse. He hoped she was still at the door.

With the money to get his own land, he felt like a new man. He untied the bay and mounted him. He glanced at the house and saw her sitting in the rocker in that pink dress. He waved.

She waved back.

Seth hoped his cheeks weren’t red because they felt warm. To avoid any more awkward feelings, he galloped down the road. He had business to take care of.

It was almost three before he rode into town. Last Chance had a few boarded-up buildings. The blizzard had made things tough on the town and the farms around. He stopped at the bank and deposited his money. The clerk wrote his balance in the register and handed it back to him.

Next stop was the land office. Mr. Calloway had quoted him the price of the farm. The family had taken a mortgage on it just a week before the blizzard. There was no way the wife left alone could pay, and she went back to Ohio to be with her parents.

Since then, the house had been damaged by a storm. No crops had been planted or harvested in a year. That Seth didn't mind as it made the land better. He walked down the street and stopped at the land office.

He went in and waited while Mr. Calloway finished with a young couple. After they left, he went to the desk. "I'm ready to buy the Ferris place."

"Great! I was hoping you'd come in soon. Let me get the papers." Mr. Calloway went back inside his office and came out with a file.

Seth presented his bank register. "Here is the money I have."

Mr. Calloway looked it over. "Good, good. I can let you have the land and buildings for part of that, giving you enough money to work on getting the house fixed. I understand the barn is in decent condition."

"I've looked it over. The house has a lot of work to be done. The barn is sturdy and should hold up during the

winter.” Seth looked over the papers. “Everything looks in order. Thank you, Mr. Calloway.” Seth stood and shook his hand.

“Will you be at the dance tomorrow?”

“I sure will. I’m staying in town tonight.”

“I’ll see you there. My wife loves parties and dances. Me, well, I would enjoy a quiet night at home. You’re not married, are you?”

“No, I’m not.”

“There are a few young ladies that might want to take care of that.” Mr. Calloway grinned. “Just a word, make sure she’s the one you can’t live without. It makes all the things you have to do for them a might easier. I love Martha, but she can get me going in circles.”

“I’ll remember that, Mr. Calloway.” Seth left the office with the deed in his hand. He was a landowner. A man and no longer a boy. He went to the hotel and rented a room for the night and tomorrow.

A wife. Willow fit that description. She might be young, but she was ready to grow up. That she changed clothes and her hair showed him that today. Well, he would do the same. After getting his room key, Seth went to the barbershop and had a haircut and shave.

Then he went to the general store and bought new trousers and shirt. He was going to that dance tomorrow with the intention of impressing Willow.

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Willow had been ready for over an hour. Uncle Bert was taking his sweet time, much to Aunt Aggie's irritation.

"Bert, get out here now. We're ready and want to get there before all the food is gone." Aggie shook her head. "If it was something he wanted to do, he'd be hollering at us. You did put the pie in the wagon?"

"Yes, Aunt Aggie. I wish Uncle Bert would hurry."

"You have your eye on that boy, Seth, don't you?"

"Yes, am I that obvious?"

Aunt Aggie gave her a hug. "I think he's a fine young man. You are still so young."

"I feel that I've grown twenty years since the blizzard took my dad and my fiancé."

"Was he anything like Seth?"

Willow paused. "No, not really. Robert wanted to be a farmer. He was thin and tall with red hair and gray eyes. He was a good man. Or would have been if he'd had time to grow up. My father liked him."

"I'm sorry for your losses, Willow. That is hard on one so young."

Willow shrugged. "I've seen all the women of Last Chance mourn. I don't think it was easy on any of them."

"True. Life does seem to come with its share of heartaches." Aggie looked down and then shrugged. "But we have to deal with them and go on."

Willow hugged her aunt. "Yes, we do."

Heavy footsteps told them Bert was coming. He turned the corner and smiled at them. "I'm ready."

Aunt Aggie's mouth hung open.

Willow turned, and shock kept her from commenting.

"Bert Frazier, you shaved off that beard. You look so handsome." Aggie rushed to her husband and kissed him.

Willow watched them. Since being at the farm, she'd seen a softening in her aunt and Bert. When they first came, they were constantly arguing. Mostly over silly things. Lately, they hardly raised their voices to one another.

And today, Willow saw their love for one another. Aggie had been after him to shave off his beard, but Bert wouldn't give in. Now, he did it purely to please Aggie. Willow could see it in his face and eyes.

Someday, Willow hoped to have a man that looked at her like that. Robert, well, she'd been thinking about him. She thought she'd been in love with the man, but now she wasn't sure. Oh, she still mourned him, but he never looked at her with such caring and love in his eyes.

She was beginning to think that she was only the means for him to get a farm. Father liked him, but he never joined in her excitement when she talked about their wedding. Perhaps he hadn't been the one for her after all.

Pastor Collins had tried to tell her that a couple of months after the blizzard. Willow hadn't wanted to listen. Too deep in grief over her father and Robert, she had put Robert on a pedestal. Now, as she thought back, things might not be the way she wanted to remember them.

She smiled to herself. That all meant that her heart was open. She didn't have to keep it closed for Robert. Besides, at the last dance they went to, she saw him looking at Becky Sue. Oh, he was all attentive to her when he was around her, but Willow knew what she'd seen.

Brushing away a pesky fly, she pushed away thoughts of the past. She had a future, and today, she was going to a dance. What's more, Seth would be there and had promised to dance with her.

## Chapter 5

Seth left his room at the hotel and walked down to the livery where the dance would take place. He enjoyed the town's attempt to bring everyone together with food and fun. Life on the prairie could be dull with repetitive days of hard work, so everyone was happy to get a chance to see one another.

And eat. The ladies would bring their prized dishes. Somehow, it always worked out that there was the perfect amount of meat and vegetable dishes balanced with desserts.

As a landowner, Seth held his head a little higher. He'd talk with the men about the best ways to fence in his property and the best grass to plant for pasture. He figured on raising horses and cattle.

The cattle would come later. Right now, he could go out on the range and catch enough horses for him to breed and train to sell. He was a good judge of horseflesh. His family came from a long line of horsemen. There were some horse thieves included in that line, but Seth had never been on the wrong side of the law.

The Carradines thought otherwise, but then they had their own black sheep that had robbed and killed Seth's father. At times, Seth felt like he should carry on the feud and go after them, but he'd let the law deal with it. Seneca was intent on carrying out the feud against Seth. But Seth only wanted to forget it.

Now, he had the land. All he needed was a good woman, and he was set. Still, he had that nagging feeling that he wasn't long for this world. Dead by thirty was what he'd heard all his life.

He smelled the food before he got to the livery. The barn was already full of people. Most had their harvest in, wood cut, and venison and hogs in the smokehouse. It had been a good year, and the people were generally happy.

Pastor Collins greeted him at the door. "Seth Thomas, how are you doing? Have you found a young woman to court?"

The man was obsessed with matchmaking. He'd practically forced some women to get married after the blizzard, but his heart had been in the right place. Life on the prairie was hard enough for a married couple. For a woman alone, it was near impossible. Still, those who had been in Last Chance the longest had said that the pastor's heart had softened.

"I've been looking, Preacher. I did buy my land. The old Ferris Farm." Was it wrong to be proud in front of a preacher?

Pastor Collins nodded. "Good. I like to hear that. The town needs families to move in and take up the abandoned farms and businesses. I'm concerned about the town. Riff-raff move in, even wild animals, and they become a danger to others."

"Yes, sir. I suppose so. I'm going to start work on my farm, but until I can live in it, the Harpers said I can stay at their farm and help out like I have been doing."



He nodded. "Now, about any young women you might want to be introduced to, you let me know."

Seth grinned. "I sure will." Just as he looked up, he saw Willow enter the barn. "Excuse me, Pastor." Seth made his way to the entrance.

Willow looked up and smiled at him. She was all woman tonight. No braids, no gingham dress. She had on a light blue dress and a smile that lit up the room.

He ran to her. "You look beautiful."

"Not like a little girl?" She tilted her head and gazed at him coyly.

"Like a young woman. One that I am pleased to accompany tonight." Seth looked at her aunt and uncle and was surprised to see Bert had shaved off his substantial beard. "That is if you two approve?"

Aunt Aggie gave Willow a hug. "Have fun, dear. We'll meet you at the hotel. Don't be too late." She raised an eyebrow and stared at Seth.

Seth nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'll have her back to you at a decent hour. I'm staying at the hotel too."

Willow took his arm. "I'm starved."

He patted her hand. "Let's go and take care of that." Seth escorted her to the tables full of dishes of wonderful smelling food. He took a plate and handed it to her.

"I love these dances. It looks like our town is coming back after that horrible time last year. Thank you for coming." Willow handed him a roll.

“Everyone seems happy.” He looked at her. “Including you. Is it just because of getting together with all the families?”

“You, Seth Thomas, are fishing. Yes, I am happy. Even Aunt Aggie seemed to be ready to enjoy herself. When she first got here, she’d been so unhappy. Lately, she’d had a spark in her eyes, and today, Bert had even shaved off his beard.”

“I noticed that.” Seth rubbed his chin. “I went to the barbershop and got cleaned up.”

She smoothed out his hair. “You look good. Then I thought you did the other day. Do you have any more horses that you’re training?”

“I might. One pretty little mare that I’ve named Sandy Rose.”

Willow was nibbling on a chicken leg when she stopped and set it down. “She sounds lovely.”

“I thought you might like her. If you’re not busy, I can bring her over, and you can ride her for me. I need to know how she does with someone else in the saddle.” Seth knew he was setting out bait to catch this woman. Willow liked horses. He knew that from their first meeting, and she took off on the bay.

“I would love to. Whenever is good for you. My aunt won’t mind. I’d really like to see the horse.” She looked at him, her gaze warming his heart.

“Great. I have some other news.”

The chicken leg was back in her hand. She gazed at him and finally lowered it back to the plate. “What is it?”

“I bought the Ferris farm. It needs a lot of work, but I’m up to it.”

“That’s wonderful. Will you raise and train horses?”

He nodded. “And cattle once I can invest in them. My pa always said don’t put all your eggs in one basket.”

“Sounds like a wise man.” She finished the chicken and set it on her plate. “I think the dance is about to start. You still up for my first dance?”

“You bet.” Seth took her hand and led her onto the dance floor. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to rake the barn, while the ladies from the church had decorated the livery so that it hardly resembled a barn.

He put his hand in hers and one behind her back. “From the moment I first saw you, I was captivated.”

She tilted her head much like a kitten might do. “Is that so? When I saw you, I was intrigued? Although, I have to say that bay caught my attention.”

“So, I rate just below a horse?”

She laughed. A pleasing sound that made his heart warm to her. “I wouldn’t put it like that.”

“No? How would you put it?”

“You are quite the fisherman. For compliments anyway. You should know that I am interested in you. I even ran and changed my dress just for you. And here I am in your arms.”

The music started. A slow waltz just perfect for the feelings he was having about this woman in his arms. She fit

just right. Then she laid her head on his shoulder and looked up at him, and any misgivings Seth had were gone. She'd won him over completely.

## Chapter 6

Willow danced with Seth and felt as if she were floating. Robert had never made her feel this way, and she'd just met Seth. She had to admit that his touch set off warm if not sharp tingles within her.

She could see that Uncle Bert and Aunt Aggie liked him. He was polite and kind. She did wonder why he had mentioned the horse. He must know she loved the animals.

The music for the first dance ended. She clapped along with everyone else and stared at Seth. Would he ask her for the next one?

“And the next dance, do you have it promised to anyone?”

She shook her head. Then she laughed. “Well, that is unless you would sign my book.”

He took her dance card and signed for the next one. “And the next”

“All of them would be fine with me.”

Seth signed for them all and handed the card back to her. “You've made my night. There isn't anyone else I wanted to be with. I thought of you all day.”

“As did I. I must have changed dresses five times, and I only have three nice ones.” She blushed. Why was she telling him about her afternoon? Then she looked at him. She wanted

to know everything about him as well as share her deepest thoughts with him.

The music started up again, and they danced a fast reel. After another dance, he asked her to take a walk.

“It’s getting warm in the barn. I can’t believe it’s so warm this time of year.”

“Daddy called it an Indian Summer. Not sure why, but I rather enjoy it. Winter can be so cold, and I get tired of being cooped up inside all day and night. Aunt Aggie likes to read and brought many books with her. Do you like to read?”

“No, can’t say that I do. I have plans to make a barn big enough to work the horses in during the winter. Did you know there are three herds of wild horses in this part of Nebraska?”

“No, I had no idea. Where do they come from?”

“Many were lost during the big wagon trains that went through here. Others came from farms. Anyway, there are plenty for me to catch and train. Even some good stock to use for breeding.”

Willow sighed. “Sounds so exciting.”

“It’s what I always wanted to do. My father was a good horse trainer.”

“He died.”

Seth turned away from her. “Yes, he died.”

She understood. He didn’t want to talk about the past. She put a hand on his back. “We have tonight. Let’s enjoy it and leave the past alone.”

He turned to her. “Thanks. I think that’s one reason I was drawn to you. I knew you had suffered loss from the blizzard, but you aren’t living in the past, and you have such a sweet smile.”

The truth was until Seth showed up, Willow had been living in the past. Now, she felt that life was real and exciting. Funny how things could change so quickly. Even Aunt Aggie seemed to catch hold of a joy for life.

“Seth, before you came, I had trouble living in the present. I was always caught up in what could have been. When you rode down our drive on that horse, something changed inside me.”

“I feel the same.” They walked along the street. “The moon is big tonight.”

Willow nodded. “This night is special. Even the air is alive as if it’s holding a secret promise of something good coming our way.”

Seth stopped and held her by her shoulders. “Willow, I know we just met, but I’d like to court you.”

“Seth, it’s only been a day. It’s so soon. It’s—”

He kissed her. Just one quick kiss to her lips. He stared at her. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t resist with the moonlight on you. The glow on your sweet face. I promise not to hurt you.”

She stared at him, her breath coming fast to catch up to her runaway heart. “Oh, Seth. It’s so soon, but yes. I feel as if I have been looking for you all my life.”

“I do too, Willow. All I know is I would die for you right now.”

She put a finger to his lips. "Let's not talk about dying. I want you to live for me. Both of us to live for a long time together in our own home on our own land. You and me."

"And children?"

She laughed. "Lots of children."

"When I have time, I'll bring Sandy Rose to you. She'll be our seal for our courtship." He squeezed her hand. "Oh, there is one other thing. I don't want a long courtship."

She looked at him. "How long?"

"When we both feel it's right, we get Pastor Collins and make it permanent."

He was taking her breath away. She knew it was crazy, but she would have walked to the church with him right now if he'd asked. How could that be? She didn't even really know him. Yet, he fit so perfectly with her heart.

"I'm fine with that, Seth Thomas. We better get to knowing one another if we're going to get married so quickly. Maybe we can have breakfast tomorrow morning."

"I'd like that. Let's go join the dance. I hear the music again."

She nodded. "I'm sure my aunt is wondering where I am."

"Your aunt and uncle seem like nice people. Have they treated you well?"

Willow nodded. "The only thing is they now own my farm. I guess my father put it in his will for them to take care of me and gave his brother the farm. That has bothered me, but



they are nice. When they first came, I don't think either of them was happy. Now, they seem to get along better, and I see Aunt Aggie smiling a lot. I am happy about that."

"I'm glad they treat you all right." He fingered her hair. "I'd have to do something if they mistreated you."

Willow felt her cheeks grow warm. Rather from his touch or words, she wasn't sure, but that he cared for her sent her heart into a gallop. At first, she hadn't trusted Uncle Bert, but the last several months, he'd become more thoughtful and kind to her and Aggie.

Soon they were in the middle of the dance floor dancing and laughing. Willow hadn't felt this good in over a year. She enjoyed being with Seth, but that bothering niggles in the back of her head kept warning. Just like it had before the blizzard.

## Chapter 7

After the dance, Seth was busy and couldn't get away to visit Willow. They'd had a good frost, and Ben wanted to worm the livestock. It was backbreaking work, but then only one of many chores on a farm. Seth didn't mind. He liked hard work that raised the sweat on his brow.

That was when he felt useful. From head to toe, his muscles worked hard to wrestle the animals, dip them, and get the wormer in them. He knew one of Trish's good dinners would be his reward.

Still, he couldn't get Willow out of his mind. He was as in love with her, almost as if he'd known her for ten years.

Ben held onto one of the yearling calves. "What's got your mind so preoccupied?"

Seth looked at him and grinned.

"I think it must be a girl. Willow Frazier maybe?"

"All right, you caught me. I met her the other day when I told Bert that his team was ready. I haven't been able to get her out of my mind since."

Ben laughed. "I understand. When I met Trish, I was in no mood to have a woman interfering in my life. Then I saw her, and she stayed in my mind until finally, I found her in my heart. I've never been happier. You are a little young, though."

"I'm old enough. Sometimes I feel as if I've lived three lifetimes." Seth leaned against the corral rail. "I come from a

family that dies young. I want to taste all that life has to give me before my time is up.”

Ben faced him. “Dying early, is there something wrong with your health?”

“No, I feel fine. Most of my family died from getting into trouble. Oh, a few had fever or cholera, but I have to say a feud that started with our grandfather has been the cause of death for several cousins, uncles, and a brother.”

“Do any of the feuding families live around here?”

“No, I left Missouri and hope to never see them again, but I can’t shake the feeling that death is hounding me.” Seth hadn’t talked about the past to anyone. He wasn’t sure he’d done the wisest thing by sharing with Ben.

“Are you a believer, Seth?”

“When I was young, my mother took us to church. I got baptized when I was nine. She died the next year, and we never went back.”

Ben put a hand on his shoulder. “Go back to what you remember. Jesus came to seek the lost and save the sinners. Find your faith and trust in Him. I don’t promise if you do that, everything will work out the way you want it to, but I can tell you that you’ll never have to walk on the hard path of life alone.”

“I guess you’re right. Pastor Collins has been talking to me from time to time. In fact, he said pretty much the same thing that you just did. Faith? I will have to work on it.”

“You just believe, Seth, and let the Lord do the work inside your heart. Like forgiving that family that you have the

feud with. Forgiveness is the only way it will end. Does anyone even know how the feud started?”

Scratching his neck, Seth shook his head. “No, I really don’t, but I think there have been enough fights and shootings to keep it going, and nobody even asks why.”

“Maybe that’s your mission. Be the first to forgive and ask for forgiveness. But then, hopefully, none of them will even show up. In that case, let the Lord handle it, but pray for them. God likes to work things out His own way, and it often doesn’t make sense to us.” Ben grabbed another pig.

“Thanks, Ben.” Seth administered the worming medicine and thought about what Ben had said. He didn’t want to forgive Seneca or even see the man again. Seth had covered his tracks pretty well. It shouldn’t be a problem.

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Willow spent the days after the dance waiting to see Seth again, but so far, he hadn’t come around. Had she imagined his interest? Or had he been playing her along just so he could dance with her?

Oh, either way, it didn’t make her feel like telling anyone about him. Aggie had asked, and Willow had just said they liked each other. She wanted to tell her that he was going to court her, but that would require him to show up.

No, not until she was sure would she open up to Aunt Aggie or Uncle Bert. It was best they didn’t know anything about Seth until she was sure. She wanted to believe him. Was it some kind of flaw in her character that she couldn’t trust him?

Willow worked hard. The weather was still pleasant, and she spent time in the garden picking the last of the vegetables. Aunt Aggie was quite the gardener and had coaxed more vegetables out of the fresh dirt than Willow had ever seen.

They also spent more time canning them too. Willow looked at Aggie and admired all her hard work. They wouldn't want for food this winter.

Aunt Aggie smiled as she put up the last jar. "There, we could even sell some at the store."

"Sure could."

"Next year, I would like to plant some berry bushes and fruit trees. The soil is so rich that anything will grow."

"If we get the rain. It was the drought that drove the men to go hunting last year." Willow regretted the moment she said it.

Aggie hugged her. "We have to let the past go. You have a bright life in front of you. Besides," She nodded at the window. "I see your young man coming down the drive."

Willow glanced at the window. "He's coming. Oh, I am a mess. Cover for me while I change."

Aggie took the apron from her. "Go, hurry. I'll entertain Seth while he waits for you."

Willow ran to her room, washed up, changed into her yellow dress, and put up her hair. She'd practiced all yesterday on the new, older look. After pinching her cheeks and lips, she left her room.

She slowed her steps so Seth might not think she'd just been waiting for him. Of course, that was the truth, but it was good for her to keep him guessing. He was sitting on the divan with his hat in hand. Peeking around the corner, she had to hide a smile. He looked uncomfortable.

Good. He shouldn't take her for granted. She walked into the room. "Seth, what a surprise."

"I told you I'd come as soon as I could." He stood. "You look lovely, but I thought, well, I brought Sandy Rose. I thought we might go for a ride."

She walked up to him. "I will have to change. Will you wait?"

"Sure."

Willow nodded at Aggie and walked slowly back to her room. After shutting the door, she ran to her closet and dug out her best old skirt fit for riding. A horse? Before the dance, that would have sent her over the moon.

Now, the mare was second to her joy at seeing and being with Seth. She did hope that Bert would let her keep the horse. Putting a hand to her head, Willow tried to compose herself. Had he said he was giving her the horse or just letting her ride it?

She couldn't remember now. She would have to hide her excitement. If that were possible. Willow pulled a scarf from her drawer and wrapped it around her neck. There, she had no resemblance to the girl who had hopped on his bay and ridden off. She didn't want Seth to remember her that way.

Walking back out to the den, she smiled at Seth. "I'm ready. Can you do without me for a while, Aunt Aggie?"

With a nod, Aunt Aggie suppressed a smile. "Yes, dear. Have a good time. We must enjoy the weather while we can. Seth, you are welcome to stay for dinner tonight."

"Thank you. I just might be persuaded if a certain young lady asks me nicely."

Willow grinned at him. "I think I can do that."

"Let's go ride. I think you'll like Sandy Rose." He led her outside.

She stopped on the top step of the porch. The horse was a dream. "Seth, she's beautiful, and her name fits her."

"She's a red roan." He took her hand and led her down the steps to the mare.

With hand outstretched, Willow went to the horse. "Hi, girl. You are a beauty."

The horse nickered and stepped closer to her.

"You are a sweet girl."

Seth untied the mare and handed the reins to Willow. "Let's ride."

Excited, Willow climbed on the saddle and looked at the young man at her side. "Where to?"

"I bought a farm the other day. It's been abandoned, so it will need a lot of work. I'd like to show it to you."

"Wonderful. Lead the way." Willow felt life in a new way. Free and exciting as if this were the start of a grand

adventure. One she'd not take alone but with Seth Thomas, and she couldn't be happier.

They started with a slow walk but soon were loping across the far meadow. She knew the place he'd bought. It bordered her farm. It gave her comfort, thinking that Uncle Bert and Aunt Aggie would be close.

She glanced at Seth just to make sure he couldn't read her mind. What was he thinking? She already had them married and living on the old, abandoned farm. At least, Seth was happy too. Although he scanned the scenery before him almost as if looking for dangerous critters or people.

“The farm borders my farm.”

He nodded. “Yes, I knew that. I hope you like it. I'll have to work hard all winter, but I thought in the spring that I could live in the house.” He glanced at her. “Maybe even with my bride.”

Willow was excited and a bit sorrowful all at once. Did that mean that he didn't want to marry her until next year? Oh, she knew that the prudish women and Pastor Collins would want a long engagement.

But life was passing her by. Some of her friends were already married and working on having babies. Willow certainly didn't want to be an old spinster. She wanted to have babies while she was young.

Besides, the real reason was that she liked Seth and didn't want him to get away. The longer they waited, the more chance that he'd find another woman and leave her. She



shouldn't feel that way, but she'd seen evidence of that in Robert.

He'd said he loved her, and they would have gotten married in the spring, but she'd seen him look at Rebecca Sue enough times to know that he was thinking which of them he really wanted. The blizzard ended that.

Willow had to admit that Rebecca was the dairy queen of the county. Her father had more dairy cows than anyone around and supplied the town with milk. He'd not gone on the hunt because he had to stay and try and keep his cows alive. Willow shook her head. Yes, if Robert hadn't died in the blizzard, she was just sure that he'd turn her down and go off with Rebecca Sue.

“How do you like the mare?”

“Oh, she rides like a dream and handles as if she knew what I wanted before I did. She'll make someone a fine horse.”

Seth pulled his horse to a stop and faced her. “Willow, Sandy Rose is yours. I meant that the other night.”

“Oh, Seth. That is too generous of you.”

“Willow, you've touched my heart in the few days I've known you. I've been thinking about getting married, and then I met you. I can't think of anyone else that I would want to marry. You are the woman of my dreams.”

She wiped tears from her eyes. How long she'd waited to hear such words. Robert had merely told her he wanted to marry her and would ask her father. But he never really said

how he loved her. It was just understood that she would go along.

Now, she could see in Seth's eyes his desire for her. Oh, she saw more than that. She saw love and caring that she'd not seen in Robert.

She patted the horse's neck. "Seth, you have set my heart on fire. I thought once that I had loved another, but now, I know differently. For I never had the feelings in my heart that I have now. You have touched me deep in my soul."

He grinned and reached for her hand. "I don't know the proper timing, but I'd marry you today if you were willing."

"Seth, I can't marry you today." She squeezed his hand. "When we go back to the farm, you can come in and talk to my aunt and uncle. They might have something to say about our wedding date."

"I'm serious."

She tapped Sandy Rose's sides and galloped away from him. She had lost her heart to this man, but she wasn't ready to get married. Not today. She barely knew him. Hoofbeats behind her told her that he was coming after her.

Seth caught up and grabbed her reins. "I was serious."

She pulled the reins from his hand. "Is this because of the feeling that you won't live past thirty?"

"No, well, some. The truth is, I can't love you more than I do now." Holding his bay to a slow trot, he stayed even with her. "Look, I've never done this before. No woman has ever caught my attention and heart as you have. When I see

you or even think of you, I can't stop thinking about how I want you to be my wife. Soon."

She stared at him. "You'll have to give me some time."

"All you need." He pointed. "My farm starts over there."

Willow followed his direction. Even from here, she could see the house was a wreck, and the barn wasn't much better. She turned Sandy Rose and galloped her toward the house. What she was going to do, she wasn't sure.

She had feelings for Seth. Maybe she even loved him, but they'd only known each other a few days. She didn't know anything about him or his family, and his crazy notion that he wouldn't live to thirty scared her.

She'd already lost one fiancé. She didn't want to marry a man only to have him die and leave her alone. Willow slowed the mare and stopped in front of the house.

A tree had fallen and landed over the porch and into the small den. She dismounted and tied the horse to a nearby hitching post.

Seth joined her. "Let me show you the house. I haven't decided if I can fix it or have to tear it down and start over."

Willow walked up the steps and had to walk over several holes. The door was hanging at an angle. "There could be animals in there."

Seth pushed the door open. "Come on." He took her hand and led her inside. "The kitchen is small, but the stove works."

She pushed past the tree and went into the kitchen. “It is very small, but it would do for a start.” Willow faced Seth. “Actually, I like this house. It has character. It won’t take much to move the tree and fix the roof and the door.” She grinned. “I can help.”

“You like it?”

“I do.” She turned, and he was right in front of her. “Seth, I’m not saying we’ll get married so soon, but I am interested.”

## Chapter 8

Seth stared at his farmhouse. It was the one big thing standing between him and marrying Willow. He'd seen it in her eyes yesterday. Only one thing to do, and that was rebuild. After he took her home, he begged off dinner and went to town to purchase the materials. Doug was delivering them today.

Last night before he left Willow's farm, he mentioned to her uncle that he was interested in her.

All that Bert would say was that she was too young.

Even though Bert didn't seem agreeable, he caught Aunt Aggie nodding with a smile on her face. At least, they had one of the two on their side. How could he explain to all of them the need to marry quickly? He'd had a bad dream about Seneca and the old feud last night. Seth felt his time was marked.

He took his saw and started work on the tree that had fallen over the porch. It was a junk tree, a cottonwood. They famously grow quickly, but their roots are high on the ground, and the trees are known for dying young and toppling over. Well, whoever planted the tree must have enjoyed it but didn't think about the future.

After hours of back-breaking work, he had the tree cut up. Now at seeing the damage, it didn't look as bad as he'd originally thought. The porch didn't need to be torn down, and the damage to the house was mainly the roof.

He set to work and soon had the roof repaired enough to keep the wind and rain out of the house. It was a good day's work and just in time as a gust of cold wind from the north threatened rain.

Seth put up the horses and fed them and was halfway to the house when a torrent of rain soaked him to the skin. He rushed in the still broken door and shoved to upright it and wedge it in the frame.

He'd managed to put some of the wood in the wood box and shoved some kindling in the fireplace. He'd not had time to check it, but the temperature was dropping fast, and he was freezing. It took him some time, but he finally got the fire going.

The only blanket he had was from the horse, and that was in the barn. The rain had quickly turned from rain to sleet. Tonight, who knows, it could be snow. Seth got out of his clothes and hung them by the fireplace.

He should have known better. Willow had told him she thought it would snow before the week was out. She'd told him to be prepared. Keep warm clothes with him and food. He had neither.

But the fire would keep him warm and dry out his clothes. He'd be all right. He had to be. He had a house to fix so he could marry Willow. He kept near the fire to try and stop his teeth from chattering.

He saw that he had more to fix up the house than the roof. The walls also needed to be calked. The driving wind blew right through, and even with the fire, the air was cold. Around midnight, his clothes were dry enough to put on.

That gave him some comfort, but the wind still blew through the cracks. Worse, his woodpile was dwindling. There was some outside, but that meant facing the sleet again. Why hadn't he listened to Willow?

What he wouldn't give for a good steak or a cup of soup. He found a pan and heated some water. Drinking the warm liquid helped his insides stop shivering, but it was going to be one long night.

The wind had yet to let up, and a pile of snow had gathered in the middle of the den. Seth had moved to the kitchen. The roof was a little sturdier, and the stove put out more heat. He didn't know what time he fell asleep, but it was the cold that woke him.

He opened the stove, and the coals were cold. Seth ran to the fireplace, but it was out too. There were a few pieces of wood near it, and he grabbed them. He shaved off some kindling and, after an hour of shivering, got another fire started in the stove.

Seth drank some more hot water, but the chills remained. Finally, about midday, the sleet, and snow stopped. Fever heated him now. Though weak, he knew he had to get help. He'd die if he stayed in this house.

He walked toward the barn but had to stop halfway and rest. His head was pounding, and his eyes blurred. His only chance was to get to Willow's farm. He got the bay and saddled him. It took all of Seth's strength to get on the big horse.

Fearing he'd pass out and fall off, he took a rope and tied himself to the saddle. Then he reined the horse toward

Willow's farm and prayed that God if He was up there and cared, would watch over him.

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Willow pulled her coat on and followed her uncle into the barn. At least, the sleet and snow had stopped, and the day looked like it would warm up. She'd gotten up early and helped Aunt Aggie with the breakfast.

Her aunt hadn't felt good the last few mornings and had asked for help. Willow had to admit she hadn't been the most helpful niece to them. It still hurt that her father had willed the farm to Bert and left her out.

Aggie had tried to tell her that she couldn't own the land anyway, but Willow hadn't wanted to hear such a thing. Even after Pastor Collins told her that it was best that Bert and Aggie had the farm in their name to keep it in the family, she'd still not believed them.

Then she heard about another family who lost their farm because the husband had died, and a brother had come to claim the farm. It wasn't right, but then there was a lot that wasn't right in the world.

Willow did like Bert and Aggie. They were nice to her and kept telling her they'd take care of her.

"Willow, if you'll get the eggs, I'll milk the cow." Bert grabbed the stool and went to the cow. "Seth seems like a nice young man, but you don't know him that well."

"No, I don't. Yet, when I'm with him, I feel like we've known each other forever and were just waiting to meet." She opened the coop and moved the hens to get their eggs.



Bert was quiet for a few minutes, whispering to the cow to get her to move away from the wall. “Aggie and I felt that way when we met. I guess there are some things that time doesn’t matter on.”

She stuffed the last egg into her apron pocket. “So, you think it would be all right if I married him?”

Bert finished milking Lucy and stood. He looked at her. “If it seems right to you and you’ve prayed about it, Aggie and I won’t stand in your way.”

“Thank you, Uncle Bert. I have been asking the Lord about it. So far, I haven’t really heard one way or the other.”

“Your heart will tell you.”

“Is there something wrong with Aunt Aggie? She’s been sick the last few days.”

Bert turned a worried look to her. “You’ve noticed too. I’m worried about her. It’s not like her to be sick. If she’s not better, I’m taking her into town to see the doctor.”

Willow nodded. “I’m sure it’s nothing.” She smiled at her uncle. “So, you and Aggie think Seth is a good man?”

“I do. He’s a hard worker. In just the short time we’ve known him, we can see how he cares about you. Let’s get this inside. I’d like to check on Aggie.”

Willow nodded. “I’ll clean up the kitchen for her.”

“Thanks. I hope you know that we came here but not to take the farm from you. Your father said in the will that the farm would be part yours too.”

“I’ve come to trust you and Aggie. I guess if I marry Seth, I won’t need two farms.” She walked with him into the house and put the eggs in the bowl. Even with the cold weather, several of the hens were still laying.

She went about her business with a light heart. She did like Bert and Aggie and wished the best for them. While she cleaned the kitchen, she prayed for Aggie that she would be all right. Willow couldn’t bear to lose another loved one.

Surely, the Lord would have compassion and heal her aunt of whatever affliction had come upon her. She’d seen the worry in Bert’s eyes. Willow prayed harder. “Please, Lord. Don’t take anyone else.”

By lunchtime, Aggie came out of her bedroom and assured her and Bert that there was nothing wrong with her. Just tired was her excuse.

Willow made lunch and was happy to see Aggie eat her fair share of beans and cornbread. “We were worried about you.”

Aggie smiled. “I’m fine. No need to worry.” She took the dishes to the kitchen. “Bert, I think we should have venison tonight. That deer you shot the other day, is the meat smoked enough.”

“I think so. I’ll check it and bring it in. The weather has warmed up. I might go hunting again today.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I need to make use of the good weather while we have it. That snow made me aware that we could be snowed in for weeks.”

Aggie nodded. “Just be careful. I need you, Bert.”

Willow nodded. After last year's blizzard, she understood all too well how things could change so quickly. She was about to sit down and do some knitting when she glanced out the window.

"Someone's coming down the drive." Willow put her yarn down and turned to get a closer look. Her heart leaped. "I think it's Seth." She was up and to the porch before she had to run back in and get her coat.

"He can stay for dinner?"

"Of course, dear." Aggie smiled.

Willow ran back outside and waved to him. Then she ran toward the horse, yelling for Bert.

By the time she reached Seth, he was sliding out of the saddle and would have fallen if he didn't have a rope tying him to the saddlehorn. Willow put a hand to him and pushed him up. "Bert, help!"

Bert ran out of the house and to her. "I'll get him. You take the horse." Bert reached up, undid the rope, and helped Seth down. "What's wrong?"

Seth stared at her with red eyes. "I'm cold."

Willow held the reins with one hand and put the other to his forehead. "He's burning up."

Bert picked Seth up and started for the house. "Willow, ride into town and get the doctor and hurry."

Willow climbed into the saddle and galloped the horse toward town. She prayed for Seth. Prayed that she wouldn't

lose him. She couldn't. Her heart was in anguish as she screamed out her pain to the Lord.

“God, help me. I can not lose another. Please!”

## Chapter 9

Willow held the horse to a walk until she was closer to town. The animal's breathing was labored. He'd worked hard, and she didn't want to hurt him, but Seth's life was in danger. Then she topped the hill and saw Last Chance before her.

She kicked the horse and slapped the reins. Even though the bay was tired, he lunged forward, and soon they were in town. She yanked him to a stop in front of Doc's office, jumped off, and ran to the door.

"Doc, I need you. Please, quick!"

He came from the back room. "Willow, are you hurt?"

"No, it's Seth. He's got a fever. At the farm."

After grabbing his bag, the doc nodded. "I'll get my wagon. You better take that horse to the livery and ride with me."

She nodded and walked the bay to the livery. Soon, they were on the way back to the farm in Doc's carriage. He kept the horse going at a steady clip.

"What happened?"

Willow shook her head. "I don't know. Bert and I saw him ride in, and he nearly fell off his horse. Seth had tied himself to the saddle, so we had to untie him. He was burning up with fever."

Doc patted her hand. "I'm sure he'll be fine. He's young and strong, but we'll see what we need to do. Is anyone

else at your farm sick?"

"No. Well, Aunt Aggie has been feeling poorly, but she seemed better at lunch." Willow prayed there was nothing wrong with her aunt. Bert would be lost without her.

The doc looked as if he were deep in thought. Willow tried to keep her mind from the events of last year, but the overwhelming sorrow followed her like a dark cloud. She wanted to trust God as Pastor Collins preached, but so far, her world had been turned upside down, and just as it was righting itself, Seth showed up sick, and Aunt Aggie wasn't feeling well.

Was she fated to live a life alone?

"Willow, are you feeling well?"

"Yes, Seth may have been caught in the cold weather. He had said he was going to work on the farm he bought."

"That would explain why he is sick. I worry about your aunt. I pray it is nothing catching."

"Me too, Doc." Willow stopped talking because she didn't want him to hear that she was near tears. It was all too much.

Then they turned into the drive to her farm. They stopped by the porch, and Willow jumped out to see about Seth. She didn't even wait for the doctor but ran up the stairs and into the house.

"Uncle Bert, where is Seth?"

Bert came out with a rag in his hand. "He's in the spare bedroom. I tried to get some warm soup down him, but he's

delirious.” Her uncle paused and looked around. “Didn’t you bring the doctor?”

“He’s coming. Right behind me.” Willow didn’t wait but ran toward the room.

Uncle Bert stopped her before going in. “I want you to wait out here until the doc has a chance to see what it is. If it’s catching, I don’t want you or Aggie to get sick.”

“I have to go to him.” She was crying now. She had to see that Seth was all right. Willow wrestled out of his grasp and ran to the door.

Bert had her by the shoulders. “He’s sleeping. I’ve got a cold cloth on his head. Please, Willow, go back. Soon enough, you can see your young man.”

She nodded and backed away just as Doc came up to them.

He put a hand on her arm. “Go make some hot soup, and soon you can go in and tend to him.” His kind face and tone helped to calm her.

Willow left them and went to the kitchen.

Aggie was sitting at the table with a coffee in her hands. “He’ll be fine, Willow.”

“How do you know? Last year, things weren’t fine at all.”

“Come, sit down and let me get you some coffee. I’ve already got the soup heating.” Aggie poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her. “Seth is a strong young man.”

“So was Robert and my father.”

“This isn’t last year. You must be strong and courageous, Willow. I’ve been praying, and I believe he will be fine.”

Willow shot her a look. “God told you?”

“Not in words, but I have peace in my heart.” She took Willow’s hand in hers. “God is the one we have to trust.”

“So, I’ve heard Pastor Collins say. That’s easy for others to say who haven’t lost those they love.” Willow had spoken harshly, but she didn’t care. She didn’t want to take the words back, nor would she. It was so easy for others to say high-sounding words when their lives weren’t involved.

“Willow, I know you have suffered hard losses, but this is not last year.”

Willow shook her head and stared at Aggie. “What do you know of loss? My father and fiancé at the same time. Then you and Bert come to take my farm from me. I lost everything.”

“Dear, dear girl. Bert and I would never take the farm from you. Your father thought we could help you. I hope you don’t ever think that we would force you out of your home.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just sick at heart. I thought Seth and I —”

“You and Seth will go on. I know that boy will be fine. It might take him a time to get his strength back, but you and Seth will have your time together.”

“Will we? Do you know that he confided in me that he doesn’t think he’ll live to thirty? I am not sure I want to sign up for more sorrow in my life. Why would he tell me that?”



Aggie looked at her with such compassion that Willow looked away, ashamed of her own harsh attitude.

“He cares about you. As for why he thinks he will die so young, I am not sure. Each day is a gift.” Aggie rose and poured more coffee into her cup. “Do you need more?”

Willow shook her head. “No thanks.” She turned in her seat and looked across the room toward the guest room. What was wrong with Seth? She lowered her head and prayed a silent, desperate prayer.

The door to the guest room opened, and the doc and Bert came out.

Willow jumped out of her chair, spilled her coffee, and ran to them. “How is he?”

The doctor shook his head. “He’s sick, all right. His lungs have congestion. Keep him warm, feed him broth, and make him cough. Some people try and stop them from coughing, but he needs to get the congestion out of his lungs.”

“I’ll take care of him.” Willow was already headed for the door when Bert caught her hand.

“Easy, girl. Let me make sure he’s covered. I’ve seen the way you have been looking at that young fellow.”

Doc laughed. “Maybe I should send Pastor Collins out here. He loves to do weddings.”

Bert shook his head. “I’m not all sure that he’s right for you, Willow.”

“Uncle Bert, you know Seth is right for me, and I intend to marry him.” Willow pulled her hand from him. “Go

and check, and then I'll tend to him until he is better."

"That's likely to take several weeks. He'll be weak as a kitten for a time." Doc nodded at Aggie. "Bert wanted me to check you out too."

Aggie blushed. "I'm fine."

"Let's just go see about that." He followed Aggie into her room and closed the door.

Willow glanced at Bert. "You think something is wrong?"

Bert shrugged. "I hope not." He let go of Willow and walked to the bedroom, and paced back and forth.

Willow knocked on Seth's door and went in. He was covered to his chin in blankets. "I'm going to take care of you."

He gave her a weak smile. "I'll be up and around before you know it."

"Doc said you're to stay in bed and keep warm. Can I get you some broth?"

Seth coughed. "Maybe later. I'm tired." His smile faded, and in minutes, he was sleeping.

Willow sat beside him and smoothed his hair. He was still burning with fever, so she took the cloth and dipped it in water to cool his brow. What if he never got better? She knew of a man who had a fever and never came back. He was always off. His wife had to sell the house, move them into a small room, and wash clothes for others to keep them alive.

She glanced at Seth and wondered if he would recover and be normal again. If not, what would she do? She loved him, but they weren't married. She wasn't bound to care for a man that could never care for her.

Willow faced the truth. She would run. Leave him and run off. She was not a good person. Or maybe, she didn't love Seth. Was this what it took? Goodness, she'd been to enough weddings in the last year she could recite the words. Right now, the until death do us part phrase haunted her.

She put another cold cloth on his forehead and prayed Seth would fully recover. Willow knew that if it was her, she would want her loved ones to take care of her. Even if she was rendered weak-minded and sickly for the rest of her days. She should be able to offer the same in return.

But the more she thought about it, the harder it became to imagine having to take care of a man as if he were a child for the rest of her days. Why was life so hard? Then she looked at Seth. He was sleeping. He wasn't dead. He wasn't going to be weak the rest of his life. He would recover. She knew it.

Yet, Willow had to wonder if she could face the idea of having to take care of a man for the rest of her days. In sickness and health. Good times and bad. Was she up to that? Or would she be better off never marrying and having to face the loss of a loved one?

As she wrestled with the hard problems, a verse from long ago took over her worries. Her mother had repeated it to her often. "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and

whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.” Mama had repeated that verse often.

She ran the wet cloth down Seth’s arms. “I want to lose my life for His sake. My life belongs to Jesus. I can do all things in Christ.” They were words that spoke to her soul and gave her comfort.

She understood that she did not have to know the future. Her heart settled with a surety that this man she was caring for would grow stronger and live and that she would marry him.

She glanced at the shut door and then bent and kissed Seth. “I love you, Seth Thomas. You get well so we can get married.”

## Chapter 10

Seth woke up, and for the first time in weeks, he could smell the bacon cooking. The other thing he noticed was the energy he felt. Oh, it wasn't much, a speck really, but he wanted to get up. He had things to do.

He threw off the covers and slipped his feet over the side of the bed. That Willow's aunt and uncle had put him up in their house for weeks was beyond generous. And Willow. Seth smiled as he thought about her.

They'd gotten to know one another in deep ways. Long talks about what they'd been through and what they thought about marriage and having children. They both agreed they wanted a lot of kids.

He was determined to surprise Willow this morning. Seth grabbed his pants and leaned against the bed to put them on. He hated how weak he was. After all, he had a house to build for the woman he intended to make his wife as soon as he was able to stand before the preacher.

Seth stopped and rested. Lying flat on his back for weeks had left him skinny and weak as a kitten. Today, he was going to get back his strength. He found a shirt and put it on and was buttoning the buttons when she opened the door.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm going to eat breakfast with you and your aunt and uncle.”

“Seth, you get back in bed.” She put her hands on his shoulders.

“No, I’m ready to get up.” Despite his desire to leave the room, Willow’s push sent him back on the bed. “Please, I need to get up.”

“Doc said that you were to stay down until he says otherwise.” She smiled at him. “I have to say, your color is better.”

“Today was the first day that I felt alive. I can smell the bacon and actually want to get up.” He took her hand and kissed it. “Please?”

“Let me help you get your socks and shoes on. If you promise to go back to bed if you begin to feel bad.”

“I promise, but if I have to stay one more day in this room, I’ll go crazy.” He pulled her to him and kissed her. “Have I told you I love you lately?”

She pulled away. “Yes, and I love you too. Give me your foot, and I’ll put on your socks.”

He held up his foot, but after a couple of minutes, he had to put it down. “I’m so weak. I hate it.”

“You’ll get stronger every day. Now, give me your other foot.” She wrestled his foot into another sock. “Now for your shoes. The floor is cold, so don’t argue with me.”

“You sound just like a bossy wife.”

She kissed his cheek. “I won’t be a bossy wife. At least not as long as you do as I say. That is until you’re well. Until then, you are under my command.”

“Miss Commander, I see. As long as you promise to kiss me, I’ll do what you say.” He loved her more every day.

“All right. Stand up and take my arm. You lean on me. I don’t want you to fall. If you need to sit down, we’ll find a chair.”

“I’m getting stronger by the minute. Smelling that bacon is making me strong.”

She grinned at him. “Let’s go.”

He leaned on her more than he wanted to admit. By the time he reached the table, it was all he could do to keep from collapsing. Breathing hard, he nodded. “I made it.”

Uncle Bert sat down. “You doing all right, Seth? You’re looking pale.”

Aunt Aggie handed him a glass of water. “Drink that down.”

Willow held onto him to make sure he didn’t fall out of the chair. “You’re clammy but not feverish.” She dished out his eggs and bacon. “Eat up, and that will help, but you are not staying up for long.”

Seth ate the eggs and then the bacon. He could feel the strength trying to come back.

Willow handed him a glass of milk. “Drink up. We’re going to fill you up on good food.”

After drinking down the milk, Seth nodded. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate all the help. I would have died on my own.” He took Willow’s hand in his. “Especially you, every time I opened my eyes, you were there.”

Willow's eyes grew moist. "It's what love does."

Aunt Aggie took hold of Bert's hand. "Yes, good word, Willow."

Seth looked at Aggie. "How are you feeling? I couldn't be happier for you and Bert."

Willow's aunt blushed. "After all these years, we're going to have a child. We have so much to be thankful for, and part of that is that you are feeling better, Seth."

"Thank you. I've got to get better so I can finish the house for Willow."

She took his plate. "I only want you to be well."

"I'd like to sit in the den and look outside."

"Just for a little while, and that's only if you stay covered up." Willow stood and held out her hand. "I'll help you to the divan."

Seth shook his head. "You make me feel like an old man. Give me a few weeks, and I'll pick you up and carry you over the threshold of our house."

"Soon, you're doing so much better."

Seth held onto her but felt his strength returning. He'd make sure that he would be just as strong if not stronger. He'd learned that Ben and Trish Harper had been taking care of his stock and had been praying for him.

Pastor Collins had held church services for him, and the town had prayed for his recovery. Never had Seth felt such a part of a town or others. One thing for sure, he was going to make up for all that had been given to him in help and time.



He sat on the divan and put his feet up. Outside, the snow had fallen, and the land transformed into bright white. It looked so clean and fresh. Much the way he felt. Somehow, his heart felt clean too.

In the time he'd had to lay in bed, he'd spent time praying and reading the Bible. God had become real to him, securing his faith in truth and hope. He hoped he would heal quickly.

# Chapter 11

Willow brought in the eggs and set them in the basket in the kitchen. Aggie put the biscuits in the oven and then turned to her.

“Did you get many?”

“Only ten. The cold weather is stopping them from laying.”

“I’m glad I pickled some earlier. We’re going to need them. How is Seth?”

“He’s good. He was helping Bert with the livestock. He’s ready to get back to his farm and work on the house. I worry about him. Do you think he’s strong enough?”

Aggie rubbed her back. “He is. You can’t keep a good man down.”

“And you? How are you feeling?”

“Blessed. I feel good. I felt the baby kick the other day. Just a little flutter, but I felt the life in me. Something I never thought I would have the opportunity to experience.” Aggie rubbed her stomach and smiled.

Willow had noticed the beauty and peace on her aunt’s face. She couldn’t be happier for her. “Aunt Aggie, Seth, and I want to get married. As soon as he’s able, we want to talk to Pastor Collins. Seth will need some help with the house.”

“Now, now. You can stay here until you get the farm livable. Bert and I don’t want to see both of you sick for

freezing. I'm sure we can get men from the town to help. Pastor Collins can organize a group of men to build the house so you can live in it."

"I'm not sure Seth would be wanting to accept charity."

Aggie put her hands on her hips. "Charity is one thing. Community and love for your neighbor are another. You tell Seth that he'll have to accept it if he wants to marry you. Bert won't let you live in that house until it can keep you warm."

Willow hugged her aunt. "Thanks for caring for me."

"I'm just sorry that when we came, we weren't the most loving. I'm afraid Bert was more interested in the farm. But the Lord has worked on our hearts. I hope you can see the difference."

Willow smiled. "I do, as I hope you see, that I have grown up and am no longer a spoiled girl."

"You are a sweet young woman that Seth is lucky to get. I also see that he is a good man for you. I know you will be happy."

The door shut, and the men walked into the den. Seth poked his head in the kitchen. "Can I talk to you, Willow?"

She grinned at Aggie and ran to him. "Yes."

"It's a nice day today, I was thinking it would be a good day for a ride and a picnic. I was thinking by the pond." He held her hand and traced his finger on her palm.

Tingles shot through her. "I think that is just what the doctor would order. I'll go change and be out in a minute."

Willow was beyond excited. This was the first time they would venture out of the house together since he got sick.

Seth was feeling much better. She could see it in his eyes. They were no longer dull and tired but shown with life. Despite the hard times and the worry if he would recover or not, she was thankful for the times that they had together. They'd had many conversations about what they wanted in life and marriage.

Each one sealed her love for him, and she was convinced that they were meant for each other. Such a better fit than she'd ever felt with Robert. At times, she felt guilty about him, but this was now, and she couldn't fix the past.

With her riding skirt on, she grabbed a jacket and wool hat. "I'm ready."

Seth came out of the kitchen with a basket. "Aggie fixed us a picnic." He stopped and shook his head. "You look beautiful."

She blushed. He adored her, and she was still getting used to it. She ran into his arms. "It's only when I see you. Let's go."

They went outside, and she saw that Bert was saddling her horse and already had Seth's saddled. Her aunt and uncle must want some time alone.

Seth took the reins to the bay. "Thanks, Bert."

"Anything to help." He smiled at Willow. "Here's Sandy Rose. Enjoy your ride but keep an eye on the weather."

"Always. Thank you, Uncle Bert. I do appreciate all that you and Aggie have done for me and for Seth." She

mounted her horse.

Bert nodded. "Have a good picnic. Be careful."

Willow looked at Seth and could only smile at how well he looked. For a time, she had wondered if he would ever recover. "How do you feel?"

Seth looked at her with a bit of disgust on his face. "I will be glad when I never hear those words again. I feel great. I feel like I'd like to ride with my girl and not think about doctors or broth."

She laughed. "Fair enough. Let's have that picnic." She tapped the sides of her horse and took off down the road.

Seth was beside her, looking fit and strong. Willow hadn't realized it, but she'd been holding her breath as if she wasn't sure how he really was. But he looked great. The color was back in his cheeks. Strength in his arms and hands. Seth was back from the brink of death. She wondered if he knew how sick he'd been.

The day was one of those sweet blue-sky days between the cold gray ones. The cold had clipped the leaves off the few trees around the pond, leaving stark branches against the bright sky. The air was warm with just the slightest of cool breezes. In other words, the perfect day.

Seth nodded. "Let's get these horses moving." He tapped the bay and took off over the prairie.

Willow followed, enjoying the wind in her face and her horse's hooves pounding the ground. When running the horse, she always felt as if she were flying over the ground as swift as an eagle and just as free.

All too soon, the pond was before them. Seth slowed his horse and stopped near a big oak. She rode up to him, and he put his hands around her waist to help her down.

“Let me get the blanket, and we’ll set the basket and food on it.” He spread out the blanket and gestured for her to sit.

“Are you hungry now? Or do you want to take a walk around the pond?”

“A walk.” She stood and took his arm. “I’m so glad you wanted to come here.”

“Trust me, I’ve been counting down the days until I could get outside. I have a farmhouse to rebuild. No telling what it looks like now. Fences to build. A lot of work.”

She put a finger to his lips. “We will do it together.” She smiled, thinking how Aggie had told her Pastor Collins might get men from town to help. She wouldn’t tell Seth. Not now.

He held her hand in his. She could feel his growing strength and praised the Lord for it. They walked to the far end of the pond, where it slipped over the dam, making a small waterfall as it trickled down into the creek below.

Seth sat her down on a boulder. Then he held her hand in his and looked into her eyes. “Willow Frazier, will you be my wife?”

Her heart thundered. “Yes.”

“This makes it official. I’ll talk to Pastor Collins tomorrow. I plan to go into town and then out to the farm.”

“But Seth, you can’t go all over the land. It was at your farm you got so sick.”

“That’s over with. I’m healthy now, and I won’t get sick like that again. I have a sweet woman to marry and take care of.” He grinned at her and kissed her, quick at first, and then he let his lips linger over hers. “I love you, Willow. You’re the reason I’m still alive. There were times I could almost feel myself leaving this world, and then I’d think about you.”

“Oh, Seth.” She leaned against his chest and put her arms around his neck. “I never knew I could love someone so much.”

He hugged her close. “Let’s go eat that picnic lunch your aunt made us. Then I need to talk to Pastor Collins.”

Willow ran ahead of him and had the plates and food set out. “Aggie makes the best fried chicken. She’s taught me a lot. My mother died when I was young.”

Seth sat beside her. “We’re two orphans.”

“No, together, we are a family, and our children will not have to worry about being orphans. We will live to a ripe old age, you and me.”

“Is that so?”

She wiped a piece of butter from his lip. “Yes, I say so.”

“All right. I’ll believe it too.” Seth sat back and rested his back against a downed tree trunk.

“Are you ready for some pie?”

“I am always ready for some pie.”

Willow pulled it out and handed him his piece.

“Cherry. My favorite.”

“Yum. Who doesn’t love cherry pie?” He took his fork and started eating. It didn’t take him long, and he was finished. “I’ve got to get back so I can go into town today. I want to talk to Pastor Collins.”

“Don’t overdo yourself and get too tired.”

He shook his head. “That is all behind me. I’m fit now. You just watch me, soon to be Mrs. Seth Thomas.”

“All right, I believe you.” She put the dishes back in the basket. “I must say that was a wonderful picnic dinner and a beautiful day, but most of all, the company pleased me.”

“Ah-ha, and me too. Soon, we’ll have every day together.” He paused. “You didn’t say when you wanted to get married.”

“As soon as you can arrange it. I don’t want to wait a moment longer.”

“Good. I’ll let Collins give us the next day he has open.” He stood and helped her up. “Let’s get back. I have the rest of our lives together to plan.”

“Not without me.”

“You’re right.” Seth helped her on the horse. “I’ll race you back to the house.”

She laughed, tapped Sandy Rose on the side, and took off. Today was the perfect day, and she’d never been happier. Willow laughed when she heard the big bay running behind



her. She looked back and waved as she again urged her horse on.

Willow beat Seth to the house and jumped down from her horse. "I won."

Seth tied the horses up to the post. "No, I'm the one that won the most. I won you, darling."

## Chapter 12

Seth rode into Last Chance, ready to settle things with Pastor Collins. He knew Ben and Trish had had run ins with the man, but Seth had only had good dealings with the man. Besides, the preacher had quite a job trying to get all the widows married. Most of what Seth had seen was a good man trying his best.

He stopped at the church and knocked on the office door. It wasn't a minute, and Pastor Collins opened the door.

"Seth, what can I help you with?"

"I want to marry Willow Frazier."

Pastor Collins put a hand to his chin. "She's awfully young, and so are you."

"We're old enough to know that we love one another." Seth was getting irritated at the man.

"As long as you take your wedding vows seriously. I don't want either of you deciding a day before the wedding that you change your mind."

"Believe me, we will not change our minds. We love one another." Seth held his hat and twisted it nervously.

"All right. When?"

"As soon as possible."

"Hmm, would this Saturday work?"

Two days from now, Seth would make it work. “Yes, sir.” True, he would have to work on the house in the next two days, but unless it had been visited by skunks or the roof fell in, it should be all right.

“Good. This Saturday at two in the afternoon. Be here early, and remember, no backing out. That is the thing I have seen young people do, and that is to change their minds and back out after everyone else did all the work.”

“You sure don’t have to worry about us. Thank you, Pastor Collins.” Seth left and went to check on the lumber he’d ordered. He was supposed to pick it up when he got sick. He left the church and walked across the street to the lumber yard and hardware store.

Seth waved at the owner. “Doug, do you still have my lumber?”

“Sure do. I delivered that first load, and I’ve kept the rest safe and dry. Are you ready for it now?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Glad to see you up and around. Bert Frazier said you were one sick boy.” Doug pulled a lock from the shelf and placed it in his basket. “I can have them delivered to you tomorrow early.”

“Great. I have a house to repair. Willow and I are getting married Saturday.”

Doug put a hand to his head. “I’m sorry, I can’t send them tomorrow. It will be Monday before I can get them to you.”

Seth's hopes fell. "I really wanted to get things ready for her."

"Sorry, you know I would have if I'd known you were coming today." Doug looked at him with a bit of a smile in his eyes.

Seth didn't see anything to be happy about. He was marrying the woman he loved, and the house wouldn't be ready for her. "We'll make do with what we have."

Doug nodded. "Sorry, Seth. I'll get it to you first thing Monday."

"Fine."

"Oh, before you go to your farm, I think the banker wanted to talk to you." Doug pointed down the street.

Seth bid him goodbye and walked down the street to the bank. Mr. Sorenson was sitting at his desk but jumped up when he saw Seth enter the building.

"Seth, how good to see you up and around."

"Doug said you needed to see me."

"Yes, it has to do with your loan. I need some more signatures. I'm afraid until I get them and send them off, you can't step foot on the farm."

Seth's shoulders sagged. What was going on? It was as if the world was conspiring against him. "I'll sign the papers. I need to get my house fixed up as soon as I can."

With a sly smile, Mr. Sorenson nodded. "I understand, but these things just can't be helped. Let me get the papers, and as soon as you sign them, I can mail them to Chicago."

“Chicago?”

“Yes, the title search is kept there while they justify the deed.”

“I thought you already did that.” Seth was beginning to get his temper up. “This is important to me, Mr. Sorenson.”

“I’m sorry, Seth. Some things can’t be helped. It’s just for a week.”

“If it can’t be helped, I guess that’s that. Let me know when I can go out to my land.” Seth left the bank and kicked at the door. He walked back to the church to get his horse. But the animal wasn’t there.

Seth knocked on the door.

Collins opened the door.

“Pastor Collins, have you seen my horse?”

“Horse?”

“Yes, my horse. A big bay was tied up right there in front of the church.”

“No, I don’t even have a horse.”

“I know you don’t. It was my horse, and he’s missing.”  
Was the whole town plotting against him?

“Dear me. A horse thief must have gotten him. You might check the livery.” Pastor Collins hesitated. “You can stay here with me tonight. I can drive you back to the Fraziers tomorrow. But then you shouldn’t see Willow until the wedding. I have plenty of room and food.”

“Thank you, Pastor. I don’t know what to do. I need to fix the house, but I can’t until the banker lets me know. Now my horse is gone.”

“Come on in. I’ll fix you some dinner. Mrs. Jonas brought me a chicken earlier. And pie.”

Seth nodded. “I should get word to Willow. I don’t want her to worry about me.”

“She knew you were going into town. I’m sure she’ll understand. Besides, you need a haircut and good shave before the wedding.”

Seth felt his chin and nodded. “I guess you’re right.”

Pastor Collins put his arm around Seth’s shoulders. “I get lonely, and it will be a joy to have someone to eat dinner with. Soon, my dear boy, you’ll have your beautiful bride by your side for the rest of your lives. Why don’t you get that haircut?”

“Good idea. I’ll meet you back here.” Seth thanked the Pastor and went to the barbershop. “I need a good cut for my wedding.”

Gerald nodded. “Your wedding? When is that?”

“This Saturday. That is, if everything goes according to plan. So far, all my plans are messed up. I can’t work on the farmhouse, my horse is missing, and I’m staying in town until the wedding.”

Gerald grinned. “It will all work out. You’ll see. Besides, you’re getting a sweet young woman.”

Seth grinned. “Yes, sir. I am.” The warm towel was over his face, and Seth relaxed for the first time since coming to town.

## Chapter 13

Willow was nervous. Seth never came back from town. She was frantically worried that something had happened to him.

Uncle Bert smiled. “The boy is fine. Don’t worry, your pretty little head. All you need to do is get ready for your wedding.” He kissed Aggie. “I’ll be back in time for the wedding. I’m sorry I have to leave, but I really wanted to see the new kind of wheat they are offering.”

Willow shook her head. Here she was nervous about Seth not coming home, and Bert was leaving them to check on some kind of wheat. Aggie didn’t seem upset about it, though.

Bert looked at her. “Aggie has some material for a wedding dress that she’s been keeping in her trunk. You’ll be a beautiful bride, Willow. If you want me to, I will be happy to stand in for your father and give you away.”

Tears stung her eyes. Willow went to him and hugged him. “Thank you, Uncle Bert. I would be honored if you would.”

“Great. You gals, have a good time and don’t wait for me. I’ll be home late tomorrow. Then Saturday, we’ll all go to town for the wedding.”

Aggie walked him to the door while Willow sat at the kitchen table and nibbled on some cookies that her aunt had made. They were Willow’s favorite, and she got up and poured a cup of milk to dip them in.



As crazy as her day had gone, she was feeling better. Cookies and milk made her feel much calmer. Well, as long as Bert was sure that Seth was in town, she could relax. There was no bad weather. So even if Seth had gone to his farmhouse, he should be all right.

She dipped another cookie and ate it. Yes, Seth would be fine. She had to believe that and trust the Lord. Surely, He would not let her lose another fiancé. He just wouldn't.

Aggie returned and sat down beside her. "Should we get the material?"

"Oh, yes. You're sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. I even have an idea on how to make it." Aggie stood and waited for her. "And we can work on it the next two days without men stomping around and bringing mud into the room."

Willow laughed. "You're right. I can't wait to make the dress. I never thought I would have anything special."

Aggie went into her bedroom and came back with a bolt of cream material and matching lace.

Willow enjoyed working with Aggie. The woman had brilliant ideas for designing the wedding dress. They worked late into the night and finally went to bed.

The next morning, Aggie had breakfast ready before Willow woke up. After eating, they went back to the dress, and by late Friday night, they had the finished dress ready for the next day.

"It's beautiful, Aggie."

“It is, and you will be the most beautiful bride Last Chance has seen. I’m so proud of you.”

“Where do you suppose Bert is?”

“Oh, he’ll be home. He knows he can’t miss your wedding. I figure he’ll be here first thing in the morning.” Aggie smiled as if she had a secret.

“I’m so happy about the baby. Have you got names picked out?”

Aggie nodded. “If it’s a boy, we’ll name him Steven after your father. If it’s a girl, we’ll name it Sigrid, after my mother.”

“Beautiful names. I can’t wait. You be sure and remember that if you need help, you call on me.”

“We better get to bed early tonight. Tomorrow will be a big day.”

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Willow awoke early. This was her day. Soon she and Seth would be married. Yes, she was still worried about him. She hadn’t seen him in two days. She never wanted to be apart from him again.

Bert came home just like Aggie said he would. He looked tired but happy. Willow figured it must be some kind of exciting wheat.

Then it was time to go. Aggie had the dress safe in a box. Bert was cleaned and shaven. And Willow was ready to outpace the horse on the way to town.

“I have never been so nervous.”

Aggie smiled. “You’re a bride. That’s part of the program. Just remember, we are here for you. Always.”

Willow nodded. “I appreciate you two. I know I was somewhat of a brat when you came.”

Bert nodded. “I would have been too if I found out my home was going to someone else. I hope you know that you are always welcome at the farm. We consider you family. Your father knew that as a woman, you wouldn’t be able to own the land. That’s why he sent for me.”

“I understand that now. I love you both.” Willow was near tears now.

They rode into town and saw that the church was crowded. “Oh my. It looks like the whole town is here.”

Bert grinned at Aggie. “I guess so.”

They walked into the church to the pastor’s office. Aggie chased Bert out. “We’ll call you when it’s time for you to walk her down the aisle.”

Bert hugged Willow and kissed the top of her head. “You’ll be a beautiful bride.”

Willow nodded. She was shaking so hard she wasn’t sure she could get dressed without falling over.

Aggie came to her. “Nervous?”

“To say the least. Petrified.”

Laughing, her aunt took the dress out of the box. “Let’s get you dressed. The crowd already sounds restless.”

“Was Seth there?”

“You aren’t supposed to see him before the wedding.”

“All right. Let’s get this going.” Willow let Aggie help her get dressed. Looking in the mirror, she didn’t even recognize herself.

“Do you think Seth will like it?”

Aggie grinned. “If he doesn’t, half the men will jump to take his place.”

“I only want Seth.”

The music began.

Willow darted a look at Aggie.

“Enjoy this day, Willow. It’s all for you and Seth.”

Aggie went out the door, and in minutes, Bert was by her side.

“I’m so nervous.”

“Don’t you worry, I’ll hold you up and carry you to the front if I have to.”

She grinned. “Let’s go.”

Bert opened the door, and the crowd in the church quieted as they turned to look at her.

Willow was so scared until she saw Seth standing in the front with the Pastor. The look on his face calmed her. He was her home. He was her peace. Her love.

Bert walked her down the aisle and placed her hand in Seth’s.

Seth looked at her with such love in his eyes. Willow knew this was as it should be. They were meant to be together.

Pastor Collins looked at the crowd and smiled. “I guess I should have a wedding every Sunday to get such a crowd.”

The congregation laughed.

“Seth Thomas and Willow Frazier, we are here to witness and celebrate your marriage. This is a solemn journey that a man and woman should undertake with the knowledge that the Lord is in the midst of their lives together.

Pastor Collins put Seth’s hand on the Bible and Willow’s hand on top of Seth’s. Then he bound them with a white ribbon. “This ribbon signifies the Holiness of marriage. A vow before the Lord is not to be taken lightly.”

Seth glanced at her and nodded.

Willow felt his love cover her.

“Seth, do you take this woman to be your wife? To love her and honor her in all ways? Protecting and providing for her all the days of your life?”

Seth was about to answer when he looked past her to the window. His face grew pale as he slipped his hand from the Bible.

She saw his eyes narrow, and the next thing she knew, he’d pushed her beside Pastor Collins and ran out the door.



## Chapter 14

Seth ran to catch him. How could this happen on his wedding day? Yet, there was no way he could go through with the wedding until he dealt with Seneca Carradine. Seth was glad he saw the man looking in the window.

That face. He couldn't forget it. The hate in the eyes was still evident after more than a year. He couldn't marry Willow and chance that she would be a widow before they left the church. He wouldn't do that to her.

So, the only option was to deal with Seneca now. He ran out into the street. "Seneca!" He looked but didn't see him. Seth crossed the street toward the saloon. The one place his enemy would go to wait for him.

Seth shoved the doors open. The darkness overwhelmed him, and Seth realized the foolish act as he tried to make his eyes see in the darkness. But just coming in from the light, he was at a great disadvantage.

There were few people in the bar as most in town were in the church. Seth's heart grieved for Willow. But he had to protect her from Seneca. The man would stop at nothing to seek revenge. That was the blood feud. No peace, only death.

Either Seth killed Seneca, or he'd be killed by the man. It would be easier on Willow not to be married. Besides, Seth couldn't take it if anything happened to her. He knew he should keep his focus on finding his enemy, but his thoughts drifted to her. The way she looked coming up that aisle.

How he wanted to love her. and how he hated himself for leaving her. But it had to be done.

“Seneca!”

Seth froze at a sound behind him.

“Right here, Seth.” The voice hissed danger.

Seth turned. “I’m not armed.”

“I know that.” Seneca sneered at him. “Took me some time to find you. Then someone told me about the mail-order bride letter you answered. A preacher. Imagine my surprise when I saw you standing up there to get married. You sure ended your wedding quick.”

“Let’s get this over with.” Seth faced him. “I don’t want to kill you.”

“It’s not up to us. What we want. It’s our fathers. Their blood cries out to be avenged.” Seneca stepped off the boardwalk and gestured for Seth to follow him.

“The Lord says that Vengeance is His. Why can’t we be the ones to stop the feud?” As Seth looked at the man, he couldn’t find any hate in his heart toward him. They were both caught in a trap that their fathers and grandfathers had set.

“You been toting a Bible around, Seth? If you think that will save you, you’re wrong.” Seneca moved into the street. “I’ve got an extra gun.” He threw it in the ground at Seth’s feet.

“I’m not picking it up.”

“I’ll kill your wife.”

“I’m not married.”



Seneca holstered his gun. “Doesn’t matter. You love her. That’s all I need.”

“Why do you want to kill me?”

“It’s the way of our fathers. A Carradine and a Thomas. Eye for an eye. Life for a life. You know that.” Seneca glared at him.

Seth held his arms open. “Why don’t we stop it?”

“Stop it?”

“Yeah, put an end to the blood feud.”

“Because we’re our father’s sons. I’ve hunted you for three years. I should have killed you in St. Louis that one time.”

“You’d have been hung by that policeman.”

“Maybe, if that is what it takes, it’s what it takes. I’ve come from Missouri to kill you, Seth. Nothing, and I mean nothing, is going to stop me.” Seneca folded his arms. “Now pick that gun up so we can get on with it.”

“No.”

“What did you say?”

Suddenly, she was at his side. His bride. Willow folded her arms. “You’ll have to kill me too. Because if you hurt Seth, I’ll pick that gun up and finish you.”

Seneca laughed. “Aren’t you a little feisty one? Might know Seth would pick a beauty. No, you’re lucky little missy. I don’t shoot women.”

“You said you would earlier.” Willow stared him straight in the eye.

Seth put his arm around her. “I got this. You get back with the others.”

Willow shook her head. “Nope. Where you go, I go. If this vagabond is going to kill you, then he will have to kill me too so we can both go through the pearly gates together.”

Pastor Collins went up to them. “Come now, we have a wedding to finish. Surely, you don’t begrudge them that, do you, sir?”

Seneca pulled his pistol out and aimed it at Collins. “Look, preacher, I don’t care who I have to kill to get to Seth. Now, take that woman and get away. I’d hate to kill either one of you.”

“I will not move.” Collins stood as straight and tall as he could.

Willow stepped forward and stood next to Collins. “We will stand here until you leave.”

Seth shook his head and plowed between the two of them. “Your fight is with me and me alone.”

Bert stepped forward. “No, that’s not true. We think a lot of Seth and Willow. You’ll have to fight me too.”

Ben Harper stepped forward along with twenty other men.

Seneca looked nervously at them. “What is this?”

“They’re called friends.” Bert edged closer to Seth. “Don’t you worry, Seth? We won’t let this man bother you.”

Seth stared at him. "I don't know what to say."

Bert grinned at him. "You might get used to that today."

"If you men know what is good for you, you'll get away from him. I aim to shoot him."

Aggie stepped forward. "Young man. You look like you could use some friends of your own. We have a good dinner with lots of pies right after the wedding. Why don't you change your mind? I am sure your mother wouldn't want you to kill a man on his wedding day."

"What kind of crazy town is this?"

"It's a good town." Willow held onto Seth's arm. "You can change, Mr. Carradine."

Seneca looked like he was wavering. Seth didn't trust him, though.

Mrs. Watterby walked up to Seneca. She was an older woman with white hair and a widow. She lived in the boarding house. With shaking hands, she pushed his gun down. "You don't want to kill anyone, son. You want a way out. Give me the gun, and we'll go eat a good dinner. I make the best rolls this side of the Mississippi River."

"Ma'am, please get back."

"No, I won't. You see, I'm old. I've lived a good life, but I see you as a young man who has had your share of bad luck and pain." She touched his chest. "I can feel that your heart wants to change. Pastor Collins over there, he has enough words from the Bible to chase the devil out of ten of you."

“I came to do a job.” Seneca backed up a step.

Pastor Collins stepped forward. “She’s right. You can start a new life right here. I can see you want it.”

Seneca shook his head. “You are all crazy. I just came to settle with Seth. Isn’t that right, Seth.”

“Give it up, Seneca. You nor I know what that feud is about. It happened before we were born. This is a good town. But it’s your choice. Life or death.”

Seneca stared at him.

Mrs. Watterby patted his arm. “I’m all alone. I would like to adopt you as my son. Seneca, that’s an interesting name. Won’t you come and eat with me?”

He looked at the old woman. “Why would you want to take me in?”

“I’m so tired of being alone. I don’t belong to anyone, and I think that perhaps you feel the same way.” She tugged on his arm. “Let’s go have some dinner. That is unless you want to go to the wedding first.”

Seneca stared at her.

Seth walked up to him. “I’d like to invite you to my wedding. I’d be honored if you’d come.”

“You’re all crazy.”

Seth grinned. “Maybe so, but it’s a good crazy.”

“Is it?”

Seth held out his hand. “Peace?”

Seneca hesitated, looked around, and then shook his hand. "Peace."

Mrs. Watterby clapped. "I am so glad. Let's go. I like to sit up in the front of the church. You're going to have to get used to that Seneca. I expect you to escort me every Sunday."

Willow walked up to Seth and took his arm. "Same goes for you. And right now, you have a wedding to finish."

"Yes, ma'am, I do." He patted her hand. "Pastor Collins, I think we're ready to have that wedding."

The town followed them back into the church. Seth looked and almost laughed as Mrs. Watterby took Seneca's hat off his head and handed it to him. They were on the first row, just like she always wanted to be.

## Chapter 15

Willow stood beside Seth. They were united as one as Pastor Collins performed the ceremony. Although at first, she'd thought another disaster had befallen her when Seth ran out of the church, now, she knew they were meant to be together.

That Seneca had taken Mrs. Watterby's hand and walked with her into the church was a surprise in itself. Willow wasn't sure the man could ever be trusted, but that he was with Mrs. Watterby gave her pause to believe that Seneca didn't have a chance to turn bad.

Then she looked at Seth. Her mind quieted from the day's turmoil, and all she saw was the man she loved dearly. The way he looked at her, she could feel his love for her come in waves.

"Do you, Seth Thomas, take Willow Frazier to be your lawfully wedded wife? To love her and cherish her all the days of your life?"

Seth held her hands. "Yes, I do."

"Do you, Willow, take Seth Thomas to be your lawfully wedded husband? To love and honor him. To respect and nurture him all the days of your life?"

"Yes, I do."

Pastor Collins put his hand on theirs. "I pronounce you as husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Seth took her in his arms and kissed her.

The kiss went through her and released more love than she thought possible. They turned and faced the congregation.

Seth held up Willow's hand. "We want to thank you all for coming and standing with us. God bless you all."

Bert and Aggie walked up to them. "Seth, Willow, we, all of us here, want to say how much we care for you. The way we decided to do that was to fix your house. We all got together and decided to make it a town project."

Seth looked at her. "Did you know?"

Willow shook her head. "No, it's wonderful."

Bert continued. "I hope you like what we've done with the place. Everything we did was to show our love for you two. We've got a wagon out front with supplies and food for the next few days." He laughed. "I hope you won't be too disappointed that we're not going out to visit you. Everyone has been told to give you a week."

Pastor Collins grinned and handed him a key. "The key to your house. You'll find your horse tied up behind the wagon."

Bert held up his hand. "And Willow's horse is in the barn at your farm. The Thomas Farm."

Seth kissed her and hugged her to him. "Are you ready to go home?"

"Yes, I am."

They walked out of the church and to the wagon. Seth helped her into the wagon. They waved to the town and rode

to begin their lives together. Willow held onto Seth and could only wonder what kind of adventure they would have together.

One thing she knew was that it would be a good one.



## Epilogue

“Seth, we need to go now. Bert and Aggie are expecting us.” Willow gathered her basket of baked goods and set it in the wagon.

“I’m ready.” Seth helped her in the wagon. “Soon, we’ll have our own baby.”

She grinned. “You’re right. One of many. I feel so heavy. I have been wondering if I am having more than one.”

Seth stared at her. “You’re not serious?”

She laughed. “Very.”

Bert said he and Aggie were running ragged with only one.

“And that’s why we’re going to help them with little Steven. He turns one today, and I thought it would be good to celebrate with them.” Willow stretched her back. She had another month to go and could barely see how she could go much longer.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go. I worry about you.” Seth patted her hand. “Are you sure you’re up to the trip?”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be riding Sandy Rose, but I can sit in a wagon. Besides, Aggie is counting on us.”

“All right, but if you get feeling bad, you let me know.” Seth was a concerned father-to-be.

“Tell me about Seneca. Has Mrs. Watterby turned him into a decent man?”

Seth laughed. "I'd have never recognized him. He got baptized last week. And now, I know part of the reason."

Willow looked at him. "Why?"

"Rebecca Sue is why. He's fallen for her. I heard he was even helping her father milk the cows. Mrs. Watterby has turned him into a decent man. I didn't think it was possible."

Willow laughed. "Our God is Lord over the impossible." She groaned. "Oh, this baby, he kicks. But the odd thing is, I felt two kicks."

"Two feet."

She stared at him. "Not from two different directions. I have had dreams of two little ones."

"Two?"

"Are you ready for that, Seth Thomas?"

"I suppose I will be."

She nodded and rubbed her back. "Better come up with another name."

Seth nodded. "We have Jacob and Eliza. Think it will be a boy and a girl?"

"Might be at that. In that case, we have them covered." She winced.

Seth turned into the drive to the Frazier Farm and stopped in front of the house. Bert met them and gave a concerned look at Willow.

"Are you sure you should have come so close to your date?" Bert helped her down.

“I’ll be fine. I didn’t want to miss your celebration.” Willow waddled up the steps to the porch. “Where is my little cousin.”

Aggie opened the door. “Come on in. Oh, Willow, you look so—”

“Huge. I know. I was just telling Seth that I think there has to be two of them in here.”

“Twins. It does run in your family.”

She looked at her aunt. “Oh, boy.”

Aggie nodded. “We have our hands full chasing one little boy around.” She looked down the drive. “Here comes the doctor, and by the looks of you, he might be needed.”

“I’m fine. Please just let me sit down.” Willow was beginning to agree that coming may not have been the smartest thing she’d done.

Seth came in and gave her a worried look. “Where is the birthday boy?”

“He’s just waking up.” Aggie went to the back room and soon came out with her son. Bert joined them, and they looked like the perfect family.

Willow winced. “That one hurt.”

Seth went to her. “Another kick.”

She shook her head. “No, it was different.” Willow clutched her stomach.

The doctor walked. “Where’s the party?”

Seth pointed at Willow. “I think she might be in labor.”

“Oh, well, maybe it’s a good thing I’m here today. Willow, how are you feeling?”

“Contractions.” She grimaced. “I’m so sorry. I wanted to be here for Steven’s birthday.”

Doc held her hand. “Abbie, do you have a guest room?”

“I sure do. Come on, Willow.” Abbie helped her stand.

Seth walked her to the back of the house and helped her lay down on the bed. “I’m right here.”

“Oh, Seth. I wanted our babies born in our house.”

Aggie put a cloth on her head. “Well, this is your home too.”

Willow groaned.

The doctor chased Seth out of the room. “We’ll take care of Willow.”

Seth paced outside the room. He tried to relax, but as soon as he did, he heard Willow groan.

Bert came to him and handed him a lemonade. “Come over here and have some birthday cake.”

“How did you do when Aggie was having Steven?”

Bert stared at him. “Honestly, I paced up and down outside her room.”

Seth nodded. “I want to help her.”

“You can pray for her and the baby.”

Seth nodded. “All right.” He knelt in front of the door and poured out his heart to the Lord. He prayed for his wife

and the baby or babies. Willow was right. She was larger than Aggie had been.

After hours of pacing, Seth finally sat down. When he heard a crying baby. Then two.

The doctor came out. “Seth, you’re the proud father of a healthy baby boy and girl. Congratulations.”

Seth ran in and saw Willow smiling and holding an infant in each arm. “Jacob and Eliza, meet your father.”

Willow hugged her children. “Look at us, Seth. We’re a family. We’ll have such a grand adventure.”

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**Author's Note** – I hope you enjoyed A Groom for Willow. This is a delightful series by wonderful authors. The Blizzard Bride Series.

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