



WESTWARD BOUND

A JACKSON BROTHERS PREQUEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MADDIE TAYLOR

Westward Bound

A Jackson Brothers Prequel

by

Maddie Taylor

Copyright © 2023 Maddie Taylor

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author.

Westward Bound: a Jackson Brothers Prequel, The Jackson Brothers, Book Four

Published by Maddie Taylor/Breathless Romance

www.RomanceByMaddieTaylor.com

Cover Design by Fantasia Frog Designs

Images by DepositPhotos.com and The Killington Group

Editing by Decadent Publishing

This book is fiction and intended for entertainment purposes only. Parts of the story are loosely based on real events and historical figures. The accounts have been dramatized and names were changed to match the characters and situations in the series.

Recommended for adult audiences only.

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Follow Maddie Online](#)

[Westward Bound](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[More Spicy Romance by Maddie Taylor](#)

[Follow Maddie Online](#)

Follow Maddie Online

[Visit Maddie's Author Page on Facebook](#)

[Join Maddie's Book Club on Facebook](#)

[Follow Maddie on Twitter](#)

[Follow Maddie on Instagram](#)

[Visit Maddie's Website](#)

[Follow Maddie on BookBub](#)

[Follow Maddie on TikTok](#)

[Get a FREE Maddie Taylor Romance!](#)

Keep up with author news, get new release updates and cover reveals before anyone else, as well as sneak previews, and lots of giveaways. And, she won't spam up your inbox. You'll only get an issue of Maddie Taylor News when there is important information to share.

Subscribe to Maddie's newsletter ⇒
<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/l2b0z0etex>

Westward Bound

A Jackson Brothers Prequel

True love conquers all, but can it survive in the Wild West?

With the threat of war growing more real by the day, Henry Jackson faces an impossible choice. Virginia is divided, with half the state poised to secede, leaving the Jackson family farm teetering on the border that will divide the north and south. He accepts the government's promise of land and a fresh start in the untamed western territories to protect his wife and their three boys.

Despite the distance from the unrest, the Jacksons exchange one danger for another. The challenges of their new life are many, especially for Leticia, Henry's wife. Leaving behind her family home, friends and neighbors, and many of her cherished family keepsakes is beyond difficult. Letty finds frontier life more demanding than expected. The loneliness and new rules put in place to protect her are almost too much to bear.

As a greenhorn pioneer, she finds herself in one scrape after another, and the decisions she's often pushed to make aren't wise. His wife repeatedly risking injury or death is something Henry will not abide. Although his devotion is unquestionable, his patience eventually wears thin. Determined to keep the woman he loves safe, he lays down the law. Will his firm hand dampen her spirit? Or will Letty finally accept that her home and heart have always been with Henry and her boys?

Publisher's Note: *Westward Bound* is a spicy historical western romance. It is the much-requested origin story of the Jackson family and is a prequel to the first three books in the series. Like the other books, it contains action, some violence, steamy scenes, and domestic discipline. If this subject matter offends you, please do not buy this book.

Chapter 1

Keeping Watch

October 1861

Indian summer had extended its stay for nearly a month in the foothills of Virginia's Alleghany Mountains. The landscape was awash with golden color, thanks to the sunny, albeit shorter days. The evenings brought a welcome respite from the heat, with a coolness that hinted at the coming of autumn. As did the breeze, carrying the scent of pine and cedar down from the towering hilltops where fall had already arrived.

Despite the warmth of the evening, shivers ran down Leticia Jackson's spine as she stood on her front porch, staring out into the darkness. She wrapped her arms around herself. The chill seeping into her bones had nothing to do with the weather but rather the jarring sound of gunfire echoing in the distance.

"Ma?"

Letty turned to see Luke, a worried expression on his face, his mouth bracketed by frown lines that seemed out of place on a boy of fourteen. But months of off-and-on skirmishes nearby were wearing on all of them.

In a gentle tone, she admonished, "You should be in bed by now, honey."

"I can't sleep. Pa should have been home days ago. Do you think he's all right?"

When she extended an arm to him, he didn't hesitate a second before he was through the door. The sound of his footsteps resonated on the wood planks as he rushed toward her, eager to accept the comfort she offered. She couldn't wrap her arm around his shoulders like she used to, given that he was rapidly approaching his father's well-above-average height, so she slipped it around his waist instead.

Her worried gaze returned to the tree-lined lane in front of their farmhouse. "I'm praying he'll come riding up any moment now."

"Me, too, but that's not exactly what I was hoping to hear."

The fighting was heating up, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the reality that the war was no longer a distant threat but coming to their corner of Virginia. But she didn't want to worry him or her other two boys. She was doing enough of that for all four of them. Letty offered the reassurances she had been clinging to instead.

"Your father has a good head on his shoulders, and he's a crack shot. He also has a lot to come home to. He won't take unnecessary chances."

The hinges on the front door squeaked as it opened. Shuffling footsteps on the planked front porch sounded as her oldest Heath, soon to be sixteen, joined them. Aaron, the youngest of the three, followed closely behind. His lanky frame hadn't filled out yet, but he was nearly as tall as his older brothers, and he didn't turn twelve until next month. Not to be left out, Buddy, Aaron's brown-and-black beagle, scampered out, too.

"You boys have school in the morning. Go back to bed. I'll keep watch for him."

"You've been out here waiting and watching every night for a week," Heath commented, disclosing something she'd hoped they hadn't noticed. "With double the chores and ten times the worry, if you don't get some shut-eye, where will the rest of us be?"

"He's all right, Ma," Aaron stated confidently. "I'd feel it in my gut if he weren't."

She offered her youngest a smile and a nod, then her gaze swept all three. Even though they were adventurous and often got into situations that required their father's intervention, her boys were a comfort to her. But no matter their reassurances, this time, even they couldn't set her mind at ease.

Henry Jackson was the love of her life. Although he could make her as mad as a hornet sometimes, more often, he made her feel cherished and could always bring a smile to her lips. He wasn't perfect, but he was perfect for her, and a firm yet loving father to their three high-spirited sons.

The thought of losing him was unbearable. If the worst happened, and he didn't come home to her, she would force herself to go on for Heath, Luke, and Aaron's sakes, but the joy she once knew would be forever gone.

Rather than dwell on what-ifs and the whirlwind of dismal thoughts plaguing her for days, she changed the subject. "Mrs. McPherson brought me a jug of cider today. What do you say we have a cup with a thick wedge of my mama's apple butter stack cake then head to bed?"

None of them seemed enthusiastic about her suggestion, except Buddy, a big fan of her pie, who woofed in agreement. For three growing boys whose stomachs were bottomless pits, it told her the extent of their concern.

Drawing energy from deep within herself, Letty spun around, her dress swishing with the sudden movement. She quickly made her way to the door, the sound of her work boots ringing loudly in the night air. Pulling it wide, she leaned against the frame.

"I'm having a slice," she announced with excitement she didn't feel. "Surely you three gloomy glumps won't make me eat all alone."

Hesitantly, they glanced at one another. Buddy woofed again. Then they clomped across the porch one by one, the old farmhouse floorboards creaking under their weight as they entered the house.

Before she followed them inside, Letty scanned the lane once more. It was deserted like every other time she'd check today and in the six preceding days. Except for the chirping of crickets and the rustling of leaves in the trees, it was silent. Another shiver of apprehension raced up her spine as she realized the gunfire had ceased. Whether it was a good or bad

omen for Henry, she couldn't guess, but she could pray, which was all she knew to do anymore.

While gathering eggs the next morning, Letty paused to wipe the sweat from her brow. She also stood and stretched, rubbing her lower back, which felt so good. Heath had been right last night about double the chores taking its toll. She felt ten years older than her thirty-six years.

"These eggs won't gather themselves, Leticia," she muttered, as she got back to it, quickly grabbing two eggs from their orneriest hen and managing not to get pecked.

Her ears rang from the fuss of squawking that ensued, which got the rest of the henhouse clucking. Despite the noise, she heard the distinct sound of a horse whinnying.

"Henry," she whispered, as hope blossomed in her chest.

When she peeked out the door, she dropped her basket, not giving a flying flip about the eggs. Without a shred of the ladylike decorum instilled in her by her Southern mama, she hiked her skirt past her knees and sprinted toward the dusty, tired-looking man reining in his horse in her front yard. He dismounted with barely enough time to turn and catch her.

As his arms tightened around her, she sobbed his name again. "Oh, Henry. I've been so dreadfully worried."

He buried his face in her neck and breathed deep. Then, more exhausted than she'd ever heard him, he sighed. "I'm home now, darlin'. You can put your fears to rest."

She drew back to look up at him, tears streaming down her face. "But for how long?"

Grim faced, he didn't answer, likely because he didn't have one to give her.

Setting her down, without relinquishing the hold he had on her waist, he gathered his horse's reins. "Walk with me to the barn."

Arm in arm, they ambled across the dusty foreyard, past the corral to the horse barn, where she confided in him about

the fighting inching closer to their doorstep. “There have been skirmishes nearby nearly every night since you’ve been away.”

“I’m not surprised and expect it to get worse. The vote passed, Letty. Virginia’s western counties have disavowed the secession and approved the creation of a new state by an overwhelming majority.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder, feeling the weight the impending split and the war would have on her family. “A fractured Virginia leaves us and the farm teetering on the border.”

He didn’t sugarcoat his reply. “I’m afraid so. They’ve scheduled the convention to elect delegates for next month.”

“Things are moving fast.”

“We’re at war, Letty. We have to take a stance if we’re to avoid the Confederacy’s fate.”

“You’re certain they’ll lose?”

“Yes. We are one nation. As Mr. Lincoln said at the convention a few years back,

A house divided against itself, cannot stand. Nothing good can come from pitting brother against brother and neighbor against neighbor. That’s what makes this damn war so intolerable.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Watch and wait for now,” he advised.

“And worry,” she added.

He stopped and pulled her flush against him, so close not a breath of air could pass between them from chest to knee. His deep-brown eyes gleamed down at her as he cupped her chin. “You see to your man, your boys, and your home. Worrying about our future is my job.”

“But—”

His lips cut off her protest. After he’d kissed her breathless, he lifted his head and urged, “Mind me, Letty. Tend

to your garden, have tea with your ladies' group, and live your life. I'll take care of the rest."

Her husband's unwavering dedication to his family meant that she and their boys were always taken care of, no matter what. But this might be too much for even Henry Jackson to manage. Despite her apprehension, she surrendered to the comfort of his embrace and another breathtaking kiss.

Chapter 2

The Fight Arrives at Their Door

Fall 1862

Letty let out a frustrated grumble as she wiped her damp, sticky hands on the towel for what felt like the hundredth time. It came away stained crimson with blood. The sight didn't usually make her sick. That it was her husband's blood made the difference.

Woken in the middle of the night, she strained her bleary eyes to focus on her task in the dimness.

"I need more light," she muttered under her breath, her forehead furrowing in concentration.

Henry tensed but didn't make a sound as she probed the jagged, seeping wound. "We've got every oil lamp we own blazing. Do the best you can."

"My best isn't good enough when your life is at stake. You need a doctor."

He shrugged his broad shoulders then grimaced in pain. "I trust you digging around for a bullet in my flesh a helluva lot more than that decrepit old sawbones in town who calls himself a physician."

"That makes one of us," was her terse reply.

She didn't mean to be cross with him. The man was injured, for heaven's sake. In her years patching up him and the boys, she'd learned a thing or two about herbs and such, but she'd never dug a bullet out of anyone before. What if she made it worse, or it turned putrid because of her digging, or, god forbid, she couldn't get it to stop bleeding?

He was doing a lot of that now. The blood oozing out of the gaping hole in his shoulder made it hard to see what she was doing, and her makeshift surgical instruments grew even more slippery. Letty picked up one of the linen cloths from the

pile on the table and wiped the wound clean. Next, she grabbed the whiskey, prepared to splash some in the bullet hole.

“This is going to sting,” she warned.

“Give it to me first,” he demanded, taking two long pulls from the half-empty bottle when she passed it to him.

His jaw clenched, and he nodded, steeling himself for what would come next. When she poured the locally distilled firewater on the wound, the sharp scent of alcohol filled the air. She could imagine the searing pain as the liquid met his skin. Her big, brave husband didn’t so much as flinch, not even a hiss escaping his lips. In his place, she’d have screamed so loudly, the echoes would have reached the neighboring farm two miles east.

Thirty minutes later, after more digging and a lot more swigging from Henry, she declared the wound clean and stitched it closed with her finest black thread. Next, she fashioned a bulky bandage in front and back, wrapping swaths of linen around his shoulder and across his chest like a sash to keep it in place.

Letty stepped back and heaved a heavy sigh. The first deep breath she’d taken since he staggered through the door drenched in blood.

“You’re lucky it went clean through without hitting bone or anything vital.”

He looked down, eyeing her handiwork, and moved his arm as though testing it. “You make a fine doctor, Leticia. I don’t feel a thing.” With his good arm, he encircled her waist and pulled her between his knees. “You’re a damn sight prettier than any of the mustached quacks hereabouts, and you smell better, too.”

“You have a half bottle of whiskey to thank for not feeling the pain, but you will when the effect of it wears off.”

“I best be getting my homecoming lovin’ before that happens, then,” he said with a lopsided grin right before he dipped his face into the bend of her neck.

“Henry...” she said in warning.

But he paid her no mind, using his chin to move her collar aside as his lips sought her throat. As he spread kisses northward, to the tender spot behind her ear, a rush of heat spread through her body. She’d missed him so much. Missed his kisses, being in his arms, and snuggling up against him at night. But strong, healthy men died from bullet wounds, and the fear he might suffer the same fate was still at the forefront of her mind. This was hardly the time to get amorous.

She wiggled and squirmed, trying to move away, but only half-heartedly, afraid she’d hurt him or start his freshly tended wound to bleeding again. “You’re injured. You can’t possibly mean to do this now.”

“I’ve been away for two weeks, woman. You better believe I intend to do it now. Since the boys are at school, and the table is handy—”

“Only because I needed it to perform surgery!” she declared.

He ignored her, his sole focus getting past her clothes to bare skin. “Hitch up your skirts and climb up,” he ordered in a passion-filled husky tone. “I’ve missed you something fierce, darlin’.”

“We can’t do it on the kitchen table! It’s improper.”

“In our house, on our table, ’course we can,” he argued, the whiskey slurring his words a little.

In complete disregard of the bullet hole in his shoulder, he hauled her on top of him as he lay back. His hand on the injured side sank into her hair, and he pulled her head down to claim her lips. The other hand rucked her skirt up and quickly found the split seam of her drawers, tearing them open more.

“Henry Lucas Jackson!” she exclaimed, but his hungry, searching mouth muffled her outrage.

“I’m injured,” he replied. “This will soothe me more than an entire case of whiskey. But you’re gonna have to help.”

“You’re incorrigible,” she protested, but even she heard how feeble it sounded. Wounded, scruffy, and drunk, he still made her heart race and her body yearn for the lovin’ he promised.

Sitting up, she helped him open his belt and breeches, which were nigh on impossible for him to undo one-handed. When his long, thick shaft sprang free and stood upright between them, he took it in his hand and stroked it.

“I ache for you, Letty. Saddle up and take me deep inside your sweet cunny.”

Without further hesitation, she swung a leg over his hips and lowered herself onto his rigid length. Her wetness, which a kiss, a whispered word, and a glance from her husband, never failed to produce, allowed her to sink onto him easily. She moaned as he filled her while he bucked his hips and thrust even deeper.

His good hand curled around her bottom as he ordered, “Ride me hard, and bring us both to pleasure.”

In the heat of the moment, and with gratitude the bullet hadn’t entered his chest two inches lower and to the left, she bobbed up and down on her husband’s stiff shaft in an utterly wanton fashion. She disregarded what she must look like with her breasts bouncing lewdly in the open placket of her blouse and that they were doing *the act* where her family ate supper every night. As they found release together, Letty didn’t care a whit if someone heard her ardent cries or her husband’s lusty shouts. Later was soon enough to worry about that.

Despite the firmness of their impromptu bed, Letty curled against her husband’s side with her head pillowed on his uninjured shoulder. She expected Henry to have dozed off after their activity and more whiskey than she’d ever seen him consume, but his fingers traced little circles on her shoulder, something he often did when he was deep in thought.

“Is your shoulder bothering you?” she asked, craning her neck to get a good look at his face.

“It’s fine,” he assured her. “I’ve suffered worse, as you know.”

His idea of worse was being kicked in the ribs while breaking a horse and the accident he’d had with the plow during their first year of marriage. She thought a bullet hole clear through his shoulder trumped both, but she didn’t experience his pain, so she kept her opinion to herself.

Propping on an elbow, she trailed her fingers along his beard-scruffy cheek that hid his dimple—only one on the right side—then along his darkly shadowed jaw. “Something else is wrong; I can tell. Talking about it might set your mind at ease.”

“It’s this damn war. No one expected it to drag on this long, and it could go much longer. Years, they’re saying now. Heath will be of age soon, and pressure will come to bear on Luke to volunteer.”

She already lost sleep about their oldest son turning eighteen the following May and going off to fight, but Luke wasn’t yet sixteen. “The new law says no one under eighteen can serve even with parental permission.”

His eyes locked with hers, and he told her with unwavering honesty, “You know as well as I do the Army asks very few questions when handing out rifles and uniforms.”

Dread for her babies gripped her heart, and she buried her face in his chest. “Sake’s alive, Henry. It’s bad enough when you’re away. I couldn’t bear it if my boys were off fighting.”

“I know. I’m worried, too. We have an option though.”

Letty knew what it was; he’d mentioned it before. The government was paying stalwart pioneers to homestead on the Western frontier.

“Leaving the only home I’ve ever known is a huge undertaking, and it will be for the boys, too. The stories I’ve read about the hardships, the dangers, and the Indian troubles frighten me.”

“More so than your sons going off to war?” he asked quietly.

“Nothing terrifies me more than that.”

“It seems we have a solution to our dilemma, then. The house and the land will bring a good price. We’ll be able to buy a big spread and run cattle or breed horses. Maybe both, in time. The boys will miss their friends, but they’ll thrive in that environment. As will I.” His hand fisted in her hair, and he gently tugged her head back until he could meet her gaze. “By sacrificing your family farm, your friends, and the active social life you have here, you, my darlin’ wife, will suffer the most, I’m afraid.”

“Where would we go?”

“Iowa or Nebraska,” he said with a shrug. A tensing of his body was the only outward sign that the movement had caused him pain. “They’re offering ten-year contracts on tracts of land,” he went on. “Besides the 160 acres promised by the Homestead Act.”

Letty stared silently at her kitchen, the new stove they’d put in just last year, her grandmother’s buffet loaded with her hand-painted china, and the 100-year-old pie safe in the corner. Cherished keepsakes from her past filled her family home, not to mention bulky furniture and countless breakable treasures. How would they transport all of it out West when the trains stopped at the Missouri River?

She knew the answer without asking—it was impossible.

Tears burned her eyes at what she’d be giving up, but they were things. She could replace things. The same wasn’t possible with the people she loved.

Henry hadn’t uttered a word, giving her time to reason it out. After several long moments, she spoke, barely above a whisper. “I suppose it’s our only hope of keeping our family together.”

“There’s my brave girl,” he murmured, turning his head to press his lips against her forehead. “We’ll be starting over. I can promise you it won’t be easy, but as you said, we’ll be together. And no sacrifice is too great for our family.”

“When would we leave?”

“Not until the spring thaw.”

She nodded, even as she blinked to keep the tears burning her eyes at bay.

Chapter 3

Hard to Say Goodbye

March 1863

Fifty of the northwestern counties voted for succession from Virginia and were barreling toward statehood. Like everywhere else, the turmoil pitted friend against friend, neighbor against neighbor, and split families. And, as they predicted, the Jacksons and their farm were smack dab in the middle of it.

Henry would have preferred to wait until April to set out, May at the latest, but they didn't feel safe, especially with increasing raids by pro-Confederate guerilla groups increasing in the area. They terrorized and intimidated the residents, setting fire to the crops and burning the houses if they didn't get immediate cooperation with their demands.

The talk of a conscription law was another concern. Forty-year-old Henry met the age requirement for eligibility. His obligation to serve would be cemented once Congress approved statehood for western Virginia. The situation was untenable. Waiting until the thaw might force them to remain, but they might not have a home left to stay in. Unable to risk delaying any further, they packed up to head westward.

The contents of their two-story, six-bedroom farmhouse could have filled two boxcars, but that would have meant at least four wagons, which wasn't feasible. Standing in the front parlor that opened into the formal dining room, Letty felt the weight of the daunting task pressing upon her. How did she choose what got left behind when each item carried with it a piece of her past and memories that clung to her heart?

She turned at a gentle touch on her shoulder. Henry's warm brown eyes, usually gleaming with an easygoing charm, were now dark and grave with concern.

“I know how difficult this is,” he began, his deep voice conveying his empathy. “These items aren’t meaningless tokens, they’re memories woven into the fabric of your life.”

That he understood meant so much but didn’t make it hurt any less. She moved into his arms, where for nearly twenty years she’d found comfort, and buried her face in his chest. “I can’t help but feel like I’m abandoning a part of myself.”

Henry’s hands stroked up and down her back, his touch bringing comfort she didn’t think possible considering the upheaval they were experiencing.

“I understand, sweetheart. Believe me, I do. But we’re at a crossroads. The war is closing in. Even if we stayed as part of the new Union state, we’re in the direct line of fire. What would be left standing in a year or two? The chaos and destruction could consume the house and land, our family... our boys. I can’t bear the thought of that.”

Tears welled in Letty’s eyes, reflecting the flicker of candlelight in the room. She knew he was right, even as the pain of departure gnawed at her heart. “I don’t want to be selfish. I know we have to go. It’s just...so much to leave behind.”

He held her close, his embrace a shelter from the storm of emotions swirling around her. “We’ll take what we can. The essentials and the things most precious to you. Everything else, we’ll replace. I promise. And in our new home, we’ll build new memories together. Our love, our bond, our family, that’s what truly matters.”

She nodded, a mixture of acceptance and sadness coursing through her. “You’ve always been my anchor, Henry. If something happened to you, or the boys, I’d be cast adrift. I trust you to do what’s right for our future.”

Taking a step back, she wiped away her tears and took a final, lingering look around the room. Then she turned to him, determination in her gaze. “I’m ready now. I’ll pack the essentials and what I can’t live without or bear to see burned.”

He gripped her hand, his eyes sparkling with admiration. “That’s my Letty. Resilient as always. I’m waiting for a buyer for the horses. He’s due in an hour. In the meantime, you decide what goes with us, and I’ll pack.”

As they set about the task together, selecting the irreplaceable and leaving the rest behind, a blend of bittersweet emotions filled her chest. But she moved forward, as difficult as it was, because he was with her for every tear shed.

While Henry met with his buyer, Letty took a break from packing. She knew it would be hard but hadn’t imagined how much so.

It was a warm day for February, and she only needed a light coat. It never failed that they got a warm spell every year about this time, long enough to trick the daffodils and flowering trees that spring had sprung. But March often brought the heaviest snowstorms and invariably froze the flowers and fruit trees while budding. She could count on one hand how many summers she had enough of a peach crop to make preserves.

She strolled past her vegetable garden that wouldn’t be plowed and planted this year because she wouldn’t be here to do it and moved to the split-rail fence surrounding the pasture behind the house. At this time of day, the field should have been filled with cows, but there were no *moos* to greet her. Henry had already sold their small herd.

Dashing more tears away, she chided herself, “Stop sniveling. You’re turning into a pathetic watering pot.”

Turning away from the meadow, she hurried to her favorite spot on the farm, the grove by the creek. Even though it was too far north for them, her papa had planted the half dozen peach trees because it was her mama’s favorite fruit. When he found Letty reading there on more than one occasion growing up, he’d installed a bench.

These were the memories she'd have to hold dear because, unlike dishes and vases and pie safes, there was no decision to be made about taking them with her.

After soaking up the sunshine and the light warmish breeze for longer than she should, with a heavy sigh, she rose and headed back to the house and back to work. While pausing to admire the mounds of phlox that had sprung up, as if overnight, on the sloping bank along the path, she bent and picked a bloom in pink, purple, and white. When she stood, she tucked them behind her ear then, in no hurry, resumed her leisurely stroll.

Out of nowhere, something dropped over her head and tightened around her arms. She looked down, confused by the rope encircling her. Struggling to get free got her nowhere because it tightened, holding her securely. Letty gasped as, with a tug, the rope propelled her backward.

A familiar chuckle had her glancing around. On the other end, reeling her toward him, was her husband, a mischievous grin on his handsome face.

“Henry! What on earth!” she exclaimed.

Her initial fright faded. Now she feigned anger, although she felt warm and tingly inside. Just because he often focused on the business of running the farm didn't mean her husband couldn't be playful, too.

“I'm practicing my roping skills. If I'm going to be a rancher, I'll need them honed to capture errant wanderers,” he teased, eyes twinkling. “I didn't think I'd find one back here, nosing around the flowers.”

Her annoyance melted away in an instant, his playful mood infectious. “I only have one thing to say about that,” she teased, her gaze locked with his. He arched a brow, waiting, which was when she pursed her lips and let out a long, low, “*MOO.*”

His laughter echoed through the meadow as, with another tug, he pulled her against him, his arms encircling her waist.

Their bodies pressed together, and Letty could feel the warmth of his breath against her skin.

“One thing I’m looking forward to with you as a rancher’s wife.” He slid his hands over the back of her skirt and squeezed her bottom. “No more of those deuced birdcages.”

He was referring to the steel hoop that went under her skirt and petticoat, giving the dress a bell-like flare at the bottom. It was the height of fashion but hardly practical for a farmer’s wife. She had ever only worn one to parties and other social events, but Henry thought they were ridiculous—she did, too, actually—and he despised them. He’d said so on more than one occasion. One, in particular, that got rather flirty came to mind.

“A woman should be soft and shapely, not rigged up in so much steel and cotton batting, a man can’t tell what she’s about.”

“You’re a married man,” she reminded him as she bent to remove a loaf of bread from the oven. “My shape is the only one you should know anything about.”

As soon as she set down the pan and towel she’d used to remove it, he caught her arm and spun her around. Before she could blink, he had pulled her close, tugged her skirt up to her waist, and molded his hands to the curves of her bottom right in her kitchen where any or all of their boys could walk in. She could feel the heat of his skin through the thin cotton layer, and his touch spiked her own temperature.

“Your shape is too glorious to hide under metal and yards of crinoline and silk,” he’d declared. “And I wasn’t talking about me looking at other women.” His fingers flexed on her cheeks. “I’ve got the most beautiful, shapely, enticing woman right here.”

He lifted her and carried her upstairs to their bedroom, rather than taking her right there on the dining table—thank goodness.

Although Henry seemed to enjoy all of her womanly bits, his hands often gravitated to her bottom. If he came across her

bent over either making the bed or doing some other chore, a gentle pat or caress on her backside would often lead to other things. More than once over the years, he'd turned her over his knee as a precursor to taking her, for fun, believe it or not. There'd been a few times that weren't much fun when they first started out. But he rarely found the need to paddle her behind for real anymore, only for play. Having been confined in one of those deuced birdcages more times than she cared to recall, she knew playtime was a darn sight easier for both of them without it in the way.

With a smile, she patted his cheek and reassured him. "You won't have to worry about finding room next to me in a carriage ever again, dear. Doubting there are many formal soirees happening on the Western frontier, I didn't even pack one."

"Hallelujah," he murmured a moment before his lips touched hers, and his tongue swept inside to tangle with her own.

All her worries and fears faded into the background, as, under the endless blue Virginia sky, her husband tumbled her onto the grassy, flowery bank. The heady scent of earth and nature swirled around them as he deepened the kiss. The hunger they had for one another increased in intensity with every passing moment. Her fingers sank into his hair, knocking off his wide-brimmed hat while he made fast work of the buttons on her coat and then her blouse. He pushed the material aside and tugged down her camisole, exposing a breast. Then his ardent mouth covered the hard peak. When his tongue swirled and he sucked hard, it flamed the fire already blazing inside her.

"Henry," she gasped. "We're outside."

"The boys are still at school, and we have no hands anymore, remember? Who's going to see?" he murmured huskily against her bare flesh.

She needed no more convincing, especially when every caress and fervent whisper sent waves of need rippling through her.

The next thing she knew, her skirts were around her waist, his breeches were open in front, and he sank into her—filling and stretching her deliciously, no matter all the years that had passed. As their bodies moved together in rhythm, her moans mingled with the rustling of the flowers around them, and his words of love and desire became more fevered. Pleasure surged within her, building to a stunning climax. When she shattered, he released a low, rumbling growl, also surrendering to the bliss of their joining.

In the aftermath, lying winded and sated in his arms, Letty gazed up at the fluffy clouds drifting by. She could still feel his warmth inside her and against her, his love enveloping her fully like a cozy embrace.

“Practicing your roping skills, indeed,” she murmured when she could speak.

Henry chuckled, his lips gently tracing the bend of her neck, her jaw, chin, and lips.

Suddenly, he plucked the forgotten blooms from her hair. “It seems I haven’t roped an errant calf after all, but the most beautiful wildflower I’ve ever laid eyes on,” he whispered, his sweet words filled with adoration.

Letty’s heart swelled with love as she snuggled closer. But their intense interlude had passed, and her worries soon came flooding back.

Looking up into his deep-brown eyes, she whispered, her voice trembling with vulnerability, “I’m scared to go but also to stay.”

“My darlin’ Leticia,” he replied, with heartfelt tenderness. “Pioneers have been traveling west for two decades now. Unlike many of them, we won’t be going it alone. I intend for us to join a wagon train with an experienced guide, and you’ll have four strapping, able-bodied men to protect you. We’ll get there safely. I promise.”

He’d never lied to her, and she saw no reason for him to start now. She found solace in his words and the strength of

their bond. “I trust that you will, my love,” she said, earning her a smile and another sizzling kiss.

Then he rolled off her and peered up at the sun in the sky. “The boys will be home soon,” he predicted as he got to his feet and adjusted his work trousers. He bent, grabbed her hands, and pulled her up, too.

They both laughed, Letty’s face flushing with heat, when she couldn’t do up the buttons of her shirt, thanks to the pesky lasso wound around her waist.

Chapter 4

The Journey Begins

It took several days of hard riding, while hauling a fully loaded buckboard wagon, to reach the nearest railroad depot. The hustle and bustle of the people, the screeching of the train's brakes, and the hiss of steam filling the air fascinated the boys. When they boarded the passenger car, the musty scent of old leather seats and cigar smoke greeted them. But no one seemed bothered by it, excited about their grand adventure, except Letty.

After a long day of travel, they arrived at their hotel, another first for Heath, Luke, and Aaron. While they gobbled down fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, and yeast rolls at the restaurant off the lavishly decorated lobby, Letty picked at her food.

"Don't you like it?" Henry leaned over to ask.

"It's fine, dear," she assured him. "I'm just tired. Although I don't know why. All I did today was sit."

"That's not true. You endured jarring stops and starts and constant swaying. Not to mention the hard, unpadded bench. All of that takes a toll."

She patted his hand. "None of you look any the worse for wear, but I thank you for trying to make me feel better."

Letty forced down several bites of her dessert while trying to feign interest in Luke and Aaron's rehash of all the exciting things they'd seen today, but he was afraid she was going to fall asleep face down in her apple pie.

He rose, saying to the boys, "I'm taking your mother up to our room. Heath, you're in charge of seeing that your brothers make it to yours by nine. We've got another long day tomorrow, and an early one."

Listening to three “yes, sirs,” and “rest well, Mas,” he assisted her from her chair and up the wide staircase to their second-floor room. The instant she had her clothes off, she collapsed into bed, exhausted. And he swore she didn’t move until he nudged her the next morning, when it was time to do it all over again.

What followed was a dizzying array of train changes and hotel stays until they reached the end of the line in St. Joseph, Missouri. That wasn’t a euphemism. The tracks actually stopped there.

Henry was well-traveled but had never been west of the Mississippi. He didn’t dare take off across the plains with his wife, three green boys, a crude map, and a prayer. But as he’d promised months ago, to ensure their safety, he arranged for them to join an Oregon-bound wagon train heading out on April 10th, two weeks away.

“Two weeks!” Aaron echoed when he told them. “That’s forever to wait, Pa.”

“Fourteen days is hardly forever, Son. The time will pass quickly. Besides, we need it to prepare.” He glanced at his wife, who was gazing at the town, if one could call it that. If he didn’t know her so well, he might not have noticed her disappointment. But the faint lines between her smooth brows gave it away.

“Where will we eat and sleep?” she asked. “Or use the necessary? And bathe?”

It was an excellent question. St. Joseph was mostly a supply stop and jumping-off point for westbound emigrants. It had two ferries to shuttle travelers across the Missouri river, but it was rustic and offered few amenities, and no hotels.

For the boys, the wait was an inconvenient delay in their adventure. They would be fine sleeping outside under the stars, as would he. While in the militia, he’d stretched out on the hard ground with a log for a pillow many a night. But he didn’t want that for Letty who faced months of rough travel shortly.

He squeezed her shoulder. “Let me see what I can arrange.” As he dug in the back of the wagon to retrieve his money pouch, he called to Heath. “You boys stay with your mother and keep a sharp eye out.”

“Yes, sir.”

Letty drew near, eyeing the filled-to-the-brim wagon. “I suppose we could make a pallet underneath. It’s going to be our way of life soon enough anyway.”

“Don’t give in just yet.”

“But what do you hope to find, Henry?” Her grim gaze swept the town once again. “I see a livestock tent, a trading post, and a ferry stop, but not much else.”

“I won’t know until I ask.” He kissed her forehead then strode away. His first stop, the trading post.

He talked to several men, some locals and others just passing through, and gleaned a lot of useful information about their upcoming journey, but not what he sought. It was the ferry departure, his last stop, that produced fruit, however.

“My wife takes boarders, but she won’t fool with just one night. It’s hardly worth the effort,” the ferryman stated between spitting two arcs of tobacco juice onto the grassy riverbank.

“The wagon train doesn’t pull out for two weeks. It’s me and my wife, and our three boys. They’re all polite young men, brought up to be respectful, so they won’t be any trouble. They can eat their weight in food though. My youngest probably double.”

“I understand. Had two boys with hearty appetites, myself. They’re grown now. It’s their rooms we rent out. But there’s only two. Your boys will have to bunk together.”

“Not a problem.”

This time when he spit, the wad of tobacco arced with it. Then he wiped his mouth with his sleeve. For a moment, Henry worried the house might be worse than the hard ground

and open sky, but other than the spitting and the older man's scruffy beard, he looked clean.

"The rate includes one meal a day, clean linens, and a hot bath twice a week. Two weeks will be costly."

"I'll pay it," he said, without asking how much.

The farm was profitable, and their savings plentiful. The sale of the farm and furnished house had brought him an excellent price. He had it to spare, despite train fare for the five of them, an extra charge for the family dog, plus cargo to get to this point.

"Name's Winslow Porter," he said, thrusting out his hand with its tobacco-stained fingers. Henry took it without hesitating and shook it firmly. "Meet me here in an hour, and I'll take you around."

"We'll be here on time. Much obliged."

When he told Letty the good news, she lit up like a child on Christmas morning, mostly when she heard the four-letter word starting with B. It was a little thing he could do for her because, from this point westward, her bathtub would be a creek if they were lucky, and other comforts would be scarce.

The Porter's home was a ten-minute ride from town. It was rustic, but clean—much to his relief—and the beef stew Mrs. Porter served for dinner was damn near as good as Letty's. After supper, he excused himself to return to town and price cattle, a larger, covered wagon, and the hundreds of pounds of supplies they'd need to make it to their destination.

His evening was productive, with nearly everything on his list reserved for pickup thirteen days from now, but he was dog-tired. He found enough energy to crouch on the back porch where Buddy was spending the night and give him an ear scratch. The tail wag he gave him and the half-eaten bone lying beside him told Henry he was okay being separated from his boy, for now at least.

Mrs. Porter was still busy in the kitchen when he let himself in. He bid her good night then trudged upstairs to their

room, his feet dragging like lead weights.

Although eager to get out of his travel-dusty clothes and into bed, expecting to fall asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, he crept carefully down the hall, trying to avoid any noise that might wake his host or his sleeping family. He came to a stop in front of the room assigned to him and Letty and fumbled in the dark for a moment with the key. When he finally fit it into the hole and turned it, he froze, hearing splashing.

A vivid image of his beautiful wife in the bath, skin glistening, cheeks flushed from the steamy water inspired a second wind. As he pushed open the door, the soft glow of the lantern cast enticing shadows around the room and over Letty. She had her thick glossy hair piled on top of her head, exposing her delicate neck, and a few escaped tendrils that clung to her damp skin. He couldn't see anything else, but he had a keen mind and an excellent memory, and his imagination filled in the gaps.

She was humming softly, a graceful arm raised as she soaped it with a cloth. Had there ever been a more alluring sight?

As his body stirred, he cleared his throat and stepped inside the room. Her gaze rose to meet his, surprised but with something else far more primal.

“Well, what's this?” he asked, the low rumble in his voice making clear his desire.

Letty's lips curved into a sultry smile. “Heaven.”

He chuckled, advancing slowly, his eyes drinking in her delicate throat, glistening shoulders, and the soap bubbles adorning the upper curves of her breasts peeking above the waterline.

“You deserve a little pampering, my dear. But have you been soaking this whole time? Your hands must be prunes.”

“It took some time to prepare even with the boys helping. The water is still quite warm.”

He knelt beside the tub, his fingers trailing along the surface to test her claim. “Then I’m in time to scrub your back. Lean forward,” he directed softly as he took the cloth from her hand. “Where is the soap?”

“In the tub with me,” she murmured, adding in a seductive tone, “somewhere.”

He rolled up his sleeve, his movements deliberate and charged with anticipation. “No trouble, Mrs. Jackson. I’ll fetch it.”

Henry plunged his hand in and searched, though what he sought wasn’t a bar of soap. Sleek skin and warm curves were his priority. She giggled and squirmed as his fingers slid everywhere.

“We’re getting water all over the floor, Mr. Jackson.”

“Then you best keep still while I find what I’m looking for.”

When his fingers slid between her thighs, she drew in a shaky breath, her head falling back against the rim of the tub. “You won’t find the soap in there, sir. But please, continue.”

That was his intent, but good that she agreed. With his gaze on her lovely face to gauge her reaction, he separated her delicate folds and sank a finger into heat many degrees warmer than the water. Letty parted her thighs and arched into his touch. But he only gave her a little taste.

Eager to be skin to skin with her, he surged to his feet, hastily shedding his clothes and revealing his rampant desire. His boots stalled his progress, and he knew well and good he looked like a fool hopping on one foot than the other, trying to get the damn things off. Her avid gaze never left him, need gleaming in her eyes.

“Scoot forward,” he rasped when he was finally naked.

As he lowered himself into the water, it was a tight fit. But with his long legs stretched out on either side of her, and her hips and backside wedged in between, he made it work.

He grunted and shifted as something dug into his hind cheek. When he removed it a moment later, he exclaimed, “Found the soap,” which made her giggle again.

“Now, where were we? Ah yes, I was playing bath attendant.”

This was a task he’d performed often, one of the many perks of being a husband. Forgoing the cloth, he soaped up his hands and ran them over her shoulders, gently massaging as he went.

“Mmm, that feels wonderful,” Letty sighed, her chin dropping to her chest, inviting him to do more.

His touch grew bolder, his hands tracing the curve of her spine to the upper swells of her bottom then rose again and slid around in front. He pulled her back against his chest and then took his time caressing her sweetly rounded breasts. He found the soap and re-lathered then paid close attention to her rosy nipples, already hard from his attention.

He played there for several moments, until she arched her back and pressed into his touch, before moving on to an even more tempting destination.

As his hand glided down her belly, he dipped his head forward, mouth open on her neck, his tongue lapping at the water beaded on her skin.

“Spread your legs. I want to make sure all the hidden crevices are squeaky clean,” he murmured, his voice a velvet promise.

“Henry, don’t tease.”

“Ah, darlin’, surely you must know by now that teasing you and making you squirm is half the fun.”

As he spread her sweet cunny open with one hand, he sank two fingers inside her and located the bud of pleasure with his thumb. Then he set a slow, deliberate pace, playing her body like a finely tuned instrument. Each touch ignited a chorus of sensations that left her breathless. Soon, she’d be soaring.

He slid his open mouth up the side of her neck to her ear. “Is this what you wanted?”

Her response was a gasping plea for more. Keeping up his thumb’s strumming, he sank two fingers into her center. And no matter how much she writhed against him, he didn’t relent. As slippery as they both were, it wasn’t easy, either.

“Please,” she implored, her breaths coming in short pants as she angled her head on his chest to look up at him. Their eyes locked in a heated exchange.

“Tell me, Letty,” he demanded in a seductive whisper. “What do you want?”

“You. Inside me,” she moaned with urgent need.

Henry’s restraint shattered. His hands encircled her waist, and he flipped her. Her soapy breasts slid over his chest as he hauled her up his body and claimed her mouth in a hot, voracious, all-consuming kiss. Water sloshed over the sides as he slid down in the tub, bringing her astride his hips. Then he thrust into her warm, welcoming wet cunny in one deep stroke.

Not to dispute her earlier claim, but being inside her, gripped tight like she’d never let him go, was truly heaven.

With their mouths melded as one, tongues intertwined, and his rock-hard cock delving deep, their movements grew more fervent. While his hands roamed her curves, her fingers tangled in his hair.

“Criminy, woman,” he exclaimed, not in protest but in a voice thick with desire. “Dead tired, so I almost had to crawl up the stairs, and you still drive me wild.”

She responded with a throaty demand, her hands cupping his beard-rough jaw. “Show me how wild, Husband.”

Groans filled the air, punctuated by the slap of wet skin and sheets of water hitting the wood floor. The room seemed to shrink, containing only the two of them, lost in a world of intense pleasure.

With their peak within reach, Henry's grip tightened, his lips claiming hers in a searing kiss, also to muffle her rising cries—knowing without a doubt the walls were paper thin. With one last stroke, their bodies trembled against each other, the release of their desire washing over them as they shared muffled cries of ecstasy.

Collapsed against one another, the soft brush of Letty's hair against his cheek, the entwining of their fingers, and the beat of their hearts in unison were all physical expressions of the love that had grown over nearly two decades. In that moment, nothing else mattered except the passion they had reaffirmed, the flames burning brighter than ever before.

Chapter 5

Jumping Off

Thirteen days later, Letty stood on the front porch of the outpost. It was narrow and filthy from an endless parade of boots, but at least it kept her off the street, which, with the steady rain of the last few days, had turned to mud. The wooden awning overhead leaked, offering little protection. Every so often, she wiped a droplet of rain off her nose or cheek as she watched Henry and the boys load everything they owned in the world into the covered wagon.

Her menfolk were drenched to the skin, but they couldn't wait for a break in the weather, which, from the gray clouds blanketing the western sky could be a while. The wagon train set out in the morning at first light, and, if they weren't there, it would leave without them.

Her husband approached wagon packing like it was a dissection puzzle. He placed one item one way then found another that matched in size and shape to butt up against it. The wooden prairie schooner—named so for the white canvas top that flapped like sails in the whipping wind and driving rain—surprised her by being larger than expected. It had to be to hold the mountain of supplies purchased: hundreds of pounds of flour, sugar, bacon, coffee, salt, ammunition for their rifles, even farming equipment and tools. They had to bring everything they needed for their journey into the wilds because there were no stores to buy from, and outposts were often days or weeks away.

The wagon also had to hold their trunks. Letty wanted six, which would have never worked. Henry insisted on two for five people. She nearly lost her mind over that. In the end, they'd brought three, which were stacked one on top of the other. Frequently used items like tools and cooking pots hung from hooks on the bonnet frame, and straps secured things like the hand plow to the sides and underneath. Once they were

finished, everything had a designated spot, leaving only a small pathway in the center for walking.

The man, god love him, even found room for her grandmother's pie safe, the only piece of furniture she'd insisted on taking.

Henry moved next to her and stood with his arms crossed over his chest as he proudly surveyed their work.

"I can't believe you fit everything in," she told him, staring in amazement at the bursting-at-the-seams wagon.

"Me, either," he said, taking off his hat and letting the rain run off the brim. Then he raked his hair, curling from the dampness, off his forehead. "Let's hope it survives the first bump."

"It must weigh an actual ton. Will two oxen be able to pull it?"

He stared at it for a moment then plopped his hat on his head with a scowl. "I'll be back," he grumbled.

"It's almost suppertime. Where are you going?"

"To buy two more damn oxen."

His cussing drew a few affronted looks from passersby but, seeing the thoroughly disgruntled look on her husband's handsome face, she couldn't keep from giggling.

A week later, as Letty shifted on the hard bench seat for the hundredth time that day, smiling, let alone laughing was the furthest thing from her mind. Her efforts to get comfortable were futile because as soon as the wagon wheels hit another rut, she bounced in the air and shifted right back where she was.

She was dirty, tired, and sore everywhere. What she wouldn't give to ride like her menfolk, but her mare had picked up a rock only three days into their journey. She was still favoring that hoof and not able to tolerate a rider. Besides, someone had to drive the team of four oxen.

When she stopped bouncing, she switched the reins into one hand and stripped off her knitted shawl. She'd done so with her coat two hours before. April on the high plains of the Nebraska Territory was a combination of winter and spring. Letty froze in the mornings when they often woke to frost on the tall grass. By midafternoon, when the sun hung high in the clear blue sky, she was stripping off layers. They were lucky not to see snow, which wasn't unheard of in the early spring, but she sure didn't feel lucky.

Poking along at the end of the train of twenty wagons, and feeling utterly miserable, Letty had the sudden urge to answer the call of nature. She halted the team at the next copse of trees, reached in back to get her satchel, and, without signaling to anyone, climbed down. At the pace they were going, she felt confident they'd have no trouble catching up. Luke, who'd drawn the short straw that morning for the dusty job of following their wagon, reined in.

"Ma? Is everything all right?" he asked as she walked stiffly toward the trees like an old woman of seventy rather than one who was in her thirties and supposedly in her prime.

"It's fine, Luke," she replied. "I'll return shortly, after I've communed with the flora and fauna that the wilds of Nebraska have to offer."

"Huh?" he asked, clearly perplexed. "We probably shouldn't leave the train."

Without slowing, and with Buddy now trotting along beside her, she called to him, "I'll only be a minute. Besides, we could crawl on our hands and knees faster than those prairie schooners are plodding along."

"Prairie what?"

Buddy barked, appearing to echo Luke's confusion.

"Pa!" he suddenly hollered. "Ma's acting funny. I think maybe she's had too much sun."

Tattled on by her own son. Didn't that just figure?

She ignored him and picked up her pace, finding that the more she walked, the more she worked out the kinks and

soreness.

“Letty!” Henry’s deep bellow carried easily across the flat, grassy fields. The thud of his horses’ hooves grew gradually louder as he approached. “We’re not scheduled to stop until the midday meal.”

Irritable and cramping from her monthly courses, which made her current state of misery far worse, she replied with more sarcasm than was wise, “So sorry to interfere with your precious schedule, husband. Go on without me if you’re in such a hurry.”

“Leave you? Like hell I will!” he spluttered. “What in tarnation has gotten into you, woman?”

She rolled her eyes that he thought she was serious and kept on walking.

Having caught up with her, he hopped down, grabbed her by the arm, and spun her around. “You can’t just stop the wagon without telling me. If Luke hadn’t been on your trail, the train could have ridden off without you. Now, what’s this about?”

“I have to use the nonexistent privy, if you must know.”

“Again? We stopped an hour ago.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him. “I need to use it again. Is that a crime?”

“That’ll be enough sass, Leticia. This isn’t like you. Are you sick?”

She looked past him to where her sons looked on, listening.

“I’m not sick, it’s just—”

“Just what?” he returned, insistently.

Surely, he wasn’t that obtuse.

“I’m having my woman’s time, that’s what,” she half hissed, half whispered.

His head snapped back. He was that obtuse, evidently, and hadn't considered such a thing might occur.

As a wave of cramps tightened her lower belly, tears flooded her eyes, which only added to her distress.

"I'm sorry, Letty. I didn't think."

"Clearly," she snapped. "I'm tired, have eaten my weight in prairie dust for hundreds of miles, and all I can think about is soaking in a hot tub, which isn't likely to happen soon, if ever again. I'm also sunburned, have splinters in my a—um, backside from that darn uncomfortable bench, and I hurt from becoming acquainted with every rut on this godforsaken trail."

She'd been hanging on by a frazzled thread to her emotions. When it broke, it was like falling into a deep dark gopher hole. Tears overflowed her lashes and poured down her cheeks. "I'm sick to death of being a pioneer and want to go home."

As she sobbed out her misery, Henry pulled her into his arms and murmured, "Please, don't cry," in his deep voice, which was now filled with sympathy.

"Does she need a doctor, Pa?" Aaron asked with concern.

"Damn," Heath breathed. "I don't know where we'll find one around here."

"Your ma is fine. She's just plumb tuckered out. Luke, tie your horse to the wagon. You'll drive the team the rest of the day. Heath, you'll take his position behind."

Without disagreement, they both nodded and said, "Yes, sir," their subdued tone proof that seeing their ma fall apart had affected them.

"I'll be fine. I just need a minute." Between her stuttering words muffled by his broadcloth shirt and her sniffles and hitching breaths, her lie about being fine didn't sound convincing.

"You'll have as much time as you need. You can rest in the wagon the rest of the day and whenever you need to. It's my fault for not attending to you better."

“I’m not a china doll. I’m just out of sorts.”

He tipped her face up to his and wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs then laid a whisper-soft kiss on her lips. “You’re my china doll, Letty darlin’, and I’m sorry for not handling you with more care. That won’t happen again. You’ve got four strapping men to help see you through this.”

She leaned into his embrace, feeling grateful for his strength and comfort. “I’m sorry for being such a shrew.”

“Don’t say such things,” he scolded gently while stroking her back. “None of this is easy for any of us.” Henry called over his shoulder to the boys, “Head on back to the wagon. I’ll stand guard for your ma until she, uh...takes care of her business.”

She stifled a groan in his shirt. A lesson she’d learned on their first day on the trail—nothing was private on a wagon train.

Of course, she couldn’t rest in the wagon. First, there wasn’t room and, second, who could nap while jouncing and jarring along the rough terrain in a springless conveyance. But sitting next to Luke on the high bench that afternoon, not having to remain on constant alert while driving, and having someone to talk to and pass the time, made a world of difference.

Come morning, they got up before it was light and did it all over again. Because she couldn’t bear their worried looks when they thought she was ill, she put on a brave face and forced a smile. But she couldn’t get to wherever they were going quickly enough. The monotony was wearing, the work never-ending, the weather unpredictable, and danger lurked around every corner. She missed the comforts of home, the familiar faces of friends and family, and the sense of security that came with living in a settled community.

With a deep breath, Letty looked out at the vast expanse of land ahead of them, knowing they had hundreds of miles to go.

“Are you all right, Ma?”

She glanced at Luke, his brown eyes as they gazed back at her, identical to his father's.

"I'm fine, honey. Don't fret over me. I'm just having a hard time making sense out of how quickly our lives have changed."

"Yeah. I was thinking how if we were still at home, I'd be in school."

Of her three sons, Luke was the least interested in his studies.

She gave his knee a pat and smiled, the first unforced smile she'd had in days.

"I hate to be the one to burst your bubble but moving west doesn't mean the end of your schooling."

A look of horror crossed his still-boyish face. "But... how... They have schools where we're going?"

"It's doubtful. But your father and I discussed it. You'll have time out of your day from farming—"

"Ranching you mean," he interrupted.

This was a point of pride for all the Jackson men. Ranching in their minds a step up from plowing and planting and harvesting. She wouldn't tell him they would still have crops. Out of necessity. The West hadn't progressed enough to have schoolhouses and stores and many of the conveniences living near a town had afforded them in Virginia.

"Ranching. That's right. I keep forgetting. But you and Aaron especially will need to press on with your studies. Having a good head on your shoulders often isn't enough as a farmer or a rancher. For example, you'll need to be smarter than the other guy when negotiating prices, whether buying or selling, so you don't get swindled."

"Pa says the same thing," he said with a sigh.

"Was school really so bad?"

"Sitting inside reading while the sun was shining, and I could be out riding? Hell, yeah." He cast her a sheepish grin.

“Sorry, Ma. That slipped.”

“At least you won’t be around those Williamson boys and their foul language any longer.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t hear it from them.”

“From who, then?”

His laughter died, and his mouth snapped shut. But he didn’t answer. The source of his education on colorful language came riding up just then.

“We’ll be making camp in about a half hour,” Henry announced. “The wagon captain says the river feeds a creek with a natural swimming hole that in ten years he’s never seen dry. It might be too cool to duck under, but we can get our feet wet and wash up.” His eyes were on her when he asked, “How does that sound?”

“I’m ducking under no matter how cold it is,” Luke answered instead.

Of course, Mr. Adventure would.

She and Henry shared a grin then he moved his mount closer. “Ride with me for a spell?”

“To get out of this wagon? Hell, yeah.”

When Luke’s head whipped around in shock, she winked at him.

As if she weighed nothing more than a feather pillow, her husband leaned down, wrapped his arm around her waist, and transferred her from the hated bench to his saddle—sitting sideways on his lap.

Putting his heels to King, his chestnut stallion, they took off along their back trail at a gallop. The wind in her face felt so good, she pulled her sunbonnet off and loosened the knot at her nape, letting her waist-length hair fly out behind her.

He nuzzled the curve of her neck. “I thought you needed a break with your husband, not from the wagon bench.”

She ran her hands over the powerful arms surrounding her. “I needed both. Thank you.”

Chapter 6

Dobytown

Upon first glance, the bustling fort brimming with soldiers and westward-bound travelers like themselves was a welcome sight for his dust-filled weary eyes. The much-anticipated stop at Fort Kearney was a grave disappointment, however. It wasn't the haven after long, arduous weeks on the trail he'd been led to believe. Henry stomped out minutes after entering the fort.

"Why are you back so soon? What's happened?" Letty asked upon his return to the wagons.

"Bad news. They're full up," he grumbled.

"You're not serious," his wife exclaimed. "How can they be full?"

"The captain says upward of 2,000 travelers come through here in a day, and their supplies to restock have been delayed."

"This is worse than bad," Letty declared. "What are we supposed to do? We have children on the train who need fresh milk. And we were told they could help with the wagon repairs. Two of the other wives told me they couldn't make it to Oregon City if they couldn't get their wagons fixed."

"Thank heavens we're not going that far," Henry muttered as he pulled his hat off and wiped the sweat from his brow with his broadcloth sleeve. His eyes squinted against the sun dipping low on the horizon. "They directed us to an outpost nearby."

Her hand flew to her chest as if to slow her racing heart, and her shoulders slumped in relief. "I was worried for a moment."

He took in his wife's petite frame and sun-worn features. That her first concern was about others wasn't surprising; she had a generous spirit. And she'd hardly complained the entire

journey, except for that one little outburst back in Kansas. She was a trouper, and he was proud of her and their three boys, but he feared what he had to tell her next might send her over the edge.

The outpost was only a short distance away, but to hear the captain talk of it—

“Dobytown,” a dust-covered man not with the train called out to his companions as he exited the fort. “Down that way.” He gestured toward a trail leading off from the main path. “There’s a trading post, and they say we’ll find gambling, whiskey, and accommodating women.”

There was whooping and hollering as they spurred their horses along the beaten-down, obviously well-traveled path in a cloud of dust.

Letty, who had watched them go, turned to look at him. “We can’t take three impressionable boys to that den of temptation.”

“Heath is seventeen. And, from the size of him, more man than boy. But the plan is to make camp close by but far from sight, and for several of us men to go in on horseback with a supply wagon. That way, the women and children won’t see what we’re expecting to find.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“Neither do I, but this is the last outpost for hundreds of miles. We don’t really have a choice.” He tied his horse to the back and climbed up onto the seat next to her, taking up the reins. “Saddle up, boys. We need to make hay; we’re burning daylight.”

Beside him, Letty muttered, “I’ve got a bad feeling, Henry.”

She wasn’t the sort to have premonitions, but when she had a “feeling,” it usually turned out to be true. He switched the reins to one hand and wrapped his arm around her, giving her shoulders a reassuring squeeze.

“We’re not leaving the camp unprotected. Half the men will go at a time, and you’ll have the boys to protect you.”

She didn't say more, but her unease transferred to him.

Nearly two hours later, when they finished setting up camp, it was almost full dark.

"Heath, Luke. Stay close to the wagons," he ordered.

The two boys exchanged glances.

"Pa, we've been on the trail for weeks," Heath began, but Luke chimed in before he could finish. "A little exploring won't hurt."

"You're fifteen, not twenty, Lucas Jackson. You'll stay with the wagon," Letty insisted.

Henry sighed. His sons were growing into young men with minds of their own, but, like his wife, he couldn't help feeling something sinister awaited them in Dobytown.

"No exploring. You boys stay here and protect your ma and your brother," he directed in no uncertain terms.

"I don't need protection, Pa," Aaron grumbled. "And I can defend Ma on my own. I shoot better than the both of them put together."

This was true. His youngest had a steady hand and lethal aim. Aaron's boasting earned him a disgusted grunt and an eye roll from his oldest brother and a shove from Luke.

Henry caught him around the neck, pulled him against his chest, and ruffled his dark-brown hair. "You're in charge, then, boy," he told him, grinning at his older brothers who frowned unhappily. Then he moved to Letty, slipped an arm around her waist, and hauled her close for a kiss. "I'll be back as quick as I can," he murmured against her lips.

"Be careful," she whispered back.

"Mr. Jackson, we're heading out!"

When he looked toward the shout, several of the men were trudging toward town with the empty supply wagon. His arm around her waist tightened. Not taking his eyes from hers, he

silently communicated his feelings like long-married couples often did. Then he released her.

“Gotta go. You boys keep a wary eye,” he called to his sons.

They’d camped at least a half mile away. When they entered town, which wasn’t much of one, consisting only of eight small adobe buildings, the noise level made up for all that it wasn’t. The air was thick with the smell of whiskey and men’s raucous laughter.

“Over there, we should find provisions,” said Bill Wheeler, their trail boss. They followed him to the largest of the buildings with a crude, hand-painted sign out front stating *Outpost*. Thankfully, lights were still burning inside.

Despite her stomach being twisted in knots with worry for Henry—hearing about the gambling, whiskey, and women, she felt certain the town wasn’t overflowing with church-going people—Letty tried to act as though it was any other night on the trail and saw to supper. It would be a cold one, since they didn’t want to draw attention with cookfires. Dried beef, cornbread from breakfast, and a slice of leftover dried-apple pie she’d made in the Dutch oven the previous night.

Leaving Luke and Aaron guarding the wagon, Heath, armed and on alert, accompanied her to the creek to wash the few dirty dishes after supper. When they returned, only one boy remained.

“Where is your brother?” Letty asked.

“He went to, uh...you know,” Aaron replied, tilting his head toward the nearby bushes.

She patted his shoulder as she passed him. “I do. Enough said.”

Letty shivered, as much from the chill in the air, since the sun had set, as from Henry not yet returning. She pulled her insubstantial shawl closer around her. “I’m going into the wagon to get warm. Do you boys need your jackets?”

“I’m fine, Ma,” Heath stated as he sat with his back against a wagon wheel, his eyes scanning the darkness where they’d last seen his father.

“What about you, Aaron?”

“I’m not cold, Ma, but I have to, uh...you know, too.” He again nodded toward the bushes.

“Is that what we’re calling the privy now?” his oldest brother asked with a snort of laughter.

“Go on,” she told him. “And check on Luke. He’s been gone long enough to take care of uh...you know...” she teased, prompting another snicker out of Heath.

She watched Aaron, who was too serious sometimes, take off toward the trees, rifle in hand, his ever-present shadow, Buddy, on his heels. “We shouldn’t tease him,” she murmured.

“He’s the youngest and the runt of the litter. It’s expected that he gets teased and babied,” Heath explained as if it was a rule written in stone.

Letty’s laughter filled the air. “Runt? He’s going to be the biggest of all of you, even taller than your pa, I’m predicting. Will you still tease your baby brother when you have to look up at him to do it?”

“You bet we will,” he quipped. “That’s what brothers do.”

“Mm...” was her response, not having any siblings herself to know that as fact.

With the biting wind serving as a sharp reminder of her purpose, she climbed into the wagon, grateful for the relative shelter provided by the canvas top. She was digging in her trunk for thicker socks when she heard a thump and a muffled sound she couldn’t place.

“Heath?” she called. “Is everything all right?”

When he didn’t answer, Letty twisted around in the cramped space and headed for the back of the wagon. She was reaching for the flap when a face suddenly appeared, startling her. The stranger’s leering expression showed off his yellow, half-toothless grin.

“Get out. This isn’t your wagon!” she demanded, backing up to retrieve the rifle she had placed in the corner near the front.

The man smacked his lips together, the sickening sound echoing in the small space. His breath reeked of whiskey, and the odor made her stomach roil in revulsion.

“There you are, purty thing.” His words slurred, and his leer intensified as he climbed inside. His clothing was filthy, and the smell of his unwashed body was worse than the whiskey fumes. “I spied you down by the creek and thought I’d find you to have a taste.”

“You’re disgusting,” she exclaimed, whirling to get her gun. But he caught the back of her skirt and reeled her in.

“Now, now. I heard folks on wagon trains were all neighborly.”

He was so inebriated folks came out as *folksh*, and trains became *trainsh*.

“You heard wrong,” she informed him tersely, grabbing onto anything she could to keep a safe distance while he continued pulling at her skirt. “We’re ornery and don’t cotton to strangers in our wagons uninvited. Now, go, before one of my three big strapping sons makes you or my even bigger husband.”

“You must mean the strapping dark-haired boy napping *againsh* the wagon wheel. Leastwise he *ish* now, since I gave his skull a nice tap with my Colt.”

Letty gasped then screamed, “Heath!”

Clearly tired of playing tug-of-war, the stranger yanked her to him and put his filthy hand over her mouth, muffling her screams.

“Shut yer yap, bitch. I mean to have me some fun, and I don’t want an audience.”

The sound of homespun tearing rent the air as she fought to get free. Twisting and struggling frantically, she tried to pry his hand loose from her mouth—so she could breathe and

didn't vomit—and keep the other hand from pawing at her breasts. No match for his strength and weakening fast, she bit him.

The alcohol must have numbed the pain because, while it registered, it didn't seem to hurt him as she'd hoped. He freed her mouth, but only so he could slap her across the face.

“I'll teach you to bite me, vicious cunt!” he roared as pain exploded across her left cheekbone.

The brutal blow knocked her sideways, and she fell against the trunks stacked two high. Then things got confusing. The sharp corner dug painfully into her ribs, but the anguished cry didn't come from her. She looked up in time to see Aaron, arms locked around her attacker's throat as he pulled him off her.

The bastard was still armed, however. His Colt waving every which way.

“Get the fuck off me,” he roared at the same time he reared back, trying to butt his head against Aaron's and shake him loose. But her baby boy was over six feet tall and by no means a lightweight. The momentum took them backward until they tumbled out the rear of the wagon, over the feed box, and disappeared from sight. An instant later, she heard another louder thud, a grunt from the much-older man, and barking and snarling.

Letty didn't take time to catch her breath. She grabbed her shotgun and followed. Once she hopped down, she took aim, but in the dark and with them rolling around in the dirt, it was hard to tell who was who, and she didn't dare risk it.

“Stop or I'll shoot,” she screamed, while still aiming down the sight.

As they grappled and exchanged punches, Buddy snarling and pulling on the man's trousers, his cursing and groaning told her Aaron was holding his own. Feeling helpless, she fired a warning shot into the air, the near-deafening report echoing across the prairie.

The men were trudging wearily back from the outpost, their boots and the heavily laden wagon's wheels crunching on the gravelly ground. The sharp crack of a gunshot echoed through the night. They all froze in their tracks, but only momentarily.

Then, as one, they sprinted toward the wagons, leaving their goods behind. Henry's heart pounded in his ears as he ran, his breath coming in ragged gasps. The acrid scent of gunpowder filled his nostrils as he strained his eyes, searching for the source of the sound.

In the darkness, he glimpsed a shadowy figure moving away from the camp, but he didn't have time to worry about that now. His only concern was getting to his family. He pushed himself harder, his legs burning with exertion.

Another shot rang out just as he reached his wagon. In a blink, he unholstered his gun and rounded the back. The scene he encountered filled him with rage and heartache. Letty, her shirt in tatters with most of her breasts bared in the moonlight, stood her ground, her rifle steady in her hands while she faced off against a belligerent drunkard who had their son in a choke hold. Aaron hadn't conceded; he grappled in the dirt with him, his face a mask of angry determination. His attacker seemed equally resolute, despite the weapon leveled on him and Buddy, baring his teeth, growling menacingly, and snapping at him.

Without a second thought, Henry joined the fray. But the lock the man had on his son's throat was relentless. Amid the dog's frantic barks, he could hear Aaron choking and wheezing.

In desperation, he got hold of one of his fingers and bent it until he heard a sickening snap. The man released Aaron and fell back, howling in pain. But his uninjured hand went for his gun. Before Henry could raise his own, a third shot rang out, the sharp crack slicing through the chaos.

A stunned expression crossed the attacker's face. He stared at him an instant then fell limp on the ground.

Turning to locate the gunman, he froze, seeing Letty, her eyes ablaze with a fire he had never witnessed before, the rifle

raised and still aimed at the bleeding motionless man.

The tension in the air slowly dissipated, and a smattering of applause from the onlookers broke the silence. Letty's hands trembled as she lowered the weapon. Rather than appearing pleased or even the slightest bit relieved, a sob escaped her chest.

Jumping to his feet, he rushed to her, catching her just as her knees gave way. "Darlin'," he whispered as he gathered her close.

"He had his gun aimed at your head. I had to shoot him, Henry. He had you dead in his sight."

"Don't you worry about blame. What you did was justified."

"It was," Bill the wagon master agreed. "We all saw it."

"He wasn't alone," one of the other men said. "There was another one going after my Josie. Mrs. Jackson firing scared him off. She saved her from god knows what kind of assault."

The others murmured their agreement, bandying about words like heroine and guardian angel. But, still trembling in his arms, she didn't seem to want or need their praise.

"I've sent my boy to the fort for a patrol to hunt the other one down," another man stated.

"You see to your wife, Mr. Jackson. We'll go back and fetch the wagon and bring your supplies."

"Obliged," he murmured, without relinquishing his hold on Letty.

Once the others moved away, he threaded his hand through her long, honey-brown hair that had come loose from its coil, and gently pulled her head back so he could see her. "Are you all right? Did he harm you?"

Her trembling fingers rose to her face. "He hit me, but mostly he scared me."

"Your blouse is torn. As is your chemise underneath. Are you sure?"

She nodded, her breath hitching with another sob. “He would have, if Aaron hadn’t arrived when he did.”

They both turned to look at their youngest who had hauled himself to his feet and, with his hands on his knees, was bent over trying to catch his breath.

“Are you hurt?” Henry asked.

“Just my pride. I should have whooped that puny polecat.”

“He was drunk,” Letty told him. “And very strong.”

“This is true,” her husband echoed her reassurance. “The lock he had on your throat was almost unbreakable.”

“What’s going on?” Luke asked from the darkness.

Suddenly, Aaron launched himself at his older brother and started throwing punches. Henry rushed over to pull them apart.

But that didn’t stop their enraged boy, who struggled in his father’s hold and shouted angrily at his brother. “Where were you when Ma was being attacked? In town, doing what you were told not to? You let her down. The bastard hit her in the face, ripped her shirt, and would have violated her, while you were off peeking at the doves of Dobytown.”

“Is this true, Luke?” he demanded to know. “After I explicitly told you not to go into town, you snuck off anyway?”

“Yes, sir. But I thought Heath and Aaron guarding her would be enough.”

“Heath!” Letty cried in alarm. “He told me he knocked him unconscious with his gun.”

Henry beat her to the other side of the wagon, his heart pounding when he saw his oldest child lying in the dirt, motionless. He dropped to his knees beside him and carefully rolled him onto his back. As he did so, Heath let out a pain-filled groan. It was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

“Thank god,” Letty breathed as she dropped into the dirt on his other side.

“My head,” Heath uttered, holding it as he sat up. “It’s like a boulder fell from a cliff and struck me on the head.”

“Do you know your name?”

“Yeah, Pa, of course. It’s Heath Henry Jackson. After you.”

“And your birthday?”

“February 9th, 1848. I’ve got a pounding headache, but I’m not addled.”

Henry chuckled low mostly from relief. “Good to know. Just checking.”

His gaze found his wife in the moonlight, shared relief passing between them.

“I’m sorry, Ma,” Luke, who had come up beside her mumbled, his gaze fixed on the ground.

While holding her blouse shut with one hand, she laid a hand gently on his forearm. “It was the wrong thing to do, sneaking off like that, but we’re all fine and still together.”

“Don’t coddle the boy, Leticia. He did wrong and deserves to be punished.”

Her hand rose to his anguished face. “I think, from his expression, knowing what could have happened is punishment enough.”

“My belt on his backside will reinforce the lesson,” he stated, his voice gruff and tinged with anger. “This isn’t the first time he’s run off looking to have a good time instead of seeing to his responsibilities. That has to end. Your ma and your brother needed you here, boy. And you let them down.”

He echoed the words of twelve-year-old Aaron, who’d had to step up in the absence of both older brothers and did.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“I want proof through action not promises.”

Luke nodded, and Henry could tell Letty wanted to take him into her arms and baby him. To prevent it, he moved to

her side and wrapped an arm around her waist. This was a harsh lesson life was teaching his son, and Luke needed to learn it well without his mama's interference.

"Let's get you inside and cleaned up, darlin'. Boy," he said to Luke, tossing him a bucket from a hook inside the wagon, "head to the creek and get some cold water for the lump on Heath's head and Aaron's bruises."

With a mumbled, "Yes, sir," he hurried away.

Henry lifted his wife into the back of the wagon and followed her in. The oil lamp was lit. When he caught sight of her bruised face and her eye swollen half shut, rage ran all over him again. Wishing the slimy bastard had suffered more, he clenched his fists. Better, that he had the power to resurrect him so he could do the deed himself.

The sound of his own heavy breathing filled his ears as he fought to control the urge to lash out. The man was dead, he reminded himself. Letty was still very much alive and needed him.

He forced himself to open his fists and gently cradled her face in his hands. When she winced in pain, he angled it toward the rising moon. Even in the dimness, he could see the swelling and bruising marring her cheek.

"The bastard struck you," he whispered, probing the area with the gentlest touch. "Does anything feel broken?"

"It throbs terribly, but I don't think so."

He bent and pressed a tender kiss to her lips. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to protect you, sweetheart."

"What you were doing, providing for us, was important, Henry. We had patrols, and they still got the drop on Heath."

"When he sees your face, he'll be as livid as Aaron was, but at himself."

She dropped her forehead against his chest. "How much longer is this awful trip going to take? I want to sleep in a bed with a real roof over my head, not one made of canvas. Where I feel safe, and my twelve-year-old son doesn't have to fend

off a man bent on ra—” She nearly choked on the awful word and the memories it invoked, and it took a moment before she could continue. “I want a hot bath and a cake of soap because I can still feel his hands on me.”

“Shh, darlin’,” he crooned as his arms enveloped her. “He can’t hurt you again. Try not to think of him.”

“I can’t help it. I’ve never killed a man before.”

“And try not to think of that, either. He was evil and got what he deserved.”

There was a knock on the side of the wagon. Henry moved to the back and opened the flap. When Luke passed in the bucket, he got a look at his ma’s face, and tears sprang to his eyes.

“A man learns from his mistakes, Son.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll talk more after I get your ma settled and see to your brothers.” He let the flap fall after Luke nodded.

“My heart hurts for him. Do you really need to punish him?”

“We’re raising three boys to be fine, upstanding young men, Leticia. Lessons aren’t always easy.” He cupped her shoulders and brought her in for another kiss, this one on the forehead. “Let’s get you changed and put a cool compress on that shiner.”

Her hand flew to her injured cheek. “Do I really have a black eye?”

“It’s purple, but by sunup, it will be.”

“Dear heavens. Sun-baked skin, cracked lips, and now a black eye. My mother would keel over with a case of the vapors if she could see me now.”

Henry thought her comment was an attempt to lighten the moment, but, like a dagger to the heart, it cut him deeply. He was her protector, but he’d let her down. As he held the cool

compress to her face, he silently swore to do what was necessary to keep anything like this from happening again.

Chapter 7

Replacing Bad Memories

He sat with Letty, rewetting the soft cloth whenever the coolness faded. It took nigh on an hour, but she at last fell asleep. For several minutes longer, he sat on the pallet beside her, watching the rise and fall of her chest and listening to the soft rush of her breath between her parted lips. If he let his eyes stray to the purplish-red mark and the swelling marring her flawless skin, his rage returned.

Her parents had raised her to be a genteel Southern lady. She should be having tea with her ladies' group, wearing fine dresses, and sipping iced tea on the wide veranda of her family home, not crossing hundreds of miles of rough terrain in harsh conditions to start over on the untamed frontier. She shouldn't have to worry about being accosted in her own wagon, and she sure as hell shouldn't have the death of a useless piece-of-shit drunk who tried to rape her on her conscience.

But the damn war gave them very few choices.

He brushed the hair back from her face and leaned down to kiss her forehead.

Her words still haunted him, and he quietly repeated his vow to her. "I promise to keep you safe, and to build you the finest home in the territory once we get to where we're going."

"I know you will, Henry."

Startled that she was awake, he drew back, but he didn't get far with her fingers threaded through his hair. She often gripped it when he was making love to her. It was the reason he kept it long.

"You should be asleep, darlin'."

"I am," she replied then said nothing more as her hand fell limply to the quilt and her breathing grew slow and even once more.

He waited to make sure she didn't stir again then pulled the covers up to her chin and extinguished the lamp. Next, he went to find his middle boy and set him straight.

When he jumped down from the wagon, he scanned his surroundings. The scent of burning wood mingled with the crisp night air. He noticed three bedrolls near the fire the boys must have started. Upon closer inspection, he realized only two of the bedrolls were occupied.

He didn't panic. Now that the men had returned to camp, the regular watch would have resumed. His shift came early, right before daylight. His boots scuffed in the dirt as he approached the fire. Heath's eyes opened, the flickering light casting shadows on his face when he looked up at him.

"How's your head?"

"Hard, evidently." Heath rose on his elbow and gingerly touched the area behind his left temple. "I've got a cut on my scalp that's tender, but the headache is gone."

Henry glanced at the spot where Letty had saved his life by shooting her attacker. The body was gone. "Where?" he asked simply.

"Several of the men hauled him off. I didn't ask where. He can rot in hell for all I care."

"My sentiments exactly."

"Is Ma all right?"

"She's sleeping."

Heath nodded, but he could tell his oldest boy had more to say. It burst forth within seconds.

"That ornery cuss got the jump on me, Pa. I shouldn't have let that happen, especially drunk like he was."

"How did it happen?"

Clearly puzzled, he rubbed his forehead. "I don't rightly know. Aaron was guarding the interior circle, which I felt was safer for him, while I took the exterior. I was scanning the perimeter. I wasn't asleep at my post, Pa, I swear. But he came

at me from my blind side. I saw a flash of light, and that's all I remember until I came to, after he'd attacked Ma."

"Did you do your best?" he asked.

"Obviously not," Heath grumbled. His oldest was always harder on himself than anyone. This would haunt him.

"Then make corrections and do better the next time. We're all still alive, with only minor bumps and bruises to show for it, so don't beat yourself up too hard. Got me?"

"Yes, sir."

His eyes shifted to Aaron. Buddy, who'd battled the enemy, too, lay beside him. "How's he doing?"

Heath glanced at his younger brother. "He's asleep, but I don't know how. He's still spitting mad—at Luke."

Henry sighed while pinching the bridge of his nose to ease the sudden pain pounding there. His second son would be the cause of him being completely white-headed at forty-five. "Did he mention what he was doing?"

He didn't specify who, but Heath understood. "He snuck into town to explore, but mostly to see the painted ladies."

While shaking his head, Henry looked up at the stars. He'd been fifteen and curious once, too. But Luke had disobeyed and deserted his post. A third pair of eyes and keen senses might have better protected his mother.

"Where is he?"

Heath tilted his head toward the trees. "He was heading down to the creek to wash up. Said he needed a minute alone after the tongue-lashing his kid brother gave him."

"Bet that went down hard."

"Yeah."

"Get some sleep. I'll go find him."

Heath rolled onto his side and settled in again.

As he moved toward the tree line, his eldest called after him quietly, "Go easy on him, Pa. Between Aaron and the ass-

kicking he's been giving himself for the past hour, there might not be much left for you to whoop."

Henry didn't reply. His long-legged stride had already taken him to the middle of the camp, and he didn't want to disturb the others. They'd had enough ruckus for one evening.

But as he strode toward the creek, he considered the consequences Luke should get for his actions. He was strict with his boys. All of them having become acquainted with the business end of his belt on more than one occasion. Growing up, his pa had tanned his mischievous hide, as Grandpa Edward had done to him. He often found a hiding preferable to lectures and looks of disappointment. But Henry wasn't unreasonable. He only took them to the woodshed, what his grandfather called it, when they did something so dadburned stupid they put themselves, or someone else, in danger.

This time, Luke's actions had put his entire family at risk.

He found him by the water's edge.

"You plan to stay out here all night?" he asked as he crouched beside him.

"Only until you came looking for me. I'm ready. I deserve every lick."

"You do, huh? If you were me, how many do you think fits the crime?"

Luke glanced at him, his youthful face so much like his own at his age. None of them had inherited their mother's honey-brown hair and blue eyes. Letty always said he couldn't deny any of his boys—as if he would.

"No answer?"

"That's a hard question, Pa. I'm darned if I say too few, and more so if I say too many, and you have less in mind."

"My pa asked me the same thing when I was your age. I said twenty, and he gave 'em to me then said he was only planning on ten."

"I deserve one hundred times as many. How's Ma? Her face looked awful. Aaron said he hit her."

“She’s sleeping. We put cool compresses on it to ease the swelling. But she’s gonna have a real shiner come morning.”

“That’s on me. I should have been here. I might have kept Heath from getting his head bashed in—”

“That’s an exaggeration, but I get your meaning.”

“And my kid brother wouldn’t have had to wrestle the man intending on—” He broke off and looked across the water into the darkness. “I can’t think it, let alone say it.”

“I’m right there with you. I’d like to wring the bastard’s neck.”

“But you don’t have to. Ma saved you the trouble. And I hate that she had to.” He lapsed into silence for several heartbeats, before he asked, sounding ravaged, “Can you forgive me, Pa? Will Ma?”

“You’re our boy. No matter how bad you mess up, we’ll always love you, and forgive. As punishment, you’re driving the team for the next two weeks, and your ma will ride Kingston, if she chooses. You’ll also tend the team besides your other regular chores.”

“That’s it?”

“You want more chores, boy?” he asked, incredulous.

“No, but I thought...”

“I saw the look in your eyes when you saw your mama’s face. That bruise will take a week or two to fade. I figure facing her every day and being reminded of how you left her unprotected will be a harsher punishment than I can ever dish out with my belt.”

“Thank god for Aaron. If he hadn’t stopped him. I couldn’t have lived with myself—”

When his voice broke from emotion, not the usual cracking of a growing fifteen-year-old boy, Henry hooked him behind his neck and pulled him into his chest.

“Like I said before, a man learns from his failings and does his darnedest not to repeat them. Your ma is softhearted. She

wasn't angry and doesn't blame you, but, from what Heath said, you've got a lot of fences to mend before your brother forgives you."

"Yeah, so Aaron told me, loudly and colorfully."

While chuckling, he rose. Luke did the same, less the chuckle.

"I hope he doesn't do that in front of your mother, or we'll all be in trouble." He slid his arm around his shoulders. He still had a few inches on Luke. Another year, maybe two, of growing, and those days would be past.

Back in camp, he left Luke crawling into his bedroll and climbed into the wagon.

Because it was cramped, and because of his size, he and Letty usually spread their bedrolls out under the wagon and snuggled together for warmth. But he didn't want to be apart from her. Cautious not to wake her, Henry stretched out on his side, fitting his front against her back like two spoons in a drawer. He'd settled and was almost asleep when she whimpered and sat up with a start.

In the moonlight, he saw her glance around, fear in her eyes.

He rested his hand on her back, murmuring softly, "You were dreaming, darlin'. I'm here, and you're safe."

She twisted and stared down at him as if disbelieving her eyes. Then her hand splayed across his chest, and she slumped in relief. "I saw him in my dream. It seemed so real."

"Come here," he whispered, easing her down next to him. His arms came around her, and, with his lips against her hair, he crooned softly, "Sleep, sweetheart. I've got you."

Letty burrowed into him, more so than usual. She hiked her leg up and threw it over his thighs, as if she couldn't get close enough. All traces of the day's warmth had vanished, but they didn't need it with the heat radiating from their bodies as they lay pressed together, skin barely separated by the fabric of their clothes.

She was quiet, but her body remained rigid with tension, both fists clutching handfuls of his shirt. “Relax,” he crooned softly as his fingers traced gentle patterns along her back. “Try to sleep.”

“I can’t. When I close my eyes, he’s there,” she replied in a tormented whisper.

“But he isn’t. He’s dead and gone.” His hand swept down the length of her hair, down her back, and up again, hoping his touch would bridge the gap between her nightmare and the reality of her lying in his arms.

“Make love to me, Henry.”

After what she’d been through, that was the last thing he expected her to say. Rearing his head back, he looked down at her. Moonlight spilled in through the front opening of the bonnet, illuminating her features. She looked desperate, and quite serious.

“Maybe that’s not such a good idea. You’ve had a taxing evening.”

“No,” she insisted, as her fingers worked the buttons on his shirt. “I won’t be able to sleep with him haunting me.”

“Letty...”

She grabbed the placket of his shirt with both hands. “You listen to me here, Henry Jackson. You’re my husband, and I love you, but tonight I *need* you. Usually, you’re the one insisting—”

“I take exception to that claim. You don’t put up any resistance.”

“I didn’t say I don’t enjoy it. But I’m the one who needs it badly now.” His belt buckle was next, and the buttons on his denim trousers. Before she reached in and did permanent damage in her overexcited state, he grasped her wrists and pulled them to his chest.

“Easy, now. You’re overwrought.”

“No. I want my husband to do his duty.” Her eyes were wild with passion and panic as she gazed up at him. “Use your

body to help me forget. Drive out the bad memories of this awful night and replace them with good.”

He cupped her uninjured cheek. “Letty...”

Leaning in, she implored, “Please, Henry,” against his mouth.

Then he relented and deepened the kiss. He tried to go slowly, to be tender, but she would have none of that, her hands pulling at his clothes and also rucking up her skirt.

“Letty, slow down. It isn’t a race. And there’s no room in here,” he grunted as he hit his elbow on a trunk and lightning shot down his arm to his fingers. “If we’re going to do this, it’s going to be my way.”

He shifted them until he was on his back with her on top. “Straddle my hips, and ride me, but go easy. This dad-blamed wagon creaks, and the boys are sleeping right outside.”

It was another reason he preferred bedrolls under the wagon. The ground did not squeak.

With a little maneuvering, he pulled his stiff cock out of his pants and found the split seam of her drawers. With his help, she raised up high enough to guide his rigid length to her entrance, then she sank onto him—warm, snug, and incredibly wet.

He suppressed a groan, just barely, while she sighed.

His hand swept up her back into her hair and pulled her down to him, angling her head just so. Then he claimed her mouth, his tongue plunging as he thrust his hips and filled her the rest of the way.

With his mouth on hers, he could stifle her moans and his groans as they moved together, grinding against one another. In her highly charged state, it didn’t take long until she was tensing and trembling in his arms and crying his name down his throat.

He kept her mouth locked with his, while his other hand gripped the fullness of her bottom and he pumped into her. Her urgency transferred to him. After another dozen deep strokes,

he tensed beneath her, growling his pleasure into her mouth as he splashed hotly inside her.

For long moments, his heartbeat echoed hers, as they clung to one another, arms and legs intertwined, him tall, her petite, but melding together perfectly.

“I’ve never acted that way before,” she said at length. “I’m sorry—”

“Don’t you dare apologize,” he cut in. “Love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things, remember?”

She tipped her head back, eyes wet with tears. “From our wedding,” she whispered. “Of course, I do.”

“You’ve comforted me plenty in two decades of marriage. It’s fitting I do the same for you when you have the need.” His lips brushed hers, a soft, unspoken, heartfelt promise for another two decades at least. “I love you, Leticia Jackson. Until death us do part.”

“I love you, too,” she said with a sob. “So very much.”

“Shh, sweetheart. I’ve got you,” he repeated. “Close your eyes now and try to sleep. We’re leaving Dobytown, never to return, at daybreak.”

“Good riddance and praise be,” she murmured, her head on his shoulder, burrowed into his side beneath the covers, and already drifting off.

He shut his eyes, too, but sleep didn’t come as quickly. He had to be up before dawn for his watch then break camp. As he would for the next six weeks at least. Their journey was far from over.

Soon, they’d have to leave the wagon train, and the friends they’d made, most of whom were forging on to Oregon City. Then it was up to him to keep his family safe until they reached their new home. Even then, they’d face more challenges and danger. He’d made vows to himself and to her to protect them all. He just prayed he was up to the job.

They broke camp at dawn with none of the delays from the usual procrastinators and not the first grumble about another day on the trail. Every man, woman, and child on the wagon train was eager to put Dobytown and Fort Kearney behind them. Surprisingly, Letty opted for the wagon. Although she didn't complain, the swelling in her face was worse, the black eye he predicted clearly tender, and from the way she grimaced and held her head when the wheels hit a rock or dropped into a deep furrow, she had a jarring headache.

Henry took Luke's place and drove the team the entire day, keeping a close eye on her. Even with him being extra cautious, as they followed the sunbaked, rut-ridden road forged by thousands of wagons that had come before them, jarring was unavoidable. He encouraged her to rest in the back of the wagon, but it only made it worse. Sitting next to him, her head on his shoulder, while he drove, was comfort enough.

It gave them plenty of time to talk. And he shared what he'd learned at the outpost before all hell had broken loose.

"The railroad is coming, Letty," he told her. "That isn't in doubt. Surveyors have been coming through here since the '50s, and, with Mr. Lincoln signing the Pacific Railroad Act last year, it's just a matter of time until we can travel coast to coast by train. The debate is where the rail lines will run. The current options include the central trail, which is part of the trek to Oregon and known for treacherous cliffs and steep grades, or the pass through the Black Hills."

"That sounds ominous."

He shrugged that off. "They're covered in evergreens and look dark from a distance, so I'm told. But I don't think that's the route they'll take. It's farther north and would be much more expensive than a direct route."

"More than through the mountains?" she asked, skeptical.

"Trappers and emigrants have used the high-plains route for some thirty years. It's part of the Overland Stage line, and there's a small settlement along the Laramie River already. The men I spoke with who know these parts assure me it's the

safer, smarter route. If I were a betting man, I'd put money on that being the eventual choice for the rail line."

"Should we take such a gamble?" Letty asked.

His gaze swung to meet hers. Her concern was evident from the way she nervously chewed on her bottom lip. With a gentle touch, he lifted her chin, and his thumb swept below it, until she released it, leaving it plump and pink. He was tempted to claim her mouth, but she'd asked a question.

Focus, man.

"It's not much of one. Even if they choose the other route, we'd be looking at a cattle drive of a few hundred miles at most. That's nothing."

"Is there a school at the settlement? Or a church?"

"I won't lie to you. From what I've heard, there isn't much to it. But there are hundreds of thousands of acres of ideal grazing land and plentiful water. It's the perfect place to raise cattle." He took her hands in his, his brown eyes gleaming with excitement. "I've got a good feeling about this."

She looked at him and nodded. He didn't drink or gamble and would never put his family in harm's way. Finally, she allowed, "I trust you to know what's best for us, Henry."

His lips kicked up on one side. "I appreciate your confidence, but not the added pressure should I be wrong."

"When have you ever been?"

"There's a first time for everything."

She graced him with a smile but only briefly before she winced, and her hand flew to her bruised cheek. "This won't be the first time, either. I've got a good feeling, too. Mostly because I know we're not going all the way to Oregon City. If you'd have told me that, I wouldn't have been nearly as receptive."

He raised one of her hands to his lips and kissed the back of it. "You'd have thrown the conniption to beat all conniptions, and I wouldn't have blamed you. I'm tired of

dining on trail dust morning, noon, and night, too. I'm ready to put down roots and call someplace home."

"How much longer would this be in days and weeks?"

His expression turned grim before he admitted, "More like a month if the weather holds."

Letty dropped her head on his shoulder and groaned. "My backside won't survive."

"We'll spell you in the wagon, darlin'. I promise."

"You'd better. Or that part of me you like to paddle on occasion will be as flat as my johnnycakes I've yet to learn how to cook over a campfire in that blasted iron skillet."

"We can't have that," he exclaimed. "Better than a paddling, I like to hold onto your curvy backside while you're riding me. I'll see about finding you a pillow."

She raised her head to see if he was teasing, but he looked completely serious.

After stopping for the midday meal and to water the oxen and horses, when Letty climbed into the high bench seat, she saw how much so. He had fashioned a cushion for the bench out of one of the lambswool blankets she'd brought along.

When she twisted and located him corralling the boys to their horses, she found his eyes on her. She recalled his fingers digging into the flesh of her bottom last night as she rode him. Sometimes, he gave her a little smack—and sometimes not so little—to go faster and harder. So she had to question which he truly liked more, the paddling or the riding.

The wagon rocked as her husband climbed up onto the bench. Despite being a wife and mother for nearly two decades, Letty's wayward thoughts and his audacious wink made her blush. Sometimes Henry said and did the most outlandish things. But that was one of the many things she loved about him.

Chapter 8

Claiming Silverbend

Dakota Territory, June 1863

Letty breathed in, smelling only clean air and sweet high-plains grass after the rain the evening before. Still early, the sun hadn't had time to burn off the dew, and the hem of her skirt and petticoat were soaked. But she didn't care. Standing on the bank of the swift creek that wound its way through the lush green valley, with the rocky peaks of the Medicine Bow Mountains as a towering backdrop, she'd seen nothing more beautiful, even back in Virginia.

Henry wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "What do you think of your new home?"

"It's breathtaking, but 50,000 acres... I still can't believe you purchased so much, and for half of what the farm sold for, not including the house and furnishings."

"When the railroad comes through, the value will quadruple."

Hearing the certainty in his tone, she tipped her head back and asked, "You're that confident that it will?"

"If Thomas Durant has any say over it, yes."

"Who is that again?"

"He's the vice president and general manager of Union Pacific, and the man is no fool." He squeezed her shoulders, his grin fading as he returned her gaze. "I know you're disappointed in the town."

"Calling it a town is a stretch, dear. The community has a grand total of eighty-eight residents, with only twelve females, four of whom are under the age of ten. There isn't even a general store. How will we get staples like sugar and flour and, good heavens, coffee?"

“We can restock at Fort Bridger or Fort Laramie, which are both only a few days ride away by horseback. But there’s a sawmill and a blacksmith, and able-bodied men interested in finding work. All of which is good for me, but I’m afraid you’ll starve for female company.”

“Living in the middle of nowhere won’t help our boys find wives when the time comes, either.”

“This area will flourish, Letty. Mark my words. Until it does, we’ll be isolated, but starting a ranch will keep us well occupied.”

“Where do you think would be the best place for the house?”

“Close to the water, but not so close we have to worry about a flood.” He nodded toward the mountains. “With the windows of our bedroom facing westward.”

“It will be nice to wake up and see that outside our window.”

He brought her body flush against his and rested his chin on the top of her head. “And sit on the porch every evening when we’re old and gray and watch the sunset over the mountains.”

She leaned into him, resting her cheek against his chest as she took in the colorful landscape. Nodding her approval because she couldn’t think of anything better than growing old with him earned her another affectionate squeeze.

“We’ll build a good life here. It’s just gonna take some time.”

The water flashed silver as the sun broke through the clouds.

“That’s it!” she exclaimed.

“What’s it?” he asked.

“The glints of silver in the water and the wide place in the creek where it bends southward. We should call the ranch Silverbend.”

He looked where she pointed, and a smile lit up his handsome face. “Silverbend Ranch. I like it.” Henry tipped up her chin with one hand as the fingers of the other sank into her hair. “If the ground wasn’t wet, I’d celebrate the christening of our new home here and now.”

“Where are the boys?”

“Getting into seventeen, fifteen, and twelve-year-old-boy trouble, no doubt.”

“If you’re certain, we can christen it against that huge maple behind you.”

His head jerked back, his sable brows arching to the brim of his hat in surprise. “Leticia Jackson! Outside up against a tree? How naughty of you?”

She rose on tiptoe to press her lips against his. “You know as well as I that keeping close quarters with three nosy boys makes finding privacy challenging. It’s been much too long.”

He showed his full agreement by lifting her and carrying her swiftly beneath the shade of the enormous tree. Four hands hurried to ruck up her skirt and open his trousers. With his hands curled beneath her bare behind, he lifted her and pressed her back against the tree. Then his mouth came down hungry and hard on hers.

“Open your blouse,” he ordered gruffly against her lips. “I want to taste your sweet nipples while I drive my cock into you.”

Heart pounding and cheeks aflame at his bawdy demands, she did as he asked, but it was difficult one-handed. He couldn’t help while holding her aloft, and, if he pinned her against the tree with his chest to free his hands, the bark dug uncomfortably into her back and they still couldn’t undo her buttons.

Suddenly, she was flat on her feet, and he was striding away.

“Henry! Where are you going?” She didn’t add with his breeches undone and the hard length of him on open display because she was too devastated that he would leave her in such

an unfulfilled state. “You can’t get me all...inspired and then leave me.”

She should have known better. After a moment at his mount, he returned, uncoiling a piece of rope. “In all the years of our marriage, Leticia Jackson, have I ever left you unsatisfied?”

“No, dear, and I thank you for that.”

He grunted, clearly put out by her specious accusation, but that didn’t diminish the ardor still poking out of his trousers. The rope, which he threw over a branch overhead puzzled her, however.

“What do you intend with that?”

“Patience, love,” he murmured, as he fashioned a loop on each of the lengths hanging down from either side of the branch. He slipped one over one of her hands, and did the same with the other, then he tightened them so they were snug around her wrist and held her arms above her head.

She tugged but was well and truly caught. “Henry, what in the world?”

He lifted her into the same position as when he’d abruptly left her, but now she only had the ropes to hang onto.

“Grip the ropes above the knots and don’t let go, lest you get burns on your wrists. Understand?”

“Yes, but...”

“No time for discussion, darlin’. Do as I say.”

Once she did, taking the biggest part of her weight with her hands, he guided her legs around his hips. Nearly eye to eye with her now, he grinned and, with both hands, undid her buttons. Once he laid both sides back, he pushed her camisole above her breasts and greedily sucked one hard nipple into his mouth.

“Henry!” she exclaimed, feeling positively wicked, bound half bare to a tree while her husband had free rein over her body.

“Against-a-tree lovin’ is fun and exciting, but even better when I have full use of my hands.” He curled his hands beneath both breasts then plumped them up and together. Next, he licked his way from one nipple to the other. “And my mouth,” he added before drawing the hard, until-now-neglected peak between his lips and biting, not hard but with enough of a nip to make her groan. “And my cock,” he concluded as he drove up inside her in one incredible, breathtaking, shamelessly impaling, glorious stroke.

Letty could only hang there by her hands, her body bare and open to him. It was wonderful, and more wicked than any time he’d taken her, and that encompassed a lot of loving over many years. Maybe it was being outdoors and the risk that, at any moment, anyone could come along. Or it might be the rope, restraining her in such a scandalous way she could only submit to whatever he wanted to do to her. She did that most of the time already, but never like this.

“I can practically hear the wheels and cogs clicking inside your head. Shut your brain off and enjoy, Letty.”

“Believe me, husband,” she said between panting breaths, “I’m thoroughly enjoying.”

He withdrew and thrust into her again, going deeper and filling her completely. A moan escaped her lips.

“Have I mentioned what an impressive man you are, Mr. Jackson?”

“I believe you have, Mrs. Jackson. But it’s been quite a while.”

“What a dreadful omission,” she replied, trying to remember how to draw air into her lungs as he pumped in and out of her, building speed. “We mustn’t let that happen again.”

“Agreed, but no more talking. You soon won’t be able to with my tongue inside your luscious mouth.”

“Anything, dear, as long as you don’t stop *impressing* yourself upon me.”

Because he was taking her tied to a tree, which was more outrageous than their inane conversation while he did so,

laughter bubbled up from deep within her even as her passion soared. But he smothered her giggles with his lips, tongue delving inside to dance with hers.

There was no more thinking after that, only feeling, especially when Henry slid a hand between their bodies. He found the tingling bud right above where they were joined, and rubbed, without stopping the persistent efforts of his tongue and demanding cock. Her face burned just thinking the word.

Soon, pleasure overcame her in shuddering shock waves, and her cries of bliss broke free of her chest. His mouth covered hers once more, smothering the sounds, and he drove into her body relentlessly, until, with a growl from deep within his chest, he followed her into the sweet bliss of ecstasy.

Wrapped around one another, with Henry's broad back now braced against the tree—his buckskin vest offering more protection from the rough trunk than her cotton blouse—the tranquility of the moment was interrupted by shouts and barking.

“Good thing I put away the rope,” he muttered as Aaron and Buddy sprinted across the meadow toward them.

“And a very good thing we took the time to get decent,” she countered.

“I wouldn't exactly call what we just did against this tree decent,” he replied with a grin.

“Henry!” she exclaimed, a fiery blush encompassing what felt like her entire body. But her tone didn't contain a hint of reproach. She was in too good a mood.

“This place is incredible, Pa,” Aaron exclaimed, running down the slight rise at full tilt. “We discovered caves deep in the woods.”

“You boys stay out of there until we decide if they're stable,” Henry ordered.

Out of breath, but grinning from ear to ear, Aaron skidded to a halt beside them. “That's what I told Heath and Luke, but

they don't listen to me." He looked from his father to her.
"Your cheeks are all red, Ma. Have you been running, too?"

"No, honey," she assured him while her dastardly husband failed to suppress his chuckle. "I forgot my bonnet yesterday and think I got too much sun."

"A sunburn isn't funny, Pa," their youngest, who was wiser than his tender years, gently scolded. "I've had one before, and it feels like being scalded by hot water. Can I get you something from the wagon?"

Letty cupped his cheek and smiled. "No, Aaron, but it's sweet of you to ask."

"Okay, then. Is it time for breakfast?" Still growing, he could out eat his older brothers and would pass them up in height by thirteen at this rate. "How about flapjacks and bacon?"

"Do we still have maple syrup?"

"Yes. We still have a full jug from the trees back home."

"Hot damn! I'll tell the others," he said as he bolted off.

Henry's hand cupped her chin and tipped her face up to meet his amused gaze. "That was a close call," he whispered against her lips.

"Too close."

"Something else I noticed."

"What's that, dear?"

"You still call Virginia home. You're going to have to start thinking of the Dakota Territory as home now."

Letty fisted the front of his shirt and raised up on tiptoe. "Get my house built, dear husband, and I'll call the foothills of the Laramie Mountains home sweet home. But not before."

She kissed him and ducked under his arm, walking up the long grade of the grassy hill to their wagon to get the cookfire started and her ceaselessly hungry boys fed.

Chapter 9

Incredibly Bad Timing

When Henry said he had a surprise, she couldn't imagine what it could be. She'd become more puzzled when he put her on the back of his horse and rode several miles east. But she was done playing games when he told her to shut her eyes.

“Stubborn, woman,” he grumbled. “Don't you want to see your new home?”

“It has only been three weeks. How can you possibly be done?”

“When I set my mind to something, I don't let moss grow beneath my feet. Now close your eyes.”

She humored him and cooperated this time, now filled with excitement. He reined in and slid from the saddle, lifting her down the next instant.

“Our goal was to get out of the wagon. Bear in mind, I had limited supplies to work with—”

“You're making me nervous. Can I look now?”

Henry stood behind her, his hands over her eyes, but at this point, he dropped them.

Letty didn't expect miracles. She knew there were challenges. But she had envisioned more than the rustic cabin in front of her.

He wasn't a carpenter by trade, but he was skilled with a hammer and saw, and he and several men from the settlement had worked tirelessly digging the well and building the cabin. She didn't want to be critical, but her heart sank clear down to her toes.

The structure before her was small. Fitting four Henry-sized humans inside plus her seemed impossible.

Grabbing her hand, he pulled her toward the front door. “Don’t judge before you see the inside. It’s bigger than it looks.”

It would have to be for them to turn around, but she kept that comment to herself.

“The windows are different sizes,” he explained, as they crossed the porch that was wide enough for a rocking chair someday. “I had to use what I could buy from folks in town,” he went on, as he drew her inside. “It wasn’t much, but I made sure to put one in the front room and your kitchen for extra light.”

She stopped just inside the door to let her eyes adjust to the dim, rather gloomy, interior. Except for the stone fireplace to her left and the sink with a hand pump against the back wall, the kitchen she assumed, it was bare. It had a pitched ceiling, and along the wall to her right was a ladder leading to a second-floor loft. The room looked big enough for a seating area, but not much else.

“Do you think there’s room for a table?” she asked skeptically.

“Not an overly large one, but to seat five, I think so.”

Moving farther into the room, she eyed the tiny kitchen. The window over the sink was tiny, and, without lamps lit, everything was shadowy even on a sunny day. Making it seem cramped was the low ceiling that doubled as the floor of the loft and extended halfway across the cabin.

“I put in a double-sided fireplace, so we can shut the bedroom door and still be warm,” Henry said as he drew her into the only other room.

The size of her closet back home, it was only slightly bigger than their bed, which had to be long enough to fit her husband’s tall frame, and made the kitchen seem spacious.

Disappointment washed over her. As she glanced at her husband’s expectant expression, she tried not to let it show. But she failed. He knew her too well.

He gathered her close, his breath warm on her cheek when he murmured, “I know it’s not what you hoped for, Letty, but it’s temporary. We can’t face winter living in a wagon with a canvas roof. You’ll have your house with a glass picture window in the parlor, slate shingles on the roof, and an indoor privy one day, I promise.”

Letty’s eyes filled with tears as she hugged him in return. It may not have been what she had envisioned, but she had faith that with her husband’s unwavering determination, he would make sure their dreams would take root here at Silverbend Ranch.

“I trust you to do what’s best for us,” she told him while peering through the bedroom door. “But if you expect me to feed the hands you plan on hiring to get the ranch ready for cattle and horses. I’m going to need more than a sink in the kitchen.”

He turned and gazed at it with her. “You are indeed. Because if they have to eat your flat-as-a-fritter johnnycakes like me and the boys have these past few months, they won’t last a day.”

The insult wasn’t much of one because it was true, but she pushed at his chest to get free. “As if you could have done better over a campfire, Henry Jackson!”

“Aaron could do better, Leticia, and did.”

This was also true. Whether being nice to his mother by helping her out or out of self-preservation because he couldn’t choke the dry stuff down another day, their youngest had become a dab hand at campfire cooking.

“He’s hired! Aaron can cook and clean and wash, while I help run fencing. I can wield a hammer as good as anyone.”

“When have you ever wielded a hammer?” he asked, amusement making his voice quiver.

“Never. But it must be easier than wrangling a cast-iron skillet over an open fire.”

He laughed, the deep rich sound echoing through the small, empty cabin. “You’ll get a kitchen table, furniture, beds,

and a stove. I bought one used in town that's in tip-top shape, and I commissioned the furniture from John Addington, a carpenter in the settlement. He was one of the men who helped with the cabin and the main reason we finished so quickly."

"A bed? Truly, Henry?" She'd run fences and do the cooking, cleaning, and wash to get to sleep in a bed again.

"We'll have to stuff it with straw for now, but yes. A proper bed."

"I don't care that it's straw, as long as it's not the hard, unforgiving ground or the even harder, more unforgiving wagon bed." She stood on tiptoe as she pulled his head down to hers. With her lips against his, she whispered, "You don't know how happy that makes me. I'll thank you properly the first night I get to sleep in our new bed."

He kicked the bedroom door shut with his boot and pressed her back against it. "Or you could show me now," he suggested, his tone becoming husky with his rising passion.

But he tensed against her when boots pounded loudly on the planked front porch then on the wooden floor of the main room.

"Isn't the loft great, Ma? I've never slept in one before. I'm not sure how Buddy will climb the ladder, but we'll figure it out." There was a pause before Aaron repeated, "Ma?"

Henry groaned, resting his forehead against hers. "That boy and his timing... I swear he could mess up a wet dream."

The stove arrived the following afternoon, the table and chairs the day after that. Two weeks later, Mr. Addington came through on his promise of a comfortable settee for her living room. With the braided rug she'd brought from home in the center of the main room, the cabin was looking and feel homier. The carpenter also promised them a bed, but only the frame. Stuffing a mattress was a first for her, but she'd done a passable job.

With the frame not expected for several weeks, they had to put it on the floor but it was much better than the wagon bed

or the hard ground. That was when Letty, who had soft lips and an agile tongue, fulfilled her promise to Henry.

Kneeling between his spread legs, her hip resting against his inner calf, she felt a shiver run through his body. Her eyes swept up and met his, the raw need in his gaze unmistakable. Letty curled her fingers around the length of him and licked in a swirl around the tip. Then she opened and took him deep, feeling him pulse inside her mouth and against her hand. As she slowly withdrew, she dragged her tongue along the underside, reveling in the way he groaned in response. The sound was barely audible, but it sent a jolt of heat sizzling through her.

Challenging her husband's control this way emboldened her. She repeated her motions, applying suction and squeezing the base this time. His fingers sank into her hair, encouraging her to go faster. But a naughty streak had awakened inside her and she pulled off. With her eyes locked with his, her mouth hovering a fraction of an inch over the head of his shaft, she hummed softly as she licked her lips, savoring the salty taste of him. He reacted immediately, his body arching off the bed, but he sat up the next instant.

"Enough," he growled, keeping his voice low to avoid waking their three sleeping boys in the middle of the night. He hooked his hands beneath her arms, pulling her up his long frame. She expected him to claim a kiss and, while holding her tightly against his chest, drive up inside her. Instead, he lifted her clear up to the pillows and settled her astride his face.

"Henry!" she gasped as he licked into her. His tongue danced over her sensitive flesh, sending intense shivers down her spine. When he sucked hard on the bud in front, an explosion of exquisite pleasure made her moan uncontrollably.

As the sound echoed through the room, he quickly grabbed a pillow and passed it to her, all while continuing to work his incredible mouth. She quickly pressed the soft, linen-covered down pillow to her face as another much louder moan broke free.

He didn't let up, subjecting every inch of her intimate flesh to his relentless exploration, lapping, sucking, and even nibbling. Yes, she definitely felt the graze of teeth, leaving no part untouched until she convulsed helplessly with pleasure.

"Stay as you are," he whispered, turning his face to kiss her inner thigh. Then he wiggled out from under her and got onto his knees behind her.

She looked back at him in confusion until he moved her hands to the frame of the bed. Next, he tucked the pillow between her hands.

"Hang on, darlin'. Muffle your whimpers and sighs of delight if you need to because it's my turn."

He nudged her knees farther apart and fitted the head of his shaft to her opening. After he seated himself with a smooth, breath-stealing thrust, he slid his hand up to her breast, fingers rolling and pinching the hard peak. His other hand didn't stay idle. It dipped between her thighs, locating the sensitive bud, and teased it like he did her nipple. Unable to contain her groans and bliss-filled cries, Letty buried her face in the pillow once more.

His mouth opened on the side of her neck when he moved inside her, slowly at first then more quickly as his urgency grew. She teetered on the brink of a second incredible climax as he tensed behind her, but he didn't leave her wanting, his wicked fingers never stopping. Only a few strokes later, with his face buried in her hair muffling his own groans, he brought them both to a quiet although intensely satisfying release together.

Breathing hard, with Henry wrapped around her and filling her completely, Letty pulled her face from the pillow and let her head fall back on his shoulder.

"Doing all right, sweetheart?" he asked.

"Other than being light-headed from lack of air, I've never been better."

He chuckled, the warmth of his breath wafted over the damp skin of her neck. "That's what I like to hear."

Several long moments later, he lifted her and laid her on the bed. When he rolled away from her, she heard water splash in the basin they kept beside the bed.

“It’s cold,” he warned after he rolled back.

“Good. Use it on my face, please. I’m rather overheated.”

He dabbed at her flushed cheeks and forehead before washing between her legs. This was something he insisted on, and she’d given up being embarrassed by it long ago.

Once done, he took care of himself and tossed the cloth back into the basin. Stretching out beside her, he pulled the sheet over them both and gathered her against him.

“You drive a hard bargain, Mrs. Jackson, but I can always count on you to keep your promises in spectacular fashion.”

“Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm,” he hummed sleepily.

“You better brace yourself, Mr. Jackson. If you think this was spectacular, wait until you see what I do the first night in our new house.”

His hum turned into a groan. “If it’s better than this, I’m a dead man. But what a way to go.”

She gripped his forearm where it lay heavily around her waist and scolded, “Don’t even think such things.” But when she closed her eyes, she didn’t sleep right away, too busy plotting ways to top spectacular.

Chapter 10

Candidate for the Glue Factory

The scorching heat of July on the high plains was almost unbearable, and the beginning of August brought no relief. Letty's sweat-dampened shirt and camisole clung to her body while the hair that had come loose from its knot stuck to her face and neck. The midday sun blazed down on her relentlessly as she hobbled stiffly to the nearest shade tree. The rough bark dug into her palms when she used the trunk to ease herself to the ground, but that was the least of her pain. Her feet ached from standing over the cookstove all morning. But the main cause of her agony right now was her bruised behind and aching lower back.

After she'd delivered lunch to the men running fence line in the southwest pasture, she was on her way back to the cabin when Sunshine, her ornery, ill-tempered, misnamed mare, got spooked by a prairie dog popping out of its hole. Her skittish mare reared on her hind legs, taking her by surprise, and the next thing she knew, she landed on her backside on the hard, sunbaked ground. If that wasn't bad enough, the ungrateful beast deserted her in a cloud of dust.

Now, here she was, stranded halfway between Henry and the cabin.

Wincing in pain as she shifted onto her unbruised hip, she muttered to the grass and trees and buzzing cicadas, the only things around for miles to hear. "I'll just rest for a spell until someone comes along."

It wasn't likely, though, at least not soon. She'd delivered enough biscuits and ham for their evening meal, too. They wouldn't miss her until they headed in at dark, leaving her with the choice of waiting until someone came looking for her or walking, neither of which was acceptable in her current condition.

As tears mingled with the beads of perspiration on her face, she let her head fall back against the tree. They weren't the first she'd shed since they packed up and left Virginia six months ago and wouldn't be the last. Unlike her husband and three boys who thought living like cowboys in the middle of nowhere was a grand adventure, she hated every minute of it. Of course, being outside from before daylight until after dark nearly every day and spending most of their time in the saddle, they were in their element. They loved sleeping outside by a campfire with the stars their only ceiling, and, while they didn't think building fences around the perimeter of what would be grazing land for cattle come spring was much of a lark, they did it without complaint. Anything to get them away from household chores and schoolwork.

The activity worked up their appetites and quite a stink. They would have fussed more about her insistence that they bathe before coming to supper reeking of sweat and horse and manure, if it didn't mean a trip to the creek and their favorite swimming hole. Henry had hung a rope swing from one of the trees as a reward for all their hard work and usually joined in on the fun at the end of the day.

Letty had enough creek bathing to last a lifetime while on the wagon train. And getting burns on her hands from a rope swing wasn't her idea of a good time. She was usually busy getting supper on the table while they were having their fun anyway. But what she wouldn't give for a night off from cooking. But there were no restaurants, like back home. The town wasn't much more than a collection of tents and makeshift buildings, the residents mostly men.

Rumors of the railroad coming through abounded and gave Letty hope that a return to civilization with friends, social engagements, and shopping so she didn't have to make everything from scratch—from soap to candles to butter—would soon be in her future. Henry felt sure it would, but he wasn't as optimistic about the timeline. With the war still raging and men to lay track scarce in these parts, he cautioned her not to get her hopes up. He was convinced no genuine progress would happen on the proposed transcontinental

railroad until the conflict between the North and South was settled.

In the meantime, a saloon and a bathhouse had come to the Laramie plains, but no church or school for her boys.

Even with the arrival of women to cater to the baser needs of the local men, they were still outnumbered ten to one, which left her without friends. As the ache in her lower back and tender posterior intensified, she added, with increasing dismay, without a family doctor, too.

She tried to nap to pass the time but was in too much pain. Even the simple act of answering the call of nature was a struggle, causing her stiff joints and sore muscles to ache even more. As the sun sank below the horizon, there was no sign of anyone coming to her aid, and she resigned herself to spending a night of misery beneath her tree.

Twilight was settling in when, in the distance, she heard barking. It sounded like Buddy. She whistled for him and called, "Here, Buddy! Here, boy!" then grimaced when even that little motion caused pain.

Squinting toward the horizon where she thought the sound was coming from, in the fading light, she thought she saw a cloud of dust appear above the next rise. Suddenly, the ground beneath her trembled with the thunderous gallop of horses.

But it looked like whoever it was came from the east. Or maybe she was turned around, or just delirious from pain and hunger and lack of water.

"Leticia," she heard faintly. When calls of, "Ma," followed, she sobbed with relief. Her rescuers had come for her after all.

Buddy reached her first. After a big slobbery lick, which she welcomed, he woofed, howled, and jumped around her, signaling to the others. Henry slid off his still-moving horse and raced toward her. He dropped onto his knees in the grass at her side.

"Where are you hurt?" he demanded briskly while running his hands over her legs, searching for broken bones.

“It’s not my legs, but my lower back and my sorely bruised post—” Cognizant of Heath, Luke, and Aaron circled around her, and several of the hands behind them, even in pain, Letty recalled her manners. “My sorely bruised pride,” she quickly amended.

“How long have you been out here?” he asked, gently running his thumb over her dry, cracked lips.

“Hours. I thought you’d never come.”

“Hand me a canteen,” he barked at the men. Three were offered instantly.

He had to hold it to her mouth, she was trembling so.

“Will it hurt if I carry you? We need to get you home.”

“Probably, but what choice do I have?”

Henry frowned. Clearly not liking her answer.

Carefully, he scooped her up and carried her to his horse. He shifted her to Heath, who passed her to him once mounted. All the jostling, although they tried to do it with care, had her moaning in pain.

“I can’t stand to see you hurting,” he said, with his lips against her temple. “We’ll go slow so as not to jar you.”

When they headed out, Aaron rode up alongside them.

“What happened, Ma? Were you thrown?”

“Yes. My ungrateful horse acted like she had never seen a prairie dog. Then she abandoned me.”

“She’s glue,” her husband threatened.

It was just like him, although he wouldn’t ever be so cruel to an animal. She would’ve laughed and called him out on his boldfaced lie, but it would have increased her agony.

“Please take me home, Henry,” she pleaded, her head lolling on his shoulder from exhaustion.

“I’ll have you there soon, darlin’. Don’t you fret.” To their sons, he ordered, “You boys ride on ahead and heat water for a bath.”

They immediately took off, but Henry had misunderstood. She didn't mean home to the cabin, or any point west of the Mississippi. No, what she wanted were the comforts of her childhood home, with all its familiar sights, sounds, and smells. She yearned for the featherbed they had shared for two decades, where she could sink into its softness and drift off to sleep. She wanted the hip bath that was connected to the heated cistern, where piped-in water flowed directly into the tub. It was so much less work than heating and lugging buckets of water. And she missed her friends and family who she could count on to lend a hand with the cooking and chores while she recovered.

None of that was possible, of course. The Dakota Territory was their future, no matter how much she hated it. She'd soldier on for Henry and the boys. She'd vowed for better or for worse after all. And there sure had been a lot of worse these past few months. But she couldn't imagine a day, even if she lived to be an old woman of 100, when she called the rustic, cramped, gloomy cabin in the wilds of the Dakota Territory home.

For the next week, she moved slowly, avoided sitting, and when she couldn't, put a plump pillow in her chair. Nothing was broken that she could tell, except perhaps a cracked tailbone. Henry, who helped her undress and bathe then put her to bed that night—facedown, which was the only position she could tolerate—wincing in sympathy when he got a good look at her backside.

“I know you're hurting. You've got a deep-purple bruise bigger than my fist.”

She was too stiff to twist and see and preferred not to anyway.

He stayed close to the cabin for the next few days, checking on her often because she had a hard time getting up from the bed or a chair. And he and the boys took over her chores because moving and bending were simply too painful.

By day four, still tender but moving better, she shooed him out and resumed her chores, albeit much slower than usual. But he didn't roam far that day, either, and surprised her by popping in to have lunch with her.

"I'm fine, Henry, really," she assured him, although she could get used to seeing him more during the day.

Letty frowned, hearing a high-pitched mew coming from nearby. "Did you hear that?" she asked, turning slowly in a circle as she scanned the floor. "It sounded like a cat."

"That's because it is a cat," he said, easing his hat away from his chest. The mews became instantly louder. "Or a kitten, I should say."

Moving faster than she had in days, she crossed to him and peered over the wide brim into the crown. Sky-blue eyes in a gray-and-black striped face gazed up at her.

"Meow," the tiny kitten cried.

"Oh, Henry, she's so pretty," she crooned as she scooped her up. "And so small. Is she weaned yet?"

"Not for another few weeks. Mama cat who took up residence in the barn was none too pleased when I took her away. After giving up Midnight, who would have been terrified of the trains, I thought you might like to have her for company here at the cabin. When she's ready to be on her own, that is."

Cuddling her close, she rubbed her chin over her downy-soft fur. "I've missed having a furry face around, and it makes me seem a little less batty if there's someone around when I'm talking to myself."

Laughing softly, he said, "I never noticed, and wouldn't dare say a word if I had."

"Thank you," Letty replied, straining on tiptoe to plant a kiss on the underside of his chin.

His arm came around her waist, keeping her close. "The smile on your face when you saw her was worth it. I noticed

you're no longer grimacing when you move. I think you're really on the mend."

She nodded. "Just don't ask me to go riding anytime soon, and never again on Sunshine. Whoever picked her name is a poor judge of horseflesh."

He scratched the mewling ball of fluff between the ears as he reminded her, "You did, I believe."

Letty sniffed, unwilling to debate with him when she was on the losing side of the argument. "I'll reserve judgement for a bit on this one. Kitty will do in the meantime."

"That it will. Cuddle her one more time so I can get her back to her mama."

With one last cheek rub and gentle squeeze, she relinquished her new pet to her thoughtful, always considerate husband.

Chapter 11

What Else Could Possibly Go Wrong?

January 1864

Letty peered through the frost-covered windowpane and, like the other twenty times she'd done so today, her heart sank at the sight. The snowstorm had swept down from the mountains during the night and transformed the golden remnants of fall into a frozen, bleak landscape. The once-familiar surroundings were now buried under a thick blanket of snow.

As the logs crackled and hissed, she felt the fire's radiating warmth on her face, but, despite its comforting glow, the rest of her was chilled to the bone. The howling wind outside rattled the shutters, sending a shiver down her spine. She pulled her woolen shawl tighter around her shoulders, trying to ward off the biting cold that permeated the air, but she couldn't get warm.

Henry and the boys should be returning soon, likely frozen solid. Chores didn't stop because of the snow. Animals still needed tending, even more so when the bitter winds blew. She had a stew simmering on the stove and biscuits in a basket keeping warm on top, waiting for them.

A chill raced up her spine as a ferocious gust shook the cabin. The storm outside grew fiercer by the minute, as if nature itself was preparing for battle. Letty's heart raced with a sense of foreboding that they were about to face another challenge in their homesteading journey.

As the light of day faded, she moved around the cabin, lighting the oil lamps. She was adjusting the wick in the last of the three when she heard deep male voices and footsteps crunching through the snow. Luke burst through the door, followed by Heath, Aaron, and Buddy, with her husband, bringing up the rear. As they entered, they brought with them a gust of chill wind and a flurry of snowflakes. Water dripped

from their coats, pooling onto the wooden floor, leaving wet footprints in their wake. She'd put a rug down, but they didn't notice, and she didn't care, relieved they were somewhere safe and warm for the night.

"Take off your boots, boy," Henry called. "No sense creating more work for your mother."

Luke hurried back to the door, sending her a sheepish glance, his cheeks ruddy from the cold. "Sorry, Ma. I'll mop it up."

"That's all right, dear. I'm sure you're frozen and hungry."

"What I am is thirsty," he exclaimed, hopping on one foot and then the other as he pulled off his boots. "Surrounded by water, but nothing to drink 'cause it's all frozen." Then he raced to the kitchen in his socks.

Letty approached her husband, reaching up to brush the snow from his hair. "Will the animals be all right in this cold?"

"They're sheltered in the barn, have plenty of hay, have been fed, and we thawed some water for them before we headed in. It likely won't stay that way, but they'll be fine until we do it all over again in the morning." He bent and kissed her cheek. "What's for supper, darlin'? I'm half starved."

"Pa!" Luke called from the kitchen where he stood staring at them from the sink. "I've pumped and pumped, but I'm not getting anything. The pipe from the well must have frozen up."

Letty, already accustomed to the challenges of their new life, rummaged through the kitchen cabinets, searching for a kettle and a pot. She instructed Heath and Aaron, who still had their boots on, "Before you boys get out of your wet things, gather some snow. We'll have to melt it on the stove for drinking, cooking, and washing."

Once the boys tromped back out into the cold, Letty approached her husband where he stood, warming himself in front of the fire. She raised a brow in silent communication, as if to ask *what else can go wrong?*

After so long together, he read her expression correctly. Shaking his head, a look of surprise on his face, he murmured, “I didn’t expect winter on the prairie to be this harsh. It must be the elevation.”

When Letty leaned into him, his hands instinctively encircled her waist, just as they had every day since their wedding. “I never saw anything like this back home, and we were *in* the mountains,” she said, her voice tinged with nostalgia.

Henry laughed, enveloping her in a hug. “They call these the high plains. You don’t notice it because of the long grade, but here in the West, we’re higher than Spruce Knob, the tallest peak near the farm. Compared to the Rockies, where this snow hails from, where we lived are mere ant hills.” He rocked her a moment, with his chin atop her head. “Do you think you’ll ever get to where you call this home instead of Virginia? Rather, West Virginia, now.”

“I hadn’t realized I did that.”

He turned her face up to his, one hand cupping her cheek. “I knew this would be harder on you than the rest of us. Other than this snowstorm, which is making them rather stir crazy—especially Luke—the boys are thriving.” He leaned down, resting his forehead against hers. “You’re stronger than you think. Once you’ve settled in, it won’t be long before you think of this as your home.”

Letty gazed into his eyes, seeing the confidence he had in his prediction and in her. She wished she felt as certain.

The blizzard raged outside, seemingly without end. Inside, the five of them gathered around the blazing fire in the hearth, trying to pass the time. Henry and Heath were reading by lamplight, Luke had stretched out on the braided rug in front of the fire for an after-supper doze, Buddy had joined him, and she and Aaron were playing a game of backgammon. He was trouncing her as usual.

But she didn't mind. She was content to lose because they were all spending time together.

Suddenly, Henry sat up straight. "Did anyone hear that?"

Letty stopped mid-roll and cocked her head, but the only sounds she made out were the crackling fire and the persistent howling wind.

"I heard something," Luke announced, sitting up, fully alert, not asleep as she'd assumed. "It was a creak, followed by a bang."

"A tree fell, maybe," Heath suggested, closing and setting aside his book.

Henry rose. "I better go check," he muttered, heading for the hooks by the front door where his heavy coat hung drying. "One of you boys come with me."

"I'll go, Pa," Luke said, hopping to his feet. "I'm bored half to death."

"You should try reading and expanding your mind," his older brother suggested.

"Yeah, reading. You know, that might actually help me fall asleep," her middle son quipped as he shoved his feet into his boots then pulled on his coat, scarf, and gloves and followed his father out in a swirl of snow and cold.

Not ten minutes passed before her husband stomped back inside. "Heath, Aaron, suit up for the cold. We've got a mess on our hands."

They didn't ask questions, just snapped to and started bundling up in their heavy garb. Letty followed Henry into the kitchen where he squatted in front of the cupboard under the sink, searching for something.

"What happened?"

"The barn roof collapsed," he grumbled. "It gave under the weight of the snow."

"Oh, no! Were any of the animals hurt?"

“They seem all right, but fallen timbers have trapped several, and I can’t be entirely sure.” He stood holding a second tool box he kept for inside repairs and a big bag of heavy nails. “We’ll be a while. A big pot of hot soup will help us thaw out when we get back.”

“I should come help,” she said, rushing toward the front door.

“No,” he ordered, in no uncertain terms. “It will go faster if we’re not worrying about you.”

“I’m not completely helpless, you know.”

His hand wrapped around the back of her neck, and he pulled her against him. “I didn’t mean to imply that you were. But you can’t lift those ceiling timbers. You tried during the barn raising, if you’ll recall. Stay here where I know you’re safe and warm. You can help by having hot water ready to melt your frozen men when we return.” Then he kissed her hard on the mouth and went to take care of yet another disaster.

Heath and Aaron followed him out, her youngest breaking the bad news to his dog before he shut the door. “Not this time, Bud. The snow is over your head,” he told him as he held the eager beagle back with his foot. “Keep Ma company.”

When he whimpered and whined, she patted her thigh and called him over. “It’s no fun being small and useless, is it?” she asked him as they sat forlornly by the fire.

Henry always liked her diminutive size, once calling her pint-sized, small enough to tote around and put wherever he wanted her. He certainly did that a lot when things got amorous between them. But at 5’4” she was average, except when compared to the men in her family.

He married the girl next door, a farmer’s daughter, but her mother raised a Southern lady. Sure, she knew how to milk cows, gather eggs, and muck out a horse stall, but she wasn’t supposed to let on that she did.

Now that he needed a pioneer wife, she wondered if he ever regretted not marrying someone strong and stout like

Amabelle Foster. Two years behind him in school to Letty's four, the girl had a huge crush on Henry growing up.

"I bet she can lift a ceiling timber," she muttered to the empty room.

The image of her husband trying to wrestle six-foot-tall Amabelle over his lap for a spanking made her chuckle. In a battle between the two, she'd put her money on Henry coming out on top, but it sure would be a sight to see.

Letty's eyes popped open at daybreak, as they always did. Snug and warm in her bed, with Henry's big heat-producing body pressed to her back, she didn't want to move. The wind still blew outside, but maybe not quite so fiercely. Otherwise, the cabin was quiet.

It was no wonder. All four Jackson men had worked well into the night. When they came in at 4 a.m., they were too tired to do anything other than strip out of their wet things and climb into bed.

"Did you get it fixed?" she asked as her husband stretched out by her side.

"We did. And Luke climbed up top and shoveled all the remaining snow off the roof." His eyes were closed, and she could tell he was fading fast when his mutter was barely intelligible. "We'll know better...what to do...next time."

Then his breathing turned deep and steady, and he was out like a light.

Since that was only two hours ago, she slipped out of bed, careful not to disturb him. She shivered as she pulled on her warmest clothes. Her first task was to add logs and build up the blaze, which had burned down to ash and glowing embers. But the logs in the metal basket they kept on the hearth were running low. The outside wood pile stacked along the side and rear walls of the cabin was higher than she was tall. Usually one of the boys replenished the supply, but she wasn't about to wake them for something she could do on her own.

With her boots laced up, woolen coat buttoned, mittens on, and scarf wound tightly around her face and neck, she grabbed the metal buckets they used to tote logs and headed outside. The wind cut through her clothes, despite all the layers, and the swirling snow stung her cheeks.

Everything was blinding white. As Letty squinted against the brightness, she noticed a path dug out to the corner of the cabin. It forked, turning right to the woodpile—three rows of chopped logs wrapping around the side and half of the back of the cabin, stacked clear to the roof—and left to the barn, which she could barely make out in the distance. It had only been two hours since they'd come home, and only a faint outline of their footprints remained. In some spots, snow had blown over the path, obliterating them altogether. She followed it, grateful for her boots because she sank into snow up to her ankles. It was better than trudging through the mounds piled high on either side of the trail.

The weight of her skirt made each step more difficult. She supposed Henry was right about helping at the barn. She only would have been in the way.

Making two trips, she brought in enough logs to do until supper. But there were more chores to do. She didn't dare go to the barn and milk their two dairy cows, but it was past time to gather the eggs. Aaron had done it yesterday, and she'd spied a shoveled path leading to the henhouse. It was more snow-covered than the others, so she grabbed the shovel by the door, a jar of water in case the chickens' barrel was frozen, and her egg basket then headed out.

Her breath formed small clouds in the frigid air as she scooped snow and tossed it aside. This made for slow going to the chicken coop, but she finally made it. The six-foot ramp leading up to the elevated henhouse was icy, and she slipped a few times but made it to the top. Pausing to catch her breath, she marveled over how she could feel warm despite the bitter chill wind, but the exertion of shoveling had heated her up.

Glancing back on her path, she noted her footsteps were only indentions, most already covered with fresh snow. As she gazed out at the prairie, she took in the beauty and the silence

that enveloped her. But not for long. A powerful gust of wind, swirling the snow so she couldn't see the cabin, ended her reverie. She ducked inside the henhouse, glad for the protection it offered.

“Morning, ladies,” she called to a cacophony of clucking and squawking. “Believe me, I’m not much pleased with the weather myself.”

She checked the water jug and poured what hadn't frozen into their tiny trough, adding the warmer contents of her jar. Then she tossed them handfuls of feed. They had to eat or freeze in this weather. Last, she gathered the eggs, pleased to see there were enough for breakfast because her men, when they roused, would be ravenous.

“Huddle close and stay warm, girls,” she said as rewrapped her scarf and slipped on her mittens. “Going back shouldn't be nearly as bad as coming,” she muttered, as she braced for the cold and opened the door. Unfortunately, the wind was blowing harder, and the swirling snow was worse.

Letty squinted against the blinding snow, straining to make out the cabin a mere twenty-five yards away. Clutching the basket of precious eggs to her chest, she started carefully down the icy ramp. But she remembered the shovel she had propped by the door and turned back to retrieve it. The biting wind pushed against her with renewed force as she grabbed it with stiff, icy fingers. Eager to return to the warmth and safety of the cabin, she hastened down the ramp.

With her next step, something went awry. She lost her balance and the basket slipped from her grasp. Eggs flew up in the air, as did the shovel. Letty couldn't catch herself and went tumbling headfirst into the snow. Engulfed in cold, with snow seeping into her boots and under her skirt, she lay there stunned for a moment trying to comprehend what had happened. Unaccustomed to the winds that whipped the snow sideways, she must have misjudged her position and stepped off the ramp into a snowdrift.

She tried to right herself, but the more she struggled, the deeper she sank. In rising panic, she shouted for help. Muffled

by the snow, it was a wasted effort. Guessing which way was up, she burrowed desperately until her hand broke through the surface.

“Henry!” she cried through the hole, as she continued to dig.

The bitter cold crept into her bones, while dampness seeped into her heavy winter skirt, weighing her down farther. She imagined her life ending, frozen amid the raging storm, while her family slept blissfully unaware only yards away. She was determined for that not to happen. But every time she dug out an inch, more snow fell in on top of her. Out of breath, and with her strength fading, she sobbed in frustration as her hope waned.

“Leticia!”

She stilled, straining to hear. Was that Henry or her imagination?

“Letty, where are you?”

“Oh, thank heaven,” she breathed. “I’m here, by the henhouse, buried in snow over my head.”

“Letty!” he shouted again. His usually deep booming voice dampened by the wind.

Obviously not having been heard, she angled her head back and screamed his name for all she was worth through the fist-sized hole in the snow.

Moments later, his face appeared.

“I’m stuck,” she needlessly explained.

“Grab hold,” he ordered while extending an arm through the hole.

But more snow covered her when she did and, when he drew her up, no more than an inch, the sides of the air pocket crumbled and fell in on top of her. She lost her grip and slid back to where she started.

Using his hands like shovels, he carved out an opening for her to breathe.

“I’m getting the rope. Try not to move, Letty. This drift is six feet on top of the two on the ground. I don’t want it to cave in farther.”

She didn’t nod or speak, her heart clenched painfully when his beloved face disappeared.

It seemed like hours before he returned and dropped a rope, with a loop on the end, down to her.

“Try to get your arms and head through,” he shouted over the whistling wind.

It wasn’t easy, but she did it. Although with all her wiggling, the air hole collapsed, covering her once again. To signal she was ready, she tugged on the rope, freezing and desperate to get free of her icy prison.

Slowly, the slack on the rope disappeared then, inch by slow inch, he pulled her out and onto the ramp where he stood. Immediately, he scooped her into his arms. Letty clung to him, her body shaking from the cold. He turned his back to the wind, shielding her.

“Are you all right?” he asked, nearing a shout to be heard.

Tears welled up in Letty’s eyes as she nodded. “I’m fine. Just—”

“No more talking,” he ordered as he moved down the ramp. “We can do that once I have you inside and get you warm.”

A few minutes later, he burst through the cabin door, barking orders. “Bring blankets and throw more wood on the fire. And someone set some water to heating. She’ll need to soak in a hot tub to thaw out.”

He set her down by the hearth and quickly stripped off her sodden woolen coat. Her blouse was dry underneath, so he left it and wrapped her in the blanket Heath shoved into his hands. Next came her skirt and petticoat, but when his fingers went to the drawstring of her quilted draws, she stopped him.

“The boys,” she protested through quivering lips.

“You’re trembling with cold. Besides, they won’t see nothing with the blanket.”

“Leave them,” she insisted.

“Boys, turn your backs so I can strip off your ma’s soaked clothes.”

They did an about-face and, not accepting any more of her protests, he tackled her drawers. The drawstring was wet and knotted. With a blistering oath, he broke it in two, but the stockings and boots she still wore thwarted his efforts at removing them. He sat with her in his lap and dealt with those, too.

Despite the thick blanket and the blazing fire, she couldn’t stop shivering, her teeth chattering loudly.

“Bring me the quilt off our bed,” he ordered, which one of the boys instantly produced. Henry tucked it around her legs and feet then rubbed her vigorously all over.

“What happened?” he asked gruffly.

“I got turned around in the whiteout and must have stepped off in the wrong direction.”

“Easy to do,” he said with a nod. “But why were you outside when I told you to stay put?”

“There were chores—”

“Which me and the boys were handling.” He waved his arm toward them. “Look at us. We’re double your size, weight, and strength, Leticia. You have no business out in a blizzard. I worried the worst would happen, and, sure enough, it did.”

“I was going to fetch the eggs, Ma,” Heath said quietly. “With a guide rope to help me find my way back.”

“Anyone would get turned around in that whipping snow and wind. That’s the reason for the rope,” Aaron explained. Her baby boy knew winter-on-the-prairie survival skills, but not her, making her feel like an idiot.

“No one told me about that.”

“There was no reason to with you staying inside, woman.”

“But Henry—”

He held up his hand, having heard enough. “Grab those buckets and fill the tub,” he directed the boys. “Then see to your chores.”

There wasn't enough room in their bedroom for the tub. For her to bathe, they had to go to the loft or leave the cabin.

Wordlessly, they did the latter, following their father's orders. Once the door closed behind them, Henry unwrapped her and stripped her remaining clothes from her body.

“I can do it,” she protested.

“No, you can't. You're chilled, your hands are shaking, and you're practically blue from the cold.”

When he set her down in the tub, the water felt scalding to her frozen skin, especially her toes, but she sank into it anyway.

He took up a cup. “Lean your head back. Your hair is like ice.”

As he rinsed it, the warmth felt good on her scalp. Next, he lathered the soap between his hands then washed her everywhere, vigorously chafing her skin, returning the blood flow to her frozen body.

“That feels wonderful. You always take such good care of me.”

He was silent, continuing his ministrations until the warmth left the water. Lifting her from the tub, he towed her dry, rubbing until she was rosy pink then rewrapped her in their quilt. He carried her back to the chair in front of the fire and sat with her in his lap.

As he rocked her, the crackling flames in the hearth cast long shadows on the walls and ceilings. The way they flickered and danced mirrored Letty's unease at her husband's unusual silence.

“Are you warm now?” he asked at length.

“Yes. I'm nice and toasty.”

“You’re sure? The chills and shivers are gone?”

“I’m sure. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me too soon.”

In a flash, she found herself face down over his lap. Without fully unwrapping her, he flipped the quilt up to her waist and then his hand set her bottom on fire.

“Henry!” she screeched in surprise. “I was only trying to help.”

“I know you were. This spanking is because you’re reckless and headstrong and won’t listen to a damn thing I say.” He didn’t slow as he scolded, keeping up the fiery, open-handed offensive on her tender backside. “One of these days, your stubbornness is going to get you killed.”

Just as quickly as she was upended, she was upright, staring into brown eyes that were ablaze with anger and fear.

“No more going off on your own into dangerous situations. You will follow your husband’s orders for your own good, like it or not. Or you’ll find your bottom so thoroughly blistered you’ll have to stand to take your meals. Is that understood?”

Her mouth fell open. Except for playful swats and lusty ones while in bed, he hadn’t spanked her for real in years. “I... uh...”

“The only answer I want to hear is ‘Yes, Henry. I understand.’”

She repeated it word for word in a whisper.

Suddenly, he crushed her to his chest, fingers in her hair tugging her head back. His lips descended, devouring hers. In between his desperate kisses, he murmured into her mouth. “We traveled 1,500 miles to start a new life. I’ll be damned if me and the boys will lose you now that we’re here. Do you hear me, woman?”

She couldn’t help but hear with him growling in her ear. But she didn’t dare say that. Although she’d been trying to do a good deed, she was a greenhorn when it came to pioneer

survival skills, and she'd scared him enough that he was shaking.

"I hear you, Husband, and I'm sorry for frightening you. I pretty well frightened myself."

He was rocking her in his arms, squeezing her tight, when the boys came plodding back inside. If they had arrived ten minutes earlier, they would have been privy to a side of their mother they wouldn't soon forget, if ever.

"Is she all right, Pa?" Heath asked.

"She seems to be." He rose with her in his arms. "I'm tucking her into bed where she's staying all day. One of you men put the soup on the stove to heat. We can have that for breakfast."

"The eggs," she breathed. "There were two dozen at least."

"If I never see another damn egg, or a chicken, it will be too soon," he grumbled as he carried her to their bed.

Chapter 12

Another First

April 1864

Spring had arrived in the high plains. The mornings were still chilly, but when the sun rose high in the sky at midday, it was warm enough to forgo a jacket, and the men, who were hard at work, rolled up their shirtsleeves. Best of all, the snows of winter were behind them.

Returning from a few errands in town, Henry went directly to the cabin and tied his horse's reins around the porch railing.

"Letty! You'll never guess the news I just heard," he called as he burst through the door. When he didn't find her in the main room or the kitchen, he checked their bedroom. It was empty, too. He'd passed the garden on his way in with no sign of her. "Maybe in the loft?" he muttered to himself.

But when he climbed a few rungs up the ladder, high enough to take a peek, he still didn't find her. He hopped down and bellowed louder, "Letty! Where in tarnation are you, woman?"

This time he heard a faint reply. "I'm on the back porch."

Of course. He should've known to look there. The back of the cabin faced east, and the porch was shaded by trees. It was the coolest place to be in the afternoon. He had placed the rocking chair he bought for her there. It was near identical to the one she had in the nursery when the boys were babies, and she had mentioned how much she missed not having it anymore.

"I've got news. A surveyor from the unit Union Pacific railroad was through here last week. Didn't I tell you? The railroad is coming through Laramie."

"Where?" she asked, head down as she folded one of two letters Heath had fetched from town yesterday. Princess, not

yet a year old but well on her way to becoming a good-sized cat didn't make it easy, taking up nearly all of her lap while napping.

“The town. That's what folks are calling it. I'm guessing it's gonna stick.”

She nodded, her gaze on her hands as she tucked the folded stationery into the envelope. The stage ran regularly through the settlement, and posts from back East from her friends came at least once a month.

“You don't seem as excited as I thought you'd be. You're quiet. Are you ill?”

“I'm fine. It's splendid news.”

Frowning because she hadn't once met his gaze, he moved in front of her chair and crouched down. He nudged Princess awake, who hopped down with a loud thud and an indignant meow then slunk away.

Henry clasped Letty's hands in his. “Look at me, darlin'.”

When she did, her cheeks were streaked with tears and her lashes spiky and wet. “What's wrong? And don't give me that cock-and-bull story of being fine. Clearly, you are not.”

“The news from home, and of the war, isn't good.”

He slid the letter from her fingers. Seeing her uncle's return address, he asked, “May I?”

She nodded and sniffled.

He read for a minute, the news as dismal as she said.

“So many of our friends and neighbors have been lost and injured. When will it end? I feel guilty that we left it behind us, but at the same time, I'm relieved Heath's name isn't on Uncle Freddy's growing list of friends and family killed in action.”

As he scanned the two dozen names, his heart grew heavy, too. Henry handed the letter back to her, but before she could put it away, his fingers enveloped her wrist, and he tugged her

to her feet. He seated himself in her chair and pulled her into his lap.

“We may not be in the thick of things, but the cows we’ll sell at market will feed people back East. Ours is a long-term investment and will provide even after the damn war is over.”

She laid her hand on his cheek. “I’m not faulting you or our decision. Stay, go, fight, farm, whatever the choice during a time such as this has to be questioned right or wrong.”

“Who is your other letter from?”

“It’s actually several in one—from my friends.” She sniffled again. “I miss them terribly.”

“You’re homesick. That’s why you’re so melancholy.”

She nodded. “I suppose. And I worry for them. Uncle Freddie says the town has been raided by Confederate-backed guerrillas, and they fight mean. Crops have been burned, homes decimated—”

“The farm?”

She shook her head. “It’s still standing. According to Freddie, the new owner is a rebel sympathizer. He figures that’s why it has been left untouched. If it had belonged to Henry Jackson, who fought with an anti-secession militia, it would be ash and cinder like so many others.”

They fell silent. No wonder she’d been crying.

With his lips against her temple, he asked, “What can I do to cheer you up. It hurts my heart when you’re not happy.”

“I don’t know,” she said with a sigh.

“The town will grow overnight, once the train comes through.”

Her head fell back against his shoulder. Looking up at him, she asked, “When will that be?” But he could tell from her expression she already knew the answer.

“Several years, I’m afraid.”

He hugged her close and rocked her until her tears subsided.

“I’ve got other news. The reason I was in town was to speak to a few experienced drovers. We’ve taken nearly a year to prepare. With the buildings up, the corrals built, and the fence lines in place to keep the cattle from straying, we’re ready to expand the herd.”

“What are you saying, Henry?”

“It’s cattle-drive time. We leave in three days.”

“Another adventure,” she replied. “I’m sure you and the boys will have a grand time.”

“As will you because you’re coming with us.”

Letty sat up so fast, he barely avoided her head clipping his jaw.

“You’re not serious.”

“Trust me, I am.”

She gazed up at him like he’d sprouted a second head. “What could I possibly contribute? I know nothing about roping or herding cows. And frankly, I don’t want to. No,” she replied without mincing words. “I’ll stay here and plant my garden.”

It was his turn to stare at her completely dumbfounded. “You can’t mean to stay here all alone.”

“I don’t see why not. I’m here by myself from daylight to dark most days anyway,” she reminded him.

He knew she didn’t like the long hours she spent alone while he and the boys worked. It was why he’d gotten her the cat. She had one back home, and was fond of Princess, but meows were no substitute for human conversation. The evenings were busy. After supper, Luke and Aaron had their lessons, since there wasn’t anything resembling a school in the settlement. By the time they were done, and she’d cleaned up after supper, Henry was usually fast asleep in their bed. But he took exception to her implication that he left her alone and unprotected.

“There’s always someone around, whether it’s me, the boys, or one of the hands. All you have to do is ring the bell and we’ll come running. If word got out we were on a drive and left you here by yourself, some folks, not the good kind, might get ideas.”

“How would they know if we don’t tell them?”

“You’re not staying on the ranch for six weeks or more by yourself.”

“Six weeks! Where do you have to go to buy cows?”

“I’ve corresponded with a rancher in Northwestern Kansas who’s giving me a fair price on fifty head of cattle. We’re fortunate to find someone so close. Most drives through the plains take four or five months.”

“Kansas,” she breathed. “That’s hundreds of miles.”

“The five cows and bull we have now are barely a start,” Henry went on. “If we want to grow, we need to add to the herd, and eventually nature will take over.”

“How many more?”

“Two hundred, to start.”

“Dear heavens. You’ll need more than one bull,” she quipped. “Trying to breed that many cows will wear the poor thing out!”

Her cheeks flushed at where her thoughts had taken her.

When she dared to look at him, his mood had shifted. “Don’t you worry,” he said, lips twitching with amusement. “I’ll get him some stiff competition.”

“Henry!” she exclaimed, her hands flying to her scalding face as he chuckled. She attempted to turn the conversation back to the matter at hand and grumbled, “I feel like I just got off the trail, and here we are, heading back out.”

“That was a year ago, Letty.”

She sniffed. “That may be, but my backside has yet to recover.”

His hand glided over her hip to one of his favorite parts of her anatomy. “If you don’t quit your griping, I have an idea how to toughen it up,” he warned, squeezing firmly.

Letty closed her eyes and sighed. When had her decisions truly been her own? First, her father decreed what she should do, and now Henry was the one pulling the strings. If it was that way in civilized Virginia, why would she expect it to be any different out in the middle of nowhere?

Already knowing his answer, she wasn’t sure why she bothered asking, “Do I have a choice?”

“You can cut a switch or stop being so bristly,” he replied in a no-nonsense tone, his patience at an end. After a pause, and a deep breath, he continued more gently, “Look at me, darlin’.”

When she met his gaze, the warmth in his deep-brown eyes transported her back to the moment they first fell in love all those years ago. He’d always had the power to melt her heart, even when they were at odds, and she suspected he always would.

“The town is growing, Letty. Soon the railroad will be here —”

“Yes, yes. That’s what you keep saying—” she cut in, earning her a pinch. Through all the layers, it didn’t hurt, but she yelped all the same.

“In a few years, you’ll get your shops, your school, your church, a social calendar that I know you miss, and, best of all, when the Union Pacific runs through Laramie, there will be no need for cattle drives.”

“I won’t have to go trudging around the prairies anymore?”

“Nope,” he agreed, his captivating smile flashing, “And neither will I.”

That was something. Still, a few years might as well be an eternity, but it wasn’t his fault.

“I’m sorry for the way I’ve been acting. I just thought my dusty, sweaty, prairie days were over. At least I won’t have to cook. Who did you get for the chuck wagon?”

“Uh...”

“You got someone, right? All cattle drives have a Cookie.”

“Well...” he drawled, and she barely stifled a groan, knowing what was coming. “For this first one, which is short and only one way since we’re picking up cattle and driving them back, I was counting on it being you.”

The sound that came from her throat was a combination of exasperation, distress, and anticipatory fatigue. When they arrived in Laramie last spring, she’d thought she’d burned her final skillet of cornbread and singed the last finger cooking over a campfire. That’s what she got for thinking.

“Are you sure I can’t stay home? You’re leaving a hand to care for the livestock, surely.”

“Andy Harmon,” he grunted. “He’s a decade older than Aaron and nowhere near as trustworthy. The other hands are more experienced, and I’ll need them with me, so he’s the best I’ve got. Barely trusting him to look after a half dozen cows. I sure as shit don’t trust him to look after you.”

“Don’t be crude, Henry.” Her husband’s colorful, often salty talk didn’t bother her. But raising three impressionable boys, her response to it had become automatic. It was his talking about her like she was a child needing tending that got her back up. “I’m thirty-seven and can fend for myself. I can also handle a shotgun as, unfortunately, I’ve proven. I don’t need to be looked after.”

“As your husband, who you vowed to love, honor, and obey—emphasis on that last one—nearly twenty years ago, I say that you do. For your safety, and my peace of mind.”

She wrinkled her nose at his master-of-all-he-surveys arrogance. Then a thought occurred to her. She laid her hands on his chest and smiled sweetly up at him while sharing it. “If you trust Aaron more than Andy, leave him here with me.”

“Like trying to scratch your ear with your elbow, that’s not happening, Leticia.”

“Why?” she asked, crossing her arms and frowning at him. “He’s bigger than most of your men, and shoots better from the way you all talk.”

“He might look like a full-grown man, but he’s still got a few years before getting there.”

“Yes, but—”

When his open hand came down hard on her backside, she let out a small shriek. Not from pain—she had three layers of padding: drawers, a petticoat, and her skirt—but from the start he’d given her.

“No more arguments. You’re going,” he said sternly. With his spanking hand covering both bottom cheeks, and the other cupping her chin, he tipped her face and kissed her long and hard and deep. When they broke apart, he set her on her feet and rose to his. He lifted his wide-brimmed black hat and combed his hair back with his fingers. When he clapped it on his head again, he decreed, “Be ready to leave in three days. Subject closed.”

A little winded, she watched him saunter away—broad shoulders, lean hips, an exquisite backside that a lady shouldn’t dwell upon—as fit and handsome as the day she’d married him.

They had grown up together, his family’s farm butting up against theirs. Despite being the youngest of three brothers, he had an easy confidence, and walked with a swagger from the time he was twelve. It came as no surprise what kind of man she was getting when she had said, “I do.”

Well, almost.

His ability to render her brain nonfunctional with a kiss, a playful wink, or a smile, and the many bawdy things he did to her in their bedroom was unexpected. Especially those wonderfully naughty things that left her breathless and wanting more. And never in her wildest dreams would she

have imagined enjoying a lusty swat on her bare backside at the height of their passion.

Letty sighed, something she often did around her husband. “Why couldn’t I have fallen in love with a meek, malleable sort of man?”

With the taste of him lingering on her lips, and her body craving more of his touch after he was gone from sight, she had her answer.

Chapter 13

Imagine it's a Rattlesnake.

Letty pulled her wool coat closer around her. It was supposed to be rain resistant. At least that's what the shop owner in Roanoke where she'd purchased it had claimed. But she was doubtful any fabric, specially coated or otherwise, could repel the deluge they'd endured since leaving Silverbend three days ago. She glanced up, hoping to see a break in the clouds, but all she saw was pervasive gray. She also got doused down her back from the water pouring off the brim of her hat for her troubles.

If given the choice between being baked in the sun until crispy or being drowned and half frozen in the saddle during a monsoon, hands down, Letty would choose the former. She couldn't remember ever being so miserable.

The chill of the rain had seeped into her bones, and she doubted if she would ever feel warm and dry again. But as they were setting up evening camp, the sun finally emerged from behind the clouds. Except it was rapidly descending toward the mountains on the horizon.

Letty knew she had to act fast before the darkness set in.

Henry had ridden ahead to scout with one of the drovers, so she advised Heath.

"I'm going to wash up by the creek and get water for coffee," she told him. He looked at her then toward the water's edge, which was down a slope but within sight of camp, and nodded.

"All right, Ma. But stay where we can see you."

"I won't be long," she replied and hurried with a pail in one hand and a bar of soap in the other to the nearby creek bank.

Dropping to her knees in the grass, she dipped and filled her bucket then cupped her hands for a drink. It was cool and clear and tasted so good, she went back for seconds and thirds. By the time she'd had her fill, another need arose.

Not far up the bank was an outcropping of rocks and tall bushes, which would give her the privacy she needed but was still in sight of camp if she stood on her toes.

With the sun on her face for a change, she peeled off her damp, clinging blouse and spread it on a rock, hoping the last few fingers of sunlight—reds and pinks and oranges streaking across the western sky—would dry it out a bit.

After tending to nature's call, she washed quickly in the cool water then settled onto the grassy bank, soaking up the last rays of warmth on her tired and battered body. The respite was short-lived, however. Supper duties loomed, and she headed back to retrieve her blouse.

As she reached for it, she heard an ominous sound. She'd never encountered a rattlesnake before, but she didn't need to be an expert to recognize what it was.

Instinct propelled her backward as a startled shriek escaped her lips.

When the snake slithered out from under the rocks and moved in her direction, without a second thought, she whirled and fled, the abandoned bucket and blouse forgotten in her haste. With a burst of frightened energy from somewhere down deep, she ran...and ran, until she had to halt to catch her breath. She bent at the waist, pressing her hand to the pain in her side and laughing at how silly it was to think it could have followed her this far.

Standing upright again, still slightly winded, a grim realization washed over her. She didn't know the direction back to camp or even to the creek. She turned in a circle then listened hard, but she didn't hear water or voices or neighing horses. Drawing on her best estimation, she ventured due east, hoping it would lead her back to familiarity.

The minutes that passed felt like hours. Her heart pounded with anxiety as dusk set in.

“Henry?” she called tentatively, hoping he would hear rather than some wild critter eager for a meal, or the two-legged kind who wasn’t part of their group.

Twigs snapped, and leather creaked behind her. She spun, hopeful and frantic, then her shoulders slumped as a driver who had hired on to help them with their first cattle drive approached on horseback.

He let out a shrill, two-fingered whistle. “We’ve been searching for you, Mrs. Jackson. We heard you scream some time back. Are you all right?”

“I happened upon a rattlesnake. I’m embarrassed to say I ran like the devil was after me and got lost.”

When he kept averting his gaze, she realized she stood before him half dressed. The cowboy’s whistle summoned more help, and soon Henry and their sons rode up. A look of exasperation quickly overtook the initial relief on her husband’s face. He dismissed the others, directing his focus solely on her.

“Criminy, Leticia. What possessed you to run off half dressed?”

“A snake possessed me. I didn’t mean to run off, but I panicked.” Her cheeks flamed twice as much at her admission this time. She didn’t admit she’d gotten lost, however.

He dismounted, a swath of white cloth gripped in his fist. “Which is why we found your blouse on the creek bank.”

“I was drying it while I washed up.”

Henry pinched the bridge of his nose as he let out a long, drawn-out, much-aggrieved sigh. “You should’ve had someone accompany you as a guard.”

“It was only a few paces away from camp. At least at the beginning. Besides, you had ridden out. Who would I have asked? The boys? Or one of the new hands to come along and kindly turned their back while I bathed?”

His patience frayed at the edges. “No, you should’ve waited for me. Or at least carried a darned gun.”

She shook her head, resolute. “I can’t, not after...”

“Darlin’.” His tone softened instantly. Drawing near, she read the understanding conveyed in his gaze. “This isn’t Silverbend, and it sure as hell isn’t Virginia. It’s untamed and dangerous. You can’t venture off, especially unarmed.”

Henry assisted her back into her blouse then withdrew his pistol. Letty’s eyes widened at the sight of the firearm. “What are you doing?”

“You’re reasonably skilled with a rifle and shotgun, but drawing and firing a pistol is faster when facing a rattler or a human snake.”

Her admission followed a pregnant pause. “I’ve never fired a pistol, and really don’t want to.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” he assured her, adding with unwavering determination, “And I’m not giving you a choice.”

“But it’s nearly dark!”

“Bad guys and danger rarely walk up, pretty as you please, in broad daylight. There’s enough light to get in several rounds.”

With the sun having dipped behind the peaks in the west, and streaks of its remaining light painting the sky with warm hues, her shooting lesson commenced.

When Henry handed her the pistol grip first, its weight felt heavy in her hand. “Why does it feel like we’ve done this before?”

“Because we have. Several times.”

“If I didn’t learn then, what makes you think this time will be different?”

“Because trouble finds you, woman. It’s high time you learned to defend yourself against the likes of snakes and bandits.”

He stood close, arms around her from behind. “Now, the first thing you do is hold it steady, and aim down the sight. And, for heaven’s sake, keep both eyes open.”

“Easier said than done,” Letty muttered as she squinted at... He hadn’t picked a target. “What am I aiming at?”

“It doesn’t matter. I just want you to get the feel of the recoil.”

She fired once, at a tree in the distance, the kick of the gun throwing her backward, but Henry was there, big and strong and unwavering, to catch her.

“Put your feet one in front of the other to distribute your weight. Don’t stiffen up; absorb the recoil with soft knees. Now, focus on that tree. Imagine it’s a rattlesnake. Or better yet, that pesky fly that’s been buzzing around camp every evening.”

With a deep breath, Letty squared her shoulders and aimed at the tree, her grip steady. “All right, fly. Consider yourself evicted.”

She squeezed the trigger, and the sharp crack of gunfire echoed through the air. But the tree remained unscathed.

His laughter boomed as he patted her back. “You missed the tree, but I reckon the fly’s probably packing its bags.”

Letty frowned, her competitive spirit ignited. “To be sure, I better try that again.”

She spent the next quarter hour shooting, with Henry reloading and providing patient guidance.

“Make this the last round,” he said, as darkness descended.

Going through the steps he’d drummed into her, she took a deep breath, her hands steady, feet apart, one in front of the other, eyes open, and squeezed the trigger once more. This time, a small branch on the target tree fell to the ground.

Her husband whooped with delight. “I do believe you scared that fly into another county! But aim for the trunk this time.”

“I was,” she drawled, after clearing her throat.

“Adjust a few inches down on the sights and try again,” he urged with unflagging patience.

She shot three times, missing completely. But on the last round in the six shooter, she finally planted lead in her target, bark fragments flying up as it embedded in the wood.

“I did it, Henry! Did you see?”

“Indeed, I did,” he replied. “You’re getting the hang of it. Not necessarily your aim, but during those last four shots, I wasn’t holding you up and keeping your pretty little backside from landing in the dirt.”

She glanced over to where he stood alongside her. When had he moved?

“That was the point of lesson one,” he told her, as he took the gun and reloaded. This time, he slid it back into his holster.

“Can you guess what lesson two is?”

Before she could reply, he bent her over his upraised thigh and lit into her backside with his hard, flat palm.

“Not to run off alone!” she cried as he whaled away.

“Such a bright girl, which is why I know we won’t be repeating this lesson, will we?”

“No. I’ll wait for you or bring a pistol.”

He smacked harder and faster. Through her skirt, petticoat, and drawers, he had to for her to feel it.

“You got that half right,” he muttered.

“I’ll wait for you!” she exclaimed immediately.

Henry grunted. Not completely satisfied yet, he landed two more swats. Then he flipped her upright, pulled her up on her toes, and bent until they were nose to nose.

“If, god forbid, you were snake bit, injured, taken, or killed, I’d be very upset with you, Mrs. Jackson,” he stated huskily. “How would I go on, or the boys? The reason you’re

here now is so I can protect you. But you sure as hell don't make it easy. Do not run off again."

She hadn't run until after the snake, but now was not the time to quibble. "I won't. I promise. I regret having worried you."

In what little light remained, he searched her gaze then nodded. The next instant, his brawny arms encircled her, and thoughts of snakes, shooting lessons, and spankings flew clear out of her head when his mouth covered hers in a searing kiss.

As they rode back to camp, Letty leaned against her husband's chest and figured he'd let her off easy by not tossing up her skirt. Despite his highhanded ways, she knew he loved her deeply and only punished when she put herself in danger. Like now and with the snowdrift fiasco.

She needed to stop doing that and scaring him and their boys. She'd been over his knee in the past year almost as much as in their first year of marriage when she was trying to find her way as a new wife. Now, an experienced old wife, she was trying to find her way in the untamed wilderness, as a green pioneer. And, 1,500 miles from home, she couldn't run to Mama like she had as a new bride when he paddled her backside for almost setting the house on fire.

After he punished her—*hoping common sense would seep through her hard skull*—he'd hugged her close, and kissed her senseless, unfurling a tingling warmth low in her belly. Funny how after a paddling, things often got amorous.

Surely that wasn't the reason she did what she did. Or was it?

She wiggled in the V of his thighs, her backside pressed firm against the hardness rising in the front of his trousers.

Henry's arm clamped around her waist, stilling her. "Whatever you're thinking, it will have to wait until we climb into our bedrolls. We've got chores, and you've got supper to cook."

She wriggled again.

"Leticia," he drawled in warning.

But she was a slow learner, or had a thicker than average skull, and did it again. This time, the bottom curve of her breasts brushed his forearm. With a growl, he reined in by a stand of trees and dismounted, taking her with him.

Expecting to be bare-arsed and bent over for another spanking, she was surprised when he pushed her up against the trunk. Her skirt and one thin petticoat went up, and so did one leg, draped at the knee over his forearm. This separated the split seam of her drawers.

In a blink, the head of his hard shaft found the warm, wet sanctuary in between. His tongue swept into her mouth. Then she moaned and pumped her hips and acted the wanton as her husband took her hard, fast, and wonderfully hungry against a sumac in the wilds of eastern Colorado.

During their second attempt at riding back to camp, Letty rode behind him, her cheek resting against the middle of his broad back. Her heart swelled knowing that despite twenty years, three children, and being a pain in his neck, she could still rouse his desire.

She also took pride in a newfound skill. She might not hit a wide tree at fifty paces, or the broad side of a barn point-blank just yet, but she'd conquered the recoil. The rest should be a piece of cake under Henry's skilled tutelage, and fun, since she'd need his arms around her to help aim.

Letty smiled. Maybe she didn't need to catch on quite so quickly.

Chapter 14

I'm Thinking Beef

The journey took them south of the Laramie Mountains and into Colorado. They traversed the high plains with the towering Rockies always on their right until they veered east toward Fort Tyler, the only trading post on their route. From there, it was much like Nebraska, tall grass for as far as the eye could see. But, to get there, they had to cross the South Platte River. Upon first sight, Letty's heart pounded. It looked as wide as the Mississippi, which they'd crossed by ferry.

Despite Henry's assurances, and much to her surprise, it was only three or four feet deep. But beneath the silt-obscured waters were quicksand bars and mud that could doom a wagon or horse in unskilled hands. The first crossing had been uneventful, Letty following her husband's horse exactly across the slow-moving water. On their return, driving 200 head of cattle, the heavy spring rains and snowmelt had swelled the water high on its banks and the current raced with a newfound ferocity.

At the shallowest point they could find, the men drove the cattle across first. Often, they had to get in and lead the reluctant cows across. Letty watched Henry from the bank, fear swelling within her. But also, admiration. Although take-charge and confident in this task as with everything he did, she found it hard to believe this was his first cattle drive. Still, in the time it took to get the herd to the other side, Letty had chewed her fingernails to the quick.

When only she and the boys, and the chuck wagon remained, he approached her, soaking wet. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Her gaze shifted from the quick-flowing water back to him. "On Sunshine, not in a million years." She leaned forward and patted her much more docile and cooperative mare's neck. "But I have faith in Serenity."

He curled his hand around her knee and squeezed. “Once I drive the chuck wagon across, I can come back and ride with you.”

“You’d have to swim across, which is another trip after you’ve already made so many. I did this once.” The water wasn’t nearly as deep or as fast though. She shook her head, determined. “I can do it again.” Letty leaned down, laying her hand on his scruffy jaw. “But your china doll thanks you for the offer.”

He wrapped his hand behind her neck and pulled her down the few extra inches needed for his lips to meet hers. When he released her, their eyes connected for several heartbeats before he gave the boys their orders. “Surround your ma and follow me.”

She entered the water with Heath on one side, his expression a mirror of his father’s determination and Aaron on the other, his eyes wide with awe at the rushing river. Luke, ever the adventurous spirit, took up the rear with a grin on his face. Ahead of them, the wagon rocked, the pots and pans hanging from the metal supports swinging wildly, but under her husband’s guidance, it moved steadily forward through the turbulent waters.

Letty’s heart clenched with unease, as the murky Platte rose higher the farther they went. A fourth of the way, the water reached her boots. Halfway, it reached her saddle, startling in its coldness. Serenity must have sensed her tension because she snorted and tossed her head.

Shouts arose from the men on the far bank.

“Watch out!”

“Debris!”

“Tree!”

When she looked up, she spotted a large branch upstream, heading straight for them.

Heath grabbed her horse’s bridle and shouted, “Move forward!”

Even skittish, Serenity followed in step with his horse. But the wagon was in the way, and to avoid the debris, they had no choice except to go around it. Aaron, on her right, kept pace. She thought they were in the clear once they pulled alongside Henry, but the riverbed was less stable. Serenity stumbled, as did Scout, Aaron's gelding.

Before she could react, Letty was pitched forward, tumbling into the churning water. The chill and shock of being completely submerged stole her breath, but instinct took over, and she kicked for the surface.

She gasped for air when her head popped up.

"Ma!" Heath's panicked shout pierced through the roaring water.

Letty's heart clenched at the fear in her son's voice. In the next instant, all sounds became muffled as the river pulled her under once more.

Desperation clawed at her as she tried to swim, fighting against the current, but the river's strength was unyielding. She kicked and twisted and tried to swim to the surface, but her heavy, sodden skirts weighed her down. In seconds, her strength had severely diminished, her breath almost gone.

Suddenly, something yanked backward, another branch at the bottom, she feared, but instead of pulling her down, she was lifted. When her head emerged, she gulped precious air.

"I got you, Ma. Hold on!" Aaron called to her, sounding frantic as he struggled to keep his grip on her skirt.

The river's relentless force proved too much and dragged him beneath the surface along with her. He kicked hard, the strength of his youthful body winning the battle. They broke through, but they weren't free. Something had them snagged.

"My boot," he exclaimed, twisting and reaching for his stirrup that had it ensnared.

Another swell of water covered them and dragged them under. When they resurfaced, gasping and flailing, their eyes locked in a wordless exchange of fear and love.

“Let me go,” she shouted in anguish.

“No!” he roared.

But she couldn't let him risk his life for hers, and, like her, end up drowned. When his head disappeared beneath the roiling surface again, without a second thought, she kicked free, sacrificing her own safety to save her child. Immediately, the current swept her away.

Letty fought with every drop of strength she had left. Truly swimming for her life, fueled by both panic and determination. Time seemed to slow, and the opportunities to gulp the life-sustaining air she needed became less frequent. When she sank under, and her boots touched the bottom, and she didn't have the strength to push upward, she knew it was over.

Calm surrounded her as cherished memories flashed before her. Of holding her babies the day they were born and counting fingers and toes. Of her boys taking their first steps and saying their first words—always Papa. Of Henry, so handsome in his blue suit on their wedding day. And the countless times he'd said he loved her.

But those precious moments were all yanked away in the next instant as her body hurtled through the water. Suddenly, she resurfaced, the arm around her waist hauling her upward.

Coughing and sputtering, Letty clung to her rescuer. The next thing she knew, she was flat on her back on solid ground. As she filled her lungs with air and her vision cleared, she stared up into familiar brown eyes, filled with worry and relief. But these weren't the eyes of her son; they were the eyes of her hero and the man she loved.

“Aaron,” she cried.

“I'm here, Ma.”

She turned to see him stretched out beside her, his chest heaving.

“Why did you do that?” he raged in between gulps of air.
“You gave up!”

“A mama bear does anything to save her cubs,” Henry told him, also breathing hard.

Tears mixed with the river water streaming down her cheeks as she sobbed with relief, her heart overflowing with gratitude and love for her man who was the papa bear. He understood.

“Damn fool accident-prone woman,” he uttered gruffly as he pulled her into his arms.

“Not me! Damn fool...ornery...accident-causing...horses, snowbanks, and surprise branches,” she stuttered as she shivered.

She thought she heard him laugh, but it was hard to tell with him hanging on to her as if he wouldn't ever let go. If he did, she vowed to haunt him forever, by god!

Held tightly and securely in the arms of the man who had always been her anchor, she reached for her youngest son's hand. So much like his pa, he would have sacrificed himself for her and was angry she'd turned the tables.

“Henry...”

“Yeah, darlin'?”

“I'll learn to shoot a pistol, cross a dusty prairie, even pick up buffalo poop to make a fire to cook your supper, but I'm drawing the line at ever crossing another river. I'm done.”

“Yes, you are. Because there ain't no way in hell I'm watching you go through that again.”

Even exhausted and waterlogged, Letty couldn't help but offer a faint smile. Her husband's speech turned salty when he was emotional. And she didn't fault him. How could she, when, in the face of calamity, his strength, determination, and love brought her safely back into his arms—as always?

Near the Colorado border, less than a week out and only fifty miles from home, they made camp for the night by a small shallow creek. Dinner was eaten, the dishes done, and they had all crawled into their bedrolls for the night. It had been a good

day. A good week, for that matter, with no mishaps or near-death experiences. She had begun to think herself cursed, a bad omen on a cattle drive, like the lore of a woman on a ship being bad luck.

The feeling was driven home as, in the distance, thunder once again rumbled across the vast plains. Beneath the wagon, Letty rolled on to her side and snuggled closer to Henry.

“Have you ever seen so much rain?” she asked with a sigh.

“I’m told this amount of rain is unusual, but we should get used to storms popping up unexpectedly, often out of a clear-blue sky.”

“Something else to keep us on our toes. Oh goody,” she drawled.

Chuckling, he pulled her on top of him, hands moving over her back and down to her hips. At forty-two, after seven grueling weeks on the trail, up at daybreak and taking his share of watch duty, Henry was not only inexhaustible, he was insatiable. He’d woken her before daylight that morning, lips on her neck, hand moving up her inner thigh, his body hard and ready. The man’s stamina was amazing.

With the coming storm, she wouldn’t be able to sleep if she tried, so she returned his kisses and adjusted her position atop him so she was straddling his hips.

He grinned up at her. “Feel like an evening ride?”

“You know I never turn one down,” she quipped. “Or you.”

“Take me inside you.”

His hands spanned her waist, balancing her as she raised on her knees and guided him to her entrance. She slid down his rigid length, savoring the stretch and fullness like it was her first time, not the thousands of times over the years. She yelped suddenly, and jerked, as a deafening crack of thunder and what sounded like a lightning strike rent the air.

As the wind shook the wagon above them, Henry lifted her off him and rolled to his side to look out. She did, too, peering

over his shoulder, noting how the sky, recently a black canvas dotted with twinkling stars, had transformed into a stormy sea of ominous clouds and near-constant flashes of light.

Letty let out an aggrieved sigh. “This journey to western Kansas has been perilous enough. Now, almost home, the elements seem determined to test our every step. Are we safe under the wagon? And what about the boys?”

He didn’t answer, ordering instead, “Hurry and get dressed.”

They emerged from underneath with dark clouds swirling overhead, lit by jagged bolts racing across the sky. A sudden gust of chill wind sent shivers down Letty’s spine.

“It’s raining somewhere,” Henry proclaimed.

Nearby, the cattle lowed uneasily.

“Boys,” her husband called, “let’s get the wagon secured.” He glanced around. “Under the trees will have to do.”

“But the lightning,” Letty exclaimed.

“We’ll have to risk it. Without protection, the wind could rip the wagon apart.”

The first raindrops splattered against her worn dress.

With the horses unhitched, the four of them moved the wagon quickly. They used straps to stake the wheels to the ground and secured the linseed oil-treated tarpaulin around the wagon bed to keep the space underneath as dry as possible and protect it from the wind.

“Get under!” Henry shouted over the wind.

Then, as if nature herself conspired against them, thunder boomed, and a bolt of lightning shot down from the heavens. It struck with a ferocious crack on the other side of the small rise where the cattle were gathered for the night.

On its heels, Letty heard pounding hoofs, and a cowboy appeared, riding hell-bent for leather toward them, waving his hat.

“Stampede!” he shouted.

The most horrifying word you could hear on a cattle drive had barely passed his lips when the first cow appeared in another flash of lightning behind him.

“Criminy! What the hell else can go wrong on this drive?” Henry exclaimed as he picked her up, his arm a band of steel around her waist, and ran with her deeper into the trees. Even in a panicked state, the cows would avoid a grove of forty-foot cottonwoods—she prayed.

“Stay here where it’s safe,” he ordered.

“You can’t mean to go out in that mess. You’ll be trampled.”

“I’ll be fine once I’m on horseback.”

The boys had run to untie the horses and had already mounted up.

He kissed her quickly. “Unfortunately, this kind of thing is all too common on a cattle drive. Don’t move from this spot until I come fetch you.”

Henry waited for her to nod then ran to where the boys were waiting for him.

In an instant, chaos engulfed the camp as the herd descended. Their powerful hooves tore up the ground as they trampled everything in their path—tents, bedrolls, the campfire, which was banked for the night but still hot.

Helpless to do anything but watch and worry—for her family’s safety, the hands, the frightened cows, and their livelihood—Letty’s heart pounded, the ground vibrating beneath her feet as the herd thundered past.

Another lightning strike, this time dangerously close, made the hair on her arms and neck stand on end. Another crack sounded, a familiar one of wood splintering. She caught a whiff of burning cinder. Not daring to look up, she sprinted from beneath the trees and out of the path of the tree branch that came crashing to the ground behind her. Her refuge from the stampede had turned into a death trap, as she’d feared.

While the storm raged on, an eerie blue light illuminated the landscape. Letty let out a startled cry and stumbled back as more cows, stragglers from the main herd, raced toward her. They were fewer, but moving faster, which made it worse. With her skirts raised above her knees, she ran, her life depending on it.

Daring a look back, fear gripped her as she realized they were almost upon her and she couldn't escape their path.

The pounding of their hooves became a roar in her ears as they descended, but a mounted figure emerged. He outpaced them, coming straight at her. Suddenly, her feet left the ground, as Henry, her rock, a beacon of strength in the storm, scooped up her trembling form, and hauled her into the saddle with him.

She clung to him, unable to believe he had accomplished such a feat and that she was still in one piece, not flattened into the earth.

"Henry..." she gasped, as her nails dug into his shoulders. The next "Henry," repeated because it was the only word she could utter, came out in a sob.

He slowed ever so slightly, letting the cows move around him, reining in when the last of them finally passed. With her clinging to him like a lifeline, he returned her embrace, holding on tight, neither caring that the sky opened up and drenched them.

"It's all right, darlin'. Everyone, including you, is all right," he assured her, his face buried in her wet hair, his words a soothing balm.

With the rain, the thunder and lightning seemed to dissipate. The wind, not even close. It whipped around them, driving the droplets of rain hard into their skin. But they'd dealt with rain and water before.

"We should find shelter," he said at length, although the grip of his arms around her lessened not at all.

"Where? Those stupid cows smashed the tents into the earth and please, don't suggest under the trees."

His hands rose to her face, framed it, and angled her head back. The brim of his hat provided some protection from the pounding rain, but not enough. Batting her eyes so she could see, her gaze met his.

“How many times is it now that you’ve snatched me from the jaws of death?”

“You’ve patched me up just as often.”

“Patching up and saving are two different things, Henry. I’d be dead if not for you.”

He grunted. “Who said you’d be safe under those trees?”

“Who rode in like a white knight and literally robbed the Grim Reaper from claiming me?”

“How about we call it even? And we pull the wagon out from under the trees then get under it or inside. I’m tired of being wet.” This came from Luke, their always-cheerful, adventurous middle child who had ridden up alongside them with his brothers.

“Will you listen to that?” Henry said with a grin. “It took a stampede in the rain to break his perpetual good mood. I thought nothing could.”

Letty chuckled as the other two boys hooted with laughter.

“The lightning has died down. We’ll move the wagon for your ma, but we’ve got cows to round up,” he told them. The latter half of his order prompted groans from all three as they moved to their task.

“I don’t blame Luke for being soured on this trip. It will be good to get home,” her husband declared as he brushed his lips against hers.

“That’s putting it mildly. Even I miss our cramped cabin,” she quipped. “I’m looking forward to dry clothes, a warm bed, a hot bath, and a home-cooked meal—not necessarily in that order.”

“I’ll join you in the bath, the bed, and the meal, as long as it’s not bacon. I’m sick of it. What did you have in mind for our first dinner back?”

A vengeful smile curved her lips. "I'm thinking beef," she drawled, which made Henry's rich laughter roll across the plains.

Chapter 15

Henry the Charmer

August 1864

Letty gazed dispassionately at the new horse barn, listening as Henry described its features.

“With two stories and eight stalls, it’s bigger than the one we had in Virginia. Upstairs, there’s a loft to store hay for when the winter snows come, and a chute so we can slide the bales into the wagon from above instead of pitching them to men waiting below. It’s much more efficient and less strain on the men.”

They’d had a barn raising with the help of the several of the men from their tiny community and, much to her shock, with thirty of them working together, they had it built in two days. They’d even painted it; she could still smell the fumes.

As she stared at it, her resentment grew, especially when she recalled the narrow straw bed inside their tiny bedroom. It was so small, they had to shove the bed from one wall to the other to get to the tiny closet or to the door when they got up in the morning. And every time she tried to change the linens, she ended up banging a shin, a hip, or an elbow.

Yet again, no one seemed bothered by their crude cabin except her. Henry spent very little time in it, working from daylight to dark. It was a place to sleep and eat, and met his needs. Heath had moved to the bunkhouse—erected after the ground thawed last spring—because, believe it or not, he had more space there. He’d turned eighteen early in the summer and was well over six feet tall with broad shoulders. He was going to be as big, if not bigger than his father. It was the same with the other two, although, at sixteen and fourteen, Luke and Aaron had a bit to go.

With Heath gone and more space, they loved the loft. Aaron had even taught Buddy to climb the ladder, although

going up for him was a lot easier, and less scary when she watched, than going down. No one was discontented in the least. All four of them loved everything about ranching, preferring horses and cattle to tobacco and corn farming like they did in Virginia. Back home, they each had their own room with a big bed. There was a real dining room, which they ate at as a family and had actual conversations like civilized people. Here, they mostly ate with the men.

Henry would run through hours after dinner and grab leftovers, usually some kind of cured meat he could put between two pieces of bread and take with him on his way to the creek to wash off the day's worth of dust, sweat, and stink before coming to bed. So, she had very little of her husband's company most days.

“What do you think? Ain't it a beauty?”

She could hear his excitement but didn't share it. “It's a barn.”

“I know. That's why we painted it red.”

He grinned, but she didn't find him funny. Her surly mood didn't spoil his, however. He took her hand and pulled her toward the double sliding doors.

“Come on. I'll show you around.”

“Isn't one barn like another?”

“Aw, darlin'. Don't be all bristled up.” When she kept dragging her feet, he stopped, bent at the waist, put his shoulder into her belly, and lifted her, carrying her like a sack of potatoes. It wasn't the first time.

“This was romantic when I was twenty, Henry Jackson. Now that I'm a grown woman of thirty-eight, it's undignified.”

His hand came down crisply on her skyward-pointed ass.

“Henry!” she squealed. “Someone will see.”

“Everyone is busy working.”

“The boys might.”

“I passed them heading to the creek for a swim.” The hand on her bottom squeezed in warning. “Now, quit your griping and try to share your man’s enthusiasm for his new barn.”

She sighed. Her mood was foul lately. Back home, except when the war arrived on their doorstep, she was rarely out of sorts. Here, it seemed to be a daily affliction. But she was homesick for her friends, a proper house with a big soft bed to sleep in, and a stove she didn’t have to wrangle with and sweat over on a daily basis. And she lived for the day she had normal-size windows with glass she could see out of as he promised her, and walls that were sealed up tight so she didn’t have to wipe a fine layer of dust off everything she owned every time the wind blew and didn’t nearly freeze in the winter.

Her improved spirits and many of the things she longed for depended upon her husband getting around to building the house he said he would.

Suddenly, she was right-side up again. Her head spun at the sudden change of position, and she grabbed his shirt as she swayed, hanging on to keep from falling.

He slid an arm around her waist and pulled her into his side, supporting her weight. “Dizzy? That’s never happened before. You need to eat more.”

Eating was a social event. But she didn’t remind him of that fact. Instead she said, “I eat plenty, and the dizziness from being topsy-turvy over your shoulder stops when I’m not topsy-turvy over your shoulder.”

“Hm,” he grunted, unconvinced. But he said nothing more as he gestured with a sweep of his long arm at the interior of the barn. “So. What do you think?”

She glanced around the empty room and empty stalls and answered with her often-dry wit, “That it will never smell this good again.”

“That’s for damn sure,” he chuckled, the endearing dimple in his cheek flashing, along with his straight white teeth.

He could be stubborn as a mule, and maddening with his rules for his family's safety, but land sakes, he was handsome.

Henry grabbed her hand and towed her toward the stalls, stopping just before them. He smacked his hand on a ladder propped randomly in the middle of the room.

When she stared at him blankly, he gripped and shook the ladder. "This leads to the hayloft."

Her gaze followed it upward. "So it does," she agreed, trying to act duly impressed for his sake, but it wasn't dissimilar to the second-floor loft in the cabin.

"Let's go up and take a peek."

She looked down at her long skirt, which brushed the top of her half boots then looked up at him. "You can't be serious. I'll fall and break my neck."

"I'll be right behind you to catch you if you fall, but I wouldn't ever let that happen."

She believed him, always feeling safe in his care. But one loft was like another. "Is it really necessary?"

"Sakes alive, Leticia. You're tetchy as a teased snake today," he declared, his patience finally at its end. "You'd argue if I said the sky was blue and the grass was green. What's gotten into you?"

If he couldn't figure out why she was unhappy after all the years they'd been together, he didn't know her at all, and she wasn't about to tell him.

"Fine," she snapped, gathering her skirt in one hand and holding it up to her knees as she grabbed the rung just above her head. When she started climbing, his hand settled on her bottom, there to catch her if she tripped and fell, as he promised. Any other day, she would have found it sweet, but it annoyed her to no end, and she wanted to smack it away. Her hands were otherwise occupied, however.

By the time she reached the top, which was a good fifteen feet above the ground, she tried stopping there, stating, "It's lovely. Can we go back down now?"

“No,” he replied firmly then boosted her, using the same big hand on her backside, on to the loft floor. When she was out of the way, he hopped up easily behind her and moved to the doors next to the hay chute. They were wide open as were the ones on the far end, allowing a pleasant cross-breeze to blow through.

“Come see the view of our mountain, Leticia.”

She moved up beside him and drew in a breath. Through a gap in the trees, she could see the glittering silver waters of the creek and the mountains beyond it.

“It really is beautiful country,” she whispered as she leaned in to his side.

“I know the move has been hard on you. Laramie is rustic and crude, but do you think you can be happy here one day?”

“I’ve been a grouch. I know that. But I was happy where we were. This”—she swept her arm toward what looked like wilderness mostly, including the wooded lot that would one day be her house—“takes some getting used to.”

He cradled her cheek in his big hand. “It’s been over a year. When do you think that might happen?”

“Probably when I get the house, you promised me.”

“This coming spring, we’ll clear the land—”

“Spring!” she wailed. “Are you telling me we have to spend another winter in that cabin cramped up together like sardines in a can?”

“You’re exaggerating. The cabin isn’t that bad.”

She bent, grabbed her hem, and raised her skirt to mid-thigh, revealing the ugly bruise she’d gotten the day before while making the bed.

He winced. “Okay, the bedroom is cramped, but you have a roof over your head and a place to sleep that’s warm and dry. Starting from scratch, I had to prioritize. A big fancy house doesn’t bring in money to feed and care for you or the boys or pay the hands wages. They needed a place to sleep, as did the horses, and—”

She put her hand up, stopping him because his to-do list could go on all day. “I understand, Henry. Really, I do. It just doesn’t make the waiting or close quarters any easier to bear. I long for the day my husband and three sons can dine at the same table with me, and when I can lie down at night with my husband and not have to worry my sons will hear their mother... Well, you know what I mean.”

He grinned when the flames of her blush rose in her cheeks, enjoying her embarrassment a bit too much. But he didn’t tease. After being married for as long as they had, surely he knew, in her current mood, that would have been a mistake.

Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her against his chest. “We’ll have that again. And you’ll have a fine kitchen, a separate dining room, the boys’ rooms on the opposite side of the house so they won’t hear your cries when I pleasure you. Or when I take you over my knee.” Both his hands slid down to her bottom, and he squeezed. “I’ve refrained from the latter these past few months because of their closeness. Probably more than I should have because you’ve gotten quite sassy.”

Her head fell back, and she glared up at him. “I’m nearing forty years old. You can’t keep spanking me!”

“When you’re a grandmother bouncing our grandbabies on your knee, Leticia Mae, if you earn a tanning, you can expect me to see to it.”

Henry took his job as head of the family seriously. Although he loved them to pieces, he believed that sparing the rod would spoil not only the child but his wife. Most often, she thought a hiding was justified with the three hellions they were trying to raise to adulthood. With her, not so much.

“One more winter,” he murmured as he nuzzled his face in the bend of her neck. “Then I’ll start building you the finest house in the territory.”

“At the risk of sounding sassy, dear husband, most of the houses in the territory are tents.”

His head came up, brown eyes twinkling, and his dimple flashed, along with his grin. “They are indeed,” he acknowledged, inclining his head. “Simonson is building a grand house on his spread south of town, but yours will be grander.” He dipped his head and brushed his lips softly over hers. “This I promise you, Mrs. Jackson. But you’re going to have to be patient for longer.”

She sighed. “I’ll try not to be such a grouch for the next few months.”

“Uh, Letty. It’s not yet September. We won’t be able to build until the spring thaw, so plan on late April or May before groundbreaking.”

“That’s months and months away,” she groaned, closing her eyes. Just as quickly, they popped open and narrowed on him. “After existing for two years in that cabin, it had better be grander than any house west of the Mississippi, with an indoor toilet,” she declared. “And a turret!” she added out of spite.

“Indoor plumbing is a tall order, but a turret?”

“Yes, with glass windows in the peak, so when I’m put out with my maddening husband, I can go up there and let the view of our mountain soothe my raw nerves.”

“Deal,” he whispered before he claimed her mouth. This was more than a mere brush of his lips. It was hot, hungry, his tongue sweeping inside to tangle with hers, and it robbed her of all lucid thought.

Therefore, it took a moment, or several, to note when his hand covered her breast, his fingers rolling the taut nipple, that they were bare skin to bare skin.

“Henry,” she breathed. “You can’t mean to...”

“Ah, but I do,” he assured her, his words rushing hotly over her lips. “Which is why there is a bed of hay spread out for our comfort and convenience.”

“You planned this.” Her accusation turned into a moan when he dipped his head to her breast and his hot tongue swirled around the tip.

“It’s all I’ve been thinking of,” he replied without moving his lips, which opened wider so he could suck the bud and the circle around it into his mouth. The sensation was dizzying, so much so, she barely registered when he slid an arm beneath her knees and carried her to the mound of hay in the corner.

It was fresh, sweet smelling, and thick enough to cushion her from the wood floor. He wasted no time in rucking her skirt up to her waist and was far too impatient to search for the drawstring tie of her drawers. The split-seam style was functional for more than one reason, but not as comfortable, and most often wore them only when traveling. This meant her ankle boots would have to come off to remove her underthings, delaying their pleasure.

He chose another solution and ripped them apart at the center. When he spread her thighs and his mouth covered her intimate woman’s flesh—she’d never been able to use the vulgar C-word that Henry did—she moaned like she hadn’t been able to with the boys in the cabin.

Letty paid her rent undergarments no mind. It wasn’t the first time her husband’s eagerness had done irreparable damage to her wardrobe, and likely wouldn’t be the last. None of that mattered, not with his mouth and fingers tantalizing her body with sinful pleasure. While he sucked and licked and swirled his tongue brazenly over her most intimate and private place, his fingers lightly pinched and rolled her nipples.

Writhing wantonly beneath him, her hands sank into his thick, wavy hair, pulling him closer.

A finger slid effortlessly into her moist center, eliciting a deep moan from her lips. With the scent of her desire intermingling with the aroma of hay and filling the air along with her ardent cries, he added a second. The combination of his mouth and his fingers playing over and inside her body made her back bow off the hay-strewn floor. Overwhelmed by sensation, ecstasy took hold.

As she quivered with aftershocks, Henry kissed a path up her stomach, leaving a trail of goose bumps in their wake. He undid the remaining buttons on her blouse and pushed her

camisole up to her neck, out of the way. With a single-minded focus, he lavished attention on her breasts, her skin sensitive to every touch and every heated breath. When she whimpered with a resurgence of need, he made his way up to her mouth, claiming it with a fierce hunger that left her dizzy.

“You’re all squirmy. There’s another release building inside you, isn’t there? You went off far too quick the first time.”

“It’s been a while since you... Since we’ve... Since I’ve...”

“Come with my mouth on your sweet cunny?” he supplied in a groan against her lips.

“Yes,” she said, squirming more and blushing furiously. After nearly two decades together, the things he said still made her cheeks kindle with fire.

Propped on a forearm, he guided the smooth head of his thick shaft to her weeping center. “Then prepare for number two with my cock inside you.”

He drove in hard and deep in one plunge before she could even consider protesting his language. In truth, his bawdy talk in the throes of passion made it more exciting.

With his hips cushioned by hers, she wrapped her legs around him, her heels digging into his firm backside.

“Move, Henry, please,” she implored.

“I aim to, darlin’, but I wanted to savor the feel of you hot and wet and snug around me for a moment.”

A loud creak echoed through the loft. Startled by the sudden sound, both of them turned to find its source. To Letty’s immense dismay, she saw a pair of wide brown eyes, just like husband’s, peering at them from the top of the ladder.

“I...thought...critters,” Heath stammered, his face redder than she’d ever seen it.

He was gone the next instant, along with the ladder itself. A moment after, a loud thud and grunt of pain wafted up to them from below.

“Dear heaven, Henry. He’s fallen!” she exclaimed.

Her husband was already on his feet, hitching up his breeches and striding to the rail to peer over the edge.

“Is he all right?” Lettie anxiously asked as she tried to right her clothing and go to him.

“I reckon so. He’s hightailing it out of here like the seat of his britches are on fire.” His father chuckled and returned to her. Standing at her feet, he gazed down at her. “Now, where were we?”

“You can’t mean to continue! Our son just saw us naked and... Cavorting in a hayloft.”

“He saw me naked—mostly my ass. You were covered by me. As for cavorting, after growing up on a farm and learning about breeding horses and cows these past few years, if he doesn’t know how things work by now, I’ll be worried.”

“But, Henry,” she exclaimed, “we’re his parents, not horses and cows!”

He dropped to his knees, a broad grin on his handsome face. “You never walked in on your ma and pa getting amorous?”

“I saw them kissing plenty of times, but they always had their clothes on.” As she spoke, her voice rose in pitch, and she squeaked by the end.

“Easy, darlin’. He’ll be embarrassed around us and probably won’t look you in the eye for a month—”

“Dear heavens,” Letty repeated, covering her flaming face with her hands.

“But he’ll be fine,” Henry concluded, his attempt to reassure—didn’t.

“I don’t think I will.”

He crawled up her body, crowding her until she had no choice except to lie back on the hay. “Let me see if I can help you forget.”

His fingers found her wetness, his thumb teasing the bud in front until he got her wriggling again and moaning softly.

“That’s my beautiful girl,” he murmured as he repositioned himself and glided into her once more.

Their passion reignited, lips searched hungrily, tongues tangled in a dizzying dance, and limbs intertwined, as their heavy pants filled the air, punctuated by soft moans from her and fervent groans from him. Their bodies moved in perfect harmony, building toward a shared, utterly intense release that left them both spent and breathless.

As they lay there in the aftermath, still wound around one another, a giggle bubbled up from her chest.

“His face...” she said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so mortified.”

His laughter joined hers. “He was so shocked, he could barely string words together. I...thought...critters!” he repeated, rolling on to his side and burying his face in her neck.

“Henry?” she asked, minutes later when their laughter had died.

“Mmm?”

“Without a ladder, how are we going to get down?”

He sat up, looked at where the ladder had once been, and muttered, “Criminy.”

Chapter 16

Daredevil Luke

October 1864

With Princess purring in her lap, Letty leaned back and relaxed in one of the four ladder-back chairs—also courtesy of the very skilled Mr. Addington—on the front porch. Very much like a southern veranda, it was one of the few things she actually liked about the cabin. They were enjoying Indian summer on the high plains, but the icy winds and snows of winter would be upon them before they knew it. She could feel it in the hint of coolness in the light breeze that brushed her face.

Presently, it felt good against her flushed cheeks after spending the entire day putting up the last of the beans and tomatoes from her garden. In between cooking for the hungry horde of ranch hands, fifteen of them now, and the four bottomless pits who were her family, she barely had time for her other chores. Jackson men grew big, and ranching was hard work, especially at haying time. Since their appetites matched their size, they'd had to extend the henhouse and add another two roosters to fill it eventually and keep her in eggs for breakfast and baking, and their other favorite, Ma's fried chicken.

As she rocked, she closed her eyes and let her mind drift. They had come a long way since leaving Virginia—no pun intended—and nearly all of it could be laid on her husband's broad shoulders. Yes, she and the boys played their part, but it was Henry's vision and determination that moved them forward. She was proud of him, those stalwart traits partially the reason she married him. With him holding the reins, the ranch was thriving, and they were all happy and healthy. Well, at least the menfolk were happy.

Maybe she'd feel differently five years from now, or ten if there was a community where she could be involved with

other women. Or a church with a congregation instead of a traveling preacher coming through to tend to his scattered flock every few months. Or a general store where she could buy necessities rather than making everything from scratch, or a dress shop so her meager sewing skills weren't constantly tested. Maybe then she could be content here.

But, heaven forbid, it took Laramie a decade to come into the 19th century.

Letty opened her eyes and looked out at the vast expanse of land stretched out before her, what she could see of it, the sun having long since disappeared behind the mountains. There was something about the wide-open spaces, the smell of freshly tilled earth, hay, and wildflowers, and the freedom of being surrounded by nature that was compelling. But she didn't like the isolation. It was a twenty-minute ride to their nearest neighbor and another ten past them into town, which, with only 300 residents, wasn't much of one.

But more folks arrived every day, especially since rumors had spread about a potential rail line through the Laramie River Settlement. There was also talk of construction of a new fort nearby. A fort meant security in these still-untamed lands, and the building of a railroad meant prosperity. Even if it took years to come to fruition, folks came now to claim land and to get the first crack at the jobs that would surely follow.

“And doesn't it beat all that Henry Jackson was right, yet again?” she whispered into the darkness. His knack for accurate predictions was impressive. It could also be maddening.

Seeing the first star of the evening twinkling in the sky, she frowned. “Where is Henry anyway?”

Letty got up from her chair and moved to the door. She thought Aaron, who had come in nearly an hour before, had said his pa was right behind him. It surprised her that her youngest son hadn't been pestering her about dinner, which she was keeping warm on the stove. But when she peered in and saw him stretched out on the couch reading, she understood why. He wasn't a bookworm, per se, but he was

inquisitive and much more studious than his older brothers, excelling beyond her and Henry's dreams at his grasp of all subjects and his attention to his studies.

"Aaron, when did you say your father would be along?"

He glanced up from his book, his gaze moving over her shoulder, and he frowned. "Something must be keeping him, Ma. He was washing up and then heading in. Said he was starved for your pot roast. That had to have been an hour ago."

Hearing a wagon coming up the lane, she turned and moved to the top of the steps, squinting into the darkness. She heard the floorboards creak under Aaron's feet as he came to the door. It had been dark for over an hour, making it close to eight o'clock, much too late for a social visit from anyone. Sensing trouble, a knot formed in the pit of her stomach.

The driver steered it toward the front of the cabin rather than around back to the barn. When it drew closer, she recognized her husband's size and posture.

It wasn't until he set the brake and then twisted to ask, "Do you need help down, Son?" that she saw the shadowy figure in the back of the wagon.

"It's my arm, Pa. Ain't nothing wrong with my legs," a deep voice she recognized as Luke's grumbled.

Letty started down the steps, hearing her husband's deeper, angry response. "You're choosing now to give me lip, boy? As if you're not in enough trouble already?"

"What happened?" she asked.

"We couldn't have had girls?" Henry grouched as he jumped down from the high seat. "I swear, Leticia, this one especially has become the bane of my existence. If he makes it to eighteen, it will be an answer to my prayers."

Like his father, Luke jumped down, but he groaned in pain and staggered when his boots hit the hard-packed ground.

She hurried to the back of the wagon to help him, but his pa was quicker. And he did something she hadn't been able to do for at least a decade; he swung their middle son, who was

over six feet tall and still growing, into his arms. As he carried him to the steps, a subtle strain from his exertions and a curtness entered his tone when he ordered, “Get the door, Letty.”

Nodding, she rushed up the steps ahead of them, but Aaron beat her to it and held it open for all of them.

“What happened?” he asked.

“That’s what I’d like to know!” Letty stated, her anxiety about not knowing rising.

“Your son, acting like a durn fool, jumped off Rock Face Bluff into the lake on a dare,” Henry grumbled as he set Luke on the couch.

In the dark, Letty hadn’t noticed the dark swath of fabric around his neck, shoulder, and left arm. It was a sling. The only part of his arm she could see were fingers swollen up like sausages.

Her hands flew to her mouth.

“Took him to see the new doctor in town,” he explained further. “He splinted two breaks.”

“Two! Land’s sake, Luke! What were you thinking? That rock face overlooking the lake is 100 feet high at least, and the water is much too shallow.”

“He’s lucky a busted arm is all he got. The jump could have broken his neck.”

Letty fussed over her second-born, laying her hand on his forehead because she didn’t know what else to do and covering him with a blanket even though the fire made the room toasty warm.

“Stop fussing over him, Leticia. Doc says he’ll be fine in six to eight weeks.”

Luke groaned while she assured him the time would pass quickly.

“I don’t know about that,” Henry interjected. “Doc said he has to keep it immobilized for the bones to heal straight, so

he'll need to take it easy. No riding, no working with the livestock, nothing strenuous or jarring. I guess you'll have company around the house for a while."

"Does it hurt, honey?"

"Yeah, Ma. It's throbbing."

She turned and looked up at Henry. "The doctor didn't give him anything?"

"Laramie doesn't have an apothecary on the corner like we did back East." Sympathy came over his face as he looked at his son. A moment later, his anger returned. "It'll be a reminder of what an asinine stunt this was."

Letty glanced toward the kitchen, frowning as she considered what she had on hand. "I have an herbal tea that might help."

Luke made a face. "That stuff tastes like dirt."

"You'll take whatever your ma gives you, boy. Without complaint. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"And watch your tone. If not for Doc's orders and your arm hurting, I'd have you over the rail out front tanning your stubborn, reckless hide."

"Henry..."

"No, Letty. The boy could have died tonight. He's close to being a man and needs to learn to use his head. This idiotic stunt nearly killed him. When is it going to end?" With his arms crossed over his chest, he frowned down at his son. "Well...I'm waiting."

"Jim and Owen dared me, and there was a nickel on the line. I couldn't not do it when most everyone else has."

Letty gasped in alarm. Together, she and Henry turned to Aaron, who was taking it all in. He held up his hands. "Don't look at me. I'm not the 'everyone else' he's talking about."

"Heath?" his Pa asked.

When neither of the boys replied, they had their answer.

Letty couldn't help but feel disappointed in her son. Gambling and taking reckless dares wasn't how they had raised him. She took a deep breath and spoke softly, "Is that what your life is worth? A paltry nickel?"

Luke looked down at his feet. "No, Ma. They egged me on, and I wanted to prove I wasn't chicken."

"Proving yourself to others should never come at the cost of your safety."

"I know, Ma. I'm sorry," he replied, clearly remorseful.

"Sorry isn't enough when you're dead, Lucas Jackson," Henry stated sternly. "I need air." At the door, he turned and stared down at his son. "You need to grow a brain and start thinking and acting like the man you'll legally be in six-months' time."

Luke nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And consarn it. Find yourself some new friends," he roared as he stomped out the door.

Letty placed a gentle hand on her son's uninjured shoulder. "Your father loves you very much. He's being harsh because you scared him."

"I know that, too, Ma," Luke said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Letty leaned down and kissed his forehead. "Good. I'll go put the kettle on and make you some of that tea and see if we can get you more comfortable."

As she walked to the kitchen, she couldn't help but worry about her son's future and the man he was becoming. She knew it was up to her and Henry to guide him in the right direction, but what happened if all their lessons didn't take?

Perched on the top rail of the rear corral fence, staring out into the darkness, Henry was angry enough to spit, but more so he was at a loss about what to do to curb his son's reckless streak

and keep him alive. Luke was high-spirited, always looking for a thrill, and had been that way since he had learned to walk.

He'd never forget the time he walked into the parlor and found him teetering on the back of a chair, trying to catch a bug climbing up the wall. He wanted to shout, don't move, but he'd been afraid to startle him into a fall. That was kind of what he was dealing with tonight. He wanted to hug him close and thank god he was all right but, at the same time, he wanted to wallop his reckless, foolish ass until he couldn't sit for a week.

When he was five, discipline was easy. But what did he do to curb the impulsiveness of a seventeen-year-old boy who was almost a man?

“If I had a penny for all those deep thoughts, I'd have enough money to pay a team of men to build me my house.”

He turned to see his petite wife, with her skirts hiked up, climbing the fence to sit beside him. Although she appeared to be as agile as she was when they met, he curled his hand around her upper arm to keep her safe all the same.

She wasn't wrong. He was so deep inside his head, he hadn't heard Letty's approach.

Resting her head on his shoulder, she murmured, “That one's a handful, huh?”

“You have the art of understatement, my dear,” he replied, wrapping his arm around her. “How is he?”

“Quiet. He doesn't like disappointing you. None of the boys do.”

“Yet he keeps getting into one fix after another. Am I not giving him enough attention?”

“If he was ten, maybe. But the idol-worship phase has passed.”

He grunted. “Did you come out here to make me feel better or worse?”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t love and respect you, but he works side by side with you practically every day.”

“Too much attention, then?”

“I don’t know if that would help. A little freedom, and he jumps off a cliff on a dare.”

“What, then?” he said with a sigh. “I just don’t know what to do with him. He’s almost a man, but he’s still acting like a reckless boy.”

“He’s trying to find his way. He’ll get beyond this,” Letty said, trying to comfort him.

“I wish I shared your confidence,” Henry said, his voice heavy with worry. “I just don’t want him to end up like some of those young ruffians we’ve seen around town. Drinking, gambling, mixing with loose women, and getting into trouble with the law.”

“What law?” Letty asked.

He harrumphed because she wasn’t wrong about that, either. There was a territorial marshal who came through once in a blue moon, but the settlement hadn’t organized yet—no mayor, no council, and no sheriff.

Letty patted his arm. “We’ve raised him to know right from wrong. I’m not sure we can do much more, although, as his mama, I’d like to lock him in his room until he grew that brain you recommended. But a trip to the woodshed at seventeen might just push him away. Then what would we do?”

“A whipping hasn’t ever pushed you away,” he whispered.

“Except that once.”

He turned just his head and looked down at her, as beautiful now as she’d been at eighteen when he married her.

“You almost burned the house down.”

“Yeah, I remember. I also remember Papa sending me home so fast I was dizzy. It seems I was a handful, too.”

“Still are,” he said, squeezing her shoulders to take the sting out of his words.

“You don’t think I haven’t noticed that although all our boys are your spitting image, Luke might have a bit of me in him?”

“Might?” he drawled, unable to keep his lips from twitching.

“Okay, does.”

“Mm, but not your temper, thank goodness.”

She gave a delicate little sniff, but didn’t disagree.

They sat in silence for a few moments, watching the stars twinkle above them. Letty’s hand found his, and she gave it a gentle squeeze.

“We’ll figure it out,” she murmured. “Together.”

Henry smiled, grateful for her unwavering support. “Together,” he repeated, a sense of calm washing over him. With his woman by his side, they could handle anything that came their way. Always had, always would.

It turned out that boredom and women’s work were enough to set Lucas Edward Jackson—named for Henry’s pa—on the straight and narrow path. After a twelve-week ban from the saddle and essentially being confined to the house, he was champing at the bit to get back to ranching, which he loved. He also had a new respect for his ma and pitched in with some of her chores when he could, usually clearing the table after breakfast and supper, carrying in but especially out the heavy wash basket, and he lobbied his pa to get her some help.

Most ranches their size had a cook for the chuck wagon who followed them when they worked a distance from the main house and on cattle drives. Letty was doing everything to keep up the family home and that job. Henry agreed and apologized to her, saying it was long past due. That’s when Charlie “Cookie” Clemens came to work on the ranch, and Ayita from the settlement came to help with the housework

and the garden, which had tripled in size from the first year,
two days a week.

Now, if she could only get her house built.

Chapter 17

Cold, Stark Fear

January 1865

The bitter winds of winter howled outside, their icy fingers clawing at the edges of the small, rustic cabin nestled deep within the heart of Silverbend. A roaring fire crackled in the hearth, and heat permeated the two rooms and the loft, making it toasty warm. But it wasn't a cozy scene inside. The atmosphere was tense, the occupants sick with worry.

Henry stood by the bedside, his brow deeply furrowed as he watched over the pale, fragile figure beneath the layers of blankets.

"I'm freezing," she whispered, trembling lips parched and cracked from two days of constant fever. "Can you add another log?"

He was stripped to his waist and sweating, but not from fever. It was hot as blue blazes. This only increased his worry because, despite the heat, Letty trembled as a chill encompassed her. The involuntary movement stirred a groan to her lips. Her blue eyes, bright from sickness, rose to his as she reached for him with trembling fingers.

"I fear...this may be more than I can bear."

His heart clenched. When he spoke, determination belied the fear invading his bones. "You'll bear it because the alternative is unacceptable. Do you hear me, Leticia?"

A faint smile played at the corners of her mouth. "How can I not, husband, when you're bellowing?"

His bellow was fierce when he twisted and shouted through the closed door, "Heath. Luke. Get in here."

It burst open a split second later. Unsurprising because all three of his sons had been pacing in the main room last he'd seen them, their youthful faces ravaged with worry.

“I need you boys to go to the settlement and fetch June Bishop, the midwife.”

Luke’s eyes shifted to the bloodstained sheets in a pile in the corner. “Did she lose the baby, Pa?”

“I’m afraid so, Son. Tell Mrs. Bishop she’s fevered, and the bleeding hasn’t stopped.” his eyes shifted to Heath. “The blizzard isn’t letting up. I can’t leave her, or I’d go.”

“We know what to do,” his oldest reassured him.

“Remember what I taught you boys about a whiteout?”

“Yes, sir,” they both chorused, their expressions determined.

Henry pressed a folded sheet of paper and a lead pencil into Heath’s hand. “Convince her to come,” he urged. “But if she won’t, write down word-for-word everything she tells you.”

As Heath and Luke bundled up then rushed out into the biting cold and swirling snow, Aaron remained in the doorway.

“How can I help?”

Rubbing his forehead, he racked his brain about what to do.

“What about Ma’s herbs? With all that she grows, there must be something that will help.”

“Aaron, you’re brilliant. Make her some blackberry tea and...” He was exhausted. Letty was the one who tended the boys when they were sick. She’d told him over the years what she used, but he left it up to her, and now he struggled to remember. “Add some rosemary,” he said at last. “If I remember right, it’s good for pain.”

His youngest son didn’t linger; he took off at a run for the kitchen.

“You listened.”

Henry returned to her side. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he took her fragile hand in his and squeezed it gently, his heart aching as he watched her grimace in pain.

He brought it to his lips and kissed the back of her fingers then laid it against his cheek as he admitted. "I only half did. Counting on you always being here to tend to us. Was I right?"

"Mostly. But yarrow is best for the bleeding. There are some leaves in a yellow tin in my medicine basket."

"I'll go tell Aaron."

When he tried to, she gripped his hand. "A child would have been a blessing," Letty whispered, the longing and sorrow written clearly on her face. Her gaze turned distant, as if lost in memories of dreams that might never be fulfilled. "I love our boys, Henry, but I always hoped for a daughter. Could you tell..."

"It was too soon, Letty. I'm so sorry." Pain gripped his chest because the loss was his, too. To mask it, he leaned down to press a gentle kiss to her forehead. "You're still a young woman, sweetheart. You still could, one day," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

But Letty's eyes grew distant, and she shook her head. That slight movement must have triggered more agony because she winced, and beads of sweat formed on her brow.

"It wasn't meant to be," she murmured. "And now...this fever, this bleeding... I might not..." Unable to put her fears into words, her eyes drifted shut. A moment later, a single tear slid down her cheek.

"Don't speak like that," he insisted, a rasp in his voice from the tumult of emotion. "You're strong. You'll pull through this."

Outside, the storm raged on, the wind howling like a mournful cry that echoed through the night. Inside the cabin, the fire crackled and danced cheerily, casting flickering shadows on the walls, a stark contrast to the tumultuous emotions that filled the room.

Aaron returned, and sat on Letty's other side, holding her hand as Henry fed her the tea, insisting she drink every drop. Once she did, she glanced at her son. "Was it as horrible when I was forcing it on you?"

“Yeah. And the poultices you made for the croup stank to high heaven,” he replied.

She laughed softly, but even that was too much movement, and she grimaced in pain.

“Rest, darlin’. Save your strength,” he whispered, his heart heavy.

The fate of their family rested in the ability of Heath and Luke to battle through the storm and return with the help Letty needed. He had faith in them to make it home safely. He just hoped—and prayed harder than he ever had—it would be in time.

Four hours later, Heath and Luke returned half frozen but with the midwife in tow. She got straight to work, demanding more yarrow tea and added some black cohosh root she brought along.

“This will cause cramps,” she warned Henry. “It won’t be pleasant, but she has to pass what remains if she’s going to get through this.”

He could barely stand to hear her anguished cries, much like when the boys were born, but he stuck by her, letting her grip his hand through the spasms and when Mrs. Bishop aggressively massaged her lower belly. By late that evening, the bleeding had slowed, but the fever raged on.

As the hours passed in a seemingly endless blur, the snow piled up outside and the wind continued to howl, and Letty’s condition grew more dire. The arrival of the midwife had brought a brief glimmer of hope, but when her patient fell into a restless, fevered sleep, her furrowed brow and solemn expression revealed the severity of the situation.

Heath, Luke, and Aaron took turns pacing the floor only because there wasn’t room for all his big strapping boys to do so at once. Their eyes frequently darted to the bedside where their beloved ma lay, her once-vibrant features now pale and drawn. The air in the cabin was thick with the scent of

medicinal herbs, the sickly-sweet aroma of sickness, and cold, stark dread.

Nigh on a week had passed since Letty had fallen ill, losing the baby before she'd even known she was expecting. On day four, when the snow stopped, Mrs. Bishop had gone home for a spell. Her husband fetched her with snow runners affixed to his wagon to see to another woman in town whose time had come. She promised to be back the next day, leaving Henry to bathe Letty with cool water and dose her with sumac tea when the fever raged.

The Jackson men looked on helplessly as the woman rode away. They had taken turns at Letty's bedside, holding her hand, wiping her brow, and whispering words of encouragement even as their own hearts were heavy with apprehension.

In the dim light of the cabin, Henry sat by Letty's side, feeling his exhaustion deep in his bones. His boys and the hands had been god-sent, tending to the stock while he watched over her. Fearing the worst, he'd barely left her side, silently praying and willing her to pull through.

On the eighth morning, after stepping outside despite the chill to take some fresh air, he went to the kitchen to make another cup of tea to drizzle between her lips and urge her to swallow.

"Time to wake up and face a new day," he announced, talking to her as if she could hear as he'd done every day during her delirium. The midwife said it wouldn't hurt and might even help, so he persisted. He even read to her—poems she loved, and passages from her favorite books.

When he sat on the edge of the bed, where he'd kept his vigil day and night, he noticed the sheets were soaking wet. His gaze rose, assessing her still form. Was he mistaken, or was her breathing easier? He laid his hand on her forehead and sobbed with relief. She was cool. Her fever had broken.

Over the course of the day, as he continued spoon-feeding her tea and broth, color returned to her cheeks, but the fever didn't. The four Jackson men watched with bated breath, but

also with palpable relief, as Letty showed signs of improvement.

“But why won’t she wake?” he asked aloud, though, with the boys out doing the evening chores, not expecting an answer.

And then, the moment they had all been praying for arrived. Her long lashes fluttered up, and the most beautiful blue eyes he’d ever laid eyes on gazed back at him. Henry’s heart soared and even though he knew he probably shouldn’t, he gathered her in his arms and gently rocked her against his chest—drenched gown and all.

With his cheek against the top of her head, he gave thanks to the almighty for not taking her yet. Heaven knew they needed her.

“How long have I been sick?” she croaked.

“Eight days and nights, the longest damn week and a day of my life.” He didn’t want to let her go, but he needed to get her out of her wet things and to change the linens.

When he eased her back, a faint smile graced her lips, a glimmer of strength returning to her eyes.

“Thank you for taking care of me, Henry.” Letty’s whisper was barely more than a breath, but music to his ears. “I know it can’t have been easy.”

He harrumphed. “I took vows to care for you in sickness and in health twenty years ago. What was I supposed to do, throw you out in the snow? There’s two feet out there with four-foot snowdrifts.” He frowned, although he wanted to dance a jig and rejoice. “Come to think of it, that might have done the trick with the fever.”

“I recognize that bluster for what it is; you were frightened.” Tears welled coming close to overflowing. “There’s no shame in admitting it. I was, too.”

His eyes were wet, too, when he reached out to grasp her hand, his grip gentle yet unbreakable. Now that he had her back, he didn’t want to let her go again—ever.

“I’ve never prayed for anything more in my life, Leticia.”

“What did you pray for?” she asked, even though she must know.

But he figured she needed the words, so he gave them to her. “That you’d come back to me.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her damp forehead. “I love you, darlin’. And I’ll thank heaven every day that you’re safe with me once again.”

Letty’s eyes shimmered with tears as she weakly squeezed his hand. “I love you, too, Henry. And, vows or no, I thank you,” she murmured, with a depth of emotion that words could hardly capture.

Heath, Luke, and Aaron came stomping in from the cold just as he pulled the fresh blanket over her scrubbed body and clean nightgown.

“Get in here, boys,” he called. “Someone wants to say hello.”

Three young men appeared in the doorway, their faces a blend of joy and relief. Aaron forced his way between his older brothers and rushed to his mother, climbing into bed beside her and burying his face in her belly as he hugged her, the same as he did as a boy. Only fifteen, he could still claim the boy in him, and no one begrudged him. Heath and Luke approached, and, while he didn’t want to leave her, he gave them space. One took her hand while the other leaned down to kiss her cheek. This was a more reserved reaction, but there wasn’t a dry eye among the five of them.

When Letty’s strength faded and her eyelids drooped, he shoed the boys out to see to supper. This meant getting dressed in their winter garb and bringing it back from the bunkhouse. Then he continued his silent vigil as she slept—peacefully for the first time in over a week—because he’d seen fevers return. But hers never did.

A week later, she had regained enough strength to get out of bed and join them in front of the fire. She read, played

backgammon with Aaron—who continued to trounce her—or snuggled up against him on the settee.

In another week, she still tired easily, but a nap midday renewed her energy, and she was back to most of her chores, including cooking because she worried they hadn't eaten like they should during her illness.

On the first day of February, Henry left to start his chores after breakfast, a big stack of Letty's fluffy flapjacks and maple syrup bought on a resupply trip to Fort Bridger because their Virginia maple was long since gone. When he stepped off the front porch, he was promptly dripped on. The sun was bright overhead and melting the snow on the roof.

A hearty laugh burst from him as he wiped his face on his sleeve and took off toward the barn. They had weathered the storm, both inside the cabin and out. The pervasive gray clouds of January had cleared out, and hope for a long, happy life with his wife and children around him, and someday their children, was reborn in his heart.

What more could he ask for?

Chapter 18

A Productive Outing

April 1865

Kneeling in the dirt, with the sun warm on her back, Letty sat back on her heels and dusted off her hands. The last of the carrot seeds was in. In addition, she had a full row of peas, cabbage, radishes, lettuce, onions, and broccoli. All resistant to a hard frost, so she had a head start on her garden. Tomatoes, peppers, squash, and the like, would have to wait until the risk of a freeze was well past. She couldn't have done it if Heath and Luke hadn't tilled the soil for her, however. Even eight weeks after her recovery, her stamina wasn't quite where it had been.

A shadow fell over her, blocking out the sun. She turned, squinting up at Henry.

"Don't overdo," he warned.

"I can't because I'm done for the day."

He looked out at the neat rows. "What about watering?"

"Aaron will be along after he finishes reading his history assignment."

He extended a hand, which she gratefully grabbed, and he pulled her to her feet. A mite too energetically, causing her to teeter and fall into him. He caught her, his hands sliding around her waist once she was steady.

"Thank you, kind sir," she said, smiling up at him, but he didn't return it. A frown gracing his handsome features instead. "What's wrong?" she asked, instantly on alert. It seemed something was always amiss.

"You're too thin. You need to eat more."

She'd heard it before. During her illness, she'd lost weight and hadn't put all of it back on, which worried him. She was eating. Not as much as her men. She'd never come close to

what they could put away. But even with her appetite returned, her clothes hung off of her.

“I baked a chocolate cake this morning, and it turned out so well, I filched a piece for an after-breakfast snack. I’ll have another for dessert after dinner with an enormous glass of milk, if that will make you happy.”

His work-roughened hand rose to her face and traced a gentle path along her cheek. “Overjoyed is more like it,” he said, all too seriously.

She knew he worried about her but wished he would stop. He had a host of other problems to fret over.

“Trust me, Henry. I’m fine.” She wrapped her hand around his wrist and insisted. “Better than fine.”

“I want you as hale and hearty as before.”

“Just like regaining my strength, putting on the pounds will take time.” When a horse snorted nearby, she looked over and saw the buckboard behind him, rigged up and waiting.

“Where are you going?”

“I have some business in town. I won’t be gone long.”

“Oh, good, then, I’ll come along.”

“You should rest. You did your morning chores, baked a cake, and planted your garden. That’s a full day.”

“For my grandmother,” she quipped. “That is a small fraction of what I got done in a morning before I lost...” Her voice fell off. It was still difficult to speak about.

His arms tightened around her. “Like you said, getting back to where you were will take time.”

“But I feel fine. I’ve barely been out of the cabin all winter, and here it is spring. Please take me with you. I’m going stir crazy.”

He hesitated. They’d had a break in the weather. The snow had been gone for weeks, and it was so warm yesterday, the men were all stripped down to their shirtsleeves while working.

“It’s such a beautiful day, and it has been forever since I rode out with my husband, where droving cattle wasn’t involved. Please, Henry.”

Her last plea won him over with conditions. “All right, but you’ll rest for an hour when we return.”

“I’ll nap like my pampered cat. I promise.” Standing on tiptoe, she pulled his face down for a kiss. “Let me run in and change my dress and get my better sun bonnet. It will take two minutes.”

And because she didn’t want him to change his mind, she didn’t make him wait another second.

The trip to town took half an hour. The road was little more than a beaten-down cow path and they bounced and jostled over deep ruts left with the spring rains, but she didn’t care. She was out of the cabin and off the ranch for the first time in months.

He had several stops to make, including checking to see if a shipment he ordered had come in on the stage. When he stopped the team and put the brake on the wagon, he hopped down and moved to her side to help her down. He frowned when his hands encircled her waist, his fingers nearly touching.

“A stiff wind would blow you away,” he grumbled.

Letty patted his forearm reassuringly, but her eyes were on the big tent where people were bustling in and out. She wouldn’t call it a station house or even a general store. The tent served as a central location where everyone in the area came to pick up their goods and mail when the stage ran through twice a week.

“Jennifer Lynn Harper, stop running around and get back here this instant.” Cheeks flushed with embarrassment, the woman who held a sleeping baby in her arms offered Letty an effusive apology. “You’d think I never taught her any manners. It’s just that she’s wound up. It was a long, hard winter, and she misses her friends back home.”

Letty could definitely understand how she felt. “You don’t need to apologize to a mother of three rambunctious boys.”

“Oh. Are any of them Jenny’s age? She’s eager to make some new friends.”

Just then, the redheaded girl in pigtails with big green eyes who looked to be about seven or eight, laughing and not watching where she was going, slammed into Heath who stood talking with a few other young men. Like she was made of rubber, she bounced off him and landed hard in the dirt. He turned and squatted in front of her.

“Are you hurt, beautiful?” he asked.

Staring up at him with wide eyes, she didn’t speak, just shook her head as he offered her a hand up. It took a moment before she put her hand in his then he pulled her to her feet.

“I’m afraid my sons aren’t little boys anymore,” Letty told her, nodding toward Heath. “That’s my oldest with your girl. He’s twenty and Luke and Aaron are eighteen and fifteen.”

Her cheeks flaming like her mother’s, Jenny rushed up and pressed close to her side. “Can we go home now, Mama?”

She put her hand on her bright hair and frowned. “Were you hurt when you fell, sweetheart?”

“No, but everyone was looking at me.”

A tall, good-looking man, who must have been her husband, called from the door, “We’ll be all loaded up in a minute, Caroline.”

Jenny darted for the door.

With a smile to Letty, her mother turned and said, “I suppose I should be getting along, too. It was nice meeting you, Mrs.—”

“Jackson, but call me Leticia, please.”

She grinned. “What a beautiful name. There are so few of us ladies in town, at least the sort we can mingle with. Maybe we can have you and your family over for supper, or you and I could have tea.”

“That sounds lovely.” She was a few years younger, but Letty was so hungry for female company, she would have befriended a teenager if they were willing.

Letty glanced through the tied-back tent flap and saw that Henry was still loading the wagon. In no hurry to leave her would-be new friend, she stayed and chatted. It turned out, the Harpers had bought a farm on the road out of town to Silverbend where they lived with their two children, Jenny, eight, and newborn, Will.

“You wouldn’t be able to sew, would you?” Letty asked abruptly. “I’m sorry. That was rude, it’s just—” Self-consciously she looked down at her too-loose and well-worn calico dress. “I’m in desperate need.”

“I’m passable, but I’m hardly a seamstress. I was going to ask you the same thing.”

Letty pulled a face. “Beyond a simple button, I’m hopeless.”

“I heard a new family moved into town recently. They’re older, and the woman used to own a dress shop back East. Maynard or Miller, or... What was it? Mayhew,” she exclaimed. “I think.”

“It’s fine,” Letty assured her.

“I’ll find out for sure, and ask if she’s taking in work, then I’ll let you know when you come for tea.”

“That’s splendid. I look forward to it.”

A man from the door, who looked about Letty’s age, sidled up to them. “Caroline, are you ready?”

“This is my husband, Eustace. Honey, this is Leticia Jackson. Her husband owns the big spread north of town along the creek.”

“We named it Silverbend Ranch, actually, for the creek.”

“What a perfect name,” Caroline said with a smile, rocking her baby boy who was yawning and making those sweet little just-waking newborn noises.

“Indeed,” the man said with a tip of his hat. “I’ve met your husband in town a time or two. Our land butts up against yours. It’s Henry, isn’t it?”

“Yes. How nice to meet our next-door neighbors.”

He laughed. “We’re not exactly a stone’s throw away, more like a twenty-minute ride at a fast clip. But it’s nice to meet you, too, ma’am.” To Caroline, he said, “Jenny’s upset about something. She’s in the wagon in tears. We should see to her.”

“Oh dear. Yes, let’s go. Little Will is always hungry when he wakes and will be fussing any moment, too.”

She waved then rushed out with her husband on her heels.

Henry appeared a moment later. “We’re all loaded up. Ready to go?”

She beamed up at him. “I believe I am.”

His head tilted in question as he returned her smile. “What has you grinning from ear to ear?”

“It’s been a productive outing. I believe I made a friend.”

He looked up as the Harpers’ wagon pulled away, Caroline waving back at her.

“That’s Eustace Harper. We pass his farm on the way to town. He seems like a decent sort.”

“His wife was very sweet. Younger, with a newborn. She could probably use a friend as moral support.”

“She couldn’t find a better expert at raising young’uns,” he said, slipping his arm around her and guiding her outside.

“What a sweet thing to say,” she murmured right before he lifted her onto the bench seat.

“It’s the truth,” he replied, after he settled beside her. “I know three fine young men who’d agree.”

Once he started the team with a *giddap*, she reached over and squeezed his forearm. “I had some expert help along the way, you know?”

He covered her hand with his but didn't agree or disagree either way.

Chapter 19

At Her Breaking Point

May 1885

Letty hefted the heavy saddle onto her mare's back with a grunt.

“Married for over twenty years to a man fitter and stronger than the day I met him,” she grumbled. “With three sons nearly as big as their pa, living on a ranch with sixteen hired hands, and here I am saddling my own horse.”

She pulled the cinch tight then checked everything again, to be certain. She was fully capable of tending to her own mount. It was just that she chose not to for the aforementioned twenty male reasons, so it had been a while. While leading Serenity to the mounting block in the yard—placed there solely for her use because she was the only one under six feet tall who worked or lived on the ranch—she called her husband every nasty name she could think of.

That wasn't something she'd ordinarily do. Her mother was a genteel Southern lady and taught her daughter to be the same, but she was tired of being ignored, or an afterthought, and sacrificing things she wanted to do because...

“Letty won't mind,” she muttered, mimicking her husband's deep voice.

And she was tired of her menfolk taking off after breakfast and not seeing anyone except her cat who slept all day and occasionally, although less and less lately, Heath joined her for lunch. Henry and the younger boys didn't get in until almost dark, and she ended up spending the biggest part of every day for the past three years alone. Further, it was hard not having a soul in the world who would sympathize since she was surrounded by men.

Because of all that, and because he clearly didn't care about her enough to show up at the agreed-upon time to take

her to town, for the fourth time in as many weeks, which included three missed invitations to tea at Caroline Harper's, she was going on her own.

Before climbing onto Serenity's back, she checked the path leading up from the house, around the stable to the back paddock, and the grazing land beyond it one last time. Seeing no sign of him, or anyone else, she swung up on her mare's back. Then she clucked her tongue and started on the way to town, alone.

"Might as well continue the pattern," she muttered. But as she fumed and wiped away a tear at being so taken for granted, she decided from that day forward, things were going to change. "If I want to visit with a friend in town, I'm going to, goldarn it. And I don't give a fig what Henry has to say about it."

Letty kicked Serenity into a gallop. If she didn't hurry, she'd be late for tea with Minerva Mayhew, the only seamstress in their tiny town. Caroline had been true to her word and made the introduction a month ago, and this was the first opportunity for them to meet. And she wasn't about to insult the woman by rudely not showing up.

When the three of them met at the only store, which was really the front office of the sawmill that doubled for a feed store because that's all Laramie offered at the moment, they'd struck up an instant connection. When Letty lamented the lack of a general store to buy the basics, like a ready-made dress, Minerva had offered to help her sew up a few.

"I'm right handy with a needle," she'd told her.

They also planned to have tea and a friendly visit. She'd painstakingly baked a pound cake in her poor excuse for an oven to bring along. But Henry had failed to show. And he hadn't sent one of the hands in his place.

She didn't ask for much. Heaven knew she worked tirelessly to take care of his home and have fresh fruits and vegetables for their table and to provide to Cookie to feed the men. The hired hands all ate like Aaron, as though they had hollow legs, so it took a lot of vegetables for stews and pounds

upon pounds of potatoes. She churned the butter, cured the meat, and washed her menfolk's dusty manure-stinking work clothes. In her threadbare, ill-fitting skirts and dresses, she looked like a washerwoman rather than the wife of the owner of the fastest-growing cattle ranch in the territory.

Worse, her once-fair skin was now constantly brown, her nose more often sunburned than not, her nails chipped and cracked, and she'd been wearing one of Henry's hats far too long. And she often smelled like one of the cowboys at the end of the day. Her mama would have been appalled.

She couldn't attribute her unsatisfactory new way of life solely to her husband. The war had forced them to pack up and leave polite society behind, to live in the wilds of the untamed frontier, not him. But she expected him to keep his promises, like a house that had yet to be built, and to take her to town when she asked. Being around belching, scratching, cussing men all the time, she deserved— No, she needed a little female interaction on occasion, and she was damn tired of waiting for Henry to find time in his day to take her.

Although she was seriously put out with her husband, she hadn't lost all reason. When he was half an hour late, and she determined to go on her own, she had stomped back to the house and retrieved his Colt 6-shot revolver from the gun case. After the snake incident on the cattle drive and for weeks after they arrived home, she'd had daily shooting lessons so she would know how to protect herself if she found herself alone with her menfolk off somewhere on the ranch working. He'd also showed her how to load and clean it.

When Henry found out she left unescorted, he'd be madder than a hornet. But in her mood, hornets or outlaws or irate husbands would be crazy to mess with her.

The ride into town took about thirty minutes. They were having an unusually warm spring, and it hadn't rained in two weeks or more. When the wind blew, it reminded her of being on the trail again. She could feel the grit on her skin and lips. Not only was her mouth parched, her throat was dry. Around the next bend, she caught sight of the creek in the distance and kicked her horse into a canter. Both of them needed a drink.

On her knees on the creek bank, both hands serving as a drinking cup—a leaky one at that—she was dipping them in the cool water for a third time when a shadow crossed over her. She tensed, fear bubbling up inside her. It wasn't her mare; she'd already drunk her fill and wandered under the trees ten yards away to get some shade. Unfortunately, that meant the six shooter, which was holstered on her saddle had wandered away with her.

When a twig snapped, she jumped to her feet and whirled to face the threat. At first glance, all she noticed about the young man in front of her was his stick-straight black hair hanging loose past his shoulders, and his bronze complexion. Alone and unarmed, she stepped back in alarm. She also lost her footing and sank knee-deep into the cool rushing water.

“Don't be afraid, Mrs. Jackson. I'm friendly.”

“Do I know you?”

“I don't think we've met, but I've become a good friend of your son Luke.”

Her gaze skimmed down his long, lanky frame for the first time, noticing he dressed like her son, too, in a linen work shirt, buckskin vest, dungarees, and boots. Still wary but far less alarmed, she gathered up her wet skirts and climbed back onto the bank. He offered her a hand, which she gratefully took when her shoe was sucked into the silt and muck of the creek bed and she almost went down again, face first this time.

Once she was back on dry, solid ground, he released her and stepped back.

“If you're a friend of Luke's, why haven't I seen you?”

“He usually meets up with me after his morning chores and we go tracking, then we part ways, me usually to skin the game I've caught, and him almost always empty-handed.”

He flashed a dazzling white grin. This young man was as handsome as her three boys and that was saying something, since she was partial.

“You know my name, but I don't know yours.”

“Forgive my lack of manners. I’m Joseph Whitefeather.”

“Oh, yes. You’re the ha—” Letty caught herself before insulting him with the term half-breed, which she tried not to say—ever—but was so common hereabouts it had almost slipped out. “Er, um, you’re the young man who lives part of the year with his father in the settlement and the other half with your mother and her people. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s me. Since it has gone dry, my mother’s people have moved to higher ground, where it is cooler and there is more game. I’ll return to her when the first snows come. And we’ll head farther south.” He glanced at her horse then around and back at her. “Forgive my asking, but are you out riding alone, ma’am?”

“Yes, I’m heading to town.”

“That isn’t wise. There’s trouble brewing.”

“What kind?”

“Not to frighten you”—he paused and thought a moment—“then again, maybe I should. It’s the kind that could lose you your pretty brown hair.”

Letty gasped and backed up again.

He immediately held up his hands and backed away. “I didn’t mean me, but people trying to look like me.”

Trying to was an odd turn of phrase. She was about to ask when he continued.

“There have been raids on a few area farmhouses.”

“I hadn’t heard that.” She glanced at her horse then at the trail leading toward town, having second thoughts about her plan. “Maybe I should head home.”

He nodded. “Good idea. If you don’t mind, ma’am, I’ll escort you.”

She noticed his horse loaded down with a bedroll and bulging saddlebags. “Will you work for your father for the next half of the year?”

“No, ma’am. He works at the sawmill, but he doesn’t own it. I usually find work as I can.”

“You’re in luck. My husband always needs ranch hands. We’re still growing, but we have a bunkhouse and provide two meals a day, plus wages. Or you could stay with your father and work for us during the day.”

A bunkhouse and a new barn, but no house for his wife or a decent roof over the heads of their three boys. Sadly, that bespoke Henry’s priorities. The reminder got her worked up all over again.

“I don’t know your husband. Where might I find him to ask for a job?”

“Show up at the ranch at 6 a.m. any morning before he heads out for the day. Luke will be there and can vouch for you, as will I.”

“Much obliged, ma’am,” he said with another tip of his hat.

“An introduction is the least I can do for your escort and steering me clear of trouble.”

They rode along, chatting about what kind of game he and Luke were tracking but Letty pulled up short as they rounded a curve in the trail, and she saw smoke billowing up from the trees in the distance.

“The Andrews’ farm is in that direction. We should go see if we can help.”

Letty kicked her horse into a gallop, but, as they approached a break in the trees that Mr. Andrews had cleared as a lane leading to their farm, Joseph grabbed her reins and stopped both horses.

“What are you doing? We must help them.”

“I don’t have a good feeling about this, Mrs. Jackson. Are you armed?”

“I have a pistol, yes. Although I wish I’d brought my shotgun.”

“Me, too,” he replied, abruptly stopping when men’s shouts and laughter filtered to them through the trees.

“That doesn’t sound like Martin Andrews,” Letty whispered, her voice barely audible.

“We need to go,” Joseph insisted, keeping a tight hold on her reins as he kicked his paint into a fast walk and quietly continued down the road toward Silverbend.

Her horse followed without protest, but she twisted in her saddle, looking back at the billowing smoke rising from the Andrews’ farm.

“If they’re in trouble, we can’t just leave them,” she exclaimed.

“I’m afraid it’s too late. I’d like to do more, but I won’t risk you.”

“How can you know it’s too late?” she protested.

“The raids I mentioned seem to follow a pattern. Once they kill the family and take their scalps—”

Her hands flew to her mouth at the brutal images his words conjured.

“The other raids...” Joseph turned his troubled eyes her way and in a grim voice told her the rest. “They burned the house and barns to the ground, and left no survivors, only their brutalized bodies out in the yard, as a sign of who they wanted everyone to believe did the killing and scalping.”

Tears sprang to her eyes as bitter bile burned her throat. She was afraid to put her fears into words. It was simply too awful, but she had to know. “Those men didn’t sound like your people. They were white men, weren’t they? That’s what you meant about people trying to look like you.”

“Yes. Their acts of senseless violence, for whatever reason, are stirring up trouble for my mother’s people. But, for now, it’s urgent that you get home. Do you understand?”

She couldn’t speak, only nod.

“Once you’re safe, I’ll go back and see what can be done.”

He passed the reins to her, and far enough away from the burning farm they needn't worry about the noise any longer, urged their horses faster. And they didn't let up until several miles down the road when they passed under the rough-hewn wooden arch marking the entrance to Jackson land. Then they trotted along in troubled silence.

"Martin Andrews was only thirty years old. His wife, Mary, was two years younger, and their child. Dear heavens," she whispered as nausea assailed her. "Baby Thomas was only two."

"Quiet," he urged, as horses' hooves pounded from farther down the trail. His tension eased, as did hers, when the growing sound emanated from the ranch up ahead, rather than from the farm behind them.

The cloud of dust became visible first, then the group of armed men on horseback. Henry was in the lead with their three sons and two of the ranch hands following close behind. He seemed shocked to see her.

"Leticia, what in blue blazes?"

"Martin Andrews' place is on fire. We think there's been an attack."

Grim faced, he glanced over her head at the smoke. "We were working in the northwest pasture and saw it." His eyes shifted to Joseph at her side. "Come here, Letty."

"I know him, Pa," Luke interjected. "His name is Joseph Whitefeather. He's the tracker I told you about."

He nodded but didn't recant his order; he repeated it. "Leticia, come here, now."

She moved her horse forward. When she drew even with him, he issued more directives. "Luke, Aaron, take your ma back to the house. Stay inside with the doors locked and your guns loaded until I return."

"But, Henry—"

"You're going back to the ranch," he cut in. "No arguing. Joseph, Heath, Seth, and Adam, you're with me."

Before he moved away, she grabbed his forearm. “What Joseph told me about the other raids is inconceivable.”

“Get home and stay inside,” he ordered, more softly. “We’ll see about the Andrews and contain the fire before it spreads.”

She nodded, choking on her horror and grief for the young family. Henry wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her close. He pressed his lips to her forehead. “Home and stay safe, darlin’.”

Then he was riding hard, the others following, as two plumes of black smoke rose above the trees into the clear blue summer sky. A sob broke free of her chest for Martin, Mary, and little Thomas because the second plume meant they’d set fire to the barn and the house. All of Joseph’s predictions were coming to pass.

“C’mon, Ma. Let’s get you home,” Luke urged gently.

She raised tear-filled eyes to him before they shifted to Aaron, and she said something she shouldn’t but couldn’t contain. “I hate it here. I wish we’d never left Virginia.”

In her sorrow, she didn’t process that to stay meant war and more fighting and even more death, possibly that of her own family. Right now, the pain was too raw.

But she didn’t raise a fuss when, like Joseph had, Luke took her reins and led her back to the place her menfolk called home but she was sure she never would.

It was late, well past midnight when Henry and Heath rode in. They tended to their horses then stripped to the waist and washed with water from the barn’s rain barrel, removing the soot, dirt, and dried blood—so much damn blood—staining their skin.

“Leave your clothes here. I’ll burn it all in the morning. Your mother doesn’t need to see it.”

“Yes, sir,” Heath said quietly.

“Are you all right, Son?” Henry asked even though he knew he wasn’t.

He’d puked in the dirt at least twice while they buried the family together in a single grave. He probably should have sent him home, but he was twenty, a man full grown, and, being honest, he hadn’t expected it to be as grisly as what they found.

“I’ve seen nothing like that, ever, and probably won’t sleep again,” he declared. “How could anyone do such a thing? Joseph said they were laughing, like it was a game to them.”

“I can’t explain the evil that lives in some men’s hearts.”

“What’s going on, Pa? Joseph also said they were white men, taking scalps to make it look like an Indian raid.”

“We’re expanding from the east and west, squeezing them out. There was the gold rush, the emigrant migration, and now the railroads are coming. It’s changed their way of life, and I understand how they can be angry. What I don’t understand is the motivation of these men today, and the other recent raids. Killing innocents to incite hatred and war serves no purpose that I can see.”

“The captain from Fort Laramie says they’ll hunt down the killers. Do you think that’s true?”

“I can only hope he’s true to his word,” Henry replied, sharing his son’s concern. “If not, we’ll have more false raids and more pointless deaths on both sides.”

“What are you going to do about Ma? It scares the life out of me she was riding out alone. She could have come across the murderers coming or going.”

The thought struck him cold. It was the same feeling he’d had when she rode up with a stranger. He didn’t know whether to hug her close and thank the good lord she was safe or shake her until her teeth rattled for running off on her own without an escort.

Even though he was undecided what he would do, he assured his son, “I’ll deal with your mother.”

Heath chuckled, although it sounded strained. "I don't envy you that." He turned toward the bunkhouse, where he slept most nights. "There's room for Luke and Aaron," he called over his shoulder. "If you want to deal with her tonight."

He needed to, but he wasn't sure he had the energy or the stomach to. She hadn't witnessed what they had, but her eyes had seemed stricken. In a way, that was good. Maybe his repeated warnings would finally sink in. He loved the gal and didn't want her to be bogged down with horrific mental images, but he was at his wit's end with her.

Buddy was on the porch, alert, as if standing guard. His tail thumped on the wooden planks when he climbed the stairs.

"Let's call it a night, boy," he said, as he opened the door and let him go in first.

The lamps were burning when he entered, both boys still wide awake and on guard. "Good job, men," he told them as he locked the door behind him. "You're off duty, now."

"Are we, Pa?" Aaron asked. "Will we ever be?"

"Forever vigilant. That's a frontier man's lot, I suppose."

"Ma says she hates it here and wishes we'd never come west," Luke said, as serious as Henry had seen him since Dobytown. "I don't think that was just fear talking. She seems sad most days. I worry."

"Don't, Son. That's a husband's job." He nodded at the ladder leading to the loft. "You two head on up to bed."

He didn't wait to see if they followed orders. The creak of the ladder and of the floorboards overhead told him they had. Quietly, so as not to wake Letty, he entered their bedroom and sat on the side of the bed. There was barely enough room to take off his boots, but he did that soundlessly as well.

"Are they dead?" her flat unemotional tone came out of the darkness.

"You should be asleep, Letty."

“Don’t coddle me, Henry. Joseph told me about the other raids. Did Martin, Mary, and little Thomas suffer the same fate?”

“All of them are gone. Let’s leave it at that. You don’t need the details or for the images to get stuck in your head.”

“What about the killers?”

“Men from town alerted a patrol from Ft. Laramie. Joseph told them what you and he saw and heard. They’re the law in these parts, and the captain said they would take it from here.”

“And you trust him to do so?”

“You sound like Heath.”

“How did he hold up? I doubt if he’s ever seen anything so...gruesome.”

“He was stoic, pitched in with the fire and the burials. Now he’s in the bunkhouse trying to put it out of his head like a man.”

“By ignoring it?”

“No, by chugging whiskey.”

He turned and reached for her in the darkness. He found her arm and followed it down to her hand, intertwining their fingers together. “I brought you here, knowing it would be tough. We discussed the choice, and you were all in. Is it worse than staying and enduring war?”

“The boys told you what I said,” she stated without inflection.

“They did. Answer the question.”

“Today, it feels like it is.”

Henry speared his hands into his hair and raked it back. Then he made an offer that he swore would never pass his lips. “The war is winding down. The Confederate forces are surrendering. We could go back. It would mean starting over.”

She squeezed his hand hard. “Do you mean it? You’ve worked so hard.”

“Yes, but you aren’t happy here, Letty. I can’t be, if you’re not.”

She curled onto her side, hugging his hand to her chest. “It means everything to me you would even consider going home, but what we once knew is gone.”

He stretched out beside her. “What will it take to make you happy, sweetheart?”

“It seems silly and petty, considering what happened today.”

“No, it’s not. It’s how you feel, and I want to know.”

“I just feel so isolated. I used to have friends. Now it’s me all day with the cat. So when you were late today—”

“We had an injured cow; I couldn’t leave her.”

“That’s what Luke said. But I was disappointed and angry. Friends are scarce when men outnumber women ten to one.”

“Is that all?”

“Do you want a list?”

“I asked for it.”

“It’s not just a lack of friends, it’s not having a proper house. Or a church congregation for support. Or a school, or a shop to buy a dress that isn’t worn so thin it’s practically see-through. It’s having to worry about stampedes, six-foot snowdrifts, men climbing into my wagon with nefarious plans, fording a river and getting swept away, or being the ranch cook when I don’t have a decent stove, and—”

“That’s quite a list.”

“I warned you.”

He pulled her into his arms, and she went willingly. With her head resting beneath his chin and his arms holding her tight, he made a few predictions. “It won’t be like this forever, Letty. Once the railroad comes through Laramie, all those things will change. You’ll have a church and shops and a school—although only Aaron will probably see the inside of one—and the town will fill up with women whose friendship

with you I can condone. Can you stick it out with me until it does?”

“Of course, I can. I love you.”

He tugged her braid until her head fell back then he swooped in for a kiss. The touch of her sweet lips had a calming effect, relieving the fear and overwhelming emotions that had built up throughout the long, horrific day. And he didn't let up until he heard the sweet whimpers he loved so much coming from her throat.

“I'm exhausted,” he murmured, brushing his lips over hers once more. “I know you must be, too. What do you say we get some sleep?”

She stiffened. “Is that it?”

“Is what it?”

“A lecture and a kiss are my punishment?”

His arms flexed around her. “We're both rattled by the day's events, so that can wait.”

“And if I prefer it not to?”

“Since you're not dishing it out, that's not your choice. Go to sleep, Letty.”

“What exactly am I waiting for? Your hand, a switch, your belt?”

“Sleep, darlin'.”

“Making me wait is punishment, too, you know.”

“If you don't hush and shut your eyes, you'll get double what I have planned.”

“See, right there? Punishment. How am I supposed to sleep now?”

“Here's an idea. Shut your eyes and stop talking.”

She huffed a frustrated breath, but, after a few minutes, she settled, and her breathing turned slow and deep as she slept. Curled around her back with his arms surrounding her and his

face in the fragrant softness of her neck, he closed his eyes and did the same.

Chapter 20

Already Taken Root

Henry was quiet for days. He spoke when necessary, otherwise mostly grunting yes or no, but he didn't bark orders like usual, tease her incessantly, or joke with the boys. And she hadn't heard one of his outrageous phrases, what she called Henryisms, since the day of the raid.

Of course, no one felt much like laughing as a pall of sadness hung over the ranch. But Letty knew her man was feeling it hard, not just the senseless violence and deaths but her role in the tragic day. She'd tried discussing it with him, but each time he'd found something that needed to be done urgently and was out the door.

After supper, three days later, with the boys out doing something somewhere, she couldn't take it anymore. She slammed out of the back door of the cabin, walking past her garden to the tree line at the edge of the yard. When she returned, he was on the porch watching her, his arms folded.

She stomped up the stairs and held out the switch she'd just cut.

He glanced down at it gripped tight in her trembling hand. "What's this for?"

"You're angry with me, and it's well deserved. Just punish me for my foolishness and get it over with."

He took it from her readily but only to break it in two and throw it over the railing into the grass.

Letty crumpled, a sob escaping that he'd rejected the solution to their impasse. "I don't know what else to do to make it right," she whispered.

Henry's fingers curled around her upper arms, and he pulled her up on her toes.

Looking into his brown eyes so familiar she could map out every golden fleck from memory, she flinched when he exclaimed, “You can make it right by staying alive, dammit. Don’t you see? My biggest fear is finding you like I did Andrews’ wife. Or like the countless women injured, attacked, and killed every day in the territories. That’s why I dragged you along on a cattle drive and ordered you not to ride out alone. The rules, which you think are arbitrary and unfair, are in place to keep you safe. I didn’t protect you in Dobytown, and you were almost—” His voice broke, unable to put those fears into words. He took a deep breath before he went on. “Like Luke, I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself if something happened to you that night. There is so much out here that is out of my hands—the criminal element proliferating here in Laramie and throughout the territories, stampeding cattle, ornery horses, a reckless teenage boy who won’t use his head, and the consarned unpredictable weather. Here at home, where the risk to you is less, I have a measure of control, but only if you stay on the ranch.”

“Mary was at home, and it didn’t save her,” Letty whispered.

He nodded but didn’t say more until he sat in her rocker and pulled her into his lap. “I always leave someone back.”

“What was that?”

“When we ride out every morning. I always leave someone back. One of the older hands, or Heath who I trust. They work in the barn or the stables, but their primary job is to keep an eye out for trouble.”

This came as a surprise but made sense of something. “I always wondered why Heath is so often nearby when it’s lunchtime.”

“He’d much rather be working with the horses anyway. But, that day, everything went to hell. We had an injured cow and an injured hand—”

“You didn’t tell me one of the men was hurt.”

“The cow injured its foreleg and slid down the creek bank. Which came first we don’t know, but it was skittish while we were trying to haul it out. Sam got stepped on and broke two fingers—”

“That’s why you weren’t here to take me to town.”

“Yeah, and I couldn’t spare someone to send. I want you to have pretty new things, darlin’, and to have friends. All I want is for you to be happy. But fate was working against us that day.”

“Oh, Henry,” she whispered, resting her hand against his beloved face. When he turned into it, nuzzling his cheek into her palm, she went on. “Perhaps it was working for us. If we’d have left on time, we may have come across the Andrews’ killers along the way.”

They fell into an uneasy silence. Fate seemed to have a personal grudge against them since setting foot on the Laramie high plains. But they were all still healthy and alive. Perhaps all this time, what she saw as bad luck was the opposite.

She’d earned the tanning of her life with this reckless act, but after what had transpired at their neighbor’s farm, Henry didn’t have it in him. The scene had etched itself into his memory like a scar, each gory detail a vivid reminder that the frontier was still a wild and dangerous place. Then his anger would flare that Letty’s defiance had put herself at such grave risk. But all the punishments he’d laid down in the past few years hadn’t helped. They seemed to make her more willful.

He wasn’t a heartless brute; Leticia had been just as shaken by the massacre. So much so, she’d been plagued by bad dreams these past few nights. When she’d awakened screaming, he’d held her close, trying to chase away the terror, his own emotions raw and overwhelming.

“I can’t stand you being cross with me,” she uttered brokenly, tears tracing wet trails down her cheeks. “Punish me. Then maybe we can somehow put this tragedy behind us.”

He gazed into her tear-filled eyes, his heart a jumble of conflicted emotions. The love he held for her surged within his chest, a potent mixture of tenderness and exasperation. Finally, he nodded, his fingers curling around her wrist as he led her inside and into their bedroom.

The windowless room was dimly lit. The only light came through the open door, which couldn't remain that way for what he planned, or from the fireplace. He set a match to the wick in the bedside oil lamp. The tiny, crowded room only had two places where he could accomplish his task, in the bed with her across his lap, or with her standing at the foot bent over it. He moved the trunk where she stored the linens and blankets out of the way.

“Skirt up, drawers down, and bend over the bed,” he told her. The air hummed with tension, unspoken anticipation hanging between them, but she didn't hesitate or argue as she moved into position.

The sight of her lifting her skirt, untying her drawers then presenting her creamy smooth bottom cheeks for punishment brought a rush of complicated emotions to Henry's chest. The urge to protect warred with the need to discipline. It was a battle he often lost, but not today.

The wide leather belt struck her tender skin with a loud *thwap* and induced a sharp intake of breath. His hand stilled momentarily, his heart aching at the vulnerability etched in her posture. He hated himself for causing her pain, even when the punishment was deserved. But as the leather met her skin again and again, the sting paled compared to what she would have suffered at the hands of the outlaws if they'd found her on the trail alone. And far less than the anguish he and their sons would have had to endure if they lost her.

After ten solid licks, when he cast the belt aside, Leticia turned and wrapped her arms around his middle, hugging him fiercely. With her face buried in his shirt, her words were muffled, but the intensity of her emotions wasn't lost on him.

“You've walloped me harder for much less.”

He returned her embrace, clasping her tightly. “That’s because I needed to teach you a lesson,” he uttered starkly into her hair. “This one, I think, has already taken root. Please, say that it has, Leticia.”

“It has, Henry,” was her whispered reply, the weight of her promise echoing in the air. “I swear I’ll stay on the ranch unless I have an escort. I won’t let you and our boys suffer for my foolishness.”

An exasperated grunt escaped him. “You’re gonna be the death of me one of these days, woman,” he grumbled as he kissed the top of her head while literally squeezing the breath out of her.

When she wheezed, “Not so tight, dear. You’ll break a rib,” he lessened his hold but didn’t let her go.

Instead, he lifted her into his arms, her slight weight familiar and comforting. Carrying her to their bed, he set her down gently, the weariness of the day beginning to fade into the background. Their lovemaking was both urgent and tender, a testament to the emotions that had simmered beneath the surface for days. In those intimate moments, as their bodies melded together, they sought solace in one another.

Chapter 21

Letty's Meadow

Weeks passed, and life went on, but a dismal pall had settled over the Jackson ranch. It was expected after such violence and tragedy, but Letty seemed affected more than the others. More so than Heath, even. Henry couldn't stand to see the faraway look in her eyes and her stricken expression because he knew she was remembering the young family. He didn't know how to erase the images, except to hold her and try to give her comfort when the nightmares came.

With his hands on his hips, gripping his hat with one the other tightly fisted, he glared at the trunks stacked against the wall of an empty stall toward the back of the barn. Beside it stood Letty's grandmother's pie safe, chock full not with pie as intended but with clothes, shoes, and household items they had packed and brought with them from Virginia. Nearly two summers had passed, and they still hadn't fully unpacked. Not that they didn't need the things stored in the barn, there simply wasn't space for them in the cabin. Heck, there was barely enough room for the five of them as it was.

Forcing them to live in such cramped quarters made him feel like he wasn't doing his job as a husband and father, and a provider for his family. How many times had he heard a bang followed by a sharp cry of pain, as one of his sons stood in the low-ceilinged loft and banged their head? And he'd had to arbitrate an argument or break up a fight at least once a week as tensions ran high. The boys, who would soon be men, barely had space to turn around, and, after two long years, had a little too much togetherness in the too-crowded space. He knew how they felt, having a permanent sore spot on the back of his head from misjudging the height of the bedroom ceiling. And the usually creamy soft skin of Letty's thighs more often than not sported bruises from walking into the furniture because there wasn't enough room to walk around.

His hands fisted tighter, and he cursed. Not holding back in the empty barn, the foul word echoed off the rafters. He wanted to give his wife, the mother of his children, and the woman he loved more than life, the finest of everything including the new house she dreamed of. And he hated disappointing her. As a pioneer and fledgling rancher's wife, she got enough of that on a daily basis, which he was sure, along with homesickness, contributed to her ongoing melancholy.

But he had to set priorities, as he'd explained to Letty and their sons more than once. The house, unfortunately, was far down his list. There were too many barriers to getting the supplies he needed from back east. Once the railroad came through...

Henry pounded his fist against his thigh as he cursed yet again. Letty had to be as tired of hearing that as he was tired of saying it. But it was true. Transporting window glass and shingles and polished flooring and all the other things she wanted for her new home was faster and safer by train. By wagon for hundreds of miles through foul weather and over the rough terrain, it was doubtful it would arrive in one piece, especially the window panes.

Besides that, he had to devote his focus and energy to getting the ranch not only operational but profitable. In the first two years, more money had gone out than had come in just readying the ranch for horses and cattle. He already worked from daylight till dark. When was he supposed to squeeze in home building?

He raised his hands to brush his hair back and replace his hat but froze seeing the crumpled brim. Subjected to rain, sun, heat, wind, sweat, and dust—hundreds or thousands of pounds of dust—little wonder it looked much the worse for wear. The hat was the reason for him being in the storage stall in the first place. He needed a new consarned hat and had packed at least two for the trip.

He opened the top trunk, which contained Letty's good dresses carefully packed in tissue paper, along with her fancy hats and good shoes. She had needed none of it since they'd

arrived because there was no place for hundreds of miles in all directions for her to wear finery. He closed the lid, guilt eating at him. But what were they supposed to do, stay on the farm and be harassed, run over, or burned out when the Confederate Army marched into town and right through their land?

He hefted the first trunk and set it aside then raised the latch on the second. His and the boys' Sunday duds were inside, along with a bunch of other odds and ends. He harrumphed, unsurprised their necessities fit into one trunk when his wife required one all to herself, even when she'd left the damn hoop, what he always thought looked like a birdcage, behind where it belonged.

"Ridiculous women's fashion," he muttered, as he pawed through the contents in search of a hat. He found one near the bottom, the crown a little smashed but looking and smelling a lot better than the one he'd been wearing. When he removed it and plopped it on his head, he spied something else of interest. A book: familiar but long forgotten.

Henry placed it on top of Letty's trunk then carefully turned to a page near the center. Before leaving the farm, he'd gone to her favorite spot by the creek and gathered several of her favorite wildflowers—Virginia Bluebells, red columbine, and wild lupine—then he'd quietly stashed them away, pressing them between the pages of the heavy book for a keepsake, and a precious piece of her past. Except they hadn't aged well, now brown and shriveled and brittle. When he picked up a bluebell, tiny seeds scattered everywhere. As he watched them roll and bounce across the pages and onto the lid of the trunk, his lips curved into a grin.

"Rather than dried petals as a memory, I'll give her a whole meadow of the real thing." It was May, the perfect time to sow them. Painstakingly, he gathered each tiny seed. "And I know the perfect place," he uttered, his heart feeling much lighter than when he'd entered the stall.

"Leticia!" her husband's deep voice boomed through the cabin. "Come outside. I've got something to show you."

In the middle of removing corn muffins from the stove, Letty turned just her head and frowned at her husband standing in a shaft of sunlight and the wide-flung front doorway. “I’m finishing up supper, Henry. Can’t it wait until after?”

“Stew and muffins will keep. Besides, the boys rode over to the neighbors to help him finish harvesting his corn. Rain and cold are coming. If he doesn’t get it in soon, there won’t be anything fit to harvest. They won’t be back until dark, I’m guessing.”

She closed the heavy cast-iron door and placed the pan on the stovetop with a clatter. Then she stretched, rubbing the small of her aching back. “If someone had told me their plans,” she huffed, “I’d have prepared something cold, like ham biscuits and beans instead of sweltering in this kitchen all afternoon.”

“I’m sorry, darlin’, but them helping really wasn’t planned. Aaron and Heath were running down a few strays and saw the poor fella struggling with barely a dent put into his harvest. He’s new to farming and got a late start planting. It was the boys who offered to help, which was right neighborly.”

Letty flushed, not from the heat but from shame. For them to volunteer to help, after already putting in a full day’s work, out of the kindness of their hearts, was exactly how she and Henry had raised them. And here she was griping about being a little overheated.

“I’m the one who’s sorry. I’m brimming with pride that our boys would do something so generous for neighbors we barely know. Of course, dinner can wait.” She frowned, suddenly. “Luke didn’t go with them?”

He sauntered over to her, stopping a foot away; but this close, she had to tip her head back to look up into his beard-scruffy but-still-handsome face.

“He’s taking on their evening chores—all of them. Which means he’ll be a while, too, and gives you time to take a walk with me.”

Her day had been long and arduous, too. She'd worked in the garden then tackled two enormous piles of dirty, dusty, sweat-stained laundry, and of course, made the beef stew. Her back hurt as did her feet, and she wanted nothing more than to find a cool spot on the back porch—which was a tall order for late August—and kick off her shoes. If no one was around to see, she might hike her skirts to her knees and try to catch a breeze, which would have shocked her mother into a case of the vapors at her very unladylike behavior.

Yes, her plan sounded much better than a walk.

“To where?” she asked hesitantly.

“When your husband invites you out for an evening stroll, does it matter where? The sun is setting, and it's cooling off.” He reached for her hand.

“Wait!” she exclaimed. “Let me take the stew off the heat and put the muffins in a basket first.”

Minutes later, they were walking hand in hand behind the house toward the creek. A light breeze blew from the mountains in the west and she turned her heat-flushed face into it.

“It's much cooler than earlier, and a lot more comfortable than the kitchen.”

He pulled her closer and slung an arm around her shoulder. “You work hard taking care of us. You deserve a little break.”

She glanced up at him, filled with suspicion. He appreciated what she did for their family and told her frequently, not taking her efforts as his due like some husbands. But this was a bit much even for him.

Stopping abruptly, she declared, “You're scaring me, Henry. What's wrong?”

He grunted, dark brows gathering. “Why do you always assume the worst?”

She held up a hand and started ticking off catastrophes. “Week-long blizzards, roof collapses, snowdrifts, stampedes, lightning strikes—”

Before she continued on her other hand, his finger covered her lips. “All right. You have justification, but not this time. I have a surprise.”

Letty looked around, seeing grass and trees and not much else. “What kind of surprise would you have out here?”

“Criminy, woman. You make it damn hard to do something nice.”

Suddenly, her feet left the ground as he swung her up in his arms.

“Henry! What on earth?”

“Close your eyes,” he ordered. “And no peeking until I say.”

Completely bewildered by his behavior but also charmed that he’d actually swept her off her feet, she slipped her arms around his neck.

She returned his gaze when he didn’t budge, only stared down at her. “We’re not moving until you shut those beautiful green eyes, Leticia.”

“But, Henry...”

“Surely after over twenty years wed, you trust me.”

“Of course.”

He bent and brushed her lips with his. “Then prove it.”

“Did you get too much sun today?”

“Leticia Jackson,” he exclaimed, clearly offended by her implication, although his lips twitched the tiniest bit. “Close your eyes and prove you trust me.”

With a sigh of resignation because he could be more stubborn than her, she lowered her lashes and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Finally,” he muttered, moving again.

When he came to a halt, moments later, he dropped the arm beneath her knees and set her gently on the ground. He didn’t let her go, however, and when she looked up at him

expectantly, his broad chest and shoulders were all she could see.

“Uh-uh. Keep ’em closed.”

“Honestly,” she breathed, to the point of exasperation from waiting and wondering.

His low growl told her he was at the same point. “I’ve been working on this surprise for months, woman, and I refuse to let your obstinance spoil it for either of us.”

His big hands covered her eyes and he turned them both in an about-face. “Now, you may look.”

When they fell away, she sucked in a breath at the sight before her. Of all the things she considered this could be about, she never in her wildest imaginings expected a meadow filled with wildflowers. They weren’t just any flowers, either, and not like the daisies and buttercups that were prolific on the high plains. These were blooming with blues and purples and reds like at home.

“Oh, Henry,” she breathed as she watched them swaying in the light breeze, awash with a golden light beneath the setting sun. “I... You... It’s not...” she stammered, making him chuckle. “I’ve never seen bluebells and columbine in our travels. Oh, and is that—”

“Spiderwort,” he supplied. “Damned foolish name for a purple flower.”

“But how did you do this?”

His arms came around her from behind. Holding her tight, with his chin on her shoulder, he reminded her of why she’d fallen head over heels in love with him so long ago.

“I gathered some of your favorites and pressed them in a book. My plan was for you to have dried petals. I also got seeds.”

She turned to face him, her hands on his cheeks, framing his face as she rose on her toes to get closer to him. “You can be vexing, autocratic, and so stubborn I think I’ll go mad

sometimes then you do something like this, and I fall in love with you all over again.”

He grunted, muttering, “That’s a backhanded compliment if I’ve ever heard one, but I’ll take it.” The smile playing around his lips as he dipped his head and brushed his mouth over hers assured her he was teasing.

It was too brief a kiss for her liking, but he took her by the hand and led her into the sea of fragrant color. “From here on out, this will be Letty’s Meadow,” he announced, coming to a stop smack dab in the middle.

She blinked back tears, overcome by the thoughtfulness of his gesture, the tapestry of brilliant hues surrounding them, and the floral scent so familiar it evoked memories of summers past, of family and home.

“You had a favorite spot on the farm, and I could see how much you missed Virginia. When I discovered the seeds, I thought to recreate a special place for you here on the ranch.” His gaze swept the meadow. “It’s not exact, but with the creek and shade trees and now the wildflowers, it’s darn close.”

“It’s perfect,” she whispered, battling the welling tears.

He glanced down at her. With a soft smile and love shining in his eyes, Henry used his thumb to whisk away the single teardrop that escaped and rolled down her cheek. “My intention was to make you smile, not cry.”

“These are happy tears.” She grabbed hold of his forearm, and, leaning into him, rested her cheek against his shoulder. “If you come in for supper and can’t find me, you know I’ll be here in this beautiful spot. Thank you for this.”

He dropped to the ground and pulled her down with him. Lying back with her on top, his fingers threaded through her hair, dislodging the pins as he aligned her face with his. With his mouth almost touching hers, his breath tickled her lips. “You’re most welcome, darlin’ wife, but I have a different thank-you in mind.”

His mouth sealed over hers, his tongue parting her lips to slip inside and tangle with hers. While his kiss stole her breath

and stoked her passion, one long arm reached down and pulled up her skirt, his nimble fingers finding and untying the string in her drawers. Not the split kind, unfortunately. He pulled them down to her knees then rolled them, making sure her skirts protected her skin from the ground before he settled on top of her. With the fingers of one hand, he worked to expose more of her, while she used both of hers to pull his shirt from his trousers then unbuckled his belt. Her fingers dipped into his trousers, releasing the hard length prodding her belly. Throughout it all, their kiss remained unbroken.

Letty felt the rush of air on her chest and belly as, through with her buttons, he brushed her blouse aside, pushed up her half chemise, and exposed her breasts. Only then did his mouth move lower, catching a hard peak between his lips and sucking as he plunged his hardness into her welcoming wetness, the lead-up making her more than ready for him. Her drawers around her knees hobbled her legs, but her hands were free to wander. One roamed his back under his shirt; the other sank into the thick waves at the back of his head. With her passion ignited, she clenched a fistful of the silky strands, her hips rising to meet his every thrust.

“Henry,” she whispered.

“I know, love,” he rasped around a nipple with the same urgency. “I feel it, too. My hunger for you burns just as strong, even after two decades.”

Then there were no more words, only moans and hitched breaths. Their hearts beat in tandem as their joined bodies exploded with pleasure. They both cried out when they reached fulfillment for the first time, but certainly not the last, on the soft ground amidst the vibrant blossoms of Letty’s Meadow.

Chapter 22

Knowin' Ain't Enough

August 1866

The sun was a fiery ball, sinking behind the rugged silhouette of the Medicine Bow, casting long shadows across the sprawling landscape. Letty's chestnut mare and Henry's sturdy black stallion clopped along the dusty trail, the rhythmic beat of hooves harmonizing with the rustling leaves and the distant hum of crickets. The air held the crisp scent of pine and earth, while the dying light painted the sky in hues of orange and pink.

As they rode, her laughter rang out like silver bells tinkling in the breeze. It was a familiar sound because, as the owner of the fastest-growing cattle and horse ranch in the territory, running 5,000 head of cattle and with people traveling for hundreds of miles to buy their ranch-bred-and-broken wild horses, he could afford to take a day off to be with his wife. It was up to twice a month now. And once or twice her friends came to her. All four of them, now.

She'd finally gotten her trip to town for tea with Mrs. Mayhew and in the past year had learned better to sew. Now she no longer looked like a washerwoman, which, to Henry's regret, he hadn't noticed. She always looked beautiful to him no matter what she wore or didn't wear, sunburned, golden skinned, dusty, or squeaky-clean from the tub. He preferred the latter, however.

The path home led them to the creek meandering through their property. He guided the horses to the water's edge and dismounted.

"I have fond memories of this spot."

With a mischievous grin, he swept Letty off her horse and tumbled her amidst the tall grass.

She looked up at him, smiling, her eyes reflecting the vivid blue of the Dakota sky. “We’re going to get caught one of these days.”

“No one’s around for miles.” Propped on an elbow, he brushed a few golden-streaked tendrils out of her face. “Besides, I keep telling you, darlin’. It’s our ranch, our land, and I don’t give a fig what other folks think.”

“What if it’s Luke or Aaron, or, god forbid, Heath—again?”

“I think our boys are wise enough and old enough and have lived in a small cabin with us long enough to know, if they see our horses standing together, in a beautiful, private spot, they best keep on riding.”

“Heaven’s Henry, our boys aren’t boys anymore, are they?”

“Nope, which is another reason I know I can tumble their ma in the wildflowers and not be disturbed.”

“I’ll just keep on pretending they don’t know what we do in beautiful, fairly private spots.”

“And haylofts.” He dipped his head for a kiss. “Or against trees.”

Her cheeks were crimson when she closed her eyes and plugged her ears with her fingers and started humming.

Laughing, he pulled one hand away and asked, “What inarnation are you doing, woman?”

“Blocking out thoughts of my precious babies knowing I’m a wanton woman.”

“Darlin’,” he murmured, pulling the other hand away then wrapping both around his neck. His lips hovered over hers, his unwavering gaze locked with her blue eyes. “There’s no shame in what we do, and our boys have witnessed for years what true love is like between a husband and wife. When it’s time for them to wed, they’ll want what their ma and pa had and won’t settle for less. I guar-an-damn tee it.”

“You think so? That would be wonderful.”

“I know so.”

“I love you, Henry.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart. Now, are we through talking so that I can kiss you, and have my way with you by the creek you named on the ranch we own? We’re burning daylight.”

The tinkling bells of her laughter rang out again. “By all means, Mr. Jackson. Have me. I can’t think of a better way to end a perfect day.”

His smiling lips covered hers, and his tongue swept inside then their passion took over. Buttons were undone, her skirts pushed up, his vest shoved over his shoulders as her hands slid under his shirt and up his broad back, and another pair of split drawers was rent in two. As they lost themselves in each other, just as Henry predicted, none of their neighbors or ranch hands or family were any the wiser as their cries of ecstasy mingled with the splashing water, the caress of the light breeze, and the birds calling overhead as they found fulfillment in one another in the high grass, by the creek, on their ranch and their land.

Their idyllic day was cut short when they arrived back at the ranch, riding into the foreyard of the barn. The atmosphere shifted, tension thickening like storm clouds on the horizon. Henry’s jaw tightened as he helped Letty down from her saddle, his playful mood replaced by a wariness.

“What is it?” he asked Aaron, who sat perched on the top rail of the corral fence, as if waiting for them, his face etched with worry.

“Luke, he, uh...” Jumping down, he paced closer, his gaze shifting uneasily behind them. “He said he’d be back well before supper. You didn’t see him on the road, did you?”

“No. Why?” Henry’s voice matched Letty’s confusion as they exchanged a glance.

“He and Jake Jessup took off right after you left. His horse came back a few hours ago—without him.” Aaron’s eyes darted toward the side of the barn, his unease palpable.

His eyes followed his son's gaze, and realization hit like a punch to the gut. The new wagon was missing. Anger surged within him then exploded like distant thunder. "In my new wagon?"

The answer was clear before Aaron even spoke. The wagon wasn't where it had been when they left. His jaw clenched, knuckles whitening against the reins. "Where did they go?"

"I, uh, don't rightly know. I tried to stop them." Aaron's shoulders slumped, eyes downcast.

"Not your job, Son," he snapped, his patience wearing thin. "But reeling in your reckless, daredevil brother is mine." He ushered Letty's mare toward Aaron. "See to your ma's horse while I go look for him. Where's Heath? I could use his help."

"He's gone to see Abigail in town." Aaron's words held both irritation and resignation.

Henry's lips twisted into a wry smile. Heath, always with a heart that raced ahead of him, chased dreams of his own. What he lacked, thankfully, was the headstrong spirit his younger brother had that got him into so much trouble.

"I'll go fetch him," he grunted, his eyes narrowing at the setting sun.

"I'll come along and help."

"No. It's likely me and your brother will need to talk. You stay and watch out for your mother." His tone brooking no argument, he turned and remounted his horse.

Letty curled her hand around his knee as she gazed up at him. "What if he's hurt?"

"I pray that he's not, but who was it that said there is a special providence for drunkards, fools, and children?"

"I don't know, but I sure hope they're right. He's still a boy, Henry. Mind your temper."

"He's eighteen, which makes him a man. But that's not gonna save his backside from a hiding if he's put a scratch on

my new wagon. You know the trouble I went through to bring that back from Cheyenne.”

“I do, but please, keep your head when you find him.”

“Right or wrong, no matter what he’s busted or wrecked or gotten into this time, he’s my boy. I love him unconditionally, darlin’. You should know that.”

“I do, dear. I was making sure you remembered you did. Bring him home safe.”

She squeezed his knee then stepped back, watching as he turned his horse and retraced the path down the lane where they’d just come from.

Henry’s search led him to a section of the creek where the bank sloped down to the water. The dirt mounded up on one side, the wagon half in and out of the water, and listing to one side because of the busted wheel told him in a glance that the boy and his friends had tried to jump it. Thank providence they didn’t do it with a horse pulling it.

Luke leaned against a tree, arms crossed, appearing as miserable as he was defiant. “You found me.”

Anger and disappointment swelled within him as he approached. “Whose idea was this? Yours or Jake Jessup’s?”

His clenched jaw and lowered head were his answer. “You let him bait you again? Why?”

Luke’s gaze shifted, guilt creeping in. “We were just having fun.”

“Fun?” Henry’s voice crackled like dry leaves underfoot. “You think this is a game, boy? We’ve got responsibilities here. I took a week away from the ranch to get that wagon. The trip wasn’t easy, and the wagon didn’t come free.”

He glanced at it in the moonlight, noticing a lot more damage than just a splintered wheel. Criminy.

Luke’s defiant stance wavered as his father’s stern gaze bored into him. “I just turned eighteen, Pa. I ain’t a boy no

more.”

His anger, which had been simmering beneath the surface, jumped to a rolling boil. “Maybe it’s time to act like it. If you want to be a man, you’ve got to stand up for right and wrong, no matter what pressure comes to bear from friends, or those pretending to be your friends. I notice it isn’t Hiram Jessup’s wagon busted and half submerged in the creek.”

Luke’s gaze dropped, the bravado fading. “It was stupid. I know, Pa.”

“Knowin’ ain’t enough,” he scolded out of both frustration and concern. “If you’re gonna act like a child, I’ll treat you like one.” He tossed him his closed knife. “Cut me a switch.”

Luke’s eyes widened as the reality sank in. “Pa, I…”

Henry’s gaze was unwavering. “Do as I say. It’s time to start using that head of yours before you find yourself in more trouble than you can handle.”

All of his boys were adventurous, but Luke took it to a whole new level. He hadn’t had to discipline Heath since he turned twelve, and Aaron hardly ever, the rare times when his brother’s influence got him into trouble. He couldn’t say the same for his adventurous, impulsive middle child. A harsh lesson was due, one passed down through generations of Jackson men. Talking himself silly sure hadn’t curbed his son’s recklessness.

With a mulish dip to his lips that reminded him so much of his mother, Luke took the knife to a nearby tree. In no time, he returned and handed him the finger-width, whippy switch he’d cut.

The switch cracked against Luke’s backside, a switch echoing through the quiet grove. Through his thick denim trousers, it couldn’t have hurt much, and he didn’t make a peep. The humiliation of being eighteen, an adult, and treated like a headstrong kid was much more painful than stinging skin.

As the punishment continued, the message was simple—a blend of tough love and a demand to grow up and do better.

When he stopped after an even dozen, Luke's eyes were moist, the pain not just physical but a deeper ache that touched his very soul.

Henry tossed the twig aside and gripped his son by the back of the neck, pulling him close. His voice was heavy with love for his exasperating child. "You could have broken your neck. Then what would me, your ma, and your brothers do without you?"

"I'm sorry, Pa."

"Make better choices, Luke. Starting with the company you keep."

Luke nodded, his gaze on the ground. "Yes, sir."

His arm slid around his son's shoulder, a heavy sigh escaping his lips. "Aaron said your horse rode in a few hours back. You'll have to ride double with me."

"Do we have to head back right away?"

"Yeah. Your ma's waiting."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Letty's fingers idly stirred the pot on the stove, the aroma of simmering stew filling the cabin. She had prepared supper, but her appetite was on hold, her thoughts consumed with the inevitable clash between Henry and Luke. She put the cover on the pot to keep in the heat and moved it off the heat. Much more simmering and it would dry up and be unfit to eat.

She walked out on the porch and perched on the top step, her gaze shifting between the yard, the barn, and the road beyond. The minutes ticked by, each one feeling like an eternity. She shot to her feet, a sense of dread washing over her when a single rider appeared. A million notions ran through her head. Henry hadn't found him, or he was hurt, or lost, or...

The moon emerged from behind the clouds, and she breathed a protracted sigh of relief that they were riding

double. Of course, they had to. Her son's horse had come back.

They didn't come to the house, stopping in front of the barn, instead. When Luke slid to the ground first, his pa tossed him the reins. His voice carried to her, but not clear enough to make out the words. He spoke with his head down, clearly embarrassed and contrite. The sight tugged at Letty's heartstrings, a pang of sympathy for the young man caught between boyhood and adulthood. Luke led the horses away, not sparing a glance at his mother, his steps heavy with the weight of his latest impulsive actions.

She descended the few steps into the yard as her husband reached her.

"What happened?" she asked, gripping his arm for reassurance because she didn't have a good feeling.

Henry's gaze met hers. "Maybe we should sit."

"It scares me you think I have to."

"I brought him home to you, Leticia. But it's not good."

He guided her to the pair of chairs on the porch. They settled in, the evening breeze ruffling her hair as she waited for her husband's explanation.

"He was racing the Jessup brothers."

"Racing? How without horses?"

"Down the steep bank by the bend in the creek. They built up the dirt to make a ramp so they could clear it. They didn't, of course, and his supposed friends left him with a busted wagon wheel to face my wrath on his own."

Her hand flew to her lips, her heart sinking at the news. "Oh, Henry. He could have been hurt—badly."

"I pointed that out."

"Your new wagon?"

"Also, not good." In the faint light from the cabin, she watched as he ran a hand through his hair, the lines on his face

deepening as he exhaled heavily. “I gave him a talking-to, Letty. Told him it’s time to grow up.”

Her hand found his, fingers entwining in a silent show of support. “He’s at a tough age, caught between wanting to prove himself and needing guidance.”

He nodded, his thumb rubbing over the back of her hand. “It seems to me Heath and Aaron already understand that actions have consequences. I told him if he’s gonna act like a child—”

“What did you do?”

“What I said I’d do if he was all right when I found him.”

She nodded, her gaze drifting to the barn where Luke was tending to the horses. “It’s a tough lesson, but a necessary one.”

His grip on her hand tightened. “If taking a switching as a man of eighteen, busting his arm for a reckless stunt, and what happened at Dobytown hasn’t taught him, I’m not sure what will.”

Her eyes flicked back to her husband. “He’ll settle down. Just as I did.”

He glanced at her, a brow raised. “Yeah? How old were you when that happened?”

A warm blush crept onto her cheeks. “Um... I’ve got a birthday coming up, and the last time you felt the need to take a belt to my backside was a year ago. So... forty?”

Henry hung his head, and the sound he produced was halfway between a groan and a chuckle.

“He’s got a fine example to follow in you, Husband. We’ll just have to stick by him, through the challenges and the joys.”

“Gotta say. I’ve had my fill of challenges. I’m damn ready for a bit of joy from Luke.”

He leaned in, pressed a gentle kiss to her lips then dropped his forehead to hers in a silent moment of shared understanding.

Chapter 23

Too Close for Comfort

June 1867

Heath felt like his heart was in his throat, and its pounding matched the cadence of his steps as he paced the uneven ground. He couldn't stay still, his nervousness making his gut churn, fingers aching where he clenched them tightly. There was no church yet in town, so he and Abigail had chosen this spot beneath the sprawling branches of a stand of cottonwoods that lined the bank of Silverbend creek. They both thought the shimmering quicksilver water and the towering mountain peaks would be the perfect backdrop to their wedding ceremony.

His gaze fixed on the dirt path that wound its way toward where he stood. Every crunch of a pebble as someone approached sent a jolt of anticipation through him. A rush of disappointment followed when it turned out to be a friend or neighbor invited to witness their vows, not his bride to be.

Pa stood nearby with Ma at his side, offering their silent support, but he read their looks of concern. Behind them, his brothers shifted restlessly as if feeding off his unease. Abigail was thirty minutes late. The ride from her frame house, one of the few in the rustic town, took a fraction of that.

When a mounted figure appeared on the horizon, hope soared within him. This was it, the moment he had been waiting for. But as the figure drew closer, his hopeful smile faded. The rider was Frank Rawlings, Abigail's father, and he rode alone.

The discomfort etched in his usually placid face mirrored the tension in Heath's chest. The world seemed to slow as Frank approached, each plodding step of his horse making Heath's heart sink a bit more.

“Mr. Jackson,” the older man said in greeting, his eyes avoiding direct contact. “I’m afraid there’s been a change of plans.”

“Where’s Abigail?” Heath’s voice wavered, betraying the emotions that churned within him.

Frank cleared his throat, his distaste for the confrontation clear. “She’s...not coming.”

Heath’s pulse pounded in her ears. “What do you mean she’s not coming?”

His Pa stepped closer, his hand on his shoulder a solid anchor. “Perhaps you can explain.” Though he stated it politely, there was no perhaps. It was a demand.

Frank’s gaze finally met Heath’s. Ill at ease, he was clearly dreading what came next. “She’s run off, I’m embarrassed to say. With Mr. Dorchester from town. I’m deeply sorry.”

The world seemed to blur around Heath, the other man’s words hanging in the air like a heavy fog. Abigail, the woman he loved, the one he envisioned sharing a life with had abandoned him. The sun that had once bathed the scene in warmth now felt like a harsh beam of light, illuminating his heartache for all to see.

Heath’s breathing grew ragged, his chest tight as if he couldn’t draw enough air. His father’s grip on his shoulder tightened, a silent reminder that he wasn’t alone. But in that moment, all Heath could feel was the crushing weight of betrayal and loss, as the future he had planned shattered like glass around him.

He knew where to find her. So often they had ridden this way and sat on the rise to watch the tall grass sway across the windswept meadow with the splashing waters of the creek only a few steps away. It was their favorite spot, or it had been.

A week had passed since Abigail had jilted him without a word then cruelly subjected him to the humiliation of waiting for his bride, who had no intention of showing up at the altar.

He had experienced a whirlwind of emotions since then: pain, anger, and bitterness. But the one that lingered like a heavy cloud over his heart was confusion. And it wouldn't pass until he knew why.

As if conjured by his thoughts, Abigail appeared on the path near the turnoff to their meadow. Dressed in dark brown from head to toe, he blended with the tree he leaned against. He didn't speak or move, letting her draw closer before alerting her to his presence. Upon seeing her serene expression and the flash of gold on her left hand, his anger blazed anew. He took a deep breath, trying to steady himself, before he pushed away from the tree.

“Abigail.”

Startled, she sawed back on the reins. The horse sidestepped but quickly settled.

“Heath,” she replied, a hand spread on her chest as if to stop her racing heart. “I didn't see you there. You frightened me.”

“I expect you were hoping never to see me again.”

“Oh, no.... That isn't true.” But it was. She couldn't meet his eyes, looking everywhere but at him.

His hands clenched into fists at his sides, his knuckles turning white. “I deserve an explanation. You left me without a word, with no warning. Why?”

Abigail's shoulders tensed, and her gaze finally met his, her eyes revealing a complex blend of regret and defiance. “You don't understand what it's like out here, on this godforsaken frontier. My father dumped me here without a by-your-leave. I can't hitch my future to a man with nothing but dreams of a ranch that might never come to anything.”

Heath's brow furrowed more deeply. “The ranch has already become something. Our herd has grown to over 5,000 head in just a few years' time, and the horses—”

“You sleep in a bunkhouse. Your family lives in a cramped, shoddy cabin. Good heavens, where were you going to put me? In the stable, perhaps?”

“I told you my father has given each of us a tract of land to build on. That was the plan when I proposed marriage and you said yes. I thought we were in this together, Abigail. We could have faced the challenges, built a life.”

A bitter laugh escaped her lips. “Love isn’t always the best basis for a marriage. It doesn’t put food on the table and wouldn’t guarantee a roof over my head. Besides, I aspire to more than that.”

Heath’s heart ached at the stark reality in her words. How had he misjudged her so? He believed that true love had the strength to weather any storm, just like parents’ always had.

“Love is worth fighting for. I thought you believed that, too.”

Abigail’s eyes flashed with indignation. “Love doesn’t keep you warm when the snow and wind blow down from the Medicine Bow in January, Heath. It doesn’t protect you from the uncertainties of this land. I need guarantees, security.”

“And the man you left me for, who is older than your father, offers these guarantees?” Heath asked, his voice cracking with the painful, humiliating truth.

Abigail’s gaze hardened. “Frank Dorchester is a railroad man. He has means and can offer me the stability I need.”

Heath’s jaw tightened, his frustration boiling over. “You married for money and by doing so pissed on the love you said you felt for me.”

“Don’t be crude,” she admonished with a grimace. Abigail’s expression softened momentarily, revealing the conflict within her. “You’re young, handsome, and full of dreams. But dreams alone won’t sustain us out here.”

Heath’s gaze held hers. “I loved you, Abigail. I thought we had something real.”

Tears glistened in Abigail’s eyes, her resolve wavering. “I love you, too, Heath. But that isn’t enough when survival is at stake.”

A chill of finality entered his chest. He had his answers and could move on. But loving her, losing her, and being viciously stabbed in the heart by her had forever changed him.

“You’ve made your choice, Mrs. Dorchester,” Heath said, noticing that she flinched slightly at the new name. “If not love and happiness, I hope your marriage brings you the guarantees you seek.”

Heath walked to his horse and mounted. But he couldn’t leave without correcting something. “I said I loved you, Abigail. Loved—past tense. Your cold, cowardly approach to ending our betrothal was a wake-up call. It showed me how close I came to being ensnared, not in a loving marriage but in a living hell to a calculating shrew of a wife. And for that, I must thank you.”

She gasped in outrage while he tipped his hat then rode away without looking back.

At twenty-two, he still had a lot to learn about life. But one thing he knew already, where people gathered, you got the good with the bad. Take Laramie, for instance. No longer a settlement but not quite a town, either. There were good folks like his family, and, tipping the other end of the scale, the less savory element that was slowly invading the town. Tonight, he was damn grateful for the bad because he needed whiskey and a helluva lot of it.

Pharaoh, his black stallion, must have sensed his mood. He didn’t need to guide him toward the small frontier town. While Heath was stewing in the saddle in a deluge of emotions, all negative, his horse took the left fork in the well-traveled path on his own.

The flickering lanterns of the tent saloon beckoned to him. Heath pushed through the worn fabric flaps and into the dimly lit interior where the scent of whiskey and tobacco greeted him, along with the drone of conversation from men seeking refuge from their own demons. He found a seat at the bar and downed one shot after another, seeking solace in the fiery liquid, if only for tonight.

As the night wore on, the whiskey dulled his anguish, if not his anger. When he stumbled to his horse hours later, drunken curses slipped from his lips, each one a bitter condemnation of the woman who had reached into his chest and ripped out his heart.

Swaying on his feet, he pulled himself into the saddle and let Pharoah take him home. He must have dozed because when they came to a halt, he was inside the barn. Lucky thing, too, because the world tilted, and he tumbled headfirst onto the hay-strewn floor. It wasn't enough to soften the landing, however.

Groaning, he rolled onto his back and stared up at the spinning barn.

Heath heard the scuff of boots and didn't have to guess who it was.

"Son..." The one word conveyed his father's concern and disappointment, and it stung, despite the numbing effects of the whiskey.

"Don't start, Pa. I don't want to hear it."

His father moved closer, his tall frame blocking the moonlight streaming in through the thrown wide barn doors. "You're hurting, I know. But drowning your sorrows won't fix a thing."

Heath scoffed, bitterness lacing his words. "I figured that out about an hour ago while puking up my guts."

"You had a rough week, Heath, but I'm afraid you're looking at an even rougher morning."

"I'm done with women, Pa," he blurted out. "Can't trust 'em. Abigail proved that."

His father's gaze hardened, a flash of sternness cutting through his usual gentleness. "Don't let one woman with feathers between her ears poison your heart. They aren't all like that. Your ma, for instance."

"You say all the time that she'll be the death of you."

"That's bluster, and you know it."

Heath's voice grew thick with despair. "You got lucky, Pa. But I'm serious when I say I am done. I won't put myself through this again. You and Ma will have to get the grandchildren you've talked of from Luke and Aaron."

He squatted beside him, letting in a shaft of light. "Don't let this pain close you off from love. Someday, the right woman will come along."

"Nope. No such thing. Leastwise, not for me."

The barn ceiling spun like a top. To keep his stomach from spewing what contents were left, he rolled onto his side. With his face half buried in hay, he didn't hear his pa leave, or anything else for that matter.

Letty had dusted, mopped, and cleaned every square inch of the small cabin but was still brimming over with nervous energy and worry. Footsteps on the front porch had her racing for the door and yanking it open.

His hand on the knob, Henry lurched inside, barely righting himself before face planting into the sturdy oak table in the main room. "Consarn it, woman. I've got a lot of years left to live. I'd like to hang on to my teeth for most of them if I can."

"Sorry, dear," she muttered briefly then pounced with her questions. "You're home so soon. Did you find him?"

His lips curved downward into a frown. "Didn't have to go far. He's sleeping it off in the barn."

"Heath's drunk!" she exclaimed.

"Do you blame him?"

"Abigail Rawlings is a witch. I never liked that...hussy and rue the day Heath ever laid eyes on her." Even as she vented her spleen, she couldn't express her profound relief that the deed hadn't been done and they weren't saddled with her for life—Heath especially. "I'll just go check on him," she said, heading for the door.

Henry caught her arm. “You’ll do no such thing, Leticia. Let the man sleep off a drunk without his mama coddling him.”

“Coddling him!” she cried. “Land’s sakes, Henry. She’s turned him to the bottle.”

“He’s young, but a man full-grown,” he reminded her. “One night of drowning his sorrows won’t turn him into the town drunk.”

“I know,” Letty whispered, her voice barely audible, as she thought of watching him this past week, his pain causing her pain. “He’s still my baby. Like when he fell and skinned his knee as a boy, I need to do something to make it better.”

He pulled her into his arms. “He’ll find his way.”

“You sound like me with Luke.”

“He’s changed for the better this past year. Works hard, still finds time to enjoy life at the end of the day, but I haven’t had to ride out and fix his flint since he splintered my wagon.”

“I just hope the wind isn’t shifting his trouble Heath’s way. Or Aaron’s.”

Henry grunted. “You couldn’t have given me girls?”

She ignored that, like she had any say in the matter. Besides, what would a man like him have except boys?

Filled with motherly pride but also sadness, she gazed up at her husband. “Heath will find his way, I’m certain, because he has his father’s stubbornness but also a good head on his shoulders, and his father’s kind heart.”

His lips quirked into a faint smile. “A potent combination, that.”

“I still want to snatch every strand of hair out of that vile girl’s head for the pain she’s caused.”

“But you won’t because you’re a good woman. And you’d only embarrass Heath further if word got out his mother was fighting his battles.”

She snorted. “He wouldn’t hurt her, so it’s a one-sided battle, which is unfair odds.”

“Still, you’ll stay out of it. Won’t you?”

With her lips pursed in a mutinous scowl, she agreed. “Yes, but next town council meeting, tell them to prioritize building a church. I need a place to go to pray away my less-than-Christian thoughts because land’s sake, Henry, we’ve got two boys left. I won’t know what to do if they set their caps for a callous hussy who’ll break their hearts.”

He bent and kissed her downturned lips. “Put that out of your head. There’s no sense borrowing trouble before it’s due. Now. How about you prioritize something else?”

“Like what?”

“Going to bed with your husband.”

She waved him off. “I’m too keyed up to sleep.”

“Hmph. Funny, I don’t recall my invitation having anything to do with sleeping.”

“How can you think of that after the day we’ve had?”

“I can because it’s close to midnight. He’s sleeping in a pile of clean hay, and will be until morning.” Understanding the depth of a mother’s emotions, he continued gently, “I’d like to say this is the last heartache any of our three will suffer, but it would be a lie. But we can’t protect them from all the hurts of the world. What we can do is give them the love and support of family and always be here to pick up the pieces.”

Letty framed his face with her hands. “Please never stop being the man you are. The man all of us need.”

“Never have, darlin’. Don’t think I plan to at this stage in the game.”

He pulled her close and when her feet left the floor, she felt weightless as he carried her to their bedroom.

Chapter 24

Her Wildest Imaginings

The piercing wail of the whistle echoed through the valley, sending goose bumps racing across her skin. Letty clutched Henry's arm excitedly. "You'd think we never saw a train pull into a station before."

He covered her hand with his and squeezed. "We haven't. Leastwise not here in Laramie."

The metal wheels clanging on the rails as the train approached was the sound of progress arriving in their small town as well. It resonated deep within the gathered crowd who had awaited this day for years. Like her and Henry, everyone stood with their heads turned, staring expectantly down the freshly laid tracks.

As the Union Pacific train emerged in the distance, Letty's heart quickened, her anticipation mingling with the collective excitement that thrummed through the air. Her gaze locked onto the monumental machine hurtling forward, a symbol of industry and advancement that her insightful husband had foreseen years ago.

Where she'd grumbled and doubted that civilization would ever come to the territory, her melancholy and complaints not making things easier on him, the man at her side had painted the future with broad strokes of promise. He'd been her steadfast anchor through trials and triumphs, assured that one day his vision would be realized. Now, here they were, five years later, and it was chugging down the tracks toward them, a testament to his foresight.

Pulling her gaze from the fascinating sight, she gazed up at him with as much awe as affection. "Every word you shared that afternoon under the clear, blue Nebraska sky, and repeated countless times leading up to today has become a reality, Henry. It's as though you magically glimpsed our future."

He chuckled, humility and warmth blending into his expression. “Not magic, my dear,” he replied, brushing off her praise with a gentle gesture. “I couldn’t have predicted Durant choosing to establish the repair depot and machine shop here in Laramie, let alone a roundhouse. Fate has played its hand.”

News of Durant’s decision had sparked ripples of astonishment and disappointment among the citizens of Cheyenne. Switching the improvements to Laramie had sparked a frenzy of anticipation. The promise of prosperity had drawn settlers in droves, swelling Laramie’s population to an impressive 3,000 residents. The once-modest town was now teeming with life, attracting both dreamers and laborers, united in pursuing a brighter future.

A mischievous glint danced in his eyes as he looked down at her. He also bent and said in a conspiratorial whisper, “And do you know what else this heralds, my love?”

Letty met his gaze with a playful smile. “Could it be that civilization is finally gracing our dear Laramie?” she ventured, a hint of jest in her tone.

He laughed, a sound that echoed the joy in her heart. “Indeed, that’s part of it, but there’s more.” He paused, allowing the weight of anticipation to settle. “I can now order the finest glass for our windows, the kind that will catch the sunlight and cast rainbows across our rooms. And the slate tiles for the roof, each one a protector against the blazing summer sun and the cutting winter wind and icy snows.”

A surge of excitement swelled within her. The prospect of a home, a place that would withstand time and storms, was no longer an elusive fantasy. “I can finally get my turret?”

He laughed. “Yes, love. And the house that goes with it.”

“And we can finally leave the confines of the cabin,” she breathed in a tender whisper laced with hope.

He squeezed her hand, his smile a promise communicated without words.

Letty stood before a house that defied her wildest imaginings. It rose two stories above the ground—three if the attic with its pitched slate roof counted—and had an air of stately elegance not typical of a ranch house. The glass windows glinted in the sunlight, and the tile roof shimmered like dark gems.

“It’s... I can’t... I mean...” When words escaped her, she simply breathed, “Oh, my.”

Smiling, his arm around her shoulders curled, bringing her in for a side hug. “Would you like to see the inside?”

With her jaw slack and unable to take her eyes off her stunning new home, she tried to respond, but all that came out was, “Uh-huh.”

He laughed outright. “Married twenty-four years, and all it took to render you speechless was building you a new house. Had I known...”

She elbowed him in the ribs, which barely registered with him as he kept laughing. But he didn’t tease her more. Instead, he led her up the wide front steps onto a covered front porch that put the one she loved at the cabin to shame.

Henry opened the oak-and-glass front door and let her precede him. When Letty crossed the threshold, the scent of fresh wood and varnish enveloped her. Then her husband took her on a grand tour, presenting each spacious room and pointing out the special touches he’d included, like built-in shelves in the front parlor for books or whatnots, the new-model stove in the kitchen with a double oven and four top burners, and upstairs, a plumbed bathroom with a toilet, and piped-in hot water from the heated cistern, just as she’d dreamed of.

Each room had a fresh coat of white paint on the walls and high ceilings. The wide wooden staircase had a spindle balustrade like she’d always dreamed of, but the pièce de résistance was the circular room on both levels, nestled in the front like a castle turret. On the first floor, it was the parlor, but on the second, it was their bedroom that faced west so they could wake to a view of the mountains in the morning just as they’d planned. Letty’s breath caught upon first sight of the

windows that framed the majesty of the mountains, as though an artist had captured it on canvas.

Turning to Henry, her eyes burned with unshed tears.

“Was it worth the wait?” he asked.

She nodded as they overflowed her lashes, so overcome with the beauty and craftsmanship of the house and the obvious attention to detail he had put into it because everything they’d ever discussed had been included, she still couldn’t speak. Instead, she buried her face in his chest and wrapped her arms around his middle, hugging him tight to show her happiness and gratitude.

She felt his lips on top of her head and heard the amusement in his voice. “I was teasing about rendering you speechless. I’d really like to hear what you think.”

Her head fell back, beaming up at him through watery eyes, as she finally managed to string a sentence together. “It’s even more beautiful than I imagined.”

He gave her a slow grin, a glint of mischief in his eyes. “Now we just need some grandchildren to fill it with laughter.”

As she looked around the house, its blank walls waiting to be infused with love and memories they would create here, she knew that this was more than a dwelling. It was a testament to her husband’s hard work and aspirations, and a sanctuary that her children, grandchildren, and their children could come home to, that would hopefully stand the test of time, a culmination of their shared dreams and enduring love.

“I love it, Henry,” she exclaimed, rising on her toes to kiss him. Before their lips met, she added, so he knew for certain he always came first, “But not as much as I love you.”

Chapter 25

Still a Rough Frontier Town

June 1868

Luke tossed back the dregs of his second shot of whiskey, nodded at the barkeep then rose, hat in hand, and headed for the door. After a long hot day of ranching, a stiff drink hit the spot. Now, he looked forward to finding a soft, sweet-smelling woman to cuddle up with for the night. When he stepped out onto the planked walkway, he breathed deep to clear his lungs of the stale smoky air inside the Bucket of Blood. He grimaced at the horrendous name. But after two recent gunfights over cheating at poker, the saloon was gaining a reputation that matched it.

A soft cry, much like a whimper, and the distinctive thuds of flesh striking flesh, made him freeze before stepping off the walkway into the street. In a reflexive action, his hand fell to the holstered gun on his hip as he moved to the nearby alley.

What he saw made him sick and flared his anger.

After the arrival of the first rail passenger service, construction had proliferated in Laramie City, along with the hope it would soon be a thriving railroad town. Stores, houses had gone up in no time, and a school and two churches were in progress. Unfortunately, with the rapid growth, chaos and crime outpaced law and order. A mayor and town council were elected but had been on the job for only a few weeks. And three sinister figures, “Big” Frank Strong, and his cousins Merle and Carl Sayers, already well established in their reign of terror, had no intention of changing their unlawful highly profitable ways, or abiding by any rules the council or the citizens of Laramie established.

Big Frank had been sheriff until his recent ousting in a vote of no confidence by residents fed up with his strong-arm tactics and corruption. He was also the proprietor of the Bucket of Blood where it appeared he continued terrorizing his

patrons, especially local landowners like Harlan Miller. He'd found two cutthroat toadies to do his bidding, and they were currently beating up the elderly farmer who owned a small farm a few miles south of Silverbend.

At sixty-seven, Mr. Miller wasn't nearly as hearty as the other homesteaders who'd settled in Laramie. But he made up for it with determination and a heart of gold. What he lacked was the strength to face down three outlaws.

"I won't do it. You can't make me," the old man exclaimed, covering his face with his arms to protect himself from Merle and Carl's fists. But they just laughed and aimed their punches lower, delivering alternating body blows to his ribs and belly.

Long's words dripped with venom as they sliced through the air like a bowie knife. "Course I can. You wouldn't want anything bad to happen to your crops before harvest, would you?"

Carl Sayers' grin twisted his features as he leaned in and hissed. "Or to your wife. Sign over the deed, and maybe we'll let her live to see another day."

"You stay away from my Annie," he cried, wheezing and grunting while the thugs' slaps and fists kept landing.

Merle, his eyes cold as ice, added, "Happy to oblige. All you gotta to do is sign. Refuse, and you'll regret it. You won't see us coming, old man. But we'll be out there, watching and waiting. Think of that when you and your shriveled-up wife bed down at night."

Miller's gnarled hands clenched and unclenched, the weight of his decision etched into the lines of his face. The land he'd toiled over, plowed and planted, his first crop just now ready for harvest had become a bargaining chip in the hands of these ruthless men.

Luke had seen and heard enough. Even though the odds were three to one against him, he wasn't about to let them intimidate the man who'd left his home in Pennsylvania and traveled hundreds of miles for a fresh start. And he for damn

sure wouldn't stand by and watch three bullies beat up on a frail old man.

His pistol cleared leather. "Hands up where I can see them," he ordered, in a perfect imitation of his pa's booming voice.

They all turned toward him, except Mr. Miller who bent double, gasping and wheezing when they released him.

"That's the middle Jackson boy," Merle whispered, although it carried in the night air. "He's a deadeye, so I hear, near as good as his pa and kid brother."

Wherever he got his information, it was accurate. Aaron could outshoot both his older brothers, and with more experience would pass up his pa who'd been a sniper in the militia back home. That didn't mean he and Heath weren't skilled. The runt just had more of a knack for shooting.

"Move along, pup," Big Frank ordered. "This ain't none of your business."

"I'm making it my business." To illustrate the seriousness of their situation, Luke fired, the bullet going through Carl's hat and knocking it clear off. With the ridiculous height of the crown, it was like he was asking for it.

The man stood wide-eyed for a moment, a trembling hand on the top of his head as if checking to see if it was still there. Then he took off like a shot for the other end of the alley.

Merle spun around a second later and ran after his brother.

"Where the hell are you two going?" Strong bellowed. "He's outnumbered."

"Maybe so, but we're outgunned, and Miller's puny farm ain't worth a bullet in my brain. No way. No how," Merle shouted before he disappeared around the corner.

"Worthless cowards," Big Frank muttered before turning to face Luke. "You've made a mistake, boy. This is my town, and no kid of Henry Jackson's is going to interfere. There'll be payback, and I'm not limiting it to you. Just wait and see."

He then followed his two toadies, who, rumor had it, were also his cousins, out of the alley, but at a more sedate pace.

Luke rushed forward to help the still-wheezing, bruised-and-battered older man.

“Thank heaven you came along when you did, son,” he wheezed. “But I fear you’ve made a powerful enemy tonight.”

“He’s an enemy to all the law-abiding citizens of Laramie and needs to be stopped. But, before I do anything else, we need to get you to the doctor.”

He bent on Mr. Miller’s good side, helped him lift his arm around his shoulders, and supported his weight. He could have easily carried the slight, much older man, but getting accosted in an alleyway was enough of a blow to his pride.

It was late, but the building crew had finished the doctor’s new office before starting on his house. He slept there most nights and would likely be in.

A gray-haired man several years older than his pa, in bare feet and a rumpled night shirt opened at Luke’s second insistent knock.

“Office hours begin at 8 a.m.,” he grumbled through a yawn.

“I don’t think he can wait until the morning, Doc.”

The physician’s eyes shot to Luke then shifted to the still-wheezing man he supported. “Harlan! What happened?” Suddenly, he held up his hand. “No. Don’t tell me. This is Strong and the Sayers brothers’ work.”

“How did you know?” Luke asked, surprised.

“Because there has been a steady parade of black eyes, bruised lips, and broken bones of late, courtesy of those three miscreants.” He opened the door wider. “Bring him in and put him on my exam table.”

This time, Luke had to help Mr. Miller who was hurting too badly to climb onto the padded table in the back room.

When the doctor helped his patient out of his shirt, revealing fist-sized purple bruises, Luke's fury quickly renewed. "Something needs to be done to stop them. I'll talk to my father and brothers and see what that might be."

Doc Morgan skewered him with a look over his wire-rimmed glasses. "Which of Henry Jackson's boys are you?"

"Luke, his middle son."

"He can't deny you, that's for certain. You're the spitting image of him."

Luke had heard this all his life. It wasn't a bad thing. Although approaching fifty, his father hadn't slowed down one bit, working side by side with his sons and the mostly younger ranch hands, doing the same strenuous work in the blistering sun and winter's cold for long hours. When his father strode through town, he still turned the ladies' heads. The looks became less blatant when Ma was on his arm, but he still got them.

"I also heard you were wild as a buck," the doctor continued. "Helping Harlan like you have, the rumors must not be true."

They were. Every one of them. His reputation was well-earned. He'd taken a hard look at himself and the noxious company he kept, specifically troublemaking Jake Jessup and his seven brothers. So, he cut all ties with them, focused on his work on the ranch that was his future, and started making better choices, as his pa pointed out that not-so-long-ago night by his splintered wagon. He had also learned that being labeled a reckless scapegrace was a difficult thing to shake, but he was trying.

As the doctor probed the man's bruised and, from his hisses and flinches, obviously tender ribs, he asked for a favor. "On your way home, can you stop by and tell Annie Miller to bring the wagon round in the morning to pick up her husband? He'll be spending the night."

"Is that necessary?" Harlan asked, between shallow, clearly pain-filled breaths.

“Yes. Broken ribs can puncture lungs. You don’t want to be home if your lung collapses during the night, do you?” The doctor used tongs to pull a cotton ball dripping in something strong smelling, like camphor, out of a jar and dabbed at a wide cut over the older man’s eye. “Besides, after I wrap your ribs, it’s going to take a while to get you stitched up.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Miller,” Luke assured him. “We’ll put a watch on your farm and your wife.”

He started to leave, but the doctor had other interesting news. “Something else your pa should know about. Mr. Boswell has been talking about taking action. I don’t know what he has planned, but with him and your pa the biggest landowners around, with more to lose than anyone, they may want to join forces.”

“I’ll let him know,” Luke said as he strode toward the front door. “Thanks for all you’ve done, Doc.”

“If you Jacksons and Mr. Boswell can do something about this menace,” Doc Morgan replied, “it’s the townsfolk who will thank you.”

Letty carried the metal coffeepot to the kitchen table and refilled Henry’s cup. How he drank the stuff at midnight and still slept was beyond her, but after hearing Luke’s dreadful tale about the attack on Harlan Miller, she doubted either of them would get a wink of rest tonight.

“What did Dr. Morgan say about Harlan? Will he be all right? At his age, I worry.”

“He had concerns—broken ribs and collapsed lungs mostly—which is why he wanted to keep him overnight.” He glanced at his pa. “I sent two men over to the Miller’s place to keep watch, just in case.”

Henry, unusually quiet while Luke spoke, nodded. He was stewing about something more than the assault on Mr. Miller. She’d bet the new dress Minerva had just finished and the matching hat she’d ordered; she knew her husband that well.

It took several moments of fuming before he erupted.

“Not even a month,” he growled as he slammed both fists on the table. Even though she’d been expecting something, Letty jumped. “Not even a month,” he repeated, clearly enraged. “White, that lily-livered poor excuse for a sheriff, blamed the new mayor and councilmen for not doing more. He wore the badge and had the authority, but he hardly gave it a chance. And now look where we are. Folks are afraid to walk the streets, to go into the shops we’ve waited years for, to let their children play outside. Without a competent sheriff, the lawbreaking hoodlums will rule the town.”

“What can you do, Henry?”

“I don’t know, but we’ve got to do something.”

“Doc Morgan said Mr. Boswell is of the same mind, Pa. He suggested we join forces with him.”

He surged to his feet. “We’ll pick up Heath along the way. Aaron, you stay here and protect your ma.”

Letty turned, not knowing Aaron was awake. He sat four steps up on the landing of the rear stairs taking in every word.

“It’s Heath’s turn, Pa. Besides, I’d like to help avenge Mr. Miller. He’s a nice man and a good neighbor, and it’s wrong for him to be bullied and intimidated by those bastards.”

“Aaron!” she exclaimed, never having heard him curse before. The other two and Henry let them fly around her occasionally, but her youngest, never.

She paid no attention to the fact that after the first cattle drive, where she’d almost been swept away to her death, one of the boys and a few men stayed behind to watch over the ranch, but mostly her. It was Heath the first few years, since he was the oldest. Now that they were all of age, they did it by rotation.

Her sons were her keepers—how humiliating. But she accepted it because it meant she didn’t have to go on another dusty, dangerous, dreadful cattle drive the rest of her life.

“Sorry, Ma. But this makes me angry.”

“Me, too, Son,” Henry stated, heading for the back door. “Get dressed, and you can come with me and Luke.”

Letty rushed after him. “Dear, slow down and breathe,” she urged, grabbing his forearm before he stormed out. “It’s 1 a.m. if you’ll recall. There’s a watch on the Miller’s place, and Harlan is safe in Dr. Morgan’s care.”

He followed her advice and took a calming breath. “You’re right. After breakfast, me and all three of the boys will ride over and discuss what can be done, with Boswell.”

“I’ll ride to the cabin and let Heath know,” Luke stated. “I’ll bunk with him for the night, and we’ll meet here first thing in the morning.”

Once the door closed behind him, Henry glanced over at Aaron. “Best get some sleep.”

“Yes, sir,” he murmured and disappeared quietly upstairs.

With the house secured for the night—the lamps turned down and the doors they rarely locked sealed up tight—they headed up not long after. Henry finished undressing ahead of her as usual and stretched out on his back. Usually he slept facing her, with her snuggled against his front, but tonight, he stared broodingly at the ceiling.

When she climbed in next to him and curled up against his side, her cheek on his chest, he put his arm around her. But he didn’t kiss her good night—which never happened—and he didn’t close his eyes.

Since he was wide awake, she voiced her fears. “I don’t like this. That awful man threatened Luke and the rest of us. Do you think they’ll come to the ranch causing trouble?”

“They’re bullies, Leticia. And bullies usually only pick fights they know they can win.”

“I also don’t like the sound of usually.”

His arm tightened around her. “I won’t leave you unprotected, darlin’.”

“I’m glad, dear. But I was more worried about you and the boys being in the thick of things.”

“We can’t be passive about this, Letty. This is our home, and we’ve waited a long damn time for progress to come to Laramie. I’m not about to let a gang of thugs steal from our neighbors, run them off, and ruin the strides this town has made. If we band together, they can’t win, and that’s what I intend to tell Boswell in the morning.”

“I know you’re right, but a wife and mother worries.”

“No sense borrowing trouble before we have a plan. Try to sleep.”

A hollow laugh escaped her lips, lacking any trace of humor. “I’m as likely to close my eyes and forget as you are, Henry Jackson.”

He rolled onto his side and half on top of her. “Then let’s see if we can find something to distract us and pass the time.”

Without waiting for her agreement, his lips and hands started to wander.

“Knowing your youngest son, who is you made over, he isn’t sleeping, either.”

“You’ll have to muffle your screams of delight with your pillow, sweetheart. Because I have a mind to have you, and my body is already hard in agreement with the plan.”

“I don’t scream,” she replied, sharpness in her tone, as if the mere suggestion was an assault on her character.

His head popped up, and he flashed a brilliant, white-toothed grin that cut through the darkness. “You do, too. And loudly. Why do you think I’m always muffling your cries with my mouth when you—”

It was she who covered his mouth—with her hand. “The things you say,” she exclaimed. “Even after all these years, you still make me blush.”

“After loving you on a regular basis, with me seeing, touching, and kissing every inch of your satiny-smooth skin, sleeping by my side every night, and bearing my three children, I’m amazed that you still do.” His lips followed the path of her heat that spread from her chest, up her neck, and

suffused her cheeks. “Then again, I’m still amazed you said ‘I do’ to this gruff, at times ill-mannered farmer turned rancher.”

“Your charm, as well as all of those things you think are faults are the reason I said yes when you asked for my hand. And because you’re sinfully handsome and never fail to do things that make me blush, even after nearly two and a half decades. Will it always be this way?”

His lips moved into the deep V of her neckline, formed by several undone buttons on her shift, as his hand found her hem and pushed it up to her waist. “I want you more now than when I married you, and that’s saying something because I was really looking forward to the wedding night.”

She let out a contented sigh as Henry’s chin nudged her gown aside and his lips captured a nipple. He sucked the hard tip into his mouth. While he was busy at her breast, he used his knee to part her thighs, and his fingers sought her heat. As waves of desire swept over her, her breathy sighs became throaty moans and grew louder.

“Pillow, Letty,” he reminded her. “I still have another breast to pay homage to.”

She flung her arm out, grabbed a handful of his soft, down-filled pillow, and covered her face. When his thumb rubbed the pleasure point at the front of her sex, and two fingers sank inside her, she clutched it more firmly. And while she no longer cared about the truth in his words, she cried her fulfillment into his soft, linen-covered pillow.

When her delighted moans subsided into soft rapid breaths, Henry ripped it away, claimed her lips with his, and plunged his hard shaft deep inside her. Several long minutes later, the joy her husband found in her brought them both to a stunning simultaneous release, and this time, his mouth muffled her screams.

Chapter 26

To Serve and Protect

The abrupt resignation of Mayor White had laid bare the oppressive hold Big Frank and his cousins had over the town. The malicious actions and constant threats toward the residents had turned the town into a powder keg of tension.

Those who had the means were considering leaving, and some of the shop owners were of the same mind, even though pulling up stakes and starting over someplace else would be a financial hardship. The future prosperity of the town was at risk. Prospective businesses would look elsewhere rather than settle in an area where violence and intimidation were a way of life. If Strong and the Sayers' malevolence went unchecked, the town faced certain ruin.

Born of industrious, well-respected, decent men who refused to allow thugs to take over the town and those who'd tasted the bitterness of fear and extortion but now hungered for redemption, a vigilance committee was formed, organized by JD Stockwell and the Jackson men.

Armed to the teeth and with steely determination in their hearts, the committee members—numbering approximately forty men—approached the Bucket of Blood on a cool morning in late October. Representing Silverbend Ranch were Henry, Luke, Aaron, and several of his hands. This included Joseph Whitefeather, who'd been working for them since he'd showed his mettle following the Andrews' massacre, and Cookie, who turned out to be a damn fine shot. Heath and eight fully armed men stayed behind to defend their land, horses, cattle, and his ma, although definitely not in that order.

Before they could confront the men responsible for the reign of terror in Laramie, they had to make it through a gauntlet of outlaws and gunmen Strong had brought in when news of a showdown spread. A block away, the first gunshot sent citizens scurrying for cover. That first foray, injuring

several on both sides, had the men of Laramie abandoning their horses. Turning back was not an option for them, however. They proceeded on foot, the pungent odor of gunpowder thick in the air, as they took cover behind horse troughs, wagons, and in the shadows of the newly erected buildings.

Among them, Aaron, who was too young to have witnessed battle before leaving Virginia, saw several good men fall. They were friends and neighbors he'd known for years. He had heard the stories of injustice, not just with Mr. Miller but with countless others, and the threats made against Luke and his family had stoked a fire within him that eclipsed his youth and inexperience. Laramie was his home, and his heart beat in solidarity with the townsfolk who had done nothing to deserve to be driven away.

With his back pressed up against the side of the bathhouse, he had cover but also a direct view of the front of the saloon. He saw when rifles busted the windows and the barrels slid out, taking aim at the committee members scattered throughout the street, hiding behind horse troughs and wagons or whatever they could find.

The noise was deafening, and so were the cries of pain when a bullet found a target. But many of the cries were coming from inside the Bucket of Blood. Several were from his own gun, Aaron not hesitating in pulling the trigger when one of Strong's men peered over the windowsill for too long or didn't duck in time. The gunfight went on for what seemed like hours to him but couldn't have been over thirty minutes. Then everything got eerily quiet.

With a sense of relief Aaron felt deep in his gut, he heard his pa call, "It's time to end this, Strong. Surrender before anyone else gets hurt or killed."

Silence was Big Frank's response.

He scanned the street, what he could see of it, for his brothers. But there was no sign of them, everyone lying low to dodge bullets.

Movement down the street set off another barrage of gunfire from inside the saloon, which the men surrounding it returned. Aaron tensed in frustration. They could wait out the men inside for days and starve them out if need be. But how many others would die in the meantime?

He left his post, silently creeping toward the back of the bathhouse. He peeked around the corner, assessing the rear of the saloon. There were no windows on the back side of the building. He scanned the roof and didn't see anyone, so he slowly and cautiously advanced.

Aaron made it to the back door without drawing fire, likely because the men who were supposed to be guarding it were lying lifeless in the dirt. If the bullets in their head or chest didn't kill them instantly, the fall from the roof did because they stared vacantly up at the clear, blue sky with their necks twisted at unnatural angles. He only spared the gruesome sight a fleeting glance, his focus on his task: getting in the back door of the saloon and disarming whoever remained breathing.

Carefully, he opened the latch, and while standing to the side, slowly pushed the door inward. He knew someone up in heaven was watching over him when the hinges didn't creak.

The storeroom reeked of liquor. Bottles shattered in the gunfight had left glass shards and puddles of whiskey on the floor. With as light a step as he could manage, he crept to the door that opened onto the main room. It had a curtain rather than a door, which definitely worked in his favor. He moved it aside, a half inch, no more, and scanned the room.

Bodies littered the floor. The only men upright were Frank Strong who had hunkered down behind the bar, and two men with rifles at each busted-out front window. Aaron withdrew his second pistol, a Colt percussion five-shot revolver his pa had given him on his 18th birthday. It was perfectly weighted, and he was dead-on accurate with it, even with his left hand. The other gun, an older-model double-barrel pistol, he wouldn't trust with anything other than his right.

After breathing deep to steady himself as his father had taught him, he stepped through the curtain. Firing twice, he

took out the men at the windows at the same time he raised his right arm and aimed the barrel point-blank between Big Frank's squinty eyes.

"It's over. Drop your weapon," he demanded, his order clear and unwavering.

The big man hesitated as his gaze swept the room. His only allies were on the floor, holding their bloody gun hands and writhing in pain. Resignation crept into his features. His revolver slipped from his fingers and clattered to the ground. Slowly, he raised his hands.

Aaron's gaze flicked toward the steps leading to the second floor. "Whoever's upstairs, come out," he called. "Your boss is caught and can't save you now."

He heard a few creaking floorboards then two scantily dressed, frightened women appeared at the rail, their hands above their heads.

"Please don't shoot. We're just saloon girls," one of them pleaded tearfully.

"Is there anyone up there with you?" he asked.

"No one still breathing," the calmer, although visibly trembling brunette replied.

Aaron motioned Big Frank toward the front door. Once they were headed that way, he shouted, "Hold your fire. We're coming out."

When they emerged from the shadow of the covered porch into the sunlight, committee members surrounded the man who had eluded justice for so long. Someone produced a rope to bind his hands behind his back.

Mr. Stockwell approached. "You'll pay for your crimes," he stated. "That I guarantee. And the penalty will be heavy with the weight of the lives you've taken." He stepped back and gestured to the other men. "Take him to the jailhouse. Once we round up the survivors, we'll see to it."

"You can't condemn me!" Strong squealed as he struggled frantically against the hands that held him. "I'm owed a trial

before a judge and to have a lawyer represent me.”

“Where do you think you are? New York City?” Stockwell laughed without humor. “This is the Western Territory, fool. You’ll receive frontier justice, and the citizens of Laramie City have called on me as acting sheriff and chairman of the vigilance committee to ensure that it’s swift and severe. We have scores of eyewitnesses to attest to your crimes, Strong, including theft, coercion, assaults, and murder—thirteen by last count. It’s the townsfolk who have suffered and endured weeks of your reign of terror, and it’s the townsfolk who will see vengeance served this day.”

Aaron watched as a half dozen men dragged him away, his whines and pleas for mercy echoing through the air. They fell on deaf ears because the same way he never showed mercy to his victims, Frank Strong would receive none in Laramie City that day.

Several of the men pounded Aaron on the back, praising his bravery and thanking him for expediting an end to the standoff.

“There are dead outlaws aplenty inside, a couple are injured and bleeding, and there’s two saloon girls on the second floor,” he told Stockwell. “They say there’s no one else alive upstairs, but I wouldn’t swear that’s the truth. You probably want to have the place searched.”

“By gum, son,” the big brawny bearded man said as he clapped him on the shoulder. “You’ve missed your calling. You should wear a badge. I’ve got a ranch to run and don’t plan on wearing the one I’ve got any longer than I have to. Laramie is going to need young, bright, resourceful lawmen to keep order after this. Think about it.”

He clapped him heartily on the back this time. If Aaron wasn’t his equal in size, he’d have knocked him to his knees. But he didn’t react, taking it in stride as Stockwell led a small contingent of armed men inside.

Now that it was over, Aaron took only his second deep breath of the day.

“That was a mighty big risk you took going in on your own.”

He turned to his pa whose frown was fierce with not so much anger as concern. His two brothers flanked him, both speechless and clearly stunned.

“The guards were dead, and the door was unlocked. It wasn’t as risky as you think,” Aaron humbly replied. “And we were getting nowhere exchanging lead with them. I saw a chance, calculated the risk, and took it.”

Henry threw his arm around his shoulders and started him walking toward the jailhouse.

“If you tell your mother what I’m about to say, I’ll deny it to my grave. What Stockwell said about wearing a badge, he’s right. You’ve got the temperament for it and are the finest gunman I’ve ever seen, even at eighteen. You’d make a helluva a lawman.”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while. Especially with the hell Strong, the Sayers, and their hired guns put this town through. Citizens should be able to walk the streets and feel safe.”

His brothers, who’d fallen in step alongside them, murmured their agreement.

“But it’s a family ranch. You need me—”

“The town needs you more,” Luke cut in.

“Yeah,” Heath agreed. “I think the ranch and the town would be better served with someone we can trust wearing a badge, runt.”

Aaron glanced at his older brother and locked eyes with him, not mentioning that he had to look down a full inch to do so.

“Perhaps a more appropriate nickname is in order,” their pa suggested drily.

They all chuckled, except Aaron. After what he’d witnessed today and during the previous weeks, it would be some time before he felt lighthearted enough to smile, let

alone laugh. And he vowed, if it was in his power, he'd never let something so heinous infect his hometown again.

At high noon, outside an unfinished cabin at the end of the street, chosen because it had one of the few trees tall enough for use, at least a third of Laramie's 3,000 citizens gathered to witness justice served. Big Frank, who'd killed at least thirteen men, squealed the entire time until the noose put a stop to it. And his life. The Sayers brothers, murderers in their own right, were far from quiet, fighting and cursing every breath as they faced the same fate.

Joseph Whitefeather, who was among the crowd, moved up alongside Henry. "Mr. Jackson," he murmured as the noose was placed around Merle Sayers' neck. "I recognize this one from the Andrews' farm that day."

He looked at him sharply. "You're certain?"

"Quite. He has a distinctive voice. Your wife no doubt hears it in her nightmares."

While he wondered about their motives behind the brutal killing of the young family, Henry didn't rush forward to stop the proceedings to ask. Instead, he murmured, "May he and his brethren all rot in hell."

Just then, the wooden barrel upon which Merle Sayers stood was kicked out from under him, and he was hanged just like his brother and cousin.

They rounded up another of Strong's men the following morning. Although he didn't match Big Frank's level of cruelty, he bought into his tactics of intimidation and violence and showed no hesitation shooting two local men who dared to defy the boss's orders. He faced the same swift justice as his boss.

Those turbulent months were an ugly scar on Laramie's brief history, but it marked the return of peace and progress. Even more so when the youngest Jackson son, who carried within him a fiery determination to preserve order and justice,

was sworn in as deputy the following week. Much to his ma's dismay, although not her surprise, he vowed to serve and protect the town and its people with his life as he'd done that fateful day.

Chapter 27

Promises Kept

Silverbend Ranch 1869

On a warm Sunday evening in late May, as the last rays of the sun left orange and pink streaks across the sky, Letty settled herself on the newly hung front-porch swing. As she watched her sons ride off, crickets chirped in the distance, and a breeze with just a hint of fall crispness ruffled her hair.

Her boys had all come for supper, like they did most Sundays. They were men forging lives of their own, so she didn't see them as often as she'd like, but they had stayed close, and, for that, she was thankful.

Heath was twenty-four now and had moved into the old cabin on the western side of the ranch to be near the stables, but he had a room in the new house where he still stayed if late-night or early morning chores made it closer. Unwilling to risk another humiliation, and having a hard time trusting any woman after heartlessly getting left at the altar, he'd sworn off love and vowed to never marry. But he was still a young man, and there were plenty of good women, more beautiful, kind, and loving than that awful Abigail Dorchester. She hadn't given up hope of him changing his mind.

At twenty-two, Luke had grown up so much in the past few years. He worked hard and had settled into his role and the responsibilities of running and owning an ever-expanding, profitable ranch. That didn't mean when work was done, he didn't find time to play. Like his father and brothers, he was a head turner and garnered female attention. But Letty worried that instead of finding a nice girl and settling down on his portion of the ranch, he was content to make his way through the saloons and bawdy houses that proliferated Laramie after the railroad came through. Yes, even miles outside of town, she heard the rumors.

Aaron, her baby, who at nineteen was a full-time deputy and had already earned a reputation as a tough yet fair lawman, was intent on cleaning up the dangerous criminal element that had invaded the town. Unfortunately, this left him spending a lot of time on 6th Street where the gin mills and brothels had proliferated. He kept odd hours what with having to patrol at night and taking his shifts at guard duty if they had someone locked up in the jail, which, in Laramie, seemed to be a daily occurrence. But he always came home to pitch in during haying or branding or whenever his pa and brothers needed an extra set of hands.

Yes, her boys had decided their future was here in Laramie City, and she was grateful. Sometimes she missed the early days in the cabin then she'd remember living like sardines in a can or see the sweeping views of the mountains from her upstairs window and pinch herself for such foolish notions.

Movement in the yard in the fading light caught her attention. The thud of Henry's boots on the wooden treads followed as he mounted the stairs.

Tall, broad shouldered, with the same lean hips and flat belly as when she'd met him a quarter of a century earlier, when he crossed the wide front porch to join her, she smiled up at her oh-so handsome husband.

"Make room, darlin'," he said in warning. She just barely scooted out of the way before he settled his large frame and considerable weight beside her, sending the swing careening wildly.

Letty had to grab hold of his arm to keep from pitching forward and landing flat on her face. But she shouldn't have worried. He slung his muscular arm around her shoulders and hauled her into his side. It was still warm out, his body heat making it warmer, but she curled up against him, regardless.

"Are the boys gone?" he asked.

"Yes. Off to town to get into heaven knows what."

"They'll be fine, Leticia. We did a good job raising them."

She laid her head on his shoulder and smiled in agreement. “We did. Aaron is building his reputation as a lawman, and, although I worry about him constantly, I’m a proud mama over what he’s accomplished so young.”

“He’ll be elected sheriff one day,” Henry predicted.

“I’m confident he’ll do better than sheriff,” she replied.

“Marshal? Or are you thinking mayor?”

“He’ll be in Washington one day. Wait and see. He’ll be away more often, but that would be so much safer than hunting down outlaws and thieves.”

“Mmm,” his chest rumbled beneath her ear as he hummed his noncommittal answer. “Luke has finally settled down.”

Her head popped up, and she looked at her husband in amazement. “He’s abandoned his reckless streak, but I wouldn’t say he’s settled. Not when he’s out carousing with friends and loose women every other night.”

“He escorted Emily Thompson to the barn dance last month. She’s a very respectable young lady.”

Letty sniffed delicately but didn’t concede her point. “That was one night out of the month, Henry. Don’t expect wedding bells when there’s a new saloon opening up with a new crop of saloon girls every week.”

His chin met his chest when he looked down at her. “How do you know about new saloon girls?”

“I hear things.”

“Women’s gossip.”

“It can’t be women’s gossip when it’s the men who frequent those establishments and carry away tales of their exploits.” This time, she actually snorted before she muttered, “Purchased though they may be.”

“Do I have to worry about you joining the temperance movement, Leticia?”

“No because my husband doesn’t stray, and now that the Wyoming Territory has decided they need women’s suffrage to

achieve statehood and figure it is a good idea to give us the right to vote, once I proudly cast my ballot in the elections next year, I'll gladly hang up my politicking hat."

"Your group's speeches and letter-writing campaigns have paid off. You're also on top of what's going on in the territory and beyond, more so than I am."

"You're a busy man. I still can't believe we reached the 10,000 mark this year. That's a lot of cows and a lot of hard work."

"True, but don't diminish your efforts. When you go to town hall to vote for the very first time, I will proudly stand behind you on that auspicious day."

"Why, thank you, dear. Not all men agree with women, especially their wives, having the vote."

"I'm an enlightened man. What can I say?"

"I'm not so sure bending your wife over the settee in the parlor, throwing up her skirts, and paddling her bare bottom is the definition of enlightened."

His hand found the coil of her hair and tugged until her face tipped up to his. "I didn't hear any complaining. And with all your squirming, and the whimpers and moans coming from your throat as I did it, not to mention the honey from your sweet cunny so plentiful it trickled down the inside of your thigh, I'd say you enjoyed it a right smart bit."

"Henry," she said, not in protest at his graphic speech but because the memories of the night before when he'd done exactly that, and much more, still lingered in her mind and on her body.

He kissed her lips, a soft touch like the gentle evening's breeze. Then his brow furrowed. "I was distracted remembering how I enlightened your lovely body. What were we talking about before?"

"Luke," she replied, a decided rasp of huskiness in her voice, and it was all Henry's fault. His quick grin said he knew it, too.

“Yes, yes, our Luke and his profligate ways. He’s sowing his wild oats, darlin’. The same as any other unmarried young man. But I wasn’t referring to that when I said he had settled. I was talking about no more risky dives into shallow lakes, no recent broken bones, or wagon jumping across the creek.”

“I still can’t believe he had such crazy notions and was brave enough to follow through with them.”

“I’m not so sure all of them were his notions. I credit his turnaround with staying clear of the Jessup brood.”

“Mr. Jessup isn’t a bad sort.”

“True.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “Maybe his boys are full-grown and still plumb wild because he’s an inept father.”

“Or maybe our boys turned out so well because they had an exemplary father who was an excellent role model.”

This time, Henry grunted, not saying one way or another if he agreed.

“I wish Heath wasn’t so dead set against marriage.”

“That Rawlings girl cut him deep,” he replied, anger simmering in his tone.

“I saw her in Ivinson’s store a few months back. She was as big as a house and looked miserable.”

“That skinny thing turned to fat?” he asked in surprise.

“No, dear. She was expecting. I heard she had the baby last month. A boy. They named him Winchester.”

Henry didn’t respond, but soon the rumbling in his chest returned. It started out low then swelled into a full-body laugh that knocked Letty off her comfortable perch.

“What’s funny?” she asked, sitting up, not thinking she’d said anything so amusing.

“Winchester,” he guffawed. “Poor kid. In a few years, outside the new schoolhouse they’re building, I can just see the other kids teasing him mercilessly for being Winchester Dorchester.” Still hooting with hilarity, he went on. “Or they’ll

shorten it and he'll be Chester Dorchester, and Chester the Pest."

Unamused, she drawled, "The crimes of the mother shouldn't be visited upon the son."

He pulled her close, still chuckling. "I'm not calling him that. But his schoolmates will. Mark my words."

It was her turn to hum noncommittally. But, sadly, for the boy who was innocent of his mother's misdeeds, Henry was likely right. As usual.

When she shifted back, her head once again on his shoulder, it rose and fell, along with his upper body as he drew in a deep breath and sighed.

"Tired?" she asked.

"Yeah, but the good kind."

She closed her eyes, letting him keep up the slow back-and-forth motion of the swing with his booted feet and longer legs.

"You should hire more hands. We can certainly afford it, and there are plenty of able-bodied men looking for work in town. Then you'd have more free time."

"To do what?"

"Oh, I don't know," she drawled. "Maybe take your wife into town for supper every once in a while."

"Where?"

"There's a restaurant opening inside the train depot, so I hear."

"Is that so? Then I think, my lovely bride, that can be arranged."

Encouraged by his easy agreement, she extended another idea. "And perhaps a trip on the new rail line to Colorado. The hot springs are supposed to be quite therapeutic."

"You want to ride a train for hours to take a bath? If that's the case, why did I break my back installing that newfangled

bathroom upstairs you insisted on?”

“All three boys helped, so I know that’s a fib. Besides, you enjoy taking a hot bath in that newfangled bathroom without having to haul water as well as I, Henry Jackson.” She sent her elbow into his rib, smiling to herself when she heard him grunt. “Aren’t you the one who told me to live my life, and you’d take care of the rest? Living life means venturing beyond the boundaries of Silverbend Ranch now and then.”

“I agree, but I’ll ask you to mind your elbows next time you want to make a point, Leticia, or you might find swinging not so comfortable for a few days.”

Normally, her husband’s threats were a lot of hot air, but she’d been on the receiving end of too many spankings over the years not to be wary. “I’m sorry, dear. That wasn’t well done of me. It won’t happen again.”

He grunted again, but this time with what sounded like satisfaction.

Except for the crickets and the creak of the chain overhead, they swung in silence for several long moments.

“Have I kept my promise, sweetheart?” he asked at length. “The early years were hard, but you have friends now. The boys have grown into good, hardworking men, and I gave you the house you dreamed of. Have you finally settled in?”

She turned to face him on the swing, peering at him in the dark and finding his gaze on her.

“You did what you had to for our family, Henry. It’s true, I gave up a lot when we left Virginia, and I wasn’t as accepting of the move as the rest of you, but now that I’m older, wiser, and less of a pain in the neck, I realize peace of mind goes a long way. As does safety, and you provided us with both.”

“Keeping you safe early on was certainly a struggle.”

“You were stern with me often enough until it wasn’t. And I’d rather not discuss my foolishness, thank you very much.”

The swing stopped abruptly. Henry twisted, grasped her around the waist, and pulled her into his lap. “You bucked

against my rules worse than the boys at times.” His hands slid lower, molding to her cheeks, and he squeezed meaningfully. “You’ve forgiven me for my sternness, though. Haven’t you, darlin’?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m still here because of your rules and... consequences. How can I fault you for them?”

He bent his neck until he rested his forehead against hers. His voice, deep and rich, washed over her like a caress. “You didn’t answer my question. Are you happy at Silverbend?”

“Very,” she replied, sliding her fingers into his wavy, still-very-thick, overlong hair. “I have a loving husband who is a wonderful provider, three strapping sons who are the spitting image of their father, a grand house filled with all the finer things, and a growing community of supportive friends and neighbors.” She tipped her head back to see his face. “There’s only one thing that would make my world complete.”

“What might that be?”

“Daughters-in-law and grandchildren,” she whispered with longing.

He chuckled, the familiar, wonderful sound wrapping around her heart. “I believe that’s two things. Or six if you add it up between all three and they each have one apiece.”

“Yeah, but you need one to get the other.”

“Uh, no. Not exactly.”

She immediately knew what he was thinking. “I know. Not always,” Letty allowed, her words an acknowledgment of the complexities of life. “But my boys better give me one before the other.”

His fingers gripped her waist, and suddenly, she was astride his lap. His lips brushed her neck, his warm breath sending shivers down her spine.

Knowing where this would lead, she protested, not the activity but the location. “Surely not here on the front porch where anyone could walk up,” she declared as his tongue

traced a trail of fire from her neck to her ear, leaving her breathless.

“The boys are gone, and the men have finished up for the day. No one’s going to walk up.”

Easily convinced, she sat up and put her hands behind her, searching for the ties of the apron she still wore. “All right, but let me take this off. I came out for air after cleaning up.”

“Let me help.” His fingers worked the ties behind her neck then joined hers at the strings knotted at her lower back. “I was thinking of the day we arrived at Silverbend all those years ago. Do you remember?”

“How could I forget? We gazed out at the beautiful land we had claimed and named the ranch.”

“Yes, that, but I was recalling something else.”

“What’s that?” she asked absently.

“How much you enjoyed being tied up while I fucked you against that tree.”

“Henry! I never heard such a foul word from your mouth.”

“It’s French, so I’ve heard,” he said with a lascivious grin. “And more earthy and carnal than *lovemaking*. You know I enjoy taking you slow and sweet sometimes, but darlin’. I’m in the mood for earthy and carnal right here on this swing.”

She would have smacked his arm for repeating it, but when she tried, her arms wouldn’t cooperate. They wouldn’t budge from behind her back as though... “Did you tie my hands with my apron strings?”

Like that long-ago day against the tree, he was free to work her buttons, open her blouse, and push her camisole out of the way. He cupped one breast within his palm, his thumb and forefinger rolling and not-so-gently tugging on her nipple while he bent and sipped the other into his unbelievably hot mouth.

All protests faded from her lips as her desire ignited like a flash fire. Especially when he pulled up her skirt, released his turgid length from his trousers, and sat her down on top of it.

While he filled, kissed, and caressed, he set the swing in motion. The slow back-and-forth rhythm, with her body ever shifting, as well as the part of him deep inside her, created a new, indescribable sensation.

Henry's touch grew bolder, his fingers exploring every curve and contour. She could feel the heat of his skin against hers, the urgency of his touch stoking the flames of desire that raged between them until Letty surrendered to the intoxicating dance of passion they'd shared through the years. Through trials and tribulations, through war, and loss and grief, and through promise and joy, in the end they came out stronger, and better, and more in love.

As soon as her cries and his rumble of satisfaction faded into the ether, he tugged on the apron strings and released her. Immediately, her arms entwined around his neck, her fingers sinking into his hair as she both clung to him and held him close.

"That was shockingly naughty, Husband, but the pleasure was beyond words."

"I aim to please. And I have to admit, I'm beyond words myself."

"We're an old married couple. We're not supposed to be acting this way."

"What way? Attracted to one another? Scratch that. On fire for one another and deeply in love? Who says?"

"I...uh... Well. I don't know."

"Good, then you needn't listen, except to your husband, who will tumble you in a meadow of wildflowers, take you up against a tree, or while swinging on our front porch until I cock up my toes as a wizened, very happy old man."

"While I'm a wizened and gray-haired old woman?" She pondered that a moment. "Since I don't plan to be gray-headed until I'm at least ninety, I can live with that."

"My grandfather Edward lived to be ninety-four and his father to ninety-seven. You may have to."

Her face came out of his neck, and her gaze met his smiling eyes. “That means living more years than I’ve been alive.”

“Are you up for it?”

“With you? The time will fly by.”

“I’d rather five decades drag so we can savor every precious moment.”

“Oh, Henry...” she breathed, charmed by him as ever.

More Spicy Romance by Maddie Taylor

MARSHAL'S LAW

(Jackson Brothers series, Book 1 of 3)

<https://books2read.com/u/bz1gpG>

When Janelle Prescott is thrown from her car as it careens off a slippery road, she expects to wake up in a hospital. Instead, to her utter disbelief, she wakes up in a jail cell which looks like something from an old western movie set. It is there, hurt and alone, with no idea what happened or how she will get back home, that Janelle first meets Aaron Jackson. As she regains her wits, however, Janelle realizes that something is terribly amiss, and her worst fears are confirmed when she learns that Aaron is the marshal of Cheyenne County, Wyoming...and the year is 1878.

When an injured, apparently addle-headed woman falls into his lap, Aaron takes it upon himself to keep her safe and nurse her back to health. Truth be told, he is instantly attracted to her despite her sharp tongue and her bizarre story—a story which the evidence quickly forces him to accept as genuine. After Aaron takes her under his wing and into his family's home, the two clash frequently, but Aaron is more than ready to lay down the law...even if that means a good, hard, bare-bottom spanking for this feisty brat from another era.

Having little choice, Janelle must learn how to live as a woman in the Old West, including submitting to the firm-handed marshal who, in spite of everything, seems to have laid claim to her heart.

THE TRAIL MASTER'S BRIDE

<https://books2read.com/u/3LVD5M>

Forced into an arranged marriage, Mina Hobart has no choice except leave her childhood home and follow her new

husband on a dangerous journey westward. Each hot, dusty day on the Oregon Trail is pure misery, and it isn't long before tragedy renders her a widow. Returning home isn't an option. She presses on, hoping to carve out a life for herself in the new frontier.

Weston Carr, the resourceful, ruggedly handsome trail master, knows the West is no place for an unaccompanied woman. When Mina's careless ways and sassy tongue bring strife to his wagon train, he has no choice except to take her in hand. But she proves herself a magnet for trouble and it isn't long before scandal and gossip force him to make her his bride.

As Mina surrenders to the pleasure of her new husband's arms, a string of mishaps befalls the wagon train, and she is the prime suspect. Can she convince the others, including her firm-handed husband, that she can be trusted? Or will the nefarious forces from within the wagon train keep her from reaching the end of the trail?

Publisher's Note: The Trail Master's Bride is an old West romance that has been revised, expanded, and republished. It includes sexual scenes and domestic discipline in a historical setting. If such material offends you, please don't buy this book.

HALFWAY HOME

<https://books2read.com/u/bzZaXE>

Nearly two decades after she left Halfway, Nebraska, Audrey Porter returns to the small town she once called home following the death of her beloved grandmother. With Nana gone, she must protect the family farm from her opportunistic mother. It isn't long before she is reminded of all the reasons she moved away. Though she no longer lets the small-town gossips bother her, ignoring the rekindled feelings she has for her teenage crush proves more difficult.

For the last twenty years, Nate Dawson has been the hometown hero. High school football star, cattle ranching

royalty, and now the county sheriff, he is admired, desired, and respected. But beneath his controlled, no-nonsense exterior is the tender heart of a young man who never forgot the girl who got away. With Audrey finally within reach, the smitten sheriff is determined not to waste his second chance.

As Audrey works through her grief, battles her mother in court, and wrestles with the decision to keep or sell the farm, Nate refuses to let her push him away. Will surrendering to the love she has always wanted bring Audrey home for good?

CAPTAIN MY CAPTAIN: Club Decadence, Book 1

<https://books2read.com/u/4X0gE1>

After nearly two decades serving his country, Special Forces Captain Tony Rossi is home for good and ready to transition to civilian life. With his business affairs in order, he wants to focus on his personal life and reconnect with the unforgettable Megan Sinclair. Their age gap and Cap's tours of duty abroad have forced him to remain distant for far too long. But Megan is all grown up now, and without any barriers in their way, Cap is determined to pursue his heart's every desire.

Megan has loved Tony forever, but she never knew he felt the same. Falling in his lap at a party gives her a chance to prove she's not just a cute kid anymore, but after years of unrequited love, she's hesitant about taking a giant leap with him. Strong, resourceful, and independent, Megan is used to standing on her own two feet. She isn't sure she has what it takes to fully submit to his dominance. If she does, can she find the courage to disclose her most wicked fantasies and join him behind the locked doors of his private kink club?

Before Megan can set foot inside the dungeon at Club Decadence, she finds herself embroiled in a dangerous drug cartel conspiracy. Tony must set aside his plans for their future in order to keep her safe in the present. As their dreams of a happily ever after are threatened, can Tony protect her while proving she was meant to be his all along?

Publisher's Note: *Captain My Captain* is Book 1 in the Club Decadence series. It has been revised, re-edited, and re-covered. All the books in the series are steamy, suspense-filled romances that contain power exchange, BDSM themes, and scenes with graphic violence, which may be disturbing to some.

TOUGH LOVE 2: DADDY'S GOLDEN RULES

<https://books2read.com/u/meK11E>

Krista Evans knows exactly how cruel life can be. When she was twelve, she lost her dad to war. Then her mother disappeared into the bottom of a bottle. Her heart has been broken, her money stolen, and she's had more than one run-in with the law. What the girl needs is a break. She just can't seem to catch one.

Sheriff Samuel Golden is a lonely man with nothing but work to fill his time. When he busts a pretty young blonde in the midst of a theft, he's tempted by his immediate attraction to her. She's guilty as sin despite her protests to the contrary, but Sam can sense there's a lost little girl inside of her who needs to be taught right from wrong.

In lieu of jail, Sam agrees to take Krista in hand for thirty days for some bare-bottom rehabilitation. But when their obvious chemistry becomes unavoidable, Sam will have to choose: resist the lure of the girl who so desperately needs a stern-yet-loving daddy or banish the ghosts of his past.

Follow Maddie Online

Scan the QR code for all Maddie's Links



Get a FREE Maddie Taylor Romance!

Keep up with author news, get new release updates and cover reveals before anyone else, as well as sneak previews, and lots of giveaways.

Subscribe to Maddie's newsletter ⇒ scan the QR code for the subscribe link