

CHERYL PIERSON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Love  
Under Fire



# *Love* Under Fire

BY  
CHERYL PIERSON



BOOK 3

## **Love Under Fire**

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**K**rissy Donovan had agreed to do this charity work Miz Oakley requested for the orphanage, but she did *not* have to like it. This certainly went above and beyond anything she'd expected her father to ask of her. She reached to adjust the maroon velvet hat she wore and forced her features into a more pleasant expression. She shifted on the hard leather-covered seat of the Butterfield stage, trying to find even the tiniest bit of comfort, but it eluded her. Maybe because she'd spent so much time on a train, and then a stage, the farther west she'd traveled, she felt she'd left a permanent indentation on every seat she'd sat in so far.

This seemingly endless journey from North Carolina to the faraway barricades of savagery could have been so much more pleasurable if she'd had a good traveling companion—her best friend, Ember, or her cousin, Tallie, or her younger sister, Brooklyn—but of course, that would never have been proper. They'd be stuck with the stuffy chaperone, Mrs. Dinwiddie, as

well. The elderly woman sat across from Krissy with the perpetual expression of confusion she wore creasing her plump face.

Krissy closed her eyes, replaying the conversation with her father that had set this debacle in motion. She hated even thinking about it for the hundredth time, but maybe Mrs. Dinwiddie would stop staring a hole through her if she pretended to be asleep.

*Kristalee, I have something to discuss with you. Please, step into my office.*

That was how this fiasco had all begun. When her father spoke *those* words in *that* tone, it meant one thing. Krissy had known that whatever it was her father had to “discuss” with her was already decided and was going to interrupt whatever plans she might have been hoping for over the summer.

And she had been right, of course.

Delano Douglas Donovan always got what he wanted—and what he wanted was for his oldest daughter to perform a shooting exhibition for charity, at the request of his old friend, Miss Annie Oakley Butler. It was quite an important favor she had asked of the Donovan family. This shooting exhibition would require Krissy to travel halfway across the country, in the dust and heat, riding in this jostling, bouncing stagecoach for—well, for what seemed like forever. And the arduous journey wasn’t at an end yet. Krissy let go a long, low sigh.

Of course, there was no arguing with Papa. He’d been dealing with difficult people—banking clients—all his adult life. Though Krissy considered herself stubborn, she had to admit she was no competition for her father.

As much as anything else, she had wanted to please him. And he’d already promised Miz Annie that Krissy would “lend a hand”, as he always put it—a favorite expression of his.

But she had mere months of...*freedom*...left, before the wedding. Maybe Papa had thought this journey west would be somehow entertaining—an

adventure—for her before she settled down. But there were so many other things she would rather have done than travel all this way to put on a shooting exhibition—even if it was for a good cause—and at the request of her father’s old friend and Krissy’s mentor, Miz Annie Oakley herself.

If Mrs. Dinwiddie wasn’t still staring at her, Krissy might have let herself cry. But there were three other occupants in the coach’s hot, wind-whipped interior, as well as herself and Mrs. Dinwiddie, so crying—for any reason, especially self-pity, was out of the question.

She cracked her eyes open, her head tilted back against the unyielding cushioning. *If that infernal Mrs. Dinwiddie didn’t find something to do besides stare at her—*

Just then, a shout sounded from outside and the wagon gave an odd lurch. Krissy felt the surge of power as the horses took off at a gallop, and the driver yelled something indistinguishable.

Mrs. Dinwiddie met Krissy’s eyes, and for a split second, Krissy read the terrible regret and fear in the older woman’s face. But there was nothing to be done as they raced along, helplessly watching the tall, dry grass of the plains speed by the open window flaps.

“Indians, do you suppose?” one of the men, Mr. Russell, asked, trying to mask the question as idle curiosity, though the hint of a teasing smile lurked in his midnight blue eyes.

Mrs. Dinwiddie gasped in horror, and Krissy shot the man a hot glare. Even though she’d spent most of the trip wishing she could be rid of the older woman, a long-time friend of the family, Krissy suddenly felt a genuine protectiveness toward her at the man’s thoughtless comment.

The wife of the other male traveler, Mrs. Streetman, gave a huff. “Of course not. Those days are well over...at least, around here!” But she glanced out the flapping window canvas, as if she wondered if she might see Indians attacking, despite her declaration.

Mr. Streetman remained tight-lipped and silent.

Krissy jumped up from her seat, steadying herself as best she could in the swaying conveyance. She tried to stand as upright as the low ceiling allowed long enough to see outside, bracing her feet against the bumping of the speeding coach.

She caught a glimpse of the scrub brush and tall grass that had been their monotonous view for the past few days. It was racing past at breakneck speed and Krissy was hard put to keep her footing. The driver...where was the driver? Normally she could look out the window and see a foot resting on the floor of the driver's box, or an arm or hand laid casually on the side...but right now, there was no sign of him.

Worse, the horses seemed to have been given their head and were running full speed down the familiar path, headed for the next stage stop.

"Sit down, young woman!" Mrs. Streetman ordered.

Though the imperious command caused Krissy to automatically begin to sit, she caught herself, and remained defiantly standing in her precarious position.

It had been a long time since anyone had ordered her to do something—much less someone she barely knew. She was in a mutinous frame of mind already—hot, uncomfortable in too many ways to count, and feeling put out for having given in to her father's demand to come on this journey in the first place—even for an old friend and a very good cause.

Kristalee Juliana Donovan dug in her heels and made no move to comply with Mrs. Streetman's order.

"I said—" Mrs. Streetman said, leaning toward Krissy as if she believed Krissy hadn't heard her.

The coach hit something that Krissy couldn't see from her vantage point. There was a screaming of rending wood, and one side of the stagecoach dropped low to the ground. Even as the forward momentum seemed to almost pause, then slow, the coach was listing to the side. In one terrible moment, the stage began to roll, then flipped over. Krissy's feet flew up, and she was



thrown backward, hitting her head, first on the wall of the coach, then the floor.

The stage rolled a second time amid a cacophony of shrieking, cracking wood, and neighing horses. Then, all was silent except for the pounding hooves as the horses broke completely free and ran, the dust settling slowly behind them.



TEN-YEAR-OLD JASON RIVERS cocked his blond head to the side and squinted thoughtfully in the direction of the coach road. “Horses comin’,” he said matter-of-factly. He glanced up at the cavalry scout seated next to him on the wide front porch of the Rivers’ Gap Stage Station. “You hear ’em too, Cap’n?”

Captain Johnny Houston gave the boy a surprised look. “Yeah, I hear ’em, Jase. You’ve got some good ears under that tow-top of yours,” he teased.

Johnny stood up straight from where he’d been leaning on the front porch railing, starting for the steps. The noon stage was due soon, but there was no sound of wheels—only horses’ pounding hooves.

“C’mon, Jase, let’s go see what’s—”

Six horses thundered into the large open area in front of the station. Johnny vaulted off the porch and ran to the slowing, milling group of horseflesh as the boy hurried to see to the fresh team he had left tethered and waiting by the barn.

As they calmed both groups of animals, Jason’s father, Dave, ran from the barn to help his son.

Johnny had the runaway team under control, speaking soothingly to them as he sorted out the tangled traces and straightened them in order to remove them.

Dave ordered his son to stay near the barn, then walked toward Johnny. “What do you think?” he asked. “Indians? Uh...I mean—uh, no offense...”

Johnny waved him off, seeing the other man’s embarrassment at his own careless words. It was no secret Johnny Houston and his older brother, Derek, both carried Indian blood themselves. Their living and working in a white world sometimes created awkward remarks, but both brothers had learned how to handle most situations that arose.

“No offense taken.”

Dave gave Johnny a relieved look. “I guess that’s the first thing I always think of, even though seems like those days are over, even here in Indian Territory.”

Johnny said, “I’ll ride down the trail and see what’s happened. The major and the rest of the company will be along soon. If I’m not back when they get here, tell them what happened and have them send someone—”

“If you ain’t back in one hour, I’ll come after you myself, Johnny.” Dave gave Johnny a look that promised his word was good.

Jason came toward them, leading Johnny’s big black, Mystic, saddled and ready to go. “I got your big ol’ boy here, Cap’n. I knew you’d be ridin’ out to see what’s happened.” There was a wistfulness in Jason’s voice, and Johnny shared a glance with Dave over the boy’s head.

“I might need to send someone back here to get a wagon if there are injured—” Johnny began.

“Oh, Pa, I can do that! Please, let me go with Cap’n Houston! Please!”

Dave scratched his head. “I’d come with you myself, but hate to leave Becky here alone, with the baby coming any time now.” Reluctantly, he said, “You’ll be watchful, Johnny? With my boy?”

“He will, Pa! And *I’ll* be careful—”

“Well, get on and get Brownie saddled up, Jase,” Dave told him roughly, but his son had already taken off like lightning for the barn.

“You know I’ll take care of him, Dave,” Johnny said, watching as Jason

disappeared inside the dark interior of the barn. “I meant what I said about having him along in case I need to send him back with a message or to bring a wagon.”

“He’s growing up,” Dave said quietly. “I have to let him be a man.”

“Dave, Johnny—lunch is ready. Y’all will want to get on in here and eat before that stage gets here!” a very pregnant Becky Rivers called from inside the front door.

“Y’all better hightail it out of here,” Dave said in a low tone. “She won’t like lettin’ Jase go with you.” He turned and called back toward the station door, “Comin’, Becky.”

Johnny cocked his head in a quick motion as Jason emerged from the barn, leading Brownie. A mile-wide smile flashed across the boy’s face as he flung himself up on Brownie’s back, and Johnny mounted Mystic.

They rode at a canter out of the yard and down the trail, Becky’s voice calling Dave once more from behind them.

“Pa’ll see to the horses first, Cap’n, if you’re worried about Ma. It’ll buy us some time.”

Johnny chuckled at the boy’s reasoning, glad Dave would be the one dealing with Becky when she discovered Jason gone.

Going in search of a missing stagecoach was preferable to facing the wrath of Becky Rivers.



**T**hey hadn't ridden more than a scant two miles when Johnny saw the gleam of sunlight on the bright crimson side of the downed coach, laying in a ravine at the bottom of an incline where the road curved.

He stopped and turned to Jason. "You wait here for me. I'm going down there to see what's happened."

"But—I can help you—"

"I'll call you to come down when I see that everything is safe, Jason. Okay?"

The boy nodded.

"Go on right over there under that big oak tree, will you? I'll signal to you for the all-clear."

Jason dutifully turned Brownie toward the tree Johnny had indicated.

Johnny skirted the stand of trees and made his way toward the overturned stage.

There was no movement other than the slow spin of one of the wheels in the tall, waving grass. The August wind blew, offering no relief from the heat, but rather, the promise of even hotter temperatures as the afternoon wore on. To the west, the sky had begun to darken as thunderheads formed in the distance.

There was no danger. No outlaws, not an Indian in sight—except himself, and he was certainly no full-blood. A caustic smile touched his lips as he moved closer. *An Indian was here to rescue the whites—if there were any who could be saved.*

There was a trail of baggage and belongings strewn all around the coach for yards, from where the conveyance had first left the road.

Much of the baggage—consisting of everything from satchels, to carpetbags, to trunks—had been crushed when the coach had rolled over—at least twice, from what Johnny could figure—and scattered the contents as far down the hillside and ravine as he could see.

But among the crushed baggage, Johnny made out the mangled figure of a man. Riding slowly closer, he recognized Lemuel Jenkins, the shotgun rider.

Johnny dismounted and walked to where Jenkins lay.

As Johnny's shadow fell across him, Lemuel opened his eyes. "Houston, what—what the devil are you doin' here?"

Johnny crouched beside Jenkins, trying to assess his injuries, but he didn't touch him. He gave Jenkins an easy smile.

"Lem, you sidewinder, I was about to ask you the same thing. What happened?"

Lem started to push himself up, but the pain stopped him. He swore and grimaced as Johnny helping him settle back to the ground again.

"Aw, those crazy horses," Lem ground out. "Rattlesnakes by the road, and they—they took exception to 'em and just went runnin' wild when they spotted 'em."

Johnny glanced up to see Jason looking at him intently, his hand shielding his eyes from the sun.

“You need me, Cap’n?” the boy called.

Johnny shouted, “Go tell your pa we need a wagon. Hurry, son.”

Jason gave a wave of acknowledgement, then took off at a gallop on Brownie toward home.

“I gotta go see to the others,” Johnny said. “You gonna be all right?”

“I—I will be, Johnny. Just so glad you’re here to take charge. I didn’t know how I was gonna d-do anything but just lay here an’ bake in this sun.”

“I’ll get you some water.” Johnny stood and reached for his canteen, uncapping it and crouching beside Lem once more to help him drink a swallow of the precious tin-tasting liquid.

Johnny withdrew the canteen and recapped it, then stood. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

As Johnny started to walk away, Lem said, “Bob Hastings was the driver, Johnny. I don’t think he made it. He was—was tryin’ to cut ’em loose...lost his balance. I think he broke his neck.”

Johnny nodded grimly. “Nothin’ you could’ve done. We’ll get everyone over to the Rivers’ Gap Station and take care of you all there. The boy’ll be back with his father and the wagon soon.”

Lem nodded and closed his eyes. “I’m grateful. Couple more miles... we’d’ve made it...”

“I know. Just hold on.” Johnny stepped away, closing the gap between where Lem lay sprawled in the grass and the coach itself.

The coach rested on its side, the door facing the sky. As Johnny reached the conveyance, he saw two wheels were shattered and unusable. There was no hope they could be repaired.

The door opened a few inches, then shut, then inched skyward again. From inside, a muffled, “Oh, dear...” sounded, then the door opened a few more inches, but closed again.

Johnny reached for the handle and lifted the heavy door against the groaning, bent hinges, but it held fast.

“Oh...dear...” the same voice muttered again, and this time, Johnny could hear the confusion and fatigue of an older woman in the tone.

Using one of the unbroken wheel hubs as a makeshift ladder, Johnny climbed up onto the side of the coach to get better leverage, and he wrestled the door open.

He found himself staring down into the face of a befuddled-looking older woman who stared up at him with blue eyes, filled with a mixture of fear and surprise.

He put a hand out to her. “Johnny Houston, ma’am. U.S. Cavalry. I’m going to help you climb out of there.”

“Oh, no—I don’t think I can, young man—”

“Yes. You can. I’m going to help you. Are you injured?”

“No...no, I don’t think so...”

“Take my hand.”

She squinted up at the bars on his uniform. “I don’t want to be first, Captain. There are others—”

He was a little surprised that the small, elderly woman had read the military stripes correctly and known his rank.

“Someone has to be first, and you’re here.” He bent and gave her a reassuring nod as he took her hand.

“So unladylike,” she murmured in a scandalized whisper. “Being lifted out like this. I’ll swan...”

Johnny hid a smile, pulled her out easily, and lowered her gently to the wheel he’d climbed up on. “Can you manage?”

She gave him a toss of her head, her gray curls all the worse for wear. “I should say I can, young man!” She put a hand to her head. “Oh—my hat!”

“We’ll get it, ma’am. After we get everyone else out.”

“Of course. I just realized it was gone and—I’m sorry.” She looked is she

might have wanted to say more, but instead, turned and made her way down the short distance from the wagon wheel to the ground.

Johnny crouched by the open portal, peering into the darkened interior of the coach. From what he could tell, there were two men and two remaining women.

The younger of the two men stirred and rubbed his head, then sat up with a moan.

“If you can stand up, I can help you out,” Johnny told him as their eyes met. The man looked lucid and when he moved, he seemed to be trying to reassure himself nothing was broken. He gave Johnny a nod of understanding and clambered to his feet shakily.

He climbed on one of the leather-covered seat cushions that lay in the floor, where the elderly woman had stood earlier.

“Give me your hand,” Johnny instructed, reaching down to help the stranger climb out.

“Are you all right?” Johnny couldn’t help but notice the pallor of the man’s face; whether from fear, pain, or injury, he wasn’t sure.

The traveler took a deep breath as he stood to his full height, rubbing his neck. “Yes. I—I am, I think. Just banged up a bit. There are three others...”

Johnny nodded. “I’ll get them out. Can you keep an eye on the elderly woman and the shotgun rider, Lemuel Jenkins? He didn’t fare as well as you did.”

“Sure...I’ll do my best. I’m Matt Russell, by the way.” The stranger rubbed his temple and then put his hand out to shake Johnny’s. “Thank you, and yes, I’ll help the others. Might even be able to lend you a hand getting the other three passengers out after I collect myself a bit.”

Johnny shook his head. “No need. Help is on the way. I’d just like for you to keep Lem awake and talking until we can get him to Rivers’ Gap Station.”

“I will.” Russell turned to make his way unsteadily to the ground. Johnny watched as Russell started toward where Jenkins lay. The elderly woman was



already sitting in the grass beside the injured shotgun rider. It looked as if the older woman and Russell were going to be all right, and were keeping good watch over Lem. They'd soon be able to travel to the station when Dave and Jason returned. Then Becky could check them over and be sure all was well.

His mind at ease for the three of them, Johnny turned to look back inside the coach. It was obvious that the other three passengers were still unconscious. *Better go in and see what he could do for them.* He climbed down into the coach, taking care not to step on anyone sprawled below him.

There was a middle-aged woman thrown against the front wall of the coach, a slightly older man beside her. One glance told Johnny the man was dead, having taken the brunt of the force of the impact. Johnny could only assume he'd tried to protect the woman, most likely his wife.

The woman was still breathing, and he moved quickly on to the last passenger—another woman, much younger by her dress. Their daughter perhaps? She had been lying face down at the opposite end of the coach's stifling interior.

Gently, he reached to lay a hand on her shoulder, his other hand supporting her as he turned her over. Long, dark hair tumbled around her face from beneath the crushed dark red velvet hat she wore.

She moaned and her eyes opened slowly, staring straight up into Johnny's.

After the jaded twenty-seven years he'd lived, Johnny was not surprised often. But the expression in her warm, brown eyes held him spellbound. It was like nothing he'd ever known before.

He'd expected a look of pain, but when her eyelids fluttered and lifted, she met his gaze with a look that he'd never experienced. He felt...as if he were home. As if he belonged with this woman, somehow.

He pushed those crazy thoughts aside. He'd never been a romantic and didn't intend to start now, at the ripe old age of twenty-seven.

It was ridiculous. He didn't have any idea who she was...knew nothing at

all about her. But there was a definite glad light in her deep brown eyes that held his gaze with hers for a few seconds before it slowly guttered out.

“Are you—injured?” Johnny finally managed to ask.

“Who—who are you?” she responded softly.

“Captain Johnny Houston, ma’am. U.S. Cavalry.” His throat was dry as he spoke. He marshaled his scrambled thoughts. “Are you injured?” he asked again, more firmly. He refused to entertain the thought of what he’d believed he’d seen in this beautiful woman’s face.

And still, he knew when she’d asked, “Who are you?” in that soft, melodic voice that she’d been asking for more than his name.

She slowly shook her head. “I-I don’t think I’m hurt, Captain.” She made a move to sit up, and Johnny helped her, leaning her back against the seat for support.

“I’m Kristalee Donovan,” she murmured, as if she felt remiss in her introduction even under these circumstances. “Krissy... No one calls me Kristalee except my father...” She leaned back with a low moan, resting her weight on the ruined cushions behind her once more.

“Those your folks over there, Miss Donovan?” Johnny nodded toward the middle-aged couple, preparing to deliver the bad news, if they were, indeed, her family.

She shook her head as she glanced over at them. “No—Mr. and Mrs. Streetman...” She made a move as if to start up from where she sat to go to them, but Johnny put a staying hand on her arm.

“You sit here and rest, Miss Donovan. I believe Mr. Streetman is... beyond help, but I need to see what can be done for his wife.”

Krissy slumped back against the cushioned surface with a nod of acquiescence. “Yes—thank you, Captain. I suppose I must be weaker than I believed.”

Johnny gave her arm a reassuring pat and moved toward Mr. and Mrs. Streetman. He carefully extricated Mr. Streetman’s body from his wife and

moved him gently to her side. Mrs. Streetman stirred slightly, and Johnny breathed a sigh of relief.

Outside, hooves sounded, and Johnny knew Dave and Jason Rivers had arrived. He gently turned Mrs. Streetman to her side as she began to regain consciousness.

“Johnny!” Dave called.

“In here!” Johnny climbed on the ruined squab and put his head out the open door. “Come give me a hand.” As Jason started over with his father, Johnny called, “Jase, will you gather up the loose clothing from the luggage? Glad to see you brought along some extra horses.”

Understanding Johnny’s cue to keep Jason away from the stage, Dave gave his son a bit of direction, then moved toward Johnny once more. He climbed up close to the open doorway, a grim look on his face.

“What? More bad news?” Johnny asked.

“Found Bob Hastings, the driver, on the road. Guess that passenger—Mr. Russell—went looking and come up on him layin’ off to the side with a broke neck.”

Johnny muttered a low curse and shook his head.

“What about inside?” Dave nodded toward the open door.

“One dead,” Johnny replied quietly. “Two ladies injured, but not badly, from what I can tell. C’mon. Give me a hand. Let’s get this wrapped up.”



**M**att Russell was able to sit a horse, riding one of the extras Dave had brought along, and Johnny hoped he'd be able to lift Lem up from the wagon bed with Jason's help when they got to the station.

The two older women and Lem were loaded into the back of the wagon along with some of the baggage. The younger woman managed to climb to the wagon seat without help, and Jason turned the team homeward.

"Glad the ladies are all fine—more or less," Dave said as his son drove the wagon away. "I think once we get that broken leg set, Lem should heal up all right."

Johnny nodded, gazing down the road after the wagon and Russell, the lone rider. "Yeah...I hope so."

"Somethin' wrong?" Dave asked, peering at Johnny.

"No." Johnny brought his attention back from the slender figure of Miss Kristalee Donovan, sitting erectly beside Jason as the boy drove the team

away from them toward the station. “C’mon. We better get this done. If the rest of Company B shows up this evening, you’ll have a full house. Becky will need all the help she can get.”

Dave nodded.

“Let’s get the dead men on a couple of the horses and we can put what’s left of the bags on the other,” Johnny said, moving toward where the animals cropped the grass. He cut a glance at the sky.

The storm had closed in. Lightning flashed in the thunderheads. Thunder responded with an ominous rumbling in the distance.



KRISSY DID what she could to help Jason and Matt Russell get Lem Jenkins into the house and settled in the room Becky had readied for him. Jason excused himself with a quick explanation of unloading their baggage in order to get the team to the barn before the storm arrived.

Mrs. Streetman steadfastly kept herself busy, along with Mrs. Dinwiddie, helping Becky get everything ready to set Lem’s leg.

Krissy felt deep in her pocket for the millionth time to be certain her revolver was still there—safe and sound. Her parents had believed she and her younger sisters, Brooklyn and Narissa, should all be trained in the fine art of marksmanship and even trick shooting with the famous Annie Oakley, and she’d picked up the habit during that time. She knew the gun was there...but still, putting her hand on it, touching the smooth grip, was comforting to her somehow.

Even more comforting was the fact that she knew exactly how to use it—expertly. But she feared she was not going to make it to the orphanage in time for the exhibition. And her father had most adamantly stressed the importance of being there in a timely manner. In fact, he’d like for her to arrive there a day or two early. It was very important, he’d said.

And, Krissy recalled, there had been something in his expression that troubled her, though she couldn't put her finger on it.

"Are you worried I'll forget everything Miz Annie taught me, Papa?" she'd teased quickly when the tension had entered his features.

"No, my darling," he'd responded. "I just—well, it's important to Annie, and I'd like for you to have fun. Be relaxed. I know this is such a long journey."

He'd chucked her under her chin. "You...*do* want to do this, don't you?"

The need for her to reply correctly was more than Krissy could bear. She could never reply honestly—that she'd been counting on having this summer to herself with her wedding looming. There were still some loose ends to tie up, though she would leave a lot of that up to her mother, since...since it was obvious her mother was more excited about this upcoming wedding than she was.

Now, just thinking of that conversation with her father brought familiar anxiety. She sighed and walked to the front window of the great room. It was quiet in here—for the moment. She'd tried to help the ladies, but had seemed only to be in the way. The room Mr. Jenkins was in was too small for so many people. She needed to be alone with her thoughts right now.

The feeling of resentment toward her father for putting her into this position had only been part of the picture. This trip hadn't been all bad; she'd certainly met some interesting people in her travels. And, she reminded herself, she was on her way to do something worthwhile in raising money for the Indian orphanage. Yet, she wasn't used to feeling so unsettled. Kristalee Donovan knew her own self. Her own thoughts and feelings.

The stagecoach wreck probably had much to do with these restless feelings—that, coupled with the pending storm would be enough to make most women more than a little nervous. She walked to the front door. There was nothing for her to do here inside. Mrs. Rivers and the other two women had everything in hand.

She wanted to be busy. Maybe young Jason could use some help, especially with the coming storm. Working with the animals would sooth her restlessness—at least, until she came face-to-face with those intense midnight dark eyes she'd looked into earlier when she'd come to in the coach.

*Captain Johnny Houston.*

She opened the door and walked onto the wrap-around porch, pulling the door closed behind her in the gusty wind. Her hair blew around her face but there was no help for it here in the open. Her hat was all but a scrap of its former self, destroyed, laying on one of the tables beside the front door where she'd put it when they had all come in earlier. She'd not even thought about pinning her hair up on the wagon ride, or since they'd arrived.

The rain hadn't started yet, but from the feel of the air and the smell of the wind, it wouldn't be long. Where were the men? Surely, it wouldn't take that long to gather the two bodies and come home. Had something happened to them?

A wry smile touched her lips. *Not very likely. Not with Captain Houston present.* The strength in his arms as he'd lifted her from the interior of the coach, the surety of his hands as he'd guided her up through the portal of the open coach door, the certainty in his voice—everything in his commanding presence told Krissy that, if need be, Captain Houston would hold the very storm above them at bay until he'd finished conducting the business at hand and returned to Rivers' Gap Station.

Jason passed by the barn door opening, headed for another stall. Krissy held her hair out of her eyes and hurried toward the barn to help the boy.

“Oh, Miss—uh—Donovan,” Jason said in a relieved voice as she entered the barn.

She gave him a bright smile. “I came to see if you might let me help you with the horses.”

Jason wiped his brow with his sleeve. “Sure!” His voice was hoarse with strain. He looked at her, then uncertainly asked, “Uh—do you know anything

about horses? I mean—you bein’ a lady an’ all—”

She nodded. “Yes, I certainly do.” She walked toward where he’d laid the curry brush. “I believe I’m probably the best currier in the United States.”

Jason laughed. “Did you win a contest or somethin’?”

“No, nothing like that. Just lots and lots of practice.” She eyed the horses. “Who’s next?”

“Josie—right there in that third stall.” He nodded toward a beautiful palomino. “Miss Donovan, I-I’ll be right back in just a minute.”

“Of course. Miss Josie and I will get acquainted.”

Jason turned and headed out the back barn door toward the outhouse.

Krissy smiled after him, then turned back to Josie with brush in hand. “Now, my darling, let’s get you taken care of. You are such a glorious girl, aren’t you?”

She leaned up conspiratorially toward Josie’s ear. “I met a man today, Josie. Captain Johnny Houston.” She plied the brush against Josie’s side, trying to ignore the shiver that rushed through her at just saying his name aloud. “You saw him.” She slowed, then stopped the brush strokes. “I’m engaged, Josie...back home in Raleigh. That’s far away from here—in North Carolina. Everyone knows I’m to marry Eversby Witherspoon the Third in the spring.”

Krissy brushed slowly across Josie’s withers. “You know what I think is so odd, Josie? I never met him before today—Captain Houston, I mean. Yet, I feel as if I know him, somehow.” She stood back and looked Josie in the eye.

“You know exactly what I mean, don’t you, sweet girl? I feel like I know him...somehow better than—than I should.” She stopped and took a deep breath, then plunged on. “Well, I mean I only just made his acquaintance today, but...” Her shoulders slumped. “And why does it even matter? I have Eversby...”

After a moment, she said, “Who knows? I don’t even understand it. And I



refuse...*I refuse* to put any kind of name to what I felt—” She sighed heavily. “I must have gotten hit on the head harder than I thought.” She gave another gentle brush, then said, “I don’t even know his middle name...”

Squaring her shoulders, Krissy fell silent and finished up grooming Josie. “Not that it even matters...about his middle name, I mean. Because I’ll soon be going back to North Carolina and...and Eversby...Eversby Wayne Witherspoon the Third.” Somehow, the name had lost much of its luster. With a soft pat, she added, “I know you understand, Josie-girl. I wish you could talk.”

Just then, Jason entered the back door of the barn. “Pa and the cap’n are here.”

Heat flooded through Krissy as she gave Jason a nod of acknowledgement. She was suddenly aware of her wind-blown hair and disheveled appearance. She’d never cared so much about her looks as she did at this very moment—and there wasn’t one thing she could do about it except wonder why it should matter.

In any case, she’d been scared silly in that runaway stage, then knocked out before she could ever take note of what was truly going on, then been without a comb...so of course she wasn’t looking her best!

But...when she’d come to from her unconscious state and found herself staring up into the darkest eyes she’d ever seen...those eyes had changed the very moment they’d connected with hers. Captain Johnny Houston had melted her heart with one smile... And just maybe her feelings had shown right through her own “windows of her soul” too, at that same moment.

But that didn’t make any kind of sense, and she knew she couldn’t believe what she’d *thought* she might have seen because...because she would soon be going home to Eversby Wayne Witherspoon the Third...and marriage.

Krissy quickly tried to finger-comb her hair into some kind of order from the riotous brunette disarray she knew it was. The first thing she should have

done was gone through what was left of her bag and hope someone had found her comb, brush, and mirror set. Was the mirror still in one piece? *Seven years of bad luck if it was broken.* She gave a heavy sigh. Perhaps that was why her thoughts were so chaotic. Maybe it wasn't at all because of the stagecoach crash, or...a certain cavalry captain.

*And...speak of the devil.*

Krissy moved back a step into the shadowed interior of Josie's stall and watched as Jason hurried forward to take the reins of the captain's horse.

"Aw, hello, Mystic, you pretty boy," Jason murmured softly, as he gave the horse a welcoming pat. Mystic nickered in response. "What? You think I should've called you handsome instead of pretty?" Jason laughed again as Mystic cocked his head consideringly.

That brought a smile to Captain Houston's sensuous lips as well, and Krissy couldn't help but laugh at the horse's antics.

Jason led the big black to an empty stall. "I'll take care of him, Cap'n." There was a note of pride in his tone, and the captain gave him a quick, approving glance.

"Thanks, Jase. I know he's in good hands with you."

The captain turned toward where Krissy stood. "Come on out of there, Miss Donovan," he ordered, a smile in his tone. "You can't hide behind Josie forever."

"*Hide?*" Krissy said on an indignant gasp. Righteous anger filled her from her toes upward, and in a flash, she could feel it painting her forehead and cheeks pink. She stepped out quickly into full view. "I don't *hide*, Captain Houston. I've never hidden from anyone or anything, and I never *will*. Certainly not you. I have nothing to fear."

But even as she said those words, she knew that was not entirely true.



**K**rissy Donovan's reaction had been swift and sure. *And honest.* Just what Johnny had expected. Somehow, that made him more certain than ever that the look she'd given him as she'd first opened her eyes in the upended coach had been genuine—whatever it had meant.

His appraisal was direct, reading the erect set of her slim shoulders, the high tilt of her head, and the blazing fire in her dark eyes.

After a moment, he said quietly, "My apologies, Miss Donovan. It seems I inadvertently struck a...very *sour* chord with you. If you'll excuse me—I need to go help set Lem's broken leg." He turned to go, but looked back at her as he stepped outside into the gusting wind.

"You might want to come back to the house before this storm hits, ma'am. I brought back another of your bags. I left it beside your door."

Before she could reply, Jason shut the back barn door and hurried to them.

“We better get inside,” he said with a quick glance out the big front door. “C’mon, Miss Donovan.” He nodded at Johnny. “Got big Mystic all taken care of, too. And I put down some fresh straw for the rest of your company when they get here.”

Johnny reached out to touch Jason’s shoulder. “Good job, son. Thank you.”

They started toward the house, and Jason turned back to call, “C’mon Miss Donovan!”

The first fat drops of rain began to fall, and Krissy hurried forward, following Johnny and Jason, just as Dave led the remainder of the horses inside the barn.

“Need help with Lem?” Dave asked hurriedly.

“No,” Johnny answered. “I think Mr. Russell can give me a hand.”

“What about me?” Jason asked anxiously.

“You better stay here and help your Pa.”

“Yes, I’ll need you, son.”

“But Pa—”

Seeing Dave’s temper flare, Johnny quickly interjected, “Jase, I’ve never seen anyone as good with horses as you are. The job’ll go a lot quicker for your pa with your help.”

“All right, then,” Jason answered proudly, taking two sets of reins from his father’s hand and leading those horses toward the back of the barn.

Dave shot Johnny an appreciative grin. “One day, Captain, you’ll have one of your own.”

“Not likely.” Johnny laughed as they passed each other.

“Miss Donovan? Still time to get inside before it opens up,” Johnny said, turning to her as he walked by.

As awkward a situation as it was, when Krissy took a look at the threatening sky, Johnny saw her demeanor change, and she fell into step beside him as they walked toward the porch—together.



NO WORDS PASSED between them as they crossed the yard toward the station, Krissy hurrying to keep up with him. She felt suddenly ashamed of herself as Johnny took her arm to help her up the porch steps. *She shouldn't have responded to him like she had in the barn.* They were all on edge from the happenings of this entire day—one to remember, for sure. And the unpleasantness of Johnny's day wasn't over yet, she thought. He still had Lem's leg to see to, and Krissy imagined he and Mr. Rivers would then take care of burying the stagecoach driver and Mr. Streetman once the rain stopped.

She should apologize for the way she'd responded in the barn. Johnny put his hand on the door handle but, before he could open the door, Krissy stopped and turned to face him.

"Captain Houston, I—" She was interrupted by the sound of horses' hooves pounding into the front yard behind them.

Johnny looked past her, and she turned toward the riders as two cavalymen rode straight to the barn and dismounted, the rain now falling in torrents. They ducked their heads and led the horses quickly inside where Dave and Jason were still at work.

"C'mon," Johnny said quietly, opening the door for Krissy to get through the entrance before her clothing got saturated from the blowing fat droplets of water.

Gratefully, she stepped over the threshold, with him following. She'd find the time to speak with him later. Maybe after some of these burdens had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Cap'n?" Becky Rivers moved as quickly as she could in her condition into the large dining room from the kitchen. She was carrying a pan of water in her work-roughened hands and a few towels under her arm, heading for the hallway that led to the bedrooms. "Oh, good, you're here. Everything's

ready. I told Mrs. Dinwiddie to go on and rest—she was feeling a bit poorly after what she went through this morning,” she rattled on.

“Can I take that water from you—” Johnny started to ask, but she shook her head.

“Come on with me,” she continued, as she walked toward the far end of the large room toward the hallway. “I asked Mrs. Streetman if she would like to go lie down, but she said no, she’d just like to keep busy.” She shook her head and *tsked* to herself, looking over her shoulder at Krissy, who followed closely, with Johnny behind her.

“Poor woman,” she went on in a low voice. “Losing her husband to such a terrible accident. She needs to think of other things, and helping with Lem is a good remedy.”

They’d come to the end of the hallway, and Becky pushed the last door on the left open, moving inside to set her burdens down on the dresser.

“C’mon in, Captain Houston.” Becky glanced up at Krissy. “Honey, you can be excused if you’d like to go freshen up a bit. Unless you’ve got doctorin’ experience...” Her voice trailed off as she gave Krissy a skeptical look.

“No...I mean...yes, I need to go. This room is small—”

Krissy met Mrs. Streetman’s red-rimmed eyes momentarily and immediately forgave her the earlier haughty order she’d issued in the coach. Becky was right. Mrs. Streetman had been through a terrible ordeal today. It was entirely possible that she’d only been worried for Krissy’s safety at the time. Mr. Russell glanced up from where he stooped close to Lem to talk with him. Captain Houston and Becky stood near to Krissy, and suddenly, the crush of so many people in such a small, close space felt-overwhelming. *She needed to get out...*

Turning away at the door and starting down the hallway, she heard Becky call, “Second door on the right, sweet pea.”

Krissy rolled her eyes. It had been at least fifteen years since anyone had

called her “sweet pea”, and she’d be glad if she didn’t have to hear it again for the rest of her life. “Thank you, Mrs. Rivers,” she replied.

One of Krissy’s larger bags was placed outside the door that Mrs. Rivers had indicated. She must have missed seeing it before when they’d come this way in all the hustle and bustle. Glad to see the familiar baggage beside the doorway to her refuge, she picked it up and opened the unlocked door, letting herself inside.

Assuming she and her chaperone would be sharing a room, Krissy was relieved to see no sign of Mrs. Dinwiddie. She breathed a deep sigh of relief, thankful for some time and a place to herself.

Krissy looked around the small room, noting the vanity with a pitcher of fresh water and a large bowl on top, a porcelain chamber pot near the end of the ample bed. A rack with a clean hand towel and wash rag stood near the vanity.

Right now, though, she could only think of finding a fresh change of clothing, after being tumbled in the overturned wagon and dust, then somewhat bedraggled further by the spitting rain at the beginning of this storm that now raged overhead.

How she longed for a real bath. But it was too much to ask under the circumstances.

She lifted her bag to the bed and opened it.

Far from containing the neatly packed contents she’d set out with on this journey, everything on the top layers had been picked up from being scattered on the grassy trail and stuffed back inside quickly. She imagined young Jason picking up the strewn clothing and trying to figure out whose bag held exactly what. Her face flushed as she pulled out some of her lacy unmentionables and laid them aside.

Delving farther into the depths, she was surprised to realize everything she pulled out definitely belonged to her and not to one of the other women.

Then her fingers touched something quite unfamiliar. It was a box made

of wood and, by the smooth feel of it, even around the corners and the edges, she knew it was beautifully, painstakingly carved, though she had not laid eyes on it yet.

Wrapping her hand around the side of it, she pulled it out carefully, both shocked and pleasantly surprised when she extracted it from beneath a clean blouse.

*Oh, how gorgeous!* Krissy laid the mahogany box on the bed and admired the gleaming brass hinges and lock. On the top of the lid was a small decorative piece of the most beautiful stone she had ever seen—a pale pink piece of mother-of-pearl that had been lovingly sculpted and mounted in the center of the lid.

Krissy gave a soft gasp at the beauty of the mahogany wood, embellished with the soft glow of the unusual pale pink stone.

Without a thought, she tried to lift the lid. It wouldn't budge, and unreasonable disappointment coursed through her. *What could this case contain, and how had it wound up in her bag? Oh, it was beautiful!*

*But...it's not mine.*

She examined the lock and saw there was no way of opening the lid without the key. To force it open was unthinkable and would ruin the exquisite workmanship. This case had been crafted with love...so much love. She would go her entire life not knowing what was inside before she destroyed the box to open it.

She ran her fingers over the polished wood. *A few scratches...just wear and tear from the travels that had taken place for whatever might be inside.*

Reluctantly, she laid it gently on the cushioning of the mattress and continued taking garments from her bag. She was relieved to find that her comb and brush set, along with her mirror, were toward the bottom of the bag. The mirror was intact, she was glad to see. She shook her head, realizing how relieved she was to discover she'd no need to worry about the seven years of bad luck. Just a silly superstition, anyhow.



This thought drew her attention back to the beautiful wood case. Was there a mirror inlaid in the inside lid of the case? Was it broken?

She picked up the wooden case and gently shook it. She could hear no tell-tale rattling, and let go the breath she'd been holding. She couldn't bear to think of anything marring the perfection of this exquisite creation.

Who did it belong to? Certainly not Clara Dinwiddie. Krissy would have seen it during this long journey with the older woman.

Mrs. Streetman? Krissy shook her head, thinking of the stoic matron and the way she'd ordered Krissy to sit down just before the stagecoach had overturned. Well, Mrs. Streetman's advice *had* been good, but Krissy was unused to being spoken to that way, let alone *ordered* to do something, as Mrs. Streetman had done. At least, not by anyone other than her parents and, soon, she'd be taking orders from Eversby, she was quite sure, if he could find it within himself to order anyone to do anything.

She'd been independent all her life, but her shooting lessons under the tutelage of Annie Oakley had given her a new perspective. Learning to shoot as well as she had, and, in fact, becoming a protégé of Miz Oakley's, provided her more confidence than she'd ever known before that time. It had also given her more independence, more ability to take life by the horns. And, she must admit, having such a natural talent for marksmanship and trick shooting also made her more reckless in some ways, and more headstrong.

*I wish I could stay out here forever.*

The thought shocked her, but it also appealed to her. She quickly tried to put it out of her mind. She would do this charity exhibition for the orphanage that she'd promised she'd do—she'd given her father her word—and then, she'd make the long trip home and get prepared for her wedding. She realized she'd stopped wondering who the magnificent mahogany case belonged to and her mind had gone a completely different direction. She shook away her fanciful thoughts, returning to trying to figure out who might be the rightful owner of the case.

*Did it belong to Mr. Russell?* She smiled. *No. Mr. Matthew Russell was much too manly to own such a case.*

But not as manly as Captain Houston. With his towering height at well over six feet, his muscles sculpted beneath the snug-fitting uniform he wore, and his piercing dark eyes, he was as “handsome as sin”, as her best friend, Ember Kingsley would say. *And she would be so right.*

Unbidden, Krissy’s own fiancé’s image leapt to her thoughts. *Eversby Wayne Witherspoon the Third.* With his sandy brown hair and hazel eyes, his barely 5’10” height, and his slightly pudgy frame...She sighed. *And his money. And his family name.* Which, of course, were the two most important things in the society she’d been reared in.

She pushed those thoughts away quickly. It was far too late to be having second thoughts about her impending marriage to Eversby. Everything was planned, and had been, for quite some time—for just about the entirety of her twenty-one years in this world. She sighed heavily. This had been the “plan” far too long now to call off their wedding without creating a life-long scandal. The rift between her papa and Eversby’s father would be irreparable. This wedding had been planned from the time she and Eversby had been children. Babies, really.

Krissy had never even looked at another man—until today. To be fair, it wasn’t that Eversby was unattractive. But he was so...ordinary. So normal... *So...tame.*

Krissy couldn’t help but compare him with Captain Johnny Houston. A wry smile twisted her lips. *Johnny Houston had never had a ‘tame’ day in his life, she’d wager.*

There was no denying the allure of a man like Johnny. With his dark good looks, his muscular build, and his ability to take charge of virtually any situation, such as something as unexpected as the stagecoach catastrophe. There was simply no comparison between Johnny and a man like...*like Eversby.*

Eversby could barely choose his preference in shirt color, could have never told his father he didn't want to follow in his footsteps in the family banking business, and could have never gone against his family's wishes of whom to marry.

Krissy sat down on the bed, her thoughts crowding her mind. Wasn't she as bad? Agreeing to come west at her father's bidding—even though it had been the last thing she'd wanted to do? And never questioning the expectation that she and Eversby would become man and wife. With their fathers having been in business together most of their adult lives and she and Eversby being less than a year apart in age, it had been a foregone conclusion—and she had never questioned it. Nor had Eversby.

She let go a long sigh. This trip had ruined everything. At least...it had certainly ruined her contentment with her life. It had suddenly made her aware that she might have a say in her own life—*her future*—if she wanted a change...a chance to make her own choice about what that future would be. This journey had awakened her consciousness...and she wasn't sure she appreciated it. She'd been perfectly happy in her world—*until today*.

A sharp knock sounded at the door, startling her back to the reality of the present.

She stood quickly and smoothed back her hair. *Silly*. She'd been lost in her thoughts instead of freshening herself up and finishing her re-packing...

"Yes?" she called, as she walked toward the door.

"Miss Donovan?"

There was no mistaking who stood on the other side of the door, and Krissy wondered if he could hear her heart pounding.

Krissy cleared her throat and opened the door to face the captain. He looked a bit more disheveled than when she'd seen him earlier, but that was to be expected since he'd been helping set a man's broken leg. Dark hair fell across his forehead. Ebony eyes pierced hers. Something about him made her want to smooth his hair back, sit down with him, and listen to...whatever he

might have to say.

There was an awkward silence between them for a moment, then they both spoke at once as if to fill the void.

“How is Mr. Jenkins?”

“I think I have something of yours—”

Krissy gave him a quick smile. “You go first.”

Johnny nodded. “Lem will be just fine. My brother rode in just as the rain started. Just before you and I came inside the station. He’s a doctor with my company.”

“Oh...the two cavalrymen who rode up to the barn,” Krissy said in understanding. “How fortuitous.”

“Uh...yeah. Very *lucky* indeed.”

Krissy met his laughing gaze, a flush spreading over her face.

Johnny went on. “So, Lem got a real doctor. Not the doctor’s brother. I just helped out.” He let the smile loose that he’d tried to hide a moment earlier, adding, “But *fortuitously*, I got a good education too. Just didn’t become a doctor.”

“Oh...well, thank you for letting me know.” Krissy stepped back and started to push the door shut, her face burning. *What was she trying to do? Flaunt her education? It had turned out Captain Donovan was just as well educated as she.*

It was unlike her to do such a thing, but perhaps she was still trying to distance herself from him and the new, unwelcome feelings she was beginning to experience every time she was in his presence.

“Miss Donovan—” Johnny put a hand out to stop her from closing the door. “Hold on just a minute.” He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a long chain. “I think this might belong to you.” He held it in his palm, and Krissy put her hand out as he tilted his cupped palm and deposited the delicate necklace into hers.

A small key nestled in the loop of the filigreed silver necklace. It was

tooled with the same intricate pattern the chain carried, and the lock on the beautifully crafted case that rested on her bed.

Her voice was breathless at the somehow familiar warmth of the metal against her skin. “Where—where did you get this?”

“Johnny!” one of the cavalymen called from down the hallway. He’d just exited Lem Jenkins’s room and was headed toward them.

“Hey, brother,” Johnny said, turning to face him.

As the other man neared, the striking resemblance between them was evident.

“Miss Donovan, my brother, Dr. Derek Houston. Derek, may I present Miss Kristalee Donovan, recently of North Carolina.”

Derek gave her a nod and a heart-stopping smile. “Miss Donovan. I’m very pleased to meet you. I’m afraid I need to steal my brother for a moment.” He turned to Johnny. “I need to brief you,” he murmured.

Johnny raised a brow in question. “Since when does a doctor brief a—”

Derek laughed and shook his head. “Not officially, brother. But you’ll want to be prepared when the major calls you over for a word. They’ll be here any time now.”

Johnny sighed. “Let’s go.” Turning back to Krissy, Johnny said, “Talk later, Miss Donovan? Maybe after dinner?”

“Oh...yes. Yes, of course.” Krissy gave him a nod as he turned to follow Derek down the hallway toward the great room where the dining tables were arranged.

Closing the door completely, she hurried to the bed, unable to ignore the tingling feeling in the palm of her hand where the chain rested.

She sat down on the bed, reaching for the wooden box, and pulling it onto her lap. Eagerly, she gripped the key and started to fit it to the lock. It slipped in easily, but just as she started to turn it, she stopped.

*The box didn’t belong to her, and neither did this key that would open it. A key that would let her see everything inside...none of which contents*

belonged to her.

But, if she *didn't* open it, how would she know for sure who it belonged to? And truly, how much did she know about the other passengers on the coach? Could she trust *their* honesty? She had every intention of turning the box over to the rightful owner. She just wanted to be certain it would go to the correct person.

The only thing she could do to be sure of—well, of *everything*—was to have a witness when she opened the box. And it must be someone she could be completely sure of. The only person she could think of who would fit that description was Captain Johnny Houston. She wished she'd thought of that sooner and made him keep the key until they could be together privately. She'd like to have him present when she opened the box to verify its contents. Would he think she'd already opened it before she mentioned needing a witness? After all, she thought ruefully, he didn't really know her, either.

Reluctantly, she removed the key from the lock and slipped the chain over her head and around her neck for safekeeping. Tonight, after dinner, she'd speak to Johnny about being her witness and helping her get the case back to its rightful owner.

Because it certainly was not hers to keep—whatever it might hold.



“**Y**ou know who she is?” Derek asked, giving a nod in the direction they’d just come from.

The rain had let up and he and Johnny were standing together on the front porch for privacy.

“The beautiful Kristalee Donovan?” Johnny shook his head. “No. Other than her name, where she’s from, and that she has a fiancé she’ll be going home to marry ‘come spring,’ as she says. Why?”

Derek heaved a sigh. “She’s a sharpshooter. Trained by Annie Oakley herself.”

Johnny shrugged. “And?”

“And...if she fails to perform at the exhibition at the—the orphanage, her father will pay five thousand dollars. It’s a kind of insurance for her to show up. But it’s put her in danger rather than acting as protection for her.”

Johnny let go a low whistle. “Are you saying that stagecoach wreck was

*anything but* an accident? That it was *arranged*?”

Derek gave an impatient wave of his hand. “Who knows, really? Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t. Either way, we need to treat it as if it *was* done on purpose to get rid of Miss Kristalee Donovan once and for all and gain five thousand dollars for our old *friend*, the headmaster at The Benevolent Home for Orphaned Indians and Others.”

“*Hannibal Malcolm.*” Johnny’s tone was cool. He leaned negligently against the house, watching the rain. “She’ll need an escort.”

Derek smiled mirthlessly. “Well, I can assure you, Major Jennings has already chosen one.”

Johnny felt a stab of disappointment, but covered it, replying quickly, “Good. Who’s he sending with her?”

Derek paused a moment, then said, “You.”

“*Me?*” Johnny stiffened, pushing away from the wall.

“He says you’re worth ten men, and he really can’t spare even one, so if he must send someone, it has to be one of his best, so he doesn’t have to send *more* than one.”

“I appreciate his vote of confidence, but my enlistment is up in a week, and I’m not planning to sign up for another stint.”

Derek gave him a speculative look. “I feel the same. Mine’s up next month, a couple of weeks after yours. But...well, this is one assignment I’d think twice about turning down, Johnny. I have to say, I agree with the major about your abilities. I know you’ll get her to the orphanage safe and sound. She’ll need your protection while she’s there, too.”

A wry smile touched Johnny’s lips. “If she’s a sharpshooter who’s been trained by Miz Oakley, she’ll be fine without me.”

Derek didn’t return his brother’s smile, or his optimism. “There are other ways to be killed than by a bullet, Johnny. This runaway coach, for example. Our Miss Donovan seems to be a trusting sort; her Eastern society is not as rough and wild as ours is here.”



“*Savage*, you mean?”

Derek eyed his younger brother for a moment, the word “savage” hanging between them. Slowly, he answered, “If that’s the word you choose to use.”

“It’s what *they* call us, brother. Including the illustrious Mr. Malcolm. Still in charge there at the orphanage, after all these years.”

“I know. All the more reason Miss Donovan needs protection. He’s... pure evil.”

“Yeah...” Johnny shrugged. “I might be the wrong person for the job. I may not wait for provocation. After the time we spent in that hell-hole when we were boys—”

“I know, Johnny. I remember. Every last stinking minute of it. The work details from dawn to dusk. Animals were treated better. Skimpy rations. The way that man took such joy laying whip against flesh...” His words faded.

“*Then why go back there?*” Johnny gritted.

“For those that are still there.” Derek moved away from Johnny impatiently, the anger of the memories making his movements stiff. After a moment, he added, “And so that Miss Donovan might *survive*.”

“This exhibition. A shooting exhibition—and nothing more—I take it?”

“Yes, a shooting exhibition. Her, alone. Out there like a sitting duck. Any fool can see she’d be worth more dead than alive and performing,” Derek said bitterly. “I truly don’t believe her father realized at the time what he was doing by placing that guarantee on her to back her performance.”

“Does *she* even know?” Johnny asked.

Derek shook his head. “Doubtful. Her father had second thoughts, I’m guessing, because he sent an urgent wire with the details of where she’d be and why. He asked for a cavalry escort for her, because he felt she’d be in danger due to ‘a business arrangement gone awry’ as he put it. The major wired back for details, and that was when Mr. Donovan disclosed the guarantee on his daughter’s performance.”

Johnny was silent a moment, then, “When does she need to be there?”

“The exhibition is scheduled for Saturday.”

Johnny breathed a low curse. *Three days away. No time to linger. No time for her to rest after being knocked around in that stagecoach. They’d need to leave at first light tomorrow.*

His thoughts turned to practicalities. *Would Dave and Becky have provisions enough to spare some for his and Krissy’s journey? She’d need a bedroll—*

“Johnny?” Derek’s voice called him to the present.

He glanced up at his brother’s worried frown. Derek looked serious. It made Johnny smile, Derek wondering if Johnny would go with Miss Donovan or not and worrying, either way it turned out. “Yeah. I’ll go. Of course, I’ll go. I’m glad you told me.”

Derek nodded. “You *will* be careful, won’t you?” Then, he shook his head. “Why am I even asking you that? You’ll do what you will.”

“I’ll do what I *have* to do, Derek. What I must, to make it all come out right.”

“Right for *who*, brother? I hate the thought of you going back there alone. *Back to that—place.*”

Derek’s anxiety was evident. Johnny knew his brother was thinking of the scrapes they’d gotten into together from their earliest memories...those terrible years at the orphanage. How Johnny had always impulsively thrown caution to the wind, and Derek, the steady, thoughtful one, was left to pick up the pieces. But it was different now. It was life or death, and Johnny sometimes had the feeling that Derek had joined up with the cavalry to keep watch over him, just as he’d done in their younger years.

Johnny veiled his expression and spoke lightly. “For Miss Donovan. We wouldn’t want her to miss her wedding date with...ah...*Eversby.*”



DEREK HAD BEEN RIGHT on all counts, Johnny mused. Major Steve Jennings and the rest of Company B had arrived a scant twenty minutes after Derek had delivered his “briefing” to Johnny on the front porch of the station.

The major wasted no time calling Johnny aside. “Captain Houston.” He greeted Johnny with a curt nod. “Let’s head out to the barn where we can speak privately.” They came to a stop beside the barn door. Major Jennings, a bit shorter than Johnny, took a step back and looked up, meeting the steadiness of Johnny’s inscrutable gaze.

A smile touched the major’s thin lips. “I’m sure your brother has already mentioned the assignment I have in mind for you. I’m also well aware that your enlistment will be up before said assignment will be completed.”

He gave a heavy sigh at Johnny’s silence. “Captain, I can’t force you to do anything, at this point. But I am asking you—”

“Major, as long as you understand I’m not going to re-enlist. Not even for one week. Not even for one *day*.”

The look on Johnny’s face let the major know there would be no discussion on that topic.

Jennings nodded. “Very well. This is what puts me in a bind.” He pulled a telegram from inside his shirt pocket and handed it to Johnny. “See for yourself. Miss Donovan’s father has unwittingly placed her in an untenable position.” He took his cigarette makings out of his inner shirt pocket and turned to shield the tobacco from the wind, then quickly began to roll a quirky as Johnny scanned the telegram.

Johnny let go a low whistle, then shook his head. “Well...looks like he realized what he’d done and is trying to do what he can to make up for it. I’d be willing to bet he’s already on his way out here to protect his baby girl.”

“I suspect you’re right. I have a daughter of my own. I’d try to do anything to protect her, too, even if I realized I’d never make it in time, and the U.S. Cavalry was the next-best thing.” He gave a grim smile. “Wanna know a poorly kept secret? I’m getting out of the cavalry, too. I haven’t seen

my daughter in nearly a year, or my wife, either. I know how Miz Donovan's father must feel, now that he's realized the danger he's placed her in."

Johnny didn't respond. He knew the major had more to tell him.

"I...I know a bit about your history—yours and Derek's. I understand you spent some time at that orphanage. And I also understand those years were not exactly the best ones of your lives, by a long shot. I hate to even ask you to go back there, for any reason." He put the cigarette to his lips. Stuffing the makings back into his pocket, he took out a lucifer, struck it, and cupped his hand around it to light the quirky. "But—I can't imagine anyone being better for this assignment than you—if you agree to it. Still...I don't want to put you in a position—"

"Major. You aren't putting me in a bad place. Derek told me what you planned to do. Ask me to go, even though my enlistment will be up before the assignment ends. That's when I realized how desperate you were." He gave the major a smile, then sobered again. "You're a by-the-book leader. And that is not a by-the-book move on your part."

Jennings took a long draw on the cigarette before he answered. "You knew it for what it was, Johnny," he said, slipping into the familiarity of first names while they were alone. "Desperation." He shrugged and looked away. "Again, unlike me." He fell silent a moment, walking away a few paces. He took another slow drag, not facing Johnny. "I guess I am sacrificing rules... regulations...correctness and propriety for expediency."

"I'll do it, Steve. The orphanage—maybe it's time I go back there, and face the child's fears with the power of a grown man."

Jennings turned to Johnny quickly and Johnny gave him a piercing look. "Don't worry. I won't kill Hannibal Malcolm unless I have to. But understand this: I can't take care of Miss Donovan if I don't take care of myself. I won't work with my hands tied. I'll never be under Malcolm's control again. As a child, I had no choice. As a man...I'll do whatever it takes. Malcolm may wind up dead. Just so you know, it could be a

possibility.”

Jennings nodded. “I know how you work. You’re right. You have to take care of yourself to make sure that the girl’s safety—and yours—is assured. I understand.”

Johnny gave him a curt nod. “All right, then. I plan to leave at first light with Miss Donovan and travel hard and fast. I’m hoping to get there early enough, so she’ll have a chance to rest a bit before the exhibition on Saturday.”

“That’s a good idea. Part of the guarantee states that she will ‘put forth her best effort to create a quality show during her performance’.”

Johnny muttered a low curse. “How much worse can this get? What was that father of hers thinking? He’s put his daughter in terrible jeopardy with this so-called guarantee.”

“There was a follow-up telegram to my reply to this one,” Major Jennings said slowly. “It may be the hardest one to try to adhere to.”

“More bad news?”

Jennings nodded. “He admits that Miz Donovan knows nothing about this guarantee. He would like to—to keep it that way.”

Johnny gave a sharp bark of laughter. “I’ll just bet he *does* hope to keep that from her. No. I’ll not agree to that. There may come a time for her to need to know. It’s not as if she’s a child.”

Jennings gave Johnny a long, calculating stare. “Something I need to know about you two? You and Miss Donovan, I mean?”

That steady question took Johnny by surprise. “Of course not,” he scoffed sharply. “You know me, Steve. I’ll be honest at all costs—even to myself. I’ll take no chances with her safety just to appease her father. If her old man’s own stupidity embarrasses him, that’s nothing compared to Miss Donovan knowing what we’re up against, and *why*.”

Jennings nodded. “Agreed. I trust your judgment. One good thing about your enlistment ending before this is all over, if there’s trouble with Mr.

Donovan, he'll have no recourse against you or the cavalry, either. This was all of his own doing. You're doing what he asked—stepping in to keep her safe. The outcome, no matter what, falls on him.”

Johnny shook his head. “No. That’s where you’re wrong. When we ride out in the morning, she becomes my responsibility. And that’s why honesty is so important. I most likely will need to tell her every last piece of this. We’re walking into a situation that will be life or death for both of us. I won’t gamble with either of our lives.”

“You’re so certain?”

A curtain veiled Johnny’s expression, making his face unreadable. “I’m positive,” he answered flatly. “If you knew Hannibal Malcolm like I do, Steve, you’d have no doubt, either.”



**T**he station was full that evening after Company B arrived. Becky repeatedly thanked Krissy, Mrs. Dinwiddie, and Mrs. Streetman for their help. She rattled on about why she put on both a pot of beans and a pot of stew. There wouldn't be seconds, most likely, but there'd be a full bowl of one or the other for all and plenty of biscuits. She explained that cavalry soldiers usually had provisions of their own, but she liked to treat them with a home-cooked meal when they came by, especially when she had advance warning.

Krissy helped dish up the food and serve it, and Becky gave her a tired smile of gratitude.

The storm had blown over earlier, but Krissy felt it was only a lull with more to come. Clouds still scudded across the sky, and the wind was gusting without letting up. Many of the soldiers thanked the women and took their food outside on the porch or to the shelter of the barn.

When everyone had been served, Krissy and the other women took their portions and found places at the tables near the kitchen to be able to sit down in peace to eat.

Mrs. Dinwiddie sat beside Krissy while Mrs. Streetman separated herself by a few seats from them, and Becky sat on a bench beside Jason at another table.

“Kristalee, I wanted to let you know that Mrs. Rivers has settled me in a small room across the hall from yours,” Mrs. Dinwiddie said quietly. “Will that be all right with you? We could have shared a room, but sometimes a young lady needs some time alone where she can dream her fanciful dreams about her future...her wedding. And so on.”

Krissy laid her spoon down and reached to touch Mrs. Dinwiddie’s arm, moved by the older woman’s care for her feelings. “Thank you, Mrs. Dinwiddie. I appreciate your thoughtfulness. I confess, I have had a lot on my mind.”

Mrs. Dinwiddie nodded and took a bite of her stew, and Krissy couldn’t help but notice how pleased with herself the older woman looked.

“Did you have a chance to look through all your belongings and make sure they were in your bags?” Krissy asked, keeping her eyes downcast. Mrs. Dinwiddie might seem confused at times, but Krissy got the feeling that there wasn’t much her chaperone didn’t notice. Most likely, nothing got by Clara Dinwiddie, and that was exactly why, Krissy knew, her father had asked the older woman to accompany Krissy on this long journey.

Delano Douglas Donovan was nothing if not shrewd. A true reader of character.

“Oh, yes,” the older woman responded with a smile. “Those men have all been so nice. So accommodating. Don’t you think, Kristalee?”

Krissy nodded, keeping Mr. Rivers, Mr. Russell, and Captain Houston all grouped together in her mind for the sake of her sanity. If she let herself think of Captain Houston’s “nice” smile—the one that made her heart jump and



beat like a caged bird—or the strength of his “accommodating” hands as he’d rescued her from the overturned stagecoach, why, she’d never be able to keep her mind on a single other thing.

“Y-yes,” Krissy said, drawn back to the conversation by the questioning look Mrs. Dinwiddie bent on her. “Yes, they certainly have been—accommodating.”

After a moment, Mrs. Dinwiddie cleared her throat and leaned toward Krissy conspiratorially. “Those brothers, Derek and Johnny Houston, are both the nicest young men, aren’t they? So...friendly.” She wiped her mouth daintily with her napkin, then looked at Krissy for a response.

Krissy nodded hurriedly. “Oh—yes. Th-they certainly are.” How she hated this small talk! But she couldn’t help but think her chaperone was fishing for something; what, she couldn’t imagine.

“That handsome captain—Johnny—he might make a young lady wish she wasn’t already committed to another, might’n’t he, Kristalee?” the older woman went on innocently. “That roguish grin, and the deep timbre of his voice...” She shook her head in dreamy remembrance. “That handsome face—almost somehow...*dangerous...exotic* in the unique features he bears... and oh, just so very—” she leaned forward and whispered, “manly.”

Though Krissy sat in stupefied silence at Mrs. Dinwiddie’s reverie-like recitation of Johnny’s handsomeness and impeccable politeness, her mind worked feverishly. How could she respond to the woman? Did Mrs. Dinwiddie suspect Krissy’s turbulent emotions, her reluctance to even acknowledge they existed? Or was she watching Krissy for her reaction to these startling observations of hers?

Krissy looked away, afraid to meet Mrs. Dinwiddie’s suddenly clear-sighted gaze. She was fully aware she should only have eyes for—for *Eversby*. But that was not the case. Not anymore. *Had she ever felt romantically inclined toward Eversby?* She pushed that thought away and squeezed her eyes shut tightly for good measure.

She was not “romantically inclined” toward Johnny Houston. She couldn’t be. She didn’t even know him. Then another thought hit her. Maybe her situation with Eversby was even worse. Worse, because she *did* know *him*. And she didn’t relish the idea of all her tomorrows being spent in the kind of marriage she’d unwittingly let herself in for with Eversby.

Did she even *like* Eversby?

The thought made her stiffen in shock. She realized she’d never even thought of that—whether or not she liked her fiancé—much less whether or not she was in love with him.

And sitting here with Clara Dinwiddie prattling on insensibly about Johnny Houston’s dazzling smile, his all-seeing eyes, and his muscular physique, it felt as if she’d awoken from a sleepwalking dream.

Somehow, she felt Clara Dinwiddie knew exactly what she was doing with this kind of talk. It wasn’t insensible prattling at all. She looked at the older woman with new eyes, seeing her in a different light altogether.

Her chaperone bent a beatific smile of innocence on Krissy, then said, “Oh, my goodness. Time for me to go rest. What a day this has been.” She stood. “Wasn’t this stew just wonderful? I’ll see you in the morning, dear, if my arm will allow. It has been aching since the unfortunate incident with the coach.” She turned to go, taking a step away. “Krissy, I see Johnny, uh, *Captain Houston*, headed this way.” She all but giggled like a schoolgirl. “That sweet young man has asked me to call him ‘just Johnny.’ Says ‘Captain’ is much too formal, and he’s planning on leaving the military soon. Such a handsome fellow.”

*Leaving the military?* Krissy’s mind snapped shut on that piece of information. She had questions. Mrs. Dinwiddie was moving surprisingly quickly for an older woman, heading for the hallway and her bedroom.

“Wait!”

But the older woman never turned, setting her sails for a straight course across the room to the hallway door that led to the sleeping chambers. She

never gave any sign she'd heard Krissy.

And Krissy had no chance to follow her, since the next person that entered her view was the man they'd been discussing—Captain Johnny Houston.

Krissy had half-risen from the table when she'd called to Mrs. Dinwiddie. She realized she must look ridiculous, standing in that position, like a crooked washerwoman with a backache.

Johnny gave her an odd look as he approached her. She forced herself to relax her awkward stance and ease back to the bench.

Belatedly, she remembered to bestow a smile on the captain.

“May I join you?” Without waiting for an answer, he put a long leg over the bench across from her, then the other, and seated himself across the table from her.

He steepled his fingers. “You look nervous, Miss Donovan—”

“Krissy,” she said hoarsely. Immediately, Mrs. Dinwiddie's comment about Johnny asking her to call him ‘just Johnny’ sprang to mind.

“Ah, yes. Krissy. You corrected me when we met.” He fell silent, watching her thoughtfully.

She squirmed under his blunt stare. Knowing she must also broach the uncomfortable topic of the wooden case and the key.

She swallowed hard. The combination of the subject that loomed between them and the “manliness” that Mrs. Dinwiddie had brought up in their earlier conversation had put her in an uncomfortable state.

“Can I get you some water, Krissy?” Johnny offered.

She quickly shook her head, pushing away the reminder Mrs. Dinwiddie had offered of how friendly and accommodating he was being. Better to put this behind her and get some rest. Above all, she must control her emotions.

But now, Johnny was sitting in front of her, looking at her as if he expected...*something*...and she must deal with the here and now.

She met Johnny's gaze and forced a quick smile. “I'm fine. Thank you,

Johnny.” In that moment, she felt a sudden rush of gratitude for his concern. “I’m s-sorry,” she stammered. “I don’t know—”

He reached across the table and took her hand as if trying to convey some kind of confidence or assurance to her. “It’s all right, Krissy. You’ve had a rough day today.” After a moment, he released her hand and said, “I wanted to talk to you about your upcoming performance at the orphanage.”

“Yes.” She frowned, thinking about the rest of the trip ahead. How was she going to make it on time now, after the setbacks of this day?

“I plan for us to leave in the morning. We’ll have to get an early start—”

“Wait.” Krissy shook her head. “What do you mean? *You’re* taking me to the orphanage?”



JOHNNY INWARDLY GRIMACED. He hadn’t meant to be so direct with her, but that seemed to be his way. It always had been.

“When do you need to be there for your exhibition?” he asked. He hated the play-acting he was being forced into in order to keep her father’s manipulations from her.

“This Saturday,” she told him. “I’m wondering if we might wire them and let them know we could be a day late.”

Johnny shook his head. He’d anticipated this might be something she’d think of. “There’s no way to do that. I’m sorry.” So, she had no idea of the money her father had put up to guarantee her performance. He had figured as much. Knowing that, he would redouble his efforts to keep her from learning the truth unless there was no other way. He understood disappointment in a father’s actions. He’d experienced it keenly himself.

Her face fell, the hopefulness leaving her shining brown eyes.

“I-I’m not sure how we’ll make it,” she said thoughtfully, staring past him. “It will quite possibly take three or four days...” Then, she met his eyes.

“I will not abuse the horses, Johnny. I can’t be cruel to them.”

Something about those words touched him. The kindness in her tone made him smile. For all the traveling she’d done, Miss Kristalee Donovan still carried a touch of naïvete within her. And that was something his jaded soul appreciated.

“I understand. I don’t think it will come to that if we can get an early start tomorrow. That trip usually takes a hard two days of riding with no pack animals. Of course, we’ll need to have those animals due to your bags and weaponry. But we have three days. Barring any unforeseen circumstances, I think we will make it on time.”

There was relief in her eyes, and her shoulders relaxed.

It occurred to Johnny that Krissy had been through a firestorm, probably one that had lasted quite a while, since the day she’d left on this journey west. On the surface, she seemed calm, capable, and able to handle what the world threw her way. But after the stagecoach had overturned, that had to have scared her. It would have frightened anyone, particularly a genteel young woman unused to this rough land.

And there was so much more to be considered that she didn’t even know about. *Especially the guarantee her father had placed on her that could be her death sentence.*

And yet, she was worried about pushing the horses too hard to make it to the orphanage on time for the exhibition.

He let go a low sigh, and she gave him a speculative look.

“I suspect this isn’t your idea of why you joined the military,” she said wryly. “Escorting women across Indian Territory. I promise not to be difficult.”

He shook his head. “You won’t be.” He paused, then said, “I can’t offer you a sidesaddle.”

“No need,” Krissy was quick to say. “My sisters and I learned to ride sidesaddle and the western design while under Miz Oakley’s instruction.”

She raised a questioning brow. “Aren’t the men in your company assigned here from all parts of the country?”

“Yes, but Derek and I were raised here. I know this area like the back of my hand.” He might as well bring it up now, he thought, with the opening she had given him. “In fact, we spent our very early years at the orphanage you’ll be doing the benefit for.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “So you must’ve volunteered to—”

“No. I didn’t.” Johnny shook his head. He kept his voice as impassive as he could. “I—it’s not a place I would ever want to revisit.”

“And now you must, because of me.” *There was that ‘knowing’ tone in her voice, as if she felt herself a burden.*

He shrugged as if it all meant nothing. “Orders are orders.”

“You don’t seem the type to take orders, Johnny.”

“You would be right. That’s why I’m leaving the cavalry in just a few short days. You are my last assignment, Miss Donovan.” He ended on a flippant note, but he could see she was not fooled.

There was a moment of silence.

“I’m very sorry.” She met his eyes and looked directly into his soul. He felt every burning moment of her appraisal.

“I would never ask you to go to a place with such grim memories. You must have been terribly young when you were there—you and Derek.” After a few seconds, she said, “Would you like me to speak to Major Jennings about it? Maybe he’d be willing to assign someone else.”

She was dangerously close to showing pity, and that, Johnny could not tolerate.

“It wasn’t up to you to ask anything of me, Miss Donovan. A good soldier follows orders. That’s what I’m doing. And counting the days until I’m a civilian again. No need to speak to the major.”

Tears filled her eyes at his cold assessment. He’d as much as told her he didn’t want to be shackled to her in any way at all. And he’d been as blunt as

he always was with his words.

She nodded and looked down, as shame filled Johnny. He slowly rose to leave.



ALL THOUGHT of discussing the mysterious case and the matching key fled. Krissy would have to travel with this hateful man, but she planned to stay as far from him as possible.

That wouldn't be easy, since it would just be the three of them on the trail for the next three days—Johnny, herself, and Mrs. Dinwiddie—if the older woman was able to travel with them.

“Better get some rest, Krissy,” Johnny told her softly. “It’s gonna be a long three days.”

“In more ways than the obvious, I’m sure. Especially for you,” Krissy responded tartly.

A spark of anger shone briefly in Johnny’s obsidian gaze, and Krissy felt a surge of triumph at having been able to needle him.

“Shall I wake you in the morning?” he asked stiffly. “Say about 4:30?”

“Not at all, Captain Houston,” she responded coldly. “I can take care of myself. What I need to do, I’ll do.” She rose as well, and they stood for a moment, squared off like two angry fighters in a boxing ring.

He gave her a curt nod. “Until then, Miss Donovan.”



**S**he stalked from the great room in a very unladylike manner that, she was certain, would have garnered her a lecture from Mama. Even though she'd brushed by Johnny, felt his touch on her arm as if he meant to offer some kind of apology as she'd passed, she'd kept walking. She had not looked left or right—just concentrated on getting out of the public room where so many people were gathered.

The refuge of her own small chamber seemed far away, and only putting one foot in front of the other would get her to the haven she needed.

When she reached her door, she was blazing mad, not only at one Captain Johnny Houston, but at the circumstances she found herself in. She pulled out her key and slipped it into the door keyhole with shaking hands. She was instantly reminded of another smaller, more delicate key that was meant for the lock of the exquisite wooden case.

*The case.*



If she set out with it in her bags, she might very well be stealing whatever was inside, along with the case itself. She knew it wasn't hers, nor Mrs. Dinwiddie's, either. And even by some miracle it should turn out to belong to her chaperone after all, the older woman would be with her every step of the way.

That wouldn't be true of Mrs. Streetman or Mr. Russell. How would she ever know if she left with it in the morning? And just what did Johnny know about it? How had the key come into his possession, truly?

She turned the key and slipped into her room, shutting the door just a little too loudly behind her.

Her fingers went to the dainty necklace around her neck, then to the delicate key that hung on it. Her thoughts went once more to the handsome cavalry scout who had delivered that chain to her.

It was unlike her, this feeling she had for the captain. And from what she read in his expression, and in his mannerisms, the feeling—or tension between them—was likewise out of character for him, as well. She suspected he was careful with his emotions—probably as guarded as she. He must be—to be his age, which she imagined to be at least five to six years older than she, and to not be married.

At twenty-one herself, she knew Mama and Papa had been getting anxious for Eversby to 'pop the question' and make things official. Finally, it had happened, on July 28<sup>th</sup>, the day of her twenty-first birthday.

If she were to admit the truth of how she'd felt that day, she'd have to say that "trapped" would be the appropriate description.

But it was all settled now, and the wedding would take place in Raleigh, only eight months away now, in April.

Eversby had felt no pressure to marry, being a man. Krissy suspected his father—and perhaps her own papa, as well—had strongly suggested Eversby make his proposal to her, and soon. And, of course, he had done so. Just as she was certain he'd been bidden to do, and with all the enthusiasm of a shy

fifth-grade schoolboy asking a young girlfriend to their first church social.

True love was out of the question for her. Her life had always been one of duty. With two older brothers, Krissy had been raised to understand she must marry well. She must be a good example for her younger sisters, Brooklyn and Narissa, and hopefully, for her cousin, Tallie. Her life would never be truly her own.

But the longer she was away from Eversby, the more she realized their marriage was not to be a happy one, but one of pretense. Very little made Krissy panic, but now, to even think of the stifling life she'd lead with Eversby was enough to make her feel her stomach was going to cause her some misery. Eversby depended on Krissy to be perfect as, it seemed, did everyone else in her world.

*Another well-kept family secret. The illusion of perfection.* Mama had told her often enough she was anything *but*. The list of her flaws would fill a book, according to Mama, who was always shaking her head and wondering why Krissy couldn't be more like her younger sister, Brooklyn.

Krissy crossed her room to where she'd set the wooden case on the vanity table beside the pitcher. She was thankful for the lock on her door. Many of these stage stations, and even the hotels, didn't have door locks. It wasn't as if she had reason to distrust her fellow travelers, in particular, but she somehow felt an odd connection to this wooden case that she didn't understand. Making certain she kept it safe until she found the rightful owner was, to her, of utmost importance. And she still didn't have any idea what was inside it.

She ran her fingers over the case again, as if to reassure herself it was really there, and not a figment of her imagination. A feeling of warmth and well-being settled over her, and she pushed the case against the wall securely, giving it one last affectionate pat.

Maybe she'd come up with a way to find out for a certainty who the case belonged to before she left the next morning. She couldn't imagine that it

belonged to anyone who'd been on the coach with her.

Perhaps the best thing to do would be to open it. There might be some identifying mark on it somewhere inside.

*No.* She wouldn't do it without a witness. And that would mean having to deal with Johnny Houston again, hours before she absolutely *had* to. Still, how could she sleep a wink with all this hanging over her, unsettled?



JOHNNY GLANCED behind him as Derek came out the door of the stage station.

Without speaking, Derek paused, then moved forward to join Johnny at the porch railing.

“Miss Donovan looked none too happy this evening as she left the dining room,” Derek finally observed.

Johnny turned to give him a withering stare. “You don’t say.”

Derek flashed him a sardonic grin. “Oh, yeah, brother. I *do* say. She looked downright ‘mad enough to go bear huntin’ with a switch’.”

At that, Johnny reluctantly smiled back.

“She’s got some troubles,” Derek murmured.

“More than she knows.”

“And more than *you* know, Johnny.”

Johnny quirked a dark brow in question. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“I know at least *one* thing, brother. I’ve been watching her...the way she looks at you. The sadness in her eyes always there, even when she smiles. Did you ever wonder how she came to be here?”

*Derek’s curiosity was legendary. Probably why he was such a good doctor.*

But right now, Johnny didn’t want to speculate on Krissy Donovan. He had been trying to keep his thoughts on anything but the brown-eyed beauty

with her pert little nose and sensuous lips that tempted him beyond all reason.

“No. I haven’t given it a second thought. It doesn’t matter, Derek. She’s here, and I’m taking her to the orphanage before the crack of dawn tomorrow. With luck on our side, we’ll make it on time, and I can get her out of there safe and send her back to dear old Daddy who put a target on her back.

“Matter of fact, I might ride the train back home with her so I can tell ‘Papa’ what I think of him. Maybe I’ll stick around and see if I get invited to the wedding—hers and Everly’s—”

“*Eversby.*”

“Yeah, him.”

Derek tried to hide a smile as Johnny turned away from him to look out toward the barn.

“What’s going on with you and Miss Donovan?”

“Not one blessed thing. She’s exceedingly happy to get out of this place and be on her merry way. She’s thrilled I’m her escort. Can’t wait to get to The Benevolent Home for Orphaned Indians and Others and show everyone how well she can shoot. Eager to line that fat devil’s pockets.” He slammed his hands down on the railing in frustration and fell silent.

“So that’s what’s eating you, huh? Hannibal Malcolm ‘lining his pockets’ with money that’s to be used for the kids. Or is it more than that, Johnny?”

Johnny turned a murderous glare on his brother at his insinuation.

Derek’s look turned smug. “I thought so. I *feared* so.” He shook his head. “Level with me, Johnny. You’ve known this woman one day. One. Day. You can’t be smitten already. You haven’t had time.”

“Of course not.” Johnny snapped. “I’m not interested. *At all.* I told her she is just my last assignment before I muster out. And that’s just what she is.”

Derek gave a low whistle. “That’s finesse, brother. Oh, you’ve got her right where you want her, now. Any woman would love to hear *that.*”

“*I don’t want her.*” Johnny turned to look pointedly at a couple of

cavalrymen who had turned to listen with undisguised interest. At his glare, they both gave a nod and moved away out of earshot of Johnny and Derek's conversation.

"I know better," Derek replied quietly, "and so do you." He held up a hand as Johnny started to deny it.

"You are playing with fire, Johnny. Her father is rich. Influential. She's engaged. Remember, you haven't even known her a full twenty-four hours."

"You have nothing to concern yourself with," Johnny responded, seething inside.

"She is your last assignment, as you said."

"Exactly."

Derek laid a hand on Johnny's arm. "I may not see you before you leave. Take care. Be safe. Above all, be true to yourself, brother."

"Stop worryin', Derek."

The look in Derek's eyes was as if the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. "You know that will never happen."



JOHNNY COULDN'T SHAKE that conversation from his thoughts as he and Krissy rode north, without Mrs. Dinwiddie, in the darkness.

At the last moment, the older woman had apologetically confessed to Krissy she just wasn't up to three days on horseback, even if she'd been at her best, at her age. The stagecoach accident had bruised her ribs. She would stay behind at the station to recover. Perhaps she would rendezvous with Krissy in Tulsa if she was well enough by next week.

Johnny watched Krissy surreptitiously as she rode, ram-rod stiff, beside him. She held her head erect, stubborn chin up, her gloved hands holding the gray's reins expertly, as if she'd been born in the saddle.

*Maybe not 'born in the saddle', but definitely born to money, no matter*

*what else might be true about her.* Johnny would not call her spoiled. He felt she was here to perform a *duty*, not because she *chose* to be here. Most young ladies of privilege would be spending their sweltering August days at a resort on the Atlantic coast or abroad in Europe.

Yes, Miss Donovan was here to perform, because it was expected of her—a duty she'd been called upon to fulfill. Her father would allow nothing less. Did she love and respect her father enough to do whatever he bid her, even marrying a man he may have chosen for her? Or was Eversby Witherspoon the Third someone she truly loved? Why did he even care, one way or another? Kristalee Donovan was what he'd told her she was at the dinner table—his last assignment before he mustered out and started the next part of his life—and she would start hers, as well, halfway across the country in North Carolina.

“Are you going to ride all the way to the orphanage without speaking to me?”

Krissy's voice was soft in the darkness and sounded somewhat unsteady. Maybe it was because she wasn't used to riding into the blackness with a virtual stranger. Maybe she was afraid. The sky was lightening to their right side. Johnny stopped his mount as she did.

“It's early. Was there something in particular you wanted to talk about?”

The light was so dim they could barely see each other's faces. The pack horses moved restively behind them.

“Yes,” she answered crisply.

No fear there now, Johnny thought. By her tone, she was still mad as an old wet hen. Had to be because of their conversation last night. He felt a pang of regret that he'd said what he had to her, but it was too late now to change it.

“Shoot.”

“Please, feel free to speak plainly since Mrs. Dinwiddie is not with us,” she said frostily.

Johnny was silent, trying to think of a way to tell her about her father, but even in the darkness he could see she was working hard to keep her composure.

She took a deep breath. "What is it you aren't telling me, Johnny?"

*A lot. There is so much I'm not telling you. So much I can't tell you.*



*Oh, yes. Johnny was hiding something.* And if there was one thing Krissy didn't like, it was a secret of any kind. Johnny definitely had *something*, maybe more than one *something*, he was keeping from her.

There was only one quicksilver gleam of surprise in those midnight dark eyes of his, she thought. Oh, but it was quite enough. It surprised her, that flash of being caught off guard that he'd shown. However minute it had been, it had definitely shown itself in his eyes...those eyes that normally hid every thought and feeling he had.

Now, she waited for his denial. But it never came.

He only nodded in agreement. "Okay...it's not really a secret. You know I lived at that orphanage many years ago. Derek and me. We were six and seven when we left there." He shook his head, the impassive stoicism fading from his voice as the memories stole over him.

"There was never a more evil, cruel man than the headmaster at that place, Mr. Hannibal Malcolm. I guess I'm just wondering how you became the chosen one to perform this exhibition, Krissy. Where do you fit in? I'm hoping you won't say Malcolm is an old family friend."

Krissy was shocked that Johnny had confided even the smallest detail to her, as he had, of his past life. She sat staring at him in the graying light of the approaching dawn.

"Um...no." She swallowed hard at this unwelcome revelation. *How did Miz Oakley know someone like that well enough to ask this favor?* That

thought was most unsettling. “Not at all. Truly, we don’t even know Mr. Malcolm. Miz Oakley made all the arrangements. She needed someone to go do this and her back was causing her too much pain to travel so far. She contacted my father and asked him if I might be able to do it rather than her having to make such an arduous trip.”

Johnny gave a flick of his reins and started forward slowly once more, Krissy riding close beside him as the pack animals followed. He remained silent as Krissy continued.

“So, really, Papa had no choice but to agree on my behalf. Even though, I will admit, it’s not something I truly wanted to do.”

“Not even for the esteemed Miz Oakley?”

There was no question Johnny was mocking her. “Miz Oakley is the family friend, Captain Houston, *not* this Mr. Malcolm. So yes, of course, my papa did what was best, even if it went against my—my selfish wishes to remain home in North Carolina.”

“*Selfish wishes?*” Johnny gave a disbelieving bark of laughter. “When did having a difference of opinion become selfish? Did he *ask* you before he promised you for the job?”

“Well, of course not. There was no time to consult me, and there was no answer but to agree for—for obvious reasons. It was a simple request.”

Johnny swore under his breath.

“And that is *most* ungentlemanly, Captain Houston.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” he said absently.

They rode in silence for a few minutes, then Krissy said, “I understand maybe we do things differently in North Carolina than you do here.” She tried to keep her voice neutral.

“Yes, ma’am,” he responded, then said nothing more. He was implying his disagreement with her father’s methods, which was something she’d struggled with herself ever since that infamous talk she and Papa had had in his office that had begun this entire journey. How could she be angry at



Johnny for believing perhaps she should have been consulted before consent had been given? She was, after all, twenty-one years of age.

She sighed. For every single one of those twenty-one years, she'd been the obedient daughter who never dared question Mama and Papa's orders, even when they concerned her to such a deep degree as this. Her entire life had been disrupted. Maybe she'd had plans for herself for this summer!

*No. She'd never had plans that were her own.* There were so many expectations from every direction: Mama, Papa, and even Miz Oakley. Society, in general. There was no way for her to make one plan for herself except what she might choose to eat from the selections at each meal.

And now that she was here, she realized, there was only herself to rely on. She'd never been in such a wonderful, dangerous, heavenly situation in her entire life! She could do whatever she wanted, within reason, of course.

As those mental and emotional chains fell away, she felt a freedom that was hard to contemplate—so foreign to her she felt almost afraid of it. A whole new world to think about. So many plans she would be able to make for herself! And, of course, she had Captain Johnny Houston to thank for opening her eyes.

Whether to be truly *thankful* for that or not remained to be seen.



**T**hey made a quick camp for lunch which Krissy appeared grateful for, though she'd never complained once during the long hours they'd spent in the saddle.

Johnny felt a grudging admiration for his beautiful traveling companion as they'd ridden together. Her dark hair peeked from under her hat, catching glints of the sunlight, like small flames of red tint in the brunette tresses. She looked at the world around her with wonder through inquisitive dark eyes—eyes that shone with the light of appreciation at her surroundings.

He'd pushed all through the morning before taking a short rest. He'd expected her to collapse from weariness, but she immediately looked around for firewood.

Johnny cautioned, "No fire. We don't have time. Those leftover biscuits and bacon from this morning will have to do."

"I thought you would want coffee—"

He smiled. “Nothing I’d like better, but we’ll have to make do with water.” He glanced upward at the slant of the sun. Close to noon. They’d made good time, and covered a lot of ground. He ground-pegged the horses in the shade of the thick trees by a nearby stream so they could drink.

When he turned back toward where he’d left Krissy, she was gone, but he could see the shapely curve of a denim-clad hip disappearing behind some bushes in the distance.

He sat down in the shade on an old, overturned log, reaching into the pouch of food he’d gotten from his saddle bag. He took out a biscuit and a piece of bacon and took a bite of the crisp meat.

What kind of father would send his daughter off on an errand such as this?

He grimaced wryly. There were all kinds of fathers in this world. Including ones like his. One he’d never known the first six years of his life. He and Derek had lived first with their mother, then at the godforsaken orphanage, feeling abandoned, alone, and as desperate as a child could feel.

When Alex Houston had ridden into the courtyard of the orphanage, of course Johnny and Derek had not known him.

But he had known *them*. Alex still recounted the story of the day he’d ridden under the orphanage entrance sign, onto the grounds, and had seen his sons going toward the headmaster’s office. Though he’d only seen Johnny and Derek a handful of times when they were very young, he’d lost track of them even before their mother had fallen ill. The boys had not had a permanent home in the Choctaw tribe after their mother died, and their mother’s white side of the family had wanted nothing to do with them.

They’d wound up at the orphanage, but their father had come “riding to their rescue” as he liked to say. Never mind they’d have had no need of ‘rescue’ had he married their mother in the beginning.

Alex Houston *had* married, just not Derek and Johnny’s mother. The boys recognized early on that their stepmother was the one who was behind the

‘rescue’, not their father.

Johnny pushed those thoughts aside as Krissy made her way back to where he sat.

“Got one of those for me?” She’d washed in the nearby creek, wiping her hands on a bandana she pulled from a back pocket.

Johnny offered her the packet of food, and she hungrily plucked out a biscuit and a piece of bacon, sitting beside him on the log.

Light caught the delicate chain at her neck, and Johnny noted the filigreed length of silver at her throat, dipping below the cut of her blouse neckline where the key pulled it down.

“What does that key go to, anyhow?” he asked.

“My heart,” she answered flippantly.

“You must be awfully glad I returned it then, Kris,” he replied seriously. “Seems like you keep a tight hold on that heart of yours.”

“No more than you do of yours, I’m sure, Captain.”

He smiled. “Really. What does it unlock?”



KRISSY DREW IN A DEEP BREATH. It was now or never. She needed to trust him. She’d thought this over so many times, with so many scenarios as to how it might play out. But she was tired of this secret.

“It goes to a beautiful wooden case that mysteriously came into my possession yesterday.”

He shrugged. “All right. It’s your secret. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.” He pulled another biscuit from the pouch and bit into it.

Krissy shook her head. “That’s really what it unlocks.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What’s inside this mysterious beautiful wood case?”

The smile that played at his lips let her know he was not taking her seriously.

“Wait—let me guess,” he said as she started to explain. “Does it have something to do with one of the other passengers? Maybe Mrs. Dinwiddie’s secret collection of love poems? Or perhaps a novel she’s writing. Maybe her memoirs.”

“Oh, stop it.” Krissy gave him a playful swat on the arm. “Of course not...” Her voice trailed off. “Come to think of it, those both could be possibilities.” She looked at him, wanting him to understand this was no laughing matter.

The laughter fled from his expression. “You mean you don’t know what’s in the case?”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t. It could be anything. You see, I found it in one of my bags after Jason had tried to gather up things and return them to their owners. It was not mine, and I had intended to return it to the rightful owner before we left.”

“Well, what happened?” Johnny asked.

“I found myself in a quandary. I would have had to unlock it to see what was in it—an identifying mark of some kind—or a name. But, not knowing *what* was inside, I felt I needed a witness when I opened it.”

Johnny stared at her and made no reply.

“Well, you know, in case something that should have been in there had gone missing. What if there were a million dollars in there and when I opened it, the rightful owner shouted, ‘Thief! There were *two* million dollars in that case when I started on my trip.’”

Johnny nodded. “But which one of the passengers could have had the case?” he mused aloud.

“Let me get it, and you tell me what your best guess is.”

As she started to get up, Johnny caught her hand. “Can we wait until this evening when we stop for the night? I don’t want to waste any more time until then. We’ll have to travel slower in this heat—stick close to the shade from the tree line along the river as far as we can.”

Krissy's disappointment was keen, but she understood his desire to keep moving. She, too, was anxious to reach their destination as soon as possible.

"Yes." She squeezed Johnny's hand quickly. "I understand." She turned away toward the horses, then looked back at him. "You were the one I wanted to witness my opening the box, since you were the holder of the key, Johnny. There is no one else I can trust."

She swallowed hard. *It was good to be able to be honest.* In her world, such bluntness and truthfulness were unheard of, especially all rolled into one declaration as she'd just made. It almost stole her breath away, as unused to it as she was.

From the look on Johnny's face, she could see he'd been taken by surprise, and that he realized what the exchange had meant to her.

He stood, and she turned completely around to face him once more.

He walked toward her, then took her by the shoulders, looking down into her face. "Don't ever doubt me, Krissy. I'm here to protect you, with my life, if necessary."

A shiver ran up her spine, as she again thought of all the things that he had not said, had not told her, that were between them...those secrets could mean his death, or hers. Desire, hot and dangerous, flashed in his eyes, and she felt the heat in his hands on her skin through the light material of her blouse.

"I'll never betray you," he murmured, and those words brought them both back to the reality of the here and now. He reluctantly let go of her arms and, slowly, she stepped back from the comfort of his mesmerizing hold.

She could only nod as the weight of his words again reinforced that feeling of him being nearby her every moment in order to save her life. *But from whom?* After a moment, she found her voice, but it came out hoarse and shaky.

"I know. Thank you, Johnny."



THEY RODE on slowly in the heat, not wanting to test the horses' endurance in the hottest part of the day.

Krissy was left to her own thoughts, with Johnny riding a little ahead of her as she followed with the pack horses, their lead ropes tied to her saddle horn.

She had plenty of time to think, and to wonder, about the events of the last days. What had seemed like an unreasonable request from Papa, for her to make this journey, had been a godsend. This beautiful, wide-open country, though perilous, now had a grip on her heart and soul that could not be eased. It was nothing like her home in North Carolina, but that was what she loved about it. It was wild and untamed, and starkly beautiful in its own way. She never could have imagined such sunrises and sunsets in this open prairie land. At night, it seemed as if the sky went on and on, with no mountains or larger cities to hamper the view. It was magical.

Something else was magical, too, she thought uncomfortably. That gleam of fire she'd seen in Johnny's eyes when he'd looked at her earlier. He'd been close enough to kiss her. And he had wanted to.

She couldn't deny the feeling was mutual.

But...he was not for her. He was soon leaving the cavalry and entering civilian life again. Did he even have a plan for the future?

It dawned on her that his middle name wasn't the only thing she didn't know about him.

It was odd that, though she knew only a few facts about the captain, those were deeply personal and painful. *He had confided in her.* She'd told him she trusted him, but it was also true he felt the same about her. He must. He wouldn't have told her about his time at the orphanage, otherwise. The vulnerability he most certainly had to have felt as a child must still haunt him when he spoke of those memories, yet, he'd told her about that time in his life

in spite of those feelings.

What *did* lie ahead for Johnny? Did he have a sweetheart waiting for him to muster out of the military? With his dark good looks, she had no trouble imagining that many women might be waiting in line for him.

Maybe marriage and settling down was the farthest thing from his mind, after living the army life. But he didn't seem like a man with no plan for what he'd do next. He was very thoughtful about details. Knowing what came next was important to him.

With a jolt, the thought of how different she and Johnny were hit Krissy. Yet, they were also similar. She paid attention to details, too, just as he did. She couldn't have become the expert markswoman she was without evaluating and using each nuance to her advantage.

She'd learned to shoot for pleasure; Johnny had learned for pure survival. Planning and anticipating what 'might' happen was integral to both of them, but not everything could be anticipated, and the best of plans could be thwarted by unforeseen circumstances.

Krissy's fingers around the reins felt suddenly numb.

Yes, she had to admit she'd not anticipated so many things that had occurred on this trip west. This journey had opened her eyes to much more than beautiful sunrises and danger she'd never could have imagined. It had made her hunger for so many experiences she couldn't even begin to put a name to.

It had made her want a different life for herself. A life of new ideas and dreams. Nameless, nebulous ideas and hopes and—and old dreams she was going to have to let go of to have these new ones realized in whatever form they took.

And that meant letting the comfortable future she was bound for back in North Carolina fade into 'what might have been.' She'd have to make the commitment to stay the course in whatever direction her decisions set for her. But, at least, they would be decisions she'd made for herself, not ones she'd



been forced into by society's expectations or those of her parents.

Krissy bit her lip. She was at a crossroads. She could push all this aside, return to North Carolina, and marry Eversby.

Or, she could rebel. She could stay here and take her chances on what might happen. Her future would be uncertain. Surely, Mama and Papa would cut her off without a penny. Oh, they'd be in high dudgeon.

But Eversby? She doubted he would care all that much. It would set him free to choose someone else. Perhaps he already had had some thoughts along those lines himself. Maybe he was no more 'in love' with her than she was with him.

That thought lightened her heart unexpectedly. It would be so much worse if only one of the two of them were in love and the other was not. And looking back on past events and conversations, Krissy could see that Eversby no more was looking forward to a future with her than she with him.

There would be no wedding in the spring for her and Eversby Witherspoon the Third, and that thought didn't bring one bit of sorrow to her heart. She wanted to shout it to the winds.

But for now, she'd keep it under wraps. Only her heart would know.

Kristalee Juliana Donovan was her own woman now with only herself to answer to. The question was, what was she going to do with herself?



LATE THAT AFTERNOON, Johnny drew Mystic to a halt. He could see the relief in Krissy's beautiful features, and a momentary pang of regret washed over him. There'd been no choice but to put in a long day this first leg of the trip. He was responsible for getting her to the orphanage on time.

"Let's make camp here," he said, dismounting as Krissy stiffly did the same.

She stretched her back and walked a few steps away from her horse as if

encouraging her legs to work once more.

After a moment, she turned to look at Johnny. He was already relieving Mystic of the saddle and gear, placing it on the ground where he'd indicated their camp would be pitched.

He started toward Krissy's horse, Stormy.

"I can do it, Johnny," Krissy said. "You've been so kind to escort me to a place I know you don't want to revisit. I hate to be any extra trouble to you."

Krissy looked...sad. Melancholy. Or maybe she was just exhausted, Johnny thought wryly.

He gave her a quick grin. "I don't mind. You want to find us some firewood while I take care of the horses? Just stack it here." He indicated a spot near his own saddle and gear, then began to undo the cinch.

Krissy gave him a nod of thanks, and he watched as she walked away to gather the wood.

*Something was on her mind.* It could be that mysterious wooden case she'd mentioned, but a niggling thought told him it was much more than that.

Absently, he wondered if she knew anything at all about setting up a campsite. Probably not. Learning to shoot from a professional teacher like Miz Oakley had to have cost her family a pretty penny, and anyone could see Miss Kristalee Donovan was a lady, born and bred. Her family had money, and plenty of it. Chances were, she'd never camped a day in her life, before today, anyhow.

But by the time he'd unloaded the pack horses, he was surprised to see Krissy had collected a sizable amount of firewood. She'd stacked it where he'd shown her earlier, just like a seasoned outdoors-woman. He smiled to himself at her enthusiasm. She was full of surprises.

"I think I'll go ahead and build a fire so I can get coffee going. It'll be nice to have it ready to cook with when we begin to make dinner," Krissy said as she returned with another armload of wood and bent to lay it down.

"You...know how to build a fire?" Johnny asked hesitantly.

She straightened and faced him, brushing off the front of her shirt and denims. She gave him a look of mock exasperation. “Yes, of course.” She batted her eyes at him and deepened her southern accent exaggeratedly. “Why, Cap’n, did you think I’il ol’ me couldn’t build a cook fire? I’ll swan!” She shook her finger. “I’ll have you know I’m not just a pretty face, suh. I can gather wood and build a fire with the best of them.”

Unthinking, he reached out and pulled her to him, both of them laughing at her antics.

“I’ll have you know, there’s only one thing I *can’t* do,” she said as they stood facing one another, the afternoon setting sun washing over them. The teasing laughter in her tone faded.

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?” Johnny reached to touch her hair that seemed to be aflame in that sunlight. She looked up into his eyes and his heart tripped. *She was his last assignment...just a few more days with her...*

She drew in a shaky breath, the smile fading from her sensual, full lips. “I...I...can’t cook. Not one thing. I don’t know how...”

He framed her face with his hands. *Had he ever felt anything softer than her skin? Or seen anything more beautiful than that teasing light in her cinnamon-colored eyes?*

Tentatively, she stepped into his strong embrace and lifted her head as if she knew what was coming...as if she expected...

His mouth covered hers, and he felt her lips tremble beneath his own in the sweetest kiss he’d ever known. Her utter trust melted him. As if she sensed that, she moved even closer.

A feeling of fierce protectiveness shot through him. He would keep her safe or die trying, but he couldn’t allow any weakness where she was concerned. Not now. Maybe not ever. He forced himself to end the kiss, releasing his hold on her slowly. Moving out of her embrace was like stepping from the comforting shelter she offered into a dark void of neutrality once more, something he was familiar with. But this time was different.

This time, he was shaken to the core.

Of all the events in his life, good or bad, this kiss was the one that had affected him more than any other thing that had happened. He let go of her completely, and reluctantly moved his hands away. They may have even shaken a little as he lowered them from her face.

He recovered as well as he could manage. He should tell her he was sorry, but that would be a lie. He wasn't sorry. Not in the least. That kiss had been brewing ever since he'd helped her out of the stagecoach the day before. *How could he be sorry for what was fated?*

But she was a lady, as he'd told himself more than once. And, more importantly, she was another man's fiancée.

As if Krissy had read his mind, she said, "Please don't say you're sorry. Just let me have this moment—this memory."

She closed her eyes and touched her lips gently, then smiled. Opening her eyes and looking into his soul as she'd done on that blasted stagecoach yesterday, Johnny felt Krissy knew every thought he'd ever had, felt every emotion.

She gave a self-conscious smile, but didn't back away from him. "With all my flaws Mama constantly reminds me of, I know one thing for sure, Johnny. I know a good man when I see one. And you are that. A very good man."

Abruptly, she turned away and began to lay the fire, giving Johnny a chance to go the opposite direction, toward the horses, to check on them and steady his raw nerves—a feeling that was as foreign to him as fear or uncertainty.

A feeling he was none too happy about.



**K**rissy's lips still tingled, not only with the remembrance of that magnificent, soul-bending kiss, but with the anticipation of another just as marvelous as that first one had been.

If she hadn't been positive about calling off her marriage before, that kiss had been the definitive deciding factor.

Her lips pressed together tightly. There was no mistaking the fact now that she and Eversby were no more suited for marriage than a frog and a swan. She shook her head at the thought.

But it wasn't because of the idea that she and Johnny might be any *better* suited for it. She tossed her head as she stood, the branches carefully placed for maximum effect.

She reached into her pocket for the lucifers Johnny had given her to get the fire burning. As she started to kneel once more, Johnny approached, calling her name.

“Hold up, Krissy.” He carried their canteens filled with fresh water along with a pack of provisions that Becky Rivers had provided them. “I’ll do that,” he told her, setting his burden down a little space away from the branches. He walked back to her to take the matches from her.

When his warm fingers touched hers, it ignited a blaze of heat and wonder inside her she could not ignore. One of the matches dropped to the ground between them.

Johnny squeezed her hand gently, his heat flowing into her from that comforting touch as he took the other matches from her nerveless fingers and put them in his shirt pocket.

“I’ll get it.” He bent to pick up the match, then walked past her as if nothing had happened between them. He knelt beside the piled makings of the soon-to-be fire and got the blaze going as Krissy watched him.

Krissy was mesmerized by the way he moved. By the way he spoke. By everything about him. Had she ever had a feeling of any kind like this for Eversby as long as she’d known him?

She didn’t have to think twice to answer that question. There was *nothing* about Eversby that remotely compared to Johnny Houston.

But though Eversby wasn’t for her—she knew that now—neither was Johnny. At least, logically, it didn’t seem that way.

Johnny would certainly never meet the approval of her parents; he was not wealthy, nor a pillar of society.

And what prospects did he envision for himself once he left the cavalry? He’d told her she was his last assignment. What would come next?

She watched as he got the fire going, the smaller branches blazing to life, and the flames creeping upward toward the larger pieces of wood she’d found.

“What will you do when you leave the cavalry behind, Johnny?” she blurted. When she heard the question leave her lips, a wave of embarrassment washed over her. Mama’s shaming tone resounded in her mind. *A lady would*

*never ask.*

Johnny glanced up at her, a glint of laughter in his midnight eyes. “Why? Were you thinking we might get married and settle down?”

Although she knew he was only teasing her, his words made her feel vulnerable and exposed.

“Of course not,” she responded tartly. “I will be marrying Eversby Witherspoon the—”

“—the Third, ‘come spring.’ I know. You mentioned that a time or two.”

“Are you making fun of me, Captain?” She lifted her chin.

He had the gall to laugh, then shook his head, raking his hand through his too-long raven dark hair.

“You shouldn’t call me *Captain* ever again, Krissy. Not after that kiss we shared earlier.”

“*Ooooh! A gentleman would not—*”

He came to his feet like a shot. “A *gentleman* I am *not*, Kristalee. I’m three-quarters white and one-quarter Choctaw. But I am not a gentleman by anyone’s standards. Too white for the Indians and too Indian for the whites. The *gentlemen* you’ve known in your world wouldn’t have me, no matter how mannerly I managed to become.”

Krissy gasped. “You seem proud of it.”

The disdain in the dark depths of his eyes disappointed her, but it also cut her as nothing ever had.

“You’d do well to remember, Kris, to *all* of them I’m a savage. No one will ever mistake me for a gentleman. Yet, you’ve done that twice now.” His voice was quiet, matter-of-fact.

Her anger evaporated. “And that makes you angry, doesn’t it, Johnny? I’m wondering why?”



THE SOFT INQUIRY, the way she so easily read him, made Johnny fall silent and try to regroup. He hadn't expected that from her. But, of course, he should have.

Krissy was a *lady* above all else. His remark about settling down had been a test to see what her response might be. It had only been said in a half-tease, he realized. One kiss didn't mean anything. Not really. If they both left it right where it had been: *in the past*.

But he couldn't. From the moment he'd helped her climb out of that wrecked stagecoach, there had been some kind of odd connection between them, beginning with the way she'd opened her eyes and looked right into him as no one else ever had.

He'd been fighting with himself ever since, combatting the ever-deepening tie that seemed to bind them closer, just by being together as they had been, with nothing more between them...until that kiss.

Krissy stood, expectantly waiting for an answer. She looked like a sweet angel, and he, the foil to her; the dark, fallen one.

He couldn't allow this friendship—or whatever it was between them—to deepen. Already, he realized when she left a few days later, she would definitely take a piece of his heart with her.

But he owed her an explanation. Someone like her wouldn't know what his life had been like. It would be beyond her imagination, unless he told her. And he wasn't used to that. On top of everything else, if he insisted on being honest, where could he draw the line? Would it be possible to do it without mentioning the danger her father had put her in by his machinations?

He gave her a wry half-smile. "Yeah, it makes me angry, Kris," he said, as the smile faded. "But I don't expect it to change at this late date."

Krissy took a step toward him. The growing fire crackled and threw off a shower of sparks, but she didn't look away from him.

"Can you tell me why?"

Johnny gave a low chuckle. "Should be pretty obvious—" But he stopped



short, remembering the conversation with Derek about Krissy's society being different.

"My mother was half white, half Choctaw. My father was—*is*—white. Out here, any hint of Indian blood brands you. Even if it's only one drop. At least, that's how most people feel."

He took a can of beans from the nearby cache of provisions and pulled his knife from the sheath at his waist to open the can. As he worked, he continued to explain.

"Though most of the open upheaval between the whites and the various tribes settled a few years ago, there's still enough bitterness amongst everyone to keep tempers hot and memories long and unforgiving."

She nodded her understanding as he glanced up at her.

"Where do you fit in, Johnny? What do you consider yourself—white or Indian?" She rushed on before he could answer. "Because none of this ever crossed my mind until you brought it up. When I met you, I saw only a man, not any particular ethnicity. Just a very caring man who—who rescued me."

A ghost of a smile touched his lips once more at her earnest declaration. "Well, Kristalee, I don't believe I've ever been described quite that way. *Caring*." He went back to getting the beans opened.

"Maybe I was too honest. Mama says I'm one to speak my mind, even when I shouldn't." He looked up and she gave him a self-conscious smile, then fixed her eyes on the fire. "Maybe she's right."

"No. She's not right. Honesty is always—" He stopped himself, then corrected, "—*nearly* always the best approach. I don't mind, Krissy."

He more than "not minded" her forthright assessment. *Caring*, she'd called him. Right now, he couldn't think of any label he'd rather have. That was accurate, at least.

"I'm assuming you and your mother are not particularly close," he said, finally getting the can open.

"No," Krissy answered quietly, as if it shamed her somehow. "I have two

older brothers and two younger sisters who are all nearly perfect. And then, there's me. With my 'great many flaws' as Mama always says."

Though she was flippant about it, Johnny instantly knew the criticism had cut so deeply that this was the only way she could talk about it without becoming emotional.

"I don't see any flaws," he murmured, his eyes meeting hers and holding her gaze for a moment. He poured the beans into a pan and set them on the outer rim of the fire.

"Oh, how kind of you to say so. I imagine you must be the only person in the world who thinks so right now."

She gave a soft sigh. "Mama says I'm lucky that I have Eversby..." Krissy's eyes were fixed on Johnny, as if she were trying to read his thoughts. "She says I'm getting older and need to be thankful that Eversby—well, I guess I'm just not. Thankful, I mean."

Johnny glanced up at her as she walked over to where he sat and seated herself nearby. Krissy had something more on her mind. If she wanted to talk about Eversby, she should realize Johnny wasn't a good source of advice. *What did he know about love, anyway?*

She handed him the can of peaches that lay between them.

"Johnny," she said slowly, choosing her words with care. "I'm not in love with Eversby. And I don't believe he is in love with me, either."

Johnny turned to face her fully. "Then, why—"

"Because our fathers are business partners, and Eversby and I have known one another since we were born. I guess it was just expected that we'd inevitably marry. But how can I marry him if I don't love him?"

Johnny held her gaze for a brief moment before he managed to shrug and look away. He started to open the peaches. "I'm the wrong one to ask," he murmured. "I haven't ever been in love. I'm definitely no expert."

She sat quietly. The only sound was that of Johnny studiously trying to get the can open.



“I GUESS I haven’t really been, either,” Krissy said. “I only thought I was. No. I have never been in love. Certainly not with Eversby. I know that now.”

She got up and started toward the packs that Johnny had taken from the horses a little distance away from them, near the creek. She had to get away. For some crazy reason, that admission had made it all real, and the tears were close. *It would not do for Johnny to see her crying.*

Her life had been nothing but a sham. Not even her upcoming marriage had been real. She couldn’t go back to North Carolina even if she wanted to. She’d be a laughingstock for calling off the wedding. How many sideways looks and snickers would come her way once the marriage cancellation was announced?

But what else could she do? What choice did she have? The only thing she knew she was really good at doing was shooting. And the thought of traveling the rest of her life to do shooting exhibitions was wearying to even contemplate.

Her dream of having a home of her own, a husband and children, would all turn to dust. But marriage to Eversby would not give her any of those things she dreamed of. Not really. Her life would be a lie, and one she knew she couldn’t keep up forever. No, she could not marry Eversby.

Of course, Mama would never forgive her, or Papa, either. But how could she forgive *herself* if she married Eversby under false pretenses? And how could she live out her entire life with someone who didn’t love her either?

She dashed the tears away with the back of her hand, angry at herself for letting her tumultuous thoughts get the better of her.

In light of her current state of mind, broaching the subject of the wooden case with Johnny might not be a good idea right now, but he’d suggested doing it this evening. And she was ready to find out what secrets the beautiful wood case held, if any.

She bent by the packs and found the wooden case quickly, retrieved it, and started back toward the fire.

A sense of peace stole over her as she held the box close to her heart. Her steps slowed. It was still hot in the early evening, but the day was winding down and cooling a small bit, at least.

She could smell the beans and, though they'd had bacon and biscuits for lunch, her stomach gave a loud growl.

Not very ladylike. She lifted her head, banishing the urge to let those thoughts in. Maybe becoming a sharpshooter wasn't so 'ladylike' either, but it had been just dandy as long as it fit everyone's needs, she thought resentfully.

But that wasn't fair, either. She'd begged Mama and Papa to let her go to Miz Oakley's shooting school the summer she'd turned fourteen. And the next. And the next. And she had loved every minute of it.

She suspected her father had loved it even more, when she'd begun to earn money in such an unorthodox way. And she'd become something of a celebrity herself in her own right, as well, pulling her parents and family right along with her, unintentionally.

Before long, Brooklyn and Narissa had wanted to attend Miz Annie's classes, and how could Mama and Papa say no to them when they had let Krissy go?

But Mama had put her foot down when Krissy had begged to go on tour with Miz Annie, saying it was too much like a common actress for her daughter to participate in that kind of life any longer. She would allow the school and even the novice teaching position that Krissy had earned there, but becoming a part of the cast of a traveling Wild West show was something Krissy would not be allowed to do.

"Krissy." Johnny motioned to her from where he stood.

Maybe everything else was ready, and he was waiting on her. She ran the last few steps. As she topped the rise where they'd made their camp, it

seemed the sky had burst into flame with the most beautiful sunset she'd ever seen.

“*Ohhh...*” It was as if she stood inside a bowl of fire overhead, with swirls of orange and yellow, the colors moving and changing. A small sliver of deepening reddish-purple emerged and widened.

“Oh, Johnny...it's beautiful! I've never...” Her voice trailed away. It seemed somehow irreverent to talk while this glorious display surrounded them. She stood close to him, almost close enough to touch. So near she could feel the heat of his body. *Manly*, Mrs. Dinwiddie had said. *And he was.*

“Our own private sunset,” she whispered, then fell silent. Maybe she shouldn't have spoken that thought aloud, but his response let her know he felt the same.

“Feels like we're the only two people in the world right now,” he murmured. Then, as if he needed to put distance between them, he moved away from her a step and separated himself. The moment became too intense, and Krissy felt the effort he had to use to keep himself aloof. He turned to look at her, finally.

In his eyes, there was a momentary flash of desire she couldn't mistake. She tried to tell herself that glimpse into his emotions couldn't have been what she'd thought it had been. But his sensuous lips twisted in a self-deprecating smile, and she knew he recognized he'd not hidden those feelings quickly enough.

He turned away from her and took a step, hands on his hips as if he were trying to make a decision that worried him somehow.

“Johnny—” Her voice was a whisper, but it seemed to be the catalyst that brought him to instant action.

He turned back toward her and took two long strides, coming to stand near her again. She faced him directly. His eyes held her in place, unmoving, as he put out a work-roughened hand and traced her cheek with a finger.

Krissy closed her eyes. As beautiful as the sunset was, this closeness

between them was even more so. Johnny cupped her cheek and she leaned into his palm. It was only for a scant second or two, but Johnny drew his palm away quickly from the sweetly intimate gesture, and the moment was broken.

Krissy lowered her eyes, praying her growing feelings were not an open book for him to see.

“Hey. You’re safe with me, Krissy. For as long as you want to be.”

*Safe.* Hadn’t that been the way her entire life had always been? Maybe she’d like to try the alternative to *safe* for a change. But she couldn’t. Not yet. She had to see this performance event through first. Then...

She didn’t have a chance to reply before he said, “C’mon. Bring that case over here and I’ll serve up our supper.”

He stepped back away from her with his usual grin. All that had just passed between them was temporarily set aside.

She followed him the short few steps toward the fire as he retrieved a camp plate and spoon and handed them to her. Nodding toward the blanket he’d put on the ground earlier, he said, “Have a seat. Let me get these beans off the fire, and we’ll eat.”

She smiled at him. “I’ll set out our ever-present biscuits and bacon.”



**T**he sunset had faded to a soft purple twilight as they finished their meal with very little said between them. Krissy had been hungrier than she realized, and the second time she noticed the humor in Johnny’s expression, she carefully checked herself and vowed to eat more slowly.

“A long day of riding makes a person hungry,” he observed.

She arched a brow, and he laughed outright. “Relax. I’m glad to see you’ve got an appetite. You’re gonna need to keep your strength up. You’ve got a lot of grit, Krissy.” There was an appreciative light in his eyes that sent a thrill through her.

Krissy flushed, glad for the shadows and firelight. She hoped he wouldn’t notice. Why should she care what he thought of her? But she did. Eversby always seemed indifferent to whatever her accomplishments were. She wasn’t used to hearing words of praise from anyone.

“Grit?” She took the last bite of her peaches, making sure she chewed

slowly, then dabbed at her mouth with a bandana. “Is that something a lady should possess?” She shot him a teasing glance. “I *think* that was a compliment. But back home, a lady probably wouldn’t want to be thought of that way.”

Johnny gave a short laugh. “Maybe not, but there are all kinds of grit, Krissy.”

She made a wry face. “Back East, I guess there’s no call for it, much. Out here, it’s a rougher, tougher life. Maybe you need it more here. I’d say here, it’s a necessity to survive.”

Johnny gave her an appraising look. “It takes a lot of *grit* to agree to marry someone you don’t love. To abide by society’s rules and consign yourself to such a fate. Yet, I’m sure plenty of women do.”

“Yes. I was almost one of them.” Krissy stared into the flames as the darkness of twilight encompassed them, the night air cooling with a gentle breeze. “It’s odd how a fire seems to drive troubles away and make them more manageable, isn’t it?” She gave a little shake, fully coming back to the present and away from her thoughts of how close she’d come to pledging her life away to a loveless union with Eversby.

“Want some coffee?” Johnny nodded at her cup.

“Oh, yes, please.” She handed the cup to him. *It was also odd how comfortable she felt with Johnny.* She enjoyed his company. She’d been full of questions today and he’d been glad to answer them all. There were times he’d ridden ahead for a short distance to scout, but he’d always let her know where he was going and how long he’d be gone.

And she’d never felt alone, even when she was. He was looking out for her, and though she couldn’t always see him, she knew he was there.

Johnny brought her coffee back and set it within her reach, then sat down beside her.

“You think it might be time for us to open that mysterious wooden case of yours and see what’s inside?”



She'd almost forgotten about the case. She'd set it down on the blanket behind them while they ate.

Suddenly, the chain around her neck seemed warmer, and she became aware of it. She'd not even remembered she was wearing it until now.

And now that the time had arrived to solve the mystery, she felt a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Johnny picked the case up and held it.

"I-I suppose we'd better, hadn't we?"

Johnny gave her a quizzical look. "Something wrong?"

She shook her head, but her voice sounded unsure when she spoke, even to her own ears. "No. I'm fine." She gave him a quick smile. "I'm just being silly, I think. But all this has been so—*odd*. I mean, having the case turn up in my bags, and then you bringing me the key. Why, Johnny? Why did you bring it to me? And why did the case end up in my things?" She reached out to run a finger over the smooth wood.

Johnny's expression had lost all laughter.

"Don't worry, Krissy." He placed his hand over hers as she gripped the case. "We'll figure it out together. Not knowing what's inside or what it all means is worse than anything. Do you want to open it? Or do you want me to?"

His eyes held hers, and she'd never felt safer than she did in this moment, but there was a strange feeling of unease, as well, brought on by what they were about to do. She'd never liked surprises. In that moment, she wished she'd never discovered the case.

"I'll do it," she said. Johnny released her hand, and she laid the case in her lap. Fumbling with the chain around her neck, she lifted it over her head.

Johnny picked the box up and turned the lock to face her. She grasped the key firmly and slipped it into the small lock.

Just then, a flaming arc of fire lit the sky above them, flashing brightly before it faded into the distance.

"Oh, Johnny, just look. A shooting star! Oh, how utterly beautiful!"

Without a second thought, she reached for his hand and grasped it tightly. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes.

“What’re you doing, honey?” Johnny asked, a hint of a smile in his question.

“I’m making a wish.” She moistened her lips, eyes still closed. “It’s sure to come true.” With everything in her, she hoped. *Oh, how she hoped it did!*



JOHNNY’S MIND was nowhere near the box, though he could feel the wood beneath one hand. He’d made a grab to steady it as it wobbled and threatened to fall from Krissy’s lap in her excitement. Looking at her exquisite features highlighted as the firelight and shadows warred with one another, he wanted to do nothing more than study her.

Her eyes squeezed tightly shut, a gentle smile curving her lips, Krissy’s entire expression could only be described as being full of happiness and hope.

*She was totally unaware of the danger she faced. How could he tell her?*

She opened her eyes and laughed in innocent delight over having made a wish on a shooting star.

And Johnny was enchanted.

“I hope you made one, too,” Krissy said softly. “A wish, I mean. Those are the best kind, the ones you make on shooting stars and birthday cakes. Those are sure to come true.” She stopped talking, her smile fading as she watched him.

He squeezed her hand gently. “I did.”

“If they come true, we can tell each other.” Then, she sobered. “If not... well, I guess it won’t much matter, anyway.”

“Deal,” he answered, his heart lighter. He was not superstitious, but he couldn’t help believing the star had been a good omen.

Johnny glanced down at the case where their hands lay, intertwined, her

white skin and his naturally darker fingers, made even more contrasting by a lifetime of being exposed to the sun.

The key was still inserted in the lock, the chain dangling from it, as if beckoning them to solve the mystery.

“Let’s do it,” Krissy said resolutely as they disengaged their grip, and she reached to turn the key.



DEREK HAD DESERTED the cavalry at sundown. He’d had a feeling of foreboding ever since Johnny and Miss Donovan had left early that morning—a feeling he’d learned early in life not to ignore.

By noon, it had gnawed at his gut so that he’d approached Major Jennings when they’d stopped to eat.

“Major, may I have a word?”

Jennings gave him a short nod, and Derek figured he knew what Derek was about to ask.

“I’m thinking it might be prudent for me to follow Johnny and Miss Donovan to the orphanage, everything being what it is.”

The major gave a deep sigh. “I was more than half expecting this.” He stood silent. As one of the other men approached, he held up a hand. “Give us a moment, Corporal, please.” As the young corporal gave a quick nod and turned to leave, Jennings looked back at Derek. “Are you telling me *I’ve* got more faith in your brother than *you* do, Dr. Houston?”

Derek rubbed at the back of his neck. It was hard to explain the bond between him and Johnny, but it was undeniable. He couldn’t leave Johnny vulnerable to whatever this impending danger might be. He walked a few paces away, gazing past the major, into the shimmering heat of the prairie.

“I’ve got faith in him,” Derek replied, thinking how ridiculous it was for him to even have to voice that to anyone. No one was more *competent* in a

dangerous situation than his brother—or more *reckless*—depending on the circumstances.

Although, in all fairness, sometimes what seemed reckless to Derek was necessity, as Johnny saw it.

But now, what Johnny was doing—accompanying Miss Donovan to the orphanage, protecting her, and getting her safely away from there and back to the stage station when it was over—was pure necessity according to *all* of them. They had agreed on that, including Major Jennings.

Derek turned and looked at Jennings. “I’m asking you for permission to go, Major. Permission to help my brother. You don’t know what Hannibal Malcolm is capable of. And he *will* remember Johnny.”

Jennings gave a short laugh. “Derek, that was years ago.” He opened his canteen and took a long drink. “You all were so young—”

Derek shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Forever wouldn’t be long enough for Malcolm. He’ll never forget. What matters is that my father came for us and took us out of Malcolm’s control. There was nothing he could do about it. To a man like him, power...*control*...is everything. He is insane.”

Jennings gave him a long stare. “How is it he’s in charge of an orphanage? Who gave him that position? And how has he kept it?”

Derek’s smile was mirthless. “He hides his illness well. He is what Dr. Koch, a German doctor of psychiatry, would call a *psychopath*. In his language, psychopath means ‘suffering soul’. But Malcolm is in the business of causing other souls to suffer right along with him...*because* of him.”

Jennings shook his head and walked toward Derek. “Doctor, I know you don’t have many days left. Neither do I. But—”

“And I know I’m putting you in a hard place, Steve. But I want you to know, *I have to go*. No matter what. I can’t hang Johnny out to dry.” He shook his head at the flash of anger in the major’s steely gray eyes, followed by resignation.

“And no, I don’t think that’s what you did by sending him with Miss

Donovan. I just think...he needs someone with him for this mission. And I'm going to be that person."

Jennings gave him a curt nod. "I see."

Derek's smile was sardonic. "But do you *understand*?"

The major's shoulders slumped. "Yes. I do. I have a brother of my own, Derek. You know we're already short by four men. I sent Johnny, thinking I'd only have to part with one man. I don't like letting you go, too. *Especially* you. You're the most valuable one of all of us, being a doctor—" He spread his hands.

"*I'm going*," Derek said flatly. He would not be talked out of this. If it turned out badly and he was court-martialed after all, it would still be better than living with the guilt of not being there to protect his brother if he should need help.

"I know."

He paused. "Will there be charges?"

Jennings shook his head. "Not if I can help it. I'm hoping we'll be back at the fort in a week's time. You'll rejoin us there to sign your discharge papers?"

Derek nodded. "God willing."

"I'm not giving my permission for this mission. I was just asking for information's sake."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"If push comes to shove, I can't risk my entire military career."

"Yes, sir."

Jennings fell silent a moment. "I know there is no reasoning with you. If you say you're going, I know there's no stopping you, either, short of putting you in irons, and I won't do that."

Derek shot him a rueful look.

"You know I wouldn't," Jennings reiterated. "Please, just wait until tonight to leave, Doctor," he said curtly.

“I will.” Derek hated leaving under these conditions. He and the major had been more than military comrades; they had been friends. This situation set them at odds in a strange way, and yet, there was nothing that could change that, for either of them.

“If that’s all, sir?”

Jennings nodded tiredly. “Yes, that’s all, Derek. Go with God.”



IMPATIENTLY, Derek had waited until full darkness fell before he led his horse, Angel, away from the encampment. When he was out of earshot of the others, he mounted up and rode south in the bright moonlight. Though he’d have to ride slower because of the darkness, at least there was a cooling breeze and the absence of the hot sun. He should make good time, despite the hindrance of the darkness.

He’d tried to put this feeling of impending disaster aside ever since he’d learned of the major’s choice to send Johnny to the orphanage with Miss Donovan. But from past experience, he knew that was going to be an impossibility. He would’ve just gone with Johnny when he and Miss Donovan had left, but Johnny would have had none of that.

Derek’s stomach clenched just thinking of going back to that horrific place. How must Johnny feel, going back to that pit of vipers, tasked with the mission of keeping himself from getting killed, but also keeping Miss Donovan from harm as well?

The problem was not knowing where the danger lurked or in what form, and by what person. It could come from any direction.

Though Johnny could have depended on Miss Donovan’s gun to help, there was the matter of her being kept in the dark about her father’s bungled plans. Derek hoped that Johnny had found a good way to tell her about the circumstances her father had placed her in. She needed to know. He was

firmly convinced of that, now. She was no shrinking violet to be protected at all costs.

Johnny would tell her when the time was right, surely.

Derek tried to keep his thoughts together as he rode, but his mind was full to bursting with Johnny's predicament and, now, one he'd had no choice but to share.

His only solace was knowing Johnny would have no right to be angry with him for showing up. He would recognize if the tables were turned, and he'd inevitably do the same for Derek. Oh, he *would* be angry at first, but that would fade when reason set in. And, with any luck, both of them would muster out of the cavalry safe and sound next weekend and Miss Donovan would be on her way back East to finish planning her wedding.



**A**s Krissy turned the key, Johnny laid his hand atop hers. When she'd glanced at him, she could see he'd noticed the anxiety she'd felt, and was trying to help her overcome it in his own way.

She was glad for his warm, comforting grip, steadying her hand as the key turned easily.

They lifted the lid together, and Krissy let out a long breath she'd been holding.

"Oh, look at *this*." A delicate pistol with pink mother-of-pearl grips was nestled in the soft green cotton lining of the case with a strap across it to hold it in place. She could see at first glance it was a .32 caliber pistol.

Krissy unsnapped the strap and removed the gun. She held it reverently, examining it in the firelight.

"Smith and Wesson," Johnny noted.

"*What a beauty*," she breathed. She broke it open expertly, checking to



see if it was loaded. She looked up into Johnny's face. His expression was questioning, but quickly changed to one of admiration at the way she handled the gun.

She smiled. "Did you think I might not have known how to handle a pistol after all, Johnny?"

His low laugh gave him away. She knew it had crossed his mind. He shrugged. "I wasn't sure *what* to think of you, Krissy."

The admiration in his expression stole her breath. *When had anyone ever looked at her like that?* No one had. Never one time. And she knew it wasn't only his pleased surprise at her obvious familiarity with a pistol that made her heart race. There was more—so much more. His intense, dark gaze held her mesmerized, her mouth dry, her heart pounding so that she was certain he must hear it from where he sat.

Suddenly, there were so many questions she wanted to ask him—things she wanted to know about him. He was a mystery she wanted to explore and learn about until she knew every thought and feeling, every fear and joy, every—

*Oh, dear lord. She was falling in love with this man. A man she barely knew.*

Earlier this evening, she'd come to understand she'd never loved Eversby, and she never would. But was she truly falling in love with Johnny because of that realization? Or...was she so shallow she would cling to the first attractive man who came along once she'd decided to call off her wedding with Eversby?

Maybe these feelings came to her so strongly because she'd been emotionally released from her commitment to marry a man she knew she didn't love. Whatever the case, she needed to figure it out, and fast. She had to think with her head and not her heart.

Krissy had never believed in love at first sight. But when she'd opened her eyes in that overturned stagecoach, she'd felt a definite connection to

Johnny. And in that moment, she'd understood that the attraction had been mutual.

Looking into his eyes right now, she could say with a certainty it still was.

She moistened her lips. "And now? What do you think?"

Something flickered in his expression—the want, the desire, and the knowledge that realistically, there was no way he could ever give her what she might expect from her life. With her future stretching before her like an untouched canvas, now that she'd made her decision not to go through with the planned wedding, the knowledge that she was free to do whatever she wanted turned everything upside down.

He shook his head. "I still don't know what to think, Krissy. We're worlds apart. I've never met a *woman* who could handle a gun as well as *I* do—or even better."

Krissy's heart slowed to a near stop, the anticipation of hearing what he might think of her dulling to a point that was almost painful as disappointment set in.

"Here, let me see it." He put his hand out toward her. She managed to hand him the pink pistol without her now-fumbling fingers dropping it.



THE GUN FELT warm and somehow soothing in his hand. And the workmanship was some of the best Johnny had ever seen.

"Nice nickel plating. This is some craftsmanship." He broke the weapon open. "Double action, five shot."

But his mind wasn't totally on the pistol. He was using his thorough examination as a gambit to hide his reaction to Krissy's question. He certainly hadn't given her the answer he could see she was hoping for. The immediate hurt and disappointment in her expression had pained him as well.

He had wondered how a woman as beautiful, as cultured, and as refined as Krissy Donovan appeared to be could possibly add *lady sharpshooter* to her list of attributes, but that didn't mean he had doubted her ability. He'd only wondered.

What a loaded question she'd asked. As if she'd been hoping he'd comment about her in a more personal way than merely about her gun handling capabilities. How could he know any more about her than what he'd witnessed in the short time they'd known one another?

It was odd, he realized, that since she'd handed off the pistol to him, his mind was filled with a wondering about things he would not have given a second thought to, normally.

*What did she expect from him?* It was obvious she had been drawn to him from the moment she'd come to and opened her eyes in the stagecoach. And if he were honest with himself, he'd not hesitate to admit that he'd felt the same.

It scared him like nothing else ever had. Emotional ties to others were not an everyday occurrence in his life. Far from it. His early years had taught him the only person besides himself that he could rely on was Derek.

He'd rather face down a ruthless gang of murdering outlaws than expose his heart to a relationship that could leave him vulnerable. Protecting himself in every way had been the key to his survival. He couldn't stop now, even if it might disappoint Krissy Donovan when he didn't give the answer she was expecting.

"Complete with a box of cartridges," Krissy murmured, intruding on his musings.

He started to hand the pistol back to her, but saw she was slowly drawing out a piece of yellowing parchment paper. She unfolded it carefully and held it up to the firelight, trying to decipher the notes that were written on it.

Johnny held on to the pistol as she moved the paper, trying to catch the firelight better. Enchanted, she wore a dreamy look as she read, her lips

curving slightly.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Hm? Oh, nothing.” She folded the paper carefully and went on matter-of-factly. “I think it was left in here by mistake, but there’s no clue as to which of the passengers on the stage the pistol might have belonged to.” She gave him a quick smile as she finished folding it and slipped it back into the pocket in the case.

Though she tried to appear unhurried, Johnny could tell she was hiding something. Her smile was a little too bright, her voice studiously controlled. Her hand shook slightly as she replaced the paper.

*Yet, how could he ask for complete honesty from her when he wasn’t giving her the same courtesy?*

He wouldn’t force it. Maybe she’d tell him later when she came to trust him more. *If they had that much time left together.*

He watched as she locked the case up with the small key and gave it a loving pat. She continued to hold onto it, though, not laying it back on the blanket.

“What?” she asked, as his lips curved in a smile.

“You treat that case like a baby.”

Krissy gave a short laugh. “It’s so beautiful. And somehow, every time I touch it, I feel the love and passion that went into its creation.” She smiled wryly. “And the pistol itself—” She shook her head. “I feel some kind of connection to it. Do you feel anything when you handle it?”

It was a careful question, almost as if she was embarrassed by even asking it.

He raised a brow and debated with himself about how to answer. Honesty reared its ugly head again, but he pushed it back. It would sound ridiculous to agree with her fanciful ideas. Although, he had to admit *something* was happening, not only with this mysterious pistol and the case it arrived in, but also between Krissy and him.

Was it all somehow connected? The discovery of this unusual pistol in the lovingly crafted case oddly coincided with Johnny and Krissy's time together. Things did seem to be moving quickly between them, and that was different for both of them, he suspected.

"Krissy, I—"

"Oh, I apologize, Johnny," she said. "I always seem to ask the wrong thing. I'm too blunt for my own good."

Johnny shook his head. "No. I agree with you. There's 'something' going on, I'll grant you that." He paused, then looked at her anxious face. "I'm not superstitious. I don't believe in what we're talking about. I think maybe it all just happened at the same time. Coincidence, maybe?"

When she started to protest, he quirked a brow. "I could be wrong, too," he said quickly. "I don't know what to believe." He blew out a sigh of exasperation.

"You must wonder about my sanity." Her hands twisted in her lap. "Johnny, I'm mixed up. I thought I knew what I wanted in life."

He watched as she struggled to put her feelings into words, remaining silent.

"I thought... I thought I should be dutiful and live with what my parents wanted for me. But I can't. I just can't."

"Eversby, you mean?"

She nodded and dabbed at her eyes with her bandana. "Yes. Eversby. But there's so much *more*. Eversby is not for me. I'm not for him. I won't marry him. It will be a favor to both of us. But it will disgrace my parents, and they will not be forgiving."

Her voice was soft, low, and determined. Johnny felt a surge of admiration for her. He hadn't known her long, but he understood her heart, her disappointments, her longings and desires, and her dreams.

That understanding, in itself, was enough to make Johnny wonder about the fortuitous appearance of the pistol and case. There was that word again:

*fortuitous*. And up to now, things had been just that.

“Also, I just can’t live the way they expect me to. To marry someone I don’t love and pretend to be happy with him for the rest of my life when my existence is flying by, and I’m not doing anything I hoped for.” She shook her head. After a moment, she seemed to gather herself. “But what else can I do? I have to make my way in the world. I’m sure they’ll see to it that I’m penniless.”

“So...you’re thinking it might be better to live as you’d planned—marry *Eversby* after all—” He could barely force himself to say the name. He had to stop at the bitterness it brought to him to utter it.

“No. Oh, no, Johnny.” Krissy shook her head again and looked away. “I can’t. Even if they disown me forever.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “You see, I have so many things I’d love to do and see and accomplish in my life. Oh, not things that most would find extraordinary. But things that matter very much to me.”

Her gaze went far away, and her voice softened as she spoke. “I want a home of my own. It doesn’t have to be fancy, just a cozy, loving home, with a small vegetable garden. I love fresh vegetables, and I’m a good gardener.”

Johnny hid a smile at her earnest proclamation.

“And Johnny, I love to grow flowers.” Excitement filled her eyes as she spoke of her beloved gardens. It faded as she continued. “I’m not really very interested in the things that are expected of young ladies in my position—the balls, and parties and ‘being seen’ in the right places. I want my existence to have some meaning. And I would love to have a husband to share my life—*my happiness*—with.”

“Anyone in particular?” Johnny teased.

“Perhaps I haven’t met him yet, but I know it’s not to be *Eversby*,” she answered in all sincerity. She sighed. “And I want a large family. Maybe even larger than my own family—the five of us siblings.” Her expression became wistful. “I want to teach them all to love one another, to be close...”

As her voice trailed off, Johnny thought of his own family. Of course, it was a given he and Derek would be close because of their early rough beginnings. But once they'd gone to live with their father and stepmother, and their half-siblings had come along, he and Derek had loved them all as full brothers and sisters. The word "half" had never been mentioned.

"I'm sure that will all happen for you, Kris," Johnny murmured. But who would she find that would be good enough for her? He felt as protective of her as he would for his younger sister, Vivi.

"This discovery is all so new to me," she said with a wry smile. "It's such a revelation that I actually have a *choice*." She sat quietly for a moment, then said, "I've made another decision, too, Johnny. Besides the fact that I'm calling off my wedding."

Johnny stood up, stretching his legs, waiting for her to continue.

"I'm not going home," she said matter-of-factly. "I'm staying here."

*Was he hearing correctly?* He turned to look down at her.

"Well, I—I can't go home anyhow," she said at his incredulous look. "Not after breaking things off with Eversby." Hastily, she added, "Which I intend to do as soon as we get to a town with a telegraph."

"Krissy—"

"My mind is made up."

For once, Johnny wished Mrs. Dinwiddie had accompanied them, so she could talk some sense into Krissy.

"There are worse things than calling off a wedding, Kris."

"But there's nothing worse than not having your freedom, is there?" she asked pertly. "And if I go back, Johnny, I will *never* have that. It's the thing I need more than any other."



**T**he next day passed much like the first, with many hours of hard riding and few stops. They were making up time her father had not accounted for when the trip had begun, and Krissy crossly wondered why he hadn't planned the timing a little better. In fact, it made her downright angry. She would like to have had a couple of days to rest before the exhibition. And what if she'd been severely injured in the stagecoach accident? She could never have made it on time, which was something he'd been most adamant about.

For the first time, she wondered if her father was short of funds and had cut the trip as fine as he could to save on lodging expenses. If that were the case, why had he paid for Mrs. Dinwiddie to accompany her as a chaperone? He'd had no choice, she realized. Her mother was caught up in planning the wedding, and she would never have been comfortable making a journey to this wild country.

There was no one else. Certainly, her younger sisters wouldn't have been



allowed to come without a chaperone for all three of them. With only Aunt Lena on her father's side, there were no other females to accompany her properly. Her brothers were busy with their own lives, both married with children of their own.

Mrs. Dinwiddie was the obvious solution. What compensation had Papa given her? An unfamiliar shadow of guilt stole across her conscience, when she thought of the older woman.

They had reached their campsite where they'd stop for the night. The day had been almost unbearably hot, even though they'd taken an hour at mid-day to rest themselves and the horses beside a small stream. How welcome that respite had been in this sweltering heat.

There had been very little conversation between her and Johnny, even when they'd stopped for their lunch earlier. He was sorry he'd been ordered to accompany her back to the orphanage, she knew. She was a duty to him.

She glanced to where he stood with the animals. The creek they'd stopped at for the evening was larger than the one they'd stopped beside earlier this afternoon. This one was a tributary to the Arkansas River, Johnny had mentioned.

It was a beautiful spot. An oasis of shade, precious cool water, and soon, a night under the stars once more.

She went about the task of gathering firewood so they could get a campfire going. Her stomach rumbled. Whatever Johnny came up with for their meal, she'd gladly eat it.

She smiled, thinking of the changes that had occurred within her in these short weeks since she'd left her home. No doubt, most of them would be completely unacceptable to her family. But she was a completely different person. Would they recognize her? Would they still care for her? She swallowed hard. Brooklyn and Narissa would. They were her dearest allies. But the idea of disappointing Mama and Papa yet again fell over her like a funeral pall.

Johnny was coming toward her with some of the provisions. She shook her dark thoughts away as she watched him. The way he moved was almost liquid. Though he seemed unconcerned, she'd noticed the careful watch he'd kept all day as they rode. She got the feeling it was pretense, this languid, easy way he had about him. There was tension under it, and she wasn't sure why. Was he expecting some kind of trouble, even this far away?

She laid the wood upon the pile she'd already collected, turning away from Johnny as he approached. Her father had always told her that her face was an open book, and she knew that what he said was true.

"I'll get the fire started," Johnny said from behind her. "Why don't you go sit down by the creek and soak your feet, or—"

He broke off at her sharp gasp.

She whirled to look at him, her face flushed.

He began to chuckle. "Pardon me, ma'am. I didn't realize that was an unseemly suggestion." He laughed again. "I sometimes forget you're from a different society, Krissy." He sobered, his dark eyes holding hers. "A place where young ladies require chaperones, and butlers answer the door. Where a young woman's biggest worry is what gown to wear to the next ball, and where *feet* are a taboo subject. My apologies."

Anger swept over her at his mockery. Frostily, she said, "Well, then, I expect both of us must remember the confines of our upbringing and the societies we both come from, Captain. I shall try my best to refrain from insulting yours for its rough-and-tumble ways if you will show me the same courtesy for the failings in mine. I understand manners and rules are hard for someone like you to—to grasp."

A spark of anger flashed in his eyes for a brief moment, only to be replaced quickly with mild impassiveness.

"Missing Mrs. Dinwiddie, Krissy?" His midnight eyes glittered. "Don't worry. I'll take care not to mention forbidden subjects again, such as feet." He gave her a sardonic smile. "I have to keep reminding myself you're

young, inexperienced, and downright—” he stared into space a moment, then said, “—*shock-able*. The perfect word for you. Probably because of your sheltered upbringing.”

“Yet, I can shoot as well as you or any other man out there, Johnny. So I am not quite as naïve as you think. I have spent some time on my own at Miz Oakley’s. I was one of her top students. I even had a teaching position in the summer classes she held,” she replied proudly.

“My, my,” he mocked. “How did you get Mama and Papa to spring for that? Couldn’t have been cheap. Maybe dear old Papa was happy enough. He could see the money in your future from these exhibitions, but Mama? From what you’ve said, the only thing she cares about is what her society friends might think. Has ‘sniping for debutantes’ become the new talent young men are looking for in a wife these days? I can’t see how it would fit in with your mama’s plans for you, otherwise.”



SHE WAS SHOCKED AGAIN, and hurt. He could tell by her initial sharp intake of breath, which was enough to wound him right back, and right where it counted—an arrow straight through his heart.

Krissy pushed it in deeper and gave it a twist as quick tears filled her eyes. She said, “Johnny...how can you be so mean?” She looked down abruptly, as if the very sight of him wounded her.

He drew a deep breath of his own and fought the pain that his words had brought to both of them.

“I’m *not* ‘mean’, Krissy. I care more for you than your family does, it seems.”

“What are you saying?” Her head came up, and she met his dark gaze, his expression hard as granite as he studied her. “*What is it you aren’t telling me?*”

*It was time.* Johnny had debated with himself about telling Krissy what her father had done ever since he'd learned of it himself.

Riding into trouble was a sure thing, where they were headed. Krissy needed to be aware, just in case something happened to him. At least she'd know to take whatever precautions she could.

He gave a heavy sigh. "Let's get supper going, and I'll tell you what I can. *We are* in some danger," he admitted. "And you need to know what's going on, just in case."

She took a step toward him. "*In case* what, Johnny? Please, just be honest."

He nodded. "A good plan for both of us, I think."

She raised a dark brow.

"The note in that gun case," he responded. "I want to know what it says, Krissy."

A guilty flush spread over her face. "I really don't know. I put it back in the pocket to read later in private. I saw some names on it, but they didn't mean anything to me."

"And what else?"

Krissy gave a noncommittal shrug. "A few words. They look like love notes of some kind. Maybe we can look at it together after we eat. And," she added, "after you tell me what's going on. And why we're in danger."

"All right."

"Come on, slowpoke," she said teasingly, breaking the tension, "let's get those cans open, and get some grub."

He smiled at her attempt to restore balance and overlook his earlier harsh words. "*You* know how to open a can with a knife? 'Grub' sounds odd coming from your pretty mouth."

She gave him a saucy grin. "Why, yes, Captain Houston, I *do* know how to open a can with a knife. I am just *full* of surprises."

Johnny couldn't help but laugh. She looked so beautiful, and she'd

managed to take away that nagging doubt he'd felt about telling her the truth of their situation. He had done the right thing. He would tell her all of it.

"Yes, you are, Krissy," he murmured. "You are *plenty* full of surprises."



DEREK WAS GAINING ON THEM, but didn't push Angel in this heat. As the temperature climbed late in the afternoon, he found a place to rest by the creek he'd been following. It looked to be the exact spot where his brother, Krissy, and their animals had taken refuge from the unrelenting sun. Or someone else who followed them.

He pushed that thought away, unable to face the idea that he should have come after Krissy and Johnny sooner than he had.

The grass was still bent, so he knew he was only a few hours behind them. He was traveling light with no pack animals to slow him down, so he fully expected to catch up with them close to the orphanage. With any luck, would be before they arrived. But animals were susceptible to this kind of heat, just as humans were.

He dismounted and led Angel to the edge of the cool stream to drink, filling his hat with water and drizzling it over his own head and shoulders.

He glanced at the sky, grateful that the relative coolness of evening wasn't too far in the future. Should he ride on, or camp here for a few hours? Traveling by night would be easier on him and Angel both. He would lose precious time, but Angel was showing signs of strain in this oppressive heat. He wouldn't overwork the animal. He'd wait till it cooled off. He was sure he could make up the time in the darkness with the moon as bright as it would be.

He made sure Angel was comfortable in the shade, then walked to a nearby willow tree and sat down beside the creek, savoring the cool peacefulness.

Maybe he could catch a quick nap before they had to travel on, just sleep until darkness fell. He needed to make use of his time. He wasn't going anywhere for at least a couple of hours, and he'd have to rest, and give Angel some rest, as well.

He leaned his head back against the tree trunk, his thoughts drifting to his brother and Miss Donovan.

Johnny was smitten with her. He didn't even realize it yet, but before long, that little detail would smack his brother right in the face. That young woman was not to be ignored, and if he wasn't mistaken, she had her sights set on Johnny, too. But, it seemed like neither one of them realized that the other was interested.

Three days on the trail together without a chaperone might make a few things clearer for both of them.

A mixed blood cavalry scout falling for a blue-blooded high society woman...couldn't get much worse. He grimaced.

*Unless she fell for him right back.*

With that uneasy thought, Derek drifted to sleep, exhausted from heat, hard riding, and worry.



“JOHNNY, why didn't we take the train?” Krissy asked as she poured a cup of coffee for him. She had to admit, she'd been surprised at Johnny's decision to remain here where they'd made camp. It was late afternoon and they'd have camped within the next couple of hours, but as pressed as they were for time, it surprised her.

She wasn't complaining. The heat was scorching, and camping here beside the river was something she felt Johnny had done for her. He was thoughtful in ways she'd never expected. Ways she noticed and appreciated. *Ways that would never have entered Eversby's mind.*

He took the coffee from her with a nod of thanks. "The train line is proposed to be extended through Hugo from north to south within the next three years, but right now, there's only an east-west line," he responded as he took a sip of the coffee. "Even had it been possible, I'm not sure it would've been a good idea. Too risky."

She glanced at him quickly from near the fire where she'd gone back to get herself a cup of the brew as well. Reaching for the pot, she asked, "Robberies?"

He gave her a slow grin. "Yeah. You *are* in Indian Territory now, Krissy. Not like what you're used to back home, for sure."

She smiled and walked to where he stood, cup in hand. "There can never be any doubt as to where we are," she said softly. "This country is more beautiful than I ever could have imagined."

He chuckled. "Probably hotter than you could've imagined, too." He sobered, and looked down at her, as if he wanted to take her in his arms again. But he only said, "Come over here and let's sit in the shade. Get out of the last of the sun."

They walked together toward the riverbank in silence. There was a smooth, flat outcropping of rock hanging over the river that Johnny unerringly moved toward. Krissy laughed in delight as they neared it.

"It's beautiful here! And perfect." She gave him a teasing grin. "Something tells me you've been here a time or two, Johnny. You knew right where to come for the best seat in the house."

He looked preoccupied, she thought, but he still kept his hand at her back to steady her as they climbed the upward slope of the ground to get to the rock, and helped her sit.

He took the seat opposite her where he had a good view of the area they'd come from. Krissy realized this wasn't coincidental, and she reached to rub her hand over the pistol she wore in the belt of her dungarees.

He nodded. "You're right to be worried, Kris. You keep watch behind

me, and I'll do the same for you, honey.”

A fiery moment of dread slithered through Krissy. “Someone is after us.” It was a statement, not a question. This trip had felt ‘off’ from the moment her father had mentioned it. She supposed that was why she’d not been as enthusiastic about coming as she normally might have been. She just hadn’t listened to her own intuition.

“Yes. I believe so. There’s a lot to say, and some of it is pretty incredible, but don’t discount any of it until you’ve heard me out.”

“Who would want to hurt us?”

“Not ‘us’, Krissy. It’s *you* they’re after.”

“Johnny—”

“Listen to me.” Impatiently, he shook his head. “I don’t know where they are, or who they are, or how many. They’re out there, though, shading us. Twice today, I’ve seen the flash of metal in the sunlight.” He gave her a cool look. “Far away, but it was there, both times. I expect they’ll make their move under cover of darkness.”

Krissy’s heart began to race. She’d seen it once, too, but when she’d looked for it again, it had not been there.

He nodded. “You’ve seen it, too.”

“Yes. I didn’t say anything, because I believed I was imagining it,” she confessed unhappily. “I was stupid. I should’ve said—*something*.”

“Don’t blame yourself. I should have told you about this earlier, but I didn’t, against my better judgment.”

“Tell me now. Tell me everything.”





“**Y**our father put a guarantee on your performances. If you fail to show up or perform poorly, he’ll pay five thousand dollars to the vendor who has signed for your services.”

Krissy sat in stupefied silence for a moment, letting Johnny’s words sink in. Her father...*her father*...what he had done was to sign her death warrant.

“Why...” She could barely find her voice. So many thoughts whirled through her mind. “Why?” She finally lifted her gaze to meet Johnny’s.

“I’m guessing he believed it would somehow protect you. Maybe he felt like the vendor who contracted for your services would value your actual performance at more than five thousand dollars.”

Krissy fought the sick feeling rising up inside her. Papa had always been able to deal with people, to know what people thought, and why they did the things they did. How could he have made such a mistake? *How?* He may as well have put a target squarely on her back in his zeal to promote her talents

and make her more sought after. And again, she had to ask herself *why*?

Surely, Papa would realize that when she and Eversby had married, these exhibition performances would have gone away. Surely...

“How could he be so...*naïve*?”

“I’m not sure that’s the word for it, Krissy. I don’t believe his intention was to hurt you, only to make your appearances in higher demand.” Again, Krissy thought of the corners Papa had cut when he arranged this trip for her. Miz Oakley had specifically asked for Krissy to go west to complete this promised performance. Papa had had to agree. What choice did he have? But maybe, maybe he hadn’t had the funds. Did he need money so badly he’d resorted to this tactic to boost the price of her contracts?

“He must need money awfully badly,” Krissy murmured, deep in thought. “He knows better. He knows how people think. And yet...and yet, he gambled with my life.”

“He realized his mistake,” Johnny said, his tone letting her know how he hated to be put in the position of defending her father, even in the slightest. He reached for her hand.

She was only vaguely aware of his touch, his words of comfort. There was no way to sort this out short of talking to Papa and asking him point blank what the devil he’d been thinking of.

Anger overcame her stunned disbelief.

“How did he ‘realize his mistake’, Johnny?” she asked hotly, her head coming up swiftly.

Johnny squeezed her hand, his touch firm, but comforting. “Krissy... honey...why do you think *I’m* here?”

She hadn’t even thought—of course. The cavalry most likely wouldn’t have given her a personal escort this far out of their way, not if they hadn’t gotten some kind of push from a person of influence.

“My father—did he—”

“He wired the Fort Smith command for an escort for you. I’m thinking he

started doubting what he'd done. By then, you were already out here. He did the only thing he could do. He wired the fort and asked for an escort for you to the orphanage. He most likely thought you'd be all right on the longest leg of your journey."

"I wonder how long it took him to figure *that* out."

"Not soon enough," Johnny said in a low tone.

His wry comment garnered Krissy's full attention. "What do you mean?"

He shook his head as if he'd thought better of what he'd said. Krissy seized on it.

*Papa wasn't the only one who could read people.*

"We talked about *honesty* earlier," Krissy said quietly. "Please, tell me everything. Don't keep me in the dark with some misguided need to protect me." She bit her lip, and then said, "Johnny, you may think there are things I don't need to know because they could hurt me. When I left Raleigh to make this journey, that might have been true.

"I've had a lot of time to think about everything. Not just the wedding and what I will do about my decision to cancel it, but also about my family, and my value. My value to them, to myself, and to the world."

She held a hand up as he started to speak, feeling as if she didn't say it all now, there might not be another chance. She gave him an uncertain smile. This was an awfully intimate confession to make to someone she barely knew.

But oddly, she felt like it was timely, appropriate, and very needed. Her father had thought nothing of sending her into this danger, then asked Johnny to risk his own life to protect her. Just the idea of Johnny being asked to give his life for her and his ready willingness to do so brought them closer than anything else ever could. She would never have this bond with anyone else. He'd told her she was his last assignment, nothing more. But she knew better.

"When I talk about my value to the *world*, I'm talking about what I can do for *others*, not what I can do to promote myself as a sharpshooter.

“Value to myself—I’m still trying to figure that out. But my father is not going to control me any longer.”

Johnny’s lips quirked at her heartfelt pronouncement.

“Can we work together?” she asked softly. “If you tell me everything, I *do* have some skills of my own that might help.” She was silent a moment. “You are going to die for me, if you must.” She clasped her hands together, marshaling her thoughts, trying to be certain she said everything just right. She might not have another chance. “I want to tell you what that means to me, but I don’t have the right words to say it, Johnny. So, all I can say is,” she paused, then rushed on earnestly, “we’re facing whatever happens *together*. This is going to be a joint effort. I—I want you to remember that I *do* know how to handle a gun very well, and I understand the stakes. It could be life or death, for either of us. Or, for *both* of us.”



THE VISION of Kristalee Donovan sitting across from him declaring her willingness to enter a life-or-death battle at his side touched Johnny as nothing ever had.

She’d clearly done nothing but weigh, consider, and ponder the situation she’d found herself in since leaving Raleigh. He imagined she’d felt something was strange about this entire journey since she’d set out. Things had started to feel odd to her, but she’d not had all the puzzle pieces to work with.

*Well, he was going to hand them to her—at least, the pieces he knew about.*

“I’m not ever going to ask you to die for me, Kris,” he said softly.

She shook her head. “I know. I’m telling you, though, if it comes to that, *I will*. My father has put you in danger due to his scheming and manipulation. I will not allow it without pledging to you that I’m willing to protect you the

same way.”

“Come here.” Johnny put his hands out to steady her as she rose and moved to sit beside him. He put his arm around her and pulled her close. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

“I’m not saying this because I love you. I mean—” She shook her head and sat up, pulling herself away from him. “I didn’t mean it that way.” Her face was flushed, and she waved a hand, flustered.

“I’m trying to say, it’s a matter of *honor*, not—” She pressed her lips together. After a moment she said, “After what my father has done, I want to restore honor, and the only way that can happen is to just speak this aloud, so you’ll know. You are willing to give the ultimate sacrifice for me. I can do no less, Johnny.”

She’d shifted to look at him, her dark eyes lit with a fire he was unfamiliar with seeing from someone else—commitment. But she was right. Most people would’ve seen this assignment as a part of his job. Didn’t cavalrymen die all the time for some cause or another? It was why her father had wired the fort command in the first place. Who else would he have turned to?

The federal marshals in Indian Territory had their hands full, with too many miles to cover for the number of men they employed. It was the same with the military, as witnessed by Jennings sending Johnny to the orphanage with Krissy alone. But Krissy’s father only wanted someone to undo the mess he’d created and make it all go away; get his daughter back in time for her big wedding day, and all in one piece; and set everything to rights again. With Krissy none the wiser, of course.

And Johnny was the one he was counting on to do that. What he *hadn’t* known was how Krissy’s new view of herself and the world, along with her independent way of thinking, would affect this outcome. Her enlightened take on this situation changed everything.

Finally, he nodded. “I understand,” he said solemnly. “I have to ask...

have you ever killed anyone?”

She shook her head. “No. And I hope it won’t come to that. But if it does, I will protect you, just as you’ll protect me.”

His heart constricted. She looked so sincere, so innocent. *When had anyone ever cared this much about what happened to him?*

“Who do you think it could be? Is there any possibility it could be an enemy of yours? Or are you sure it’s someone trying to collect the five thousand dollars on me?”

He sighed. “Doesn’t matter. Both of us will be killed if he gets the drop on us, Krissy. My gut says it’s someone after you and that reward money.”

She gave him a startled look. “*It doesn’t matter?*”

Johnny laughed. “Well, you don’t believe they’re gonna leave a witness behind, do you?”

“I never even thought of that.”

“I know. Those kinds of details are things a beautiful young woman should never have to concern herself with. But unfortunately, you’re going to have to be thinking ahead. And be wary of everyone, honey.”

She shivered in the heat. “I can’t wait to be done with this—to know we are both safe again.”

“I know. It’ll all be over after tomorrow.” They sat silently for a moment, then Johnny said, “I’ll do my best to protect you, Kris.”

She reached for his hand and squeezed gently. “I know you will. I don’t take that lightly.”

“Let’s head back and look at that note you found with the pink pistol,” he said as he stood, helping Krissy to her feet.

“I have to admit I’ve wondered about that note all day,” she told him wryly.

He flashed her a grin. “I’ve been curious myself. Let’s go see what it has to tell us.”

They’d gone only a few feet when he said, “Stop here a minute. There’s

something I want you to see.” He pulled her close into a gentle embrace.

“Look over my shoulder toward where the embankment rises. See it?”

She nodded. “What’s there? A person?”

“No, a cave. It’s pretty well-hidden, but I wanted you to know where it is in case we get separated, or—*worse*.”

Just then, Krissy made out the entrance and she gave a slight nod. “I see it,” she said softly.

“I don’t want to call attention to it, in case we’re being watched.”

“How do I get over there?” she asked. “I’m not much of a swimmer.”

He reluctantly released her, putting his arm around her as they made their way off the rock and down the rise of the embankment to level ground.

“To your right—don’t look—there is a narrowing of the river and an old log across it there that makes a bridge. It’s only about thirty feet from here. If you fall, the river is shallow. You can cross there. It’s about waist high, and you can touch the underside of the bridge for guidance, if it’s dark.”

She nodded. “Is it well known? Does it get regular use?”

“Only the people who live in this area know about it. And people like me and my brother. I’d say it doesn’t get a lot of use. It’s small, but it’s a good place to take refuge, if needed.”

They walked slowly back to the campsite, and Krissy retrieved the gun case from their packs. Johnny took it from her, and they settled themselves a little space away from the fire as early evening began to set in.

Krissy unlocked the box with the small key and lifted the lid. She carefully removed the folded parchment, and with a gentle touch, began to open it.

She held it toward Johnny, and he moved closer, taking one side of it so they could read it together.

*She who possesses this pistol, possesses an opportunity that must not be squandered. Cast in the tender dreams of maidens from ages past, the steel of this weapon is steadfast and true and will lead an unmarried woman to a*

*man forged from the same virtuous elements. One need only fit her hand to the grip and open her heart to activate the promise for which this pistol was fashioned—the promise of true love. Patience and courage will illuminate her path. Hope and faith will guide her steps until her heart finds its home.*

*Once the promise is fulfilled, the bearer must release the pistol and pass it to another or risk losing what she has found.*

*Accept the gift . . . or not.*

*Believe its promise . . . or not.*

*But hoard the pistol for personal gain . . . and lose what you hold most dear.*



KRISSY BREATHED a long sigh as she finished reading the first entry. She glanced quickly at Johnny, who had let go of the paper, leaving it in Krissy's fingers.

"Sounds serious," Johnny said finally. "Like a great piece of advice, but you must follow it to the letter—*or else.*"

"Do you believe it?"

Johnny gave a low laugh. "Doesn't matter. It's directed at *you*, Krissy. You were the one in possession of it. And it *is* pink. You'll have to decide if you choose to lose what you hold most dear."

She recognized the teasing note in his tone and swatted his arm. "Don't make light of this, Johnny. Of course it's meant for me. It says 'she' and 'her' all through it. It somehow appeared in *my* bag. And..." She broke off, unwilling to go on. The emotions she felt for Johnny were so foreign to her she couldn't sort them out herself yet, much less put them into actual words and try to talk to him about them. Her face warmed, and she was glad of the gathering darkness.

"And?" Johnny prodded her to continue.



“Never mind. Let’s see what these other notes say.”

*A gift from the great Annie Oakley, this pistol carries a legacy of love. If you possess this pistol and find love, please record your name and a bit of your story to encourage those who follow.*

***Tessa James married Jackson Spivey on March 3, 1894 in Caldwell, Texas - I was aiming for his heart but accidentally winged him in the arm. Thankfully, forgiveness and love cover a multitude of mishaps.***

Johnny gave a short laugh. “She shot him.”

Krissy cut him a quick glance. “It was an accident. And he did forgive her.”

“Wonder what happened...*really*...” he mused.

“Let’s read the next one,” Krissy said, changing the subject, although she was burning to know what had happened between Tessa and Jackson, as well.

***Rena Burke wed Josh Gatlin on June 2, 1894 in Holiday, Oregon – When my trousers and target practice didn’t send him running, I knew true love had hit the perfect target for me.***

“Guess I could say the same about trousers,” Johnny teased, pointedly glancing down at her long pants. “But I wouldn’t dare. I kinda like the way you look in those. I bet Josh felt the same way about Rena.”

Krissy’s face flushed with the compliment. Hardly knowing how to respond, she resorted to silence.

“Well, looks like these ladies have found true love when they were in possession of the pistol, Kris. Your turn.” He flashed her a teasing grin, then laid back on the quilt, propping up on his elbow.

Krissy barely heard him. Everything was beginning to make sense to her now. Johnny may not be a believer, but she certainly was. From the moment the pink pistol had been in her possession, even before she’d known it was in her bag, she’d felt a change.

When she’d come to, after being knocked out on the overturned stagecoach, she’d felt a deep emotional connection with the dark, handsome

stranger who was bending over her. The warm strength of Johnny's hands comforted her even when she didn't yet realize what had happened.

His voice had covered her in a blanket of security, and his midnight eyes had reassured her that she'd be safe and well, even before he'd spoken the words to her.

But, at that time, her immediate feelings toward him were so unlike a normal reaction from her. She looked back on it now with the knowledge that there had to be more at work than her confusion at waking from being knocked senseless in the accident.

Krissy was not the impulsive type. She'd worried over her odd reaction to Johnny from the very moment she'd laid eyes on him. And that response, now, at least to her way of thinking, could be placed squarely at the door of the pink pistol being in her possession, even without her knowledge of it at the time. Now, after she had handled it, picked it up and held it, she was even more certain about the connection.

She'd never believed in love at first sight. There had been no thought of it for her, since the expectation of her marriage to Eversby had been with her from the day she was born six months after he had come into the world.

Really, what other conclusion could she draw, especially after reading the first message about what the pink pistol's purpose was? After reading about how it had brought the intended happiness of true love for two other women before her, she was convinced.

Well, this was where the pistol's meaning and purpose would end, she was sure. As if her budding attraction to Johnny hadn't been bad enough, the moment she'd grasped that pistol and handled it, there had been no doubt about her feelings. She'd been afraid of the strength of her emotions, and her ability to think of nothing but the kiss they'd shared. And the fact that *she'd* placed far too much importance on it.

*That kiss had evidently meant much more to her than it had to Johnny. She'd been a fool to think it meant any more to him than an experiment to see*

*if she'd allow it.*

Johnny had carefully kept his hands off of her and his lips to himself since then, except for the few times he'd comforted her with a gentle touch or had put his arm around her.

"Johnny, do you think the pistol will work for me?" she blurted. "Now that I've decided not to marry Eversby, I mean?"

Johnny's face was impassive, his voice steady, as if he'd been expecting her to ask this very question. "Maybe it'll help you see Eversby in a different light, and you won't have to call the wedding off after all."

*The wedding. Her sacred union with Eversby...an event that meant so much more to everyone else than to her.* "No. Nothing can change that now. I'm talking about it working for the future—*my* future. And if it does, how long should I give it? I'm just wondering how long I should wait for it to prove itself—"

Like lightning, Johnny reached for her. He pulled her to him, cutting off the rest of her words with a kiss that melted her and stole her breath until she could think of nothing else. When he lifted his lips from hers, he gave her a searching look.

"I think it happened for you—*for us*—about two seconds after you took that gun out of the case yesterday, Krissy," he said, his voice raw with emotion. "You're all I've thought about since then. All night, all day. Yes, I believe it works, but I'm not sure it isn't faulty where we're concerned." The confession was unexpected, ripping away any doubts Krissy had entertained just moments earlier.

But her absolute joy crashed at his last words. "Why, Johnny?" She laid her head on his chest, as if she could blot out his misgivings by holding him near.

He paused, then slowly his arm came around her, holding her close to him. "Look at us, Krissy," he said quietly. "The princess and the saddle tramp. Neither one of us knows what's coming next. You've decided to stay

here with no means of support. I'm mustering out of the army next week, as soon as I see you safe from...*this*. Your exhibition. I've got some money put up, but it isn't enough to—to plan a future for us. Especially not for the style of living you're used to."

"But I don't care about that!" She lifted her head to look at him.

He shook his head. "Your family expects you to make a good match, to marry well, and live as you deserve—in comfort. And obviously, I'm not able to provide that for you yet."

"My family," she said in a wry tone. "They want the best for me. But they don't know what that is. Only I can make that decision. I realize that now."

She nestled closer to him listening to his heart beating. How could she choose Eversby over Johnny? It was unthinkable! How could she make any kind of life in the rough country with no income? She doubted there were many engagements for sharpshooting females out here, though she had some talents. She supposed the only thing she'd be able to make a viable living at would be to accept a school teaching position. A rueful smile curved her lips. Though she'd always secretly wished to be a teacher, it was only a guilty dream in her family's view. Young women of her upbringing and social status did not teach school. What would mortify Mama and Papa the most, she wondered. Canceling her wedding, staying here in Indian Territory, or becoming a schoolteacher to support herself?

*Or...marrying Johnny.*



“K rissy will be so surprised to see us!” Brooklyn’s excitement at seeing her older sister was catching.

“Well, Kitten,” her father smiled, “we won’t make it in time for the exhibition, but—”

“Due to poor planning on your father’s part,” Letitia Donovan interrupted with a smug look at her husband. “Isn’t that right, Delano?”

Delano Donovan quirked a dark brow at his wife. His expression said silently what he’d love to have said aloud to the controlling woman he’d been married to for nearly thirty years. She merely tittered in satisfaction at his fuming anger.

“She’ll still be happy,” Brooklyn asserted. “She cares about *us*, Mama, not the fact that we didn’t make it in time to see her exhibition.”

“Of course, dear. But it would have been nice to see her performance if your father hadn’t been so short-sighted. If only we had left the day she did!

We could've all traveled together, and perhaps this godforsaken country could have been more bearable for everyone, including our dear Kristalee.”

Brooklyn rolled her eyes at her younger sister, Narissa, who sat across from her in the jostling stagecoach. They'd almost made it to Rivers' Gap Station. There, they'd find out how much of a head start Krissy had on them to Hugo.

Perhaps the station owner had a conveyance they might rent and continue on toward Hugo. Delano didn't understand this feeling of foreboding that had settled over him almost from the very moment Kristalee had left Raleigh.

The thought of this whole fiasco made perspiration break out on his forehead. He pulled out his handkerchief and dabbed at his brow. Though this heat was overwhelming at times, this feeling of *sweating* was due to panic and poor decisions on his part.

He supposed he could have told Miz Annie that Kristalee couldn't possibly perform so far away with wedding plans still to be concluded. But he didn't like to lie, and Kristalee had looked so unhappy for the past several months. In his heart of hearts Delano had hoped this journey west might have diverted Kristalee and given her something to think about other than Letitia's harping and her obsession with the upcoming wedding. A wedding Kristalee didn't seem the least bit excited about.

Come to think of it, the boy, Eversby, didn't seem too thrilled at the prospect, either. Not for the first time, Delano admitted he had qualms about the upcoming nuptials between his daughter and Eversby Witherspoon the Third.

Kristalee had always done her duty, even when she hadn't been one hundred percent agreeable to whatever she'd been asked to do. The Witherspoon boy was much like his father, *indecisive*. Delano was certain Kristalee would take the reins in the marriage, at some point. But still, he didn't believe she'd be happy. She was, again, just doing her duty.

“I feel as if I'm going to swoon from this ungodly heat, Delano,” Letitia

huffed. "Why did I ever go along with this crazy idea of yours?"

"Because we love Krissy, and we want to surprise her, Mama," seventeen-year-old Narissa said in her practical way. "Isn't that so, Brooklyn?"

Delano watched the smile Brooklyn gave her younger sister. Narissa always seemed to gain the upper hand with Letty. Even though Narissa was the youngest, she knew better than any of the others how to handle her mother.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose that's exactly why," Letitia conceded, not waiting for Brooklyn's agreement.

Just then, the stagecoach driver, Bill Isham, called out, "Rivers' Gap Station just ahead!"

Delano breathed a sigh of relief. He would never have embarked on such a venture with Letty and the girls if he hadn't had this prickly feeling of nagging worry that would not leave him. He had to be certain that Kristalee was safe and sound. He must see it with his own eyes. Nothing else would do.

When they'd reached Fort Smith, he'd been reassured that Kristalee would be in safe hands with her escort that he'd wired for. It was all handled. The fort commander had not been pleased, but he assured Delano the situation had been taken care of, and a rider had been dispatched to carry the telegrams he'd sent previously to Major Jennings, who was patrolling the area of the stage station where his daughter would be arriving.

Delano took heart that perhaps he and his family might catch Kristalee and Clara Dinwiddie, since Mrs. Dinwiddie had wired him about a two-day delay in St. Louis due to a train wreck. They'd been stalled there, waiting for the tracks to be cleared and made safely passable again.

Delano had sent a wire on to Hugo to the sheriff, asking that Kristalee be delayed until his and Letty's arrival. He had not waited for a response. There was no time to spare, in his mind.

As the driver slowed the team and pulled into the station yard, Delano felt relief at being so close to Kristalee. He watched Narissa close the book she was reading, Shakespeare, and slide the heavy volume into her carpet bag. Narissa was always prepared for anything and completely practical. Much like Kristalee in that regard.

Brooklyn, he worried about. She often had her head in the clouds and was much more the dreamer than either of her sisters. All three of his daughters were beauties, and each had her own particular talent. He wanted them to all find happiness. Right now, he had his doubts about Kristalee.

Delano snatched up his hat and hastened from the coach's interior so he could hand the women down, but the shotgun rider had already beaten him to it, standing beside the door and patiently waiting.

A young boy had come to unhook the spent team and a man, probably the boy's father, was leading the fresh team over to take their place.

"Be here about an hour, folks," the driver announced. He looked at Delano questioningly. "Uh, in case you change your mind, Mr. Donovan, and want to continue on... Well, in any case, go on inside and get yourself some supper. Let your stomach settle from all the bouncin' around."

He looked at Delano. "Mr. Donovan, this is where we'll part company, as you and your ladies will be traveling southward toward Hugo." He looked uncertain as he said it, as if questioning Delano's sanity. "As I say, unless you change your mind."

"Mr. Isham," Delano replied, inclining his head toward the driver, "thank you for all you've done and for the information you provided about how to get to our destination."

Isham shook his head. "I surely hope you know what you're doing, setting out on this road toward Hugo with three ladies."

Delano forced a smile. "I'm sure it'll be fine. Would you be so kind as to speak with the station master and make arrangements for a suitable conveyance for us?"



Isham studied the ground a moment. "I'll speak to him, all right." He looked up, meeting Donovan's stare. "But that don't mean there'll be a fitting carriage for this rugged land. There's barely more'n a cow trail down south to Hugo. There's talk of a north-south rail line goin' in there a year or two from now, but ain't nothin' there now except a trail you can barely make out."

Delano's smile faded. "What do you suggest, Mr. Isham? I'll pay you, if you'll take us there."

Isham gave him an incredulous look, followed by a sharp bark of laughter. "Now, how can I do that? I've got a route to run for Butterfield. I'm not about to leave and go off down to Hugo, Mr. Donovan."

Isham's eyes narrowed as he studied Delano. "You're pretty used to havin' ever'thing your way." He shook his head. "Ain't how it works out here, Mr. Donovan. I'm sorry."

Isham turned to head toward the station master, and Delano felt the man's disgust for him, even with Isham's back to him.

After a moment, Delano followed the women and the shotgun rider into the station, secretly glad for the respite of a solid, unmoving floor beneath his feet.

As he entered the station door, he was surprised to hear a call of greeting from the interior. His eyes adjusted from the brightness of the sunlight, and he recognized Clara Dinwiddie as she embraced Brooklyn.

"Oh, my dears! Why I never dreamed I'd be seeing you all here in Indian Territory. My goodness. What has happened?" Her face clouded. "Oh, I hope a tragedy hasn't befallen someone."

"Oh, no, Clara, dear!" Letty hugged the older woman. "But where's our Krissy?" Letty glanced around as if she expected her eldest daughter to come around the corner from the hallway at any moment.

"Come, sit down, and eat while you talk," Becky Rivers said. "Got some good fried chicken ready for our supper today."

When they were all seated, Brooklyn leaned toward Mrs. Dinwiddie

anxiously and asked, “Where’s Krissy, Mrs. Dinwiddie?”

“Oh, my dear, Krissy is gone. She and her handsome cavalry captain are traveling to Hugo together.”

“But—why aren’t you with them?” Letty asked barely able to keep the reproach from her tone.

“Well, our stagecoach overturned just two miles from here, and it threw me around so badly I could barely keep my head on! There wasn’t any way I could spend three hard days in a saddle, and I didn’t want to impede Krissy. She said it was terribly important for her to arrive on time. We’d lost those two days in St. Louis, you know.”

She fixed Delano with a baleful stare. “I dare say, the next time we arrange such a journey, we need to allow for several more days in case such a mishap occurs, Del. Thank goodness Krissy wasn’t injured and was able to continue on with that nice Captain Houston, but it would’ve been all the same had things turned out otherwise.” She pursed her lips and cut into her chicken breast.

“So, it’s just Kristalee and uh...Captain Houston out there on the trail together?” Delano asked cautiously.

Mrs. Dinwiddie daintily dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. Fixing him with a gimlet eye, she said, “Delano, I would never have allowed that under any circumstances had I had any worries about our dashing Captain Houston. He is a good man. An *upstanding* man. He would not harm a hair on our dear Kristalee’s head.”

“Yes...but...Clara, her reputation will suffer all the same,” Letty put in as gently as she could. “People will talk.”

“People always talk,” Narissa muttered.

It didn’t escape Delano’s notice that Brooklyn elbowed her little sister discreetly and slid her a glance. “Was Krissy hurt in the accident?” Brooklyn asked.

Clara shook her head, sending gray curls bobbing. “Oh, no. She was

perfectly all right, thankfully. She'll be able to make it just fine. In fact, they left two days ago. They will be there tomorrow evening for her performance, I'm certain."

"Was anyone else hurt?" Narissa asked, her curiosity evident.

"Yes, sadly, the driver was killed. The shotgun rider has a broken leg." Clara nodded toward the hallway. "He's recovering in his room, and another passenger, Mr. Matt Russell, stayed over to help us care for him, what with little Becky's condition and her husband's station responsibilities taking up so much of his time.

"Another passenger, Mr. Streetman, was killed in the accident. His widow left this morning on the first stage that came in. It was very tragic. Krissy and I were extremely lucky."

Delano ate in silence, feeling his house of cards crumbling around him. If the exceptionally proper Witherspoons had any inkling that Kristalee was traveling in the wilds of Indian Territory alone with a man, there would be no wedding.

His daughter would be damaged goods for anyone of their social standing, in Raleigh, or anywhere else.



AS DARKNESS FELL, Krissy helped Johnny arrange a fake campsite with their bedrolls beside a banked fire. There was only a faint glow, barely enough to see the location of the bedrolls. The animals were tied near the river, and that was where Johnny and Krissy would be before long, lying in wait.

Krissy had to admit to a feeling of curiosity more than fear. She wanted to get to the bottom of it all and put this behind her. Once tomorrow came and went, she'd be on her own. The idea was exhilarating, but she had to admit, also frightening.

But she had a good feeling all would be well in her world if she could

survive this last exhibition.

As she took pains with her bedroll, Johnny gave her a nod and left her, heading toward the horses, ostensibly to be sure they were secure for the approaching night.

Krissy felt some trepidation, watching him walk away. She reached for the gun in the waistband of her form-fitting trousers, pulling it out and checking it. Even though she knew by the weight of the weapon it carried a full load of ammunition, it comforted her to check it this one last time.

She stood up and walked away from the banked fire as if she were going to the animals, following Johnny. Under the cover of darkness, she veered away, heading for the log bridge he'd described. They'd argued earlier about her going to the cave for safety and waiting, but she'd put her foot down.

"I can shoot as well as you," she'd told him flatly.

"It's not that, Kris," he'd replied. "You've got to stay safe. They're going to be trying to kill you first, then come after me."

"I realize that. But they don't know we're on to them."

He'd turned and taken her by the shoulders, and she could see he wasn't sure whether to shake some sense into her or kiss her silly. In the end, he'd done neither.

"Don't distract me. Just at least say you'll wait for me by the bridge. Don't make yourself a target."

She'd given in to him, and she would keep to her part of that agreement, unless gunfire erupted, and he needed her. If that happened, she'd be in the thick of it.

Krissy was glad she had situated herself near the bridge, just in case. She wasn't certain she could've found it if it had been any darker.

She'd sat down near a large willow tree, snuggled against the base of it, as if it could protect her. At least it offered some bit of shelter as a place to hide and wait.

Johnny had walked back toward the campfire as if he hadn't a care in the

world. It was full dark now, and she could see him as he disappeared in and out of the shadows. It would be hard for anyone to take a shot and be accurate. Hard, but not impossible.

But it wasn't time to worry yet. Johnny had said he figured they'd wait and give him and Krissy a chance to fall asleep heavily before they made their move.

This waiting game had Krissy on edge. Johnny had been coldly impassive when he'd described his plan to her.

In the darkness, it would be impossible for the killers to tell if she and Johnny were sleeping. They'd have to be in the camp area in very close proximity. No shots could be accurate, otherwise. Johnny assured her the killers would do whatever it took, even if it meant getting dangerously close and risking being killed themselves.

By that time, Johnny would have the drop on them from behind a nearby tree. The campsite offered a perfect view of anyone who approached from several feet away. Shooting from farther away in the darkness offered too little accuracy.

Krissy shivered, thinking of how she and Johnny had placed some of the green leafy tree branches under their ground sheets to add bulk. As if a human were there, sleeping.

Right now, she couldn't let her thoughts drift or be distracted by visions of what her future might look like. Those ideas would have to wait until after tomorrow night's performance.

She was afraid. Not just for herself, but especially for Johnny. He would take chances he shouldn't take, be too reckless with his own safety, to protect her. He thought, she was certain, that her shooting ability was highly overrated. No, it was true she'd never had to shoot to kill another human being, but that didn't mean she *wouldn't* do so if she found herself in such a position.

Especially if it was someone she'd come to...*to love*. Panic flashed

through her. *Oh, how could this even be happening, logically?*

Just a few short weeks earlier she had been facing a neatly planned life that she'd been told was what every young lady wanted. Wedding plans, a groom who would provide a good life for her, a beautiful home of her own, and an elevated position in the society she'd been raised in.

Now, she'd come into mysterious possession of an exquisite gun case with an unusual pink pistol inside. The paper accompanying it claimed the pistol had the power to forge loving relationships, with signed proof from two other people who seemed to verify those unbelievable assertions.

Yet...wasn't she living proof of it herself? She wasn't fickle. She had always known what she wanted in her life, or at least, she *thought* she did. Perhaps that was the difference. She hadn't realized what a big world this was. Nor had she understood how many choices were waiting for her outside the confines of the society she lived in.

So much to see and do! So many worthwhile endeavors to involve herself in. A life that could be completely different than the one she'd always imagined for herself. Did she dare?

Was the legend of the Pink Pistol something she could truly believe in? Something that would provide a love that lasted?

She touched her lips that tingled at the very memory of the hot kiss Johnny had given her earlier. He was in love with her, too. It wasn't something he'd planned on, she was certain. It wasn't something he even wanted to acknowledge, by the way he acted.

She suspected he was the kind of man who didn't want any emotional entanglements, especially after the early years of his life at the hands of the horrific headmaster at the orphanage, Hannibal Malcolm.

Though Johnny had told her briefly about the man, it was what he didn't say that let her know how those years had damaged him. He seemed determined to be a loner, not let anyone into his realm, and yet, he was somehow compelled to allow her in, after all. It had to be the pink pistol!

What else could it be, to cause these feelings between them so soon? What else could make her turn her back on her carefully planned future with Eversby? What else could make her realize so definitively that she was not in love with her fiancé and never had been?

Possession of the pistol had changed everything, and it was too early to say what the outcome would be—good or bad. She shook her head at her thoughts.

“Please let it be good,” she whispered. “For all our sakes.”

Just then, six shots rang out from the direction of the campsite. From the spacing of them, Krissy realized they came from multiple guns.

She leapt to her feet, melting against the tree for a moment before flying toward where she knew Johnny was waiting. Heedless of moving quietly, she scrambled along the riverbank toward the place where Johnny had been earlier, by the animals.

Low voices sounded as she neared the horses, and she stood beside the big animals for a moment, trying to get her bearings and make out the scene before her.

Two men lay on the ground. Johnny knelt beside one of them. Relief flooded through her at the sight of Johnny alive and well.

As she neared, she heard Johnny ask, “Who paid you, Colvin?”

The man wheezed an answer that was unmistakable, even in his breathlessness. “Hannibal . . . Malcolm.”

She sucked in a startled breath. *The headmaster at the orphanage*. The man she would have to put on a performance for tomorrow evening. The man who had been unspeakably cruel through the years to so many helpless children.

It was at that moment that Krissy realized what she was going to do. She would see every child at that orphanage set free from the man who had tried to have her and Johnny murdered!

Johnny muttered a low curse.

Colvin said, "Promise you'll bury...me...decent."

"I won't bury you at all," Johnny snarled.

"Yes," Krissy said as she took a step toward the men. "Yes, we will, if you tell us why he tried to have us killed and if there are others he's hired."

Johnny turned to look at her. "Kris—"

"We need to know," she said calmly. "You don't have much time, Mr. Colvin."

Johnny glanced down at Colvin and gave him a reluctant nod.

"He wanted the five thousand dollars..." Colvin wheezed. "Hired me and...and Ellis over there...to do the job. Now, we're both goners, for sure."

"Anyone else?" Johnny asked tersely.

Colvin grimaced in pain. "Y-yes. If we failed—which...which we did... then during the intermission of the performance, Thompson and Andrews... they'll steal her away and...do away with her. That's all I know. I swear it."

Johnny gave him a hard look, then nodded in acceptance of what he'd stated.

"Thompson and Andrews—any descriptions?"

Colvin shook his head. "I'm dyin' here! Just give me some...*peace*. Willya?"

Johnny stood abruptly and walked to the other man, crouching beside him to be certain he was dead.

"Ellis?" Colvin called. When there was no answer, he called again for him a bit louder.

Krissy made her way to Colvin and knelt beside him. *No matter what, a man shouldn't die alone*. She glanced at Johnny. He had placed a hand over Ellis's heart near the bloody hole the bullet had made.

He shook his head at Krissy. "He's gone."

"I'm sorry. Your friend is dead," Krissy said quietly.

Colvin gave a sharp gasp. "I'm s-sorry, ma'am. I regret..."

There was a final question in his eyes, obvious in the moonlight.



“I promised you’d be buried. I meant it.”

Colvin gave a relieved nod. “Th...thank...”

Krissy patted his hand as his eyes slid closed, and he breathed his last.



**J**ohnny stood and turned toward the horses. “Guess we better get moving. I don’t think either one of us will get any sleep. Might as well make use of our time. It’ll be cooler in the dark, though slower.”

Krissy came to her feet. “We must bury these men, Johnny.”

“We don’t have time. We need to get moving.”

She strode toward him, arms crossed. “We made a deal with Mr. Colvin. He kept his end of the bargain. We must keep ours.”

“He tried to kill us.”

“Nevertheless, he gave us the answers we needed. And we must keep our word,” she replied calmly.

“No. We’ll take them with us. Bury them in Hugo.”

She started to protest, but he held up a hand and continued. “It’s not a half-mile away from the orphanage. We won’t have to waste time.”

“I’ll save you the trouble,” a voice said from nearby.

Johnny whirled and drew in one motion.

Derek laughed. “Hey. It’s just me.” He stepped out of the shadows, hands up.

“*Derek!*” Johnny holstered the gun and walked to meet his brother. “What the devil are you doing here?”

Derek clapped him on the shoulder. “You told me not to worry, but I couldn’t stop. I told Jennings I was coming after you. He didn’t like it, but he didn’t stand in my way, either.”

“Good of him,” Johnny said sardonically.

“Yeah.” Derek grinned. More seriously, he added, “He understood. We parted as friends, but I imagine it was only because he realized my time is short, and yours is shorter.”

“I’m glad to see you, brother.”

“I’ve done some hard riding to catch you two.” Derek nodded at the two bodies. “Glad this turned out like it did. I heard what Colvin said. Two more of Malcolm’s men waiting, maybe more. It’ll be a big crowd. You’ll need a hand with all that, so we don’t put Miss Donovan in jeopardy.”

Derek kept his tone light, his gaze steady as he held Johnny’s. Understanding passed between them.

“Do you need a rest before we saddle up?” Johnny asked, half teasingly.

“Nah. I’m not *that* much older’n you.”

Johnny laughed. “C’mon, let’s get these bodies loaded up. Their horses can’t be far away.”



DELANO DONOVAN WAS DETERMINED to keep moving and wanted to continue on to Hugo after only a few hours’ rest.

After a conversation with Dave Rivers, Delano had been told he would not be receiving any sort of personal escort to Hugo to reunite with his eldest

daughter and the cavalry captain who had escorted her southward, Captain Johnny Houston.

Rivers had assured him that he knew Captain Houston personally and trusted him completely. There was nothing to worry about where the young lady was concerned. Captain Houston was a trustworthy gentleman, even if he *was* part Indian.

Still, anything could happen in this wild country as evidenced by the wagon accident Kristalee had suffered through, Delano had argued. And, Captain Houston was, had he heard correctly, an *Indian*?

Rivers had shrugged and said, “Yes, he’s part Choctaw. Your daughter is safer with him than almost any other man you could name. I appreciate your concern, but what do you expect me to do about it, anyhow? My wife is expecting any day. I have a shotgun rider laid up with a broken leg who needs extra care in one of my rooms. On top of that, we have stagecoaches coming through here regularly with people who must be fed and horses that must be changed and cared for. And I have a soon-to-be eleven-year-old son of my own who needs some attention once in a while.”

At Delano’s perplexed look, Dave continued. “I have a smaller wagon you may borrow, but it isn’t very comfortable to travel that far in. It’ll be slow going, and a bumpy ride, but it’s in good shape and it will make the journey. That’s the best I can do.”

Delano gave a heavy sigh and waved an exasperated hand. “This won’t do, Rivers. I’ll have to think of something else.”

“At best, you’ll have a hard two-day trip ahead of you, and that’s if you travel alone on horseback.”

“That’s what I’ll do, then,” Delano replied. “Can you spare young Jason to accompany me? I will compensate him quite well for his time, and I’ll see no harm comes to him.”

Dave raised a brow. “Seems like, in this case, it’d be the other way around.”



DELANO CAME into the station in a rush. Letty knew immediately he had something on his mind to tell her, and she knew equally well she wouldn't like it.

"Absolutely not," she protested vehemently. "We are not traveling another mile, and that is final."

"No. Letty, listen to me. I'm going on ahead. You and the girls and Mrs Dinwiddie will follow by wagon."

"Delano, I do not see the purpose in this wild goose chase," Letty said, highly vexed. "We won't make it in time for her exhibition, obviously, unless we sprout wings and fly."

"Nevertheless, Letitia, this is my plan. I just have a very bad feeling about all this." Delano mopped his brow again. "I wish I'd never sent Kristalee out here."

"Well, so do I. This has been nothing but trouble since the day she left, with us behind them almost immediately. And me with a wedding to plan—"

"Oh, Letty, will you hush about the wedding? I'm talking about something more serious."

Letty's mouth flew open, and she stalked toward him, stopping directly in front of him. "What could be *more serious* than Kristalee's wedding plans? There is *nothing* more important, I tell you. Oh, just like a man to look at things this way all because you have a 'feeling'—"

"Letty, I did something I should never have done, and I'm worried."

"What? What did you do?" She waved a dismissive hand before he could answer. "Oh, never mind. I don't care. I'm sleeping in a bed tonight and tomorrow night, too. You take off, and do what you must. I am completely exhausted, and this heat alone is enough to kill a person, even with nothing else to account for in the way of hardship."

She'd stormed off to find Brooklyn and Narissa to tell them what a

complete fool their father was being over this entire affair. Flinging their chamber door open, she entered, then shut it behind her with a loud thud. Narissa stood by the window, Brooklyn nearby.

“Girls, your father is *mad*—absolutely *stark raving mad!*” Letitia’s temper had finally boiled over with her husband’s latest suggestion. But when she delivered the upsetting news, she was met with shocked silence.

After a moment, Brooklyn walked over and sat on the edge of the bed, a thoughtful look on her face. “Mama, you’re right. You stay here. Narissa and I will ride down in the wagon in a couple of days. I’m going to ask Mr. Russell if he might accompany us. Maybe Mrs. Dinwiddie would like to go.”

“Brooklyn, you are as mad as your father!” Letty exploded, incredulous at her daughter’s reaction to the news.

“*Mama!*” Narissa took a step forward. “You are being perfectly dreadful. You have been wretched this entire trip.”

Letty’s breath whooshed out of her at her youngest’s pronouncement.

“I am surrounded by ingrates,” Letty finally hissed. “All of you. You stay in this bedroom until you can show respect for your mother, Narissa Victoria.” She wheeled around for the door, slamming it behind her once more as she marched out of the bedroom.



BROOKLYN LOOKED up at where Narissa still stood. “Rissa, we’ll figure this out. Mama’s in high dudgeon, because she didn’t want to come in the first place. You know how she hates changes of any sort.”

Narissa shook her head. “Brook, you don’t have to comfort me. Mama has been this way for a while now, though I will admit this trip has made it worse.” Narissa’s eyes filled with tears.

“I fear I’ve brought it to a head by confronting her about her abominable behavior,” Narissa said softly. “But someone had to.” She nodded at

Brooklyn. “Maybe you should talk with Mr. Russell and ask if he might help us. But first, speak with Mr. Rivers and find out if he knows anything about this Mr. Russell. We can’t very well go traipsing off on the trail with a man we know nothing about.”

Brooklyn smiled at Narissa’s practicality. “Just remember, Rissa, *he* doesn’t know anything about *us*, either. I daresay, we both use a gun better than he does, more than likely.”



IT WAS close to noon when Johnny, Krissy, and Derek rode into Hugo. With the two bodies strapped across the killers’ horses Derek had located near the campsite, and Krissy and Johnny’s two pack horses, they made quite an entrance.

Johnny was relieved to have finally reached their destination. The first stop would be the sheriff’s office to inform him of the identity of the two corpses, then on to the undertaker’s, and finally to the hotel to check in. And somewhere in all of this, their horses would need to be taken to the livery and seen to.

Johnny wanted to be sure word got around that he and Derek had not only escorted the beautiful sharpshooter to town, but also brought in the two dead men who had tried to kill her.

Sheriff Amos Bell took a cursory look at the two corpses, agreed with the identifying names Johnny gave him, and invited him to come inside for a moment to see if there were reward posters on them.

Johnny turned to Derek. “Can you see Miss Donovan to the hotel? I’ll take care of this and get them to the undertaker.” He gave a nod toward the corpses, wrapped in their bedrolls.

“Sure. I’ll bring the horses to the livery once I get us all checked in. See you there.”

Johnny followed Sheriff Bell into his office and began to thumb through the posters Bell plunked down in front of him.

“Sit, Johnny,” Bell said with a smile. “Easier that way. I b’lieve both those *hombres* have some kind of bounty on them.”

Johnny gave a noncommittal grunt, pulling one of the posters out of the stack as he sat down in a chair opposite Bell’s. “Ellis. One thousand.” He gave a low whistle.

“*Hmm*. Find Colvin, and you might be able to retire.”

Looking up from the posters, Johnny flashed a grin. “Amos, you’re a mind reader.”

“Takin’ up bounty huntin’, Johnny?”

Johnny shook his head, then pulled out another paper and laid it with the first. “Colvin. Another thousand.”

Bell eyed him from across the desk. “There’s a couple more of these bushwhackers I’d love to see right alongside these first two. Names of Luke Thompson and Reston Andrews. They’ve been skulkin’ around here in Hugo off and on.”

Johnny frowned. “Got posters on them, too?” he began thumbing through the posters again.

Bell leaned forward in his chair, compelling Johnny to give him his full attention. “You may be wonderin’ why I haven’t arrested them yet myself, Johnny.”

Johnny nodded. “That thought had crossed my mind. But...I think I might have an idea why you haven’t. You look like you’re short-handed.”

Amos rubbed the back of his neck. “I am. I have been now for over a month, since my deputy packed up and left town. No one else wants the job.” He looked down. “To tell the truth, I’m scared of these *hombres* myself, Johnny. That’s why I haven’t gone lookin’ and tried to bring ’em in. I’m one man. Up until today, it has just seemed impossible—with four of ’em. Now...” he shrugged, “...maybe it’s still impossible. I don’t know. At least,



the odds are a little better.”

Johnny leaned back in his chair and said, “I’m gonna help even those odds a little more, Amos.” He gave him a full account of everything that had happened, including what Colvin had told them before he died.

“I could use your help tonight at the exhibition,” Johnny said. “I know you’re no coward. You’re a man I can depend on. Derek and I plan to see Miss Donovan safe. Knowing these men will be after her helps, but we can’t identify them. You can.”

Bell nodded. “That’s quite a story. I’ll be glad to help and to *have* help. This whole town is afraid of Malcolm and his henchmen.”

Johnny’s eyes narrowed. “Sounds like nothing’s changed in the last twenty years. What’s going on out at that godforsaken orphanage?”

Amos shook his head. “I’m not sure, but you can bet it’s something rotten. Same as it’s always been, seems like. Malcolm’s got connections somewhere, and he is not about to give up that job.”

Johnny’s stomach turned over. “What about those kids?”

“Makes me sick to think about ’em and what could be happenin’ out there, and me not able to do one thing about it.” Bell shuddered. “Malcolm claims he’s a federal agent, duly appointed. I checked it out. He is,” he went on sourly. “I’ve gone out to look in on the kids in the past but, about six months back, Malcolm stopped lettin’ me on the grounds. Said it wasn’t none of my business. That’s when I looked into it and found out he was right. It wasn’t. None of my business, I mean.”

“All that ends tonight,” Johnny said evenly. He went back to scrutinizing the posters, holding his roiling emotions in check. “Thompson—twelve hundred dollars—” He looked up at Bell again as he pulled the poster out and laid it with the others. “Amos, talk about retiring. You could—”

But the sheriff put his hands up. “Oh, no. Not me. I’ve already proven I don’t have the guts I always thought I did. You bring them in dead or alive, and I’ll wire for that money this very night.”

Johnny gave him a long look. "Don't sell yourself short. You never know what you're capable of until you have to do it. I'm counting on your help."

Amos nodded. "I'll be there. You'll have it. You can depend on me, Johnny. Never think otherwise."

"I never did." He pulled out one more sheaf of paper and laid it aside. "Here's the one for Andrews. The biggest reward of all. Two thousand dollars." He gave a low whistle. "Lot of money."

"I hope you get him and Thompson tonight. You'll have cleaned this place up to where we might can live here again. Oh, another thing. You know Malcolm decided to move the exhibition from the orphanage to right here on Main Street? He thought the attendance would be better that way."

"He's got a lot to hide out there." Johnny's voice was rough.

"I agree."

"Wonder if he realizes he won't be on federal land any longer if he's here in town?"

Bell cut Johnny a surprised look.

"Yeah, I'm going after *him*, too, Amos. He's worse than any of these others. And he's not worth a penny to anyone but me, Derek, and all the other orphans who managed to survive."

"How you gonna get them kids out of there?"

Johnny's face was set. "They're going to come into town for the performance. Or else."

"Or else what?" Bell took a deep breath.

"Or else we will take the exhibition to the orphanage, where it was scheduled to happen in the first place."

Bell shook his head. "Naw. He ain't gonna want that. He'll bring 'em to town."

"Any of 'em speak Choctaw? Creek?"

Bell shook his head. "I don't know. They run pretty harsh on them if they don't speak English only."

“Yeah,” Johnny said wryly. “I know. I remember it well.”

“Why are you wonderin’?”

“I may need help from some of the older kids. Thought it would be a good way from being overheard and found out, should the need arise. Anyone in there I can count on?”

Bell smiled. “Yes. Oh, yes, sir, there sure is. Two boys, both mid-teens. Don’t know what their real names are, but they give ’em the names of Dakota and Sage. I’ll point ’em out to you and tell them you’re to be trusted and may need help, if I can get close enough to ’em this evening.”



**K**rissy ordered a bath and soaked herself clean from days on the trail. Though Hugo was a small town in comparison to Raleigh, with talk of the intersecting north-south railroad line coming in the foreseeable future, and with the east-west line already established, there were a couple of nicer hotels already in business.

The exhibition was to begin at six o'clock, and end at eight, with a thirty-minute intermission halfway through.

Krissy had saved a lightweight blouse and a clean split riding skirt for the occasion. She usually wore a dress to perform in, back East, but not this evening. With danger ever present, a split riding skirt and tailor-made lightweight shirt to complete the ensemble would be much more practical than a bulky dress and petticoats.

The heat would still be oppressive, even though September would arrive tomorrow. Somehow, she'd thought that things would be cooler by now. Just

another difference in this raw land than where she was from.

But after tonight, it would all be over. She'd be safe. She'd never perform again, unless *she* decided she wanted to. After tonight, the world was hers to step into however she wanted with no expectations to conform to, at least, none that her parents might levy on her. It was a heady thought. And somewhat frightening, as well.

She rose from the bath, wrapping her wet hair in a towel, then drying herself with another towel. For a few moments, she relaxed at the comfort of something as ordinary as a soft, clean towel. Laying both towels aside, she reached for her blue riding ensemble and dressed.

She went about her preparations in a daze with the feeling of being cared for, of being loved, wrapping itself around her invisibly.

The feeling came from many sources. Derek's care to get her checked in and see that she got an immediate tub of water sent up to her room, which was one of the most luxurious the hotel had to offer, meant more than she could say. Johnny had lovingly squeezed her arm as they'd parted. She recalled the times he placed his hand on her back to steady and bolster her during this exhausting journey.

Of course, there were the kisses they'd shared. She'd come to realize they meant much more than she'd believed, at first. He'd as much as told her he loved her when they'd discussed the pink pistol. She smiled as she remembered inadvertently admitting her love for him, as well, when she'd tried so inadequately to explain her commitment to uphold the honor her father had dropped in the dirt and trampled on.

She couldn't ignore the feelings she'd discovered about herself up to this point. She found pride in the idea of this new awakening and of being responsible for herself in every way. She would never give that up, not to Mama and Papa, and certainly not to someone like Eversby.

She brushed her hair, then ran her fingers through it, surprised at how fast it had begun to dry. Opening a window, the hot breeze blew in, welcome

from the former stillness of the air in her room.

The knock on her door interrupted her musings. She instantly remembered Johnny's advice to be cautious of this very situation. She picked up her pistol that lay nearby on the washstand.

"Who is it?"

"It's Johnny, Krissy."

Turning the lock, she took several steps back and pointed the gun at the door.

"Come in. It's open."

Johnny opened the door slowly. He gave her a solemn nod. "It's all right. Just me."

Krissy sucked in her breath. "You look...so..."

"Clean?" He grinned. "Yeah. I worried you might not recognize me."

Johnny was always handsome, but she'd never seen him at his best. Now, all bathed, shaved, and with his hair just cut, he stole her breath away. From the way he was staring at her, he must be feeling the same way.

Finally, Johnny tore his gaze away from her. "Are you hungry? It's been a while since we've had a good meal. I can send for room service, or we can go down to the restaurant, if you don't mind eating with everyone staring at you." He stood by the doorway.

"It would probably be safer to eat here," Krissy said quietly. "I just wish it were cooler."

Johnny shook his head. "I don't think that'll matter. Whatever you decide, it's still gonna be August."

She laughed. "Yes. I need to stop complaining, don't I? I've never been anywhere so brutally constantly hot." Her smile faded slowly. "I find myself thinking of the children in the orphanage, Johnny, more and more. How stifling their little rooms must be in the summer...how dreadfully cold in the winter months."

She saw by the look on his face she'd triggered old memories for him.

“I’m sorry.” Lifting her steady gaze to his, she said, “I’m going to do something about it, too. I’ve been thinking about this for a couple of days, more and more.

“When Colvin admitted to you that Malcolm had hired him and Ellis to kill me, I knew at that moment what I had to do.” She took two hesitant steps toward Johnny.

“You had to live in terror for those years—you and Derek—but how can we allow one more day to go by, knowing Hannibal Malcolm is still holding children under his power?” She shook her head passionately. “We can’t. Neither of us, nor Derek either, I’m sure.”

He blew out a long breath at the thought. “I agree, Kris. When Malcolm is dead or run out of town on a rail, someone will have to take over running that place. Either that, or take those kids and relocate them.”

“Yes! And wouldn’t that be best for everyone concerned? Obviously, the people here in this town don’t care what’s happened to these children and haven’t cared for generations.”

Johnny’s smile was rueful. “I can vouch for that.”

“Oh, Johnny, where can we take those little ones? How can we make them a safe haven? We don’t even know how many of them there are.”

“We? Krissy...I don’t know what you have in mind, but—”

“Of course, *we*. They’ll never come with me. They’ll be afraid and untrusting. I can’t do it alone.”

There was a thread of doubt in Johnny’s eyes, and when he glanced away, Krissy’s panic overcame her. She’d thought of nothing else on the last leg of this journey.

How could he refuse her? What would she be able to accomplish alone, here in an unfamiliar place among strangers? Miz Annie certainly hadn’t had this turn of events in mind when she’d asked Krissy to do this exhibition!

But knowing Miz Annie, Krissy would bet her bottom dollar the great lady had no inkling of what was happening here, and who Mr. Hannibal

Malcolm really was. Krissy wasn't going to even consider it now. She would think of all that later on, after this night was over. Right now, she had to figure out how to get the children away from their jailer and get them to safety.

She hadn't realized how much she'd counted on Johnny's help and, by his reaction, now that seemed to be off the table.



JOHNNY WATCHED the emotions play across Krissy's face.

How had he managed to get caught up in this? He'd planned to do a job, which was deliver Krissy to Hugo safely and keep her safe while she was here. Then he'd return her to Rivers' Gap Station, put her and her elderly chaperone on the stage back to Fort Smith, and go his own way. Now everything had changed.

But...it wasn't Krissy's fault. And it was definitely a change for the good. If Malcolm was killed tonight, or even if he wasn't, Johnny realized he'd come to the same decision as Krissy had.

The children were going to be saved, one way or another. Whether it meant Malcolm's death or not, they were not going back to the Benevolent Home under any circumstances.

They had to go *somewhere*. He didn't even know exactly how many children there were, what their ages might be, or—well, he didn't know much, did he?

He gave a heavy sigh. There was no way he could do this without help from Krissy. She was perfectly ready to do so, and perfectly willing to try to do everything herself, even. Which was totally unthinkable. Yet, she was determined to try to save these unknown children in unfamiliar surroundings, with no money, and without knowing a soul, except him.

She'd been counting on him. Together, they had a chance. But separately,



it would be impossible.

Seeing the despair and disappointment on her lovely face nearly crippled his own zeal for what needed to be done. *Almost*. Neither of them could walk away from the children now. But was taking on the dilemma of these orphans together enough to build a future on?

Thoughts of her kept him awake at night as he remembered the sound of her lilting laughter at the smallest things. The way she responded to his touch, his kiss... When he *did* manage to sleep, she was there in his dreams.

He blew out a slow, heavy breath. There was only one answer, but how could he ask her? If he did, what if she turned him down? Could his heart survive her rejection?

Though he'd had no clear plan of what he would do once he mustered out of the army, the last few days had changed everything. One beautiful sharpshooting female had come into his life and managed to turn everything upside down in his entire world.

Before, he'd wondered what he would do once he quit the military. Serving as a scout had been something he'd enjoyed. He'd done it effortlessly. He and Derek both knew Indian Territory well, having been born and raised here.

Although always careful to plan every next move, he'd found himself at odds about what was to happen next in his life, until Krissy Donovan had come along with that pink pistol of hers and those odd notes that predicted love would find her.

Looking into her eyes, he knew that parchment had decreed *both* their futures. It wasn't *going* to happen. It already *had* happened. For both of them.

It was an all-encompassing commitment, but he was ready. The only way any of this could work was if Krissy married him. And, if he were honest with himself, that was the only way he could regain any shred of sanity, and maybe get a full night's sleep again.

Before he could say anything, Krissy came forward one last step and took

his hands in hers. The look she gave him was so tender, so honest, his heart melted. He forgot what he'd wanted to say as he became lost in the depths of her eyes.

"Johnny..." Her voice trembled. He should've said something, but his throat was too dry. So, he left it up to her to try and continue. Her hands shook. Her grip on his fingers tightened as she tried to gain control. She closed her eyes, then started again.

"Johnny, I know this wasn't in your plans, and...well, I wouldn't want either one of us to be trapped into something we didn't truly want to do."

She opened her eyes, catching her bottom lip in her teeth as if deciding whether or not she should continue. She drew a deep breath and glanced away but didn't let go of his hands.

"The pink pistol has altered everything I ever wanted or dreamed of," she said softly.

"How?" He knew what she was going to tell him about her change of heart with Eversby.

She smiled wistfully at her own thoughts, then looked up at him. "It wasn't all the pink pistol's ideas. Some of those alterations are mine, and mine alone. I'd already begun to notice things about my relationship with Eversby before I ever embarked on this journey to Indian Territory. I think I knew it wasn't going to work from the moment he asked me to marry him," she said seriously.

The confession surprised him. "Then why did you—"

"Because." She released his hands and turned away, as if she were ashamed to even discuss it. "It was—*expected*. I felt as if I had no choice." After a moment, she added, "I feel sure he must have been overcome with those same expectations. He won't be sorry to have our wedding called off. And all I can feel is relief."

She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin as she stared at the open window, the curtains fluttering in the hot breeze.

Johnny moved closer to her, gripping her arms gently from behind, waiting to hear more. He thought she must be crying, and when she dabbed at her eyes, there was no doubt.

“I-I’m not in love with him. You remember, we talked about that.”

“Yeah, honey. I remember.”

“But, Johnny, I do know what love is, now. And I know I’m—I’m—”  
Finally, she could hold back the flood of tears no longer.

Gently, he turned her toward him and took her in his arms.

“Krissy...”

“No, don’t say anything. Just hold me like this for a minute. Soon, you can muster out of the cavalry, and we’ll part ways, and...and...you can be free of me...”

“Sweetheart, I’ll *never* be free of you. And I don’t want to be.” He gently kissed her hair.

She stopped shaking and became very still.

“Marry me, Kris. See, I learned what love is, too.”

She looked up into his face quickly, every hope and dream flashing in the depths of her dark eyes. He smiled down at her, his lips slanting across hers in a sweet kiss.

“Shadow,” he murmured as he lifted his mouth from hers, then bent to kiss her again.

She gave him a questioning look as he broke the kiss.

“My middle name. Shadow. A well-kept secret I don’t tell just anyone, except a special lady who worries about such things.”

She turned crimson, and he knew she remembered her conversation with Josie the horse at the Rivers’ Gap Station before the storm had hit.

“Oh—” she said on a breath. “You must’ve heard everything—”

“Don’t be embarrassed, Krissy.” He turned serious. “You know, that was the moment I dared to believe you might be able to—” He broke off and shook his head. “But how? You were in love with Eversby and engaged to be

married. How could there ever be anything between us?"

She smiled and put a soft hand to his cheek. "As you say, 'the saddle tramp and the princess...'"

He gave her a crooked grin. "Exactly." The grin faded. "And I'm afraid *that* hasn't changed. You didn't get the glass slipper, but you ended up with the pink pistol." He grimaced. "And I'm afraid I am no Prince Charming."

"You are to me," Krissy whispered. "And I wouldn't call a cavalry captain a saddle tramp, you know. You're much more than that." She paused a minute, then said, "Anything else I should know?"

"Yeah. When we get back home to the ranch, my mother sometimes calls me by my middle name, so I had to confess beforehand. And, sometimes my father refers to me as Jonathan. Which is my actual first name. I wanted you to know that, too."

She gave him an impish grin. "Seems there's a lot for us to learn about one another." She stopped and cocked her head. "The ranch...?"

"Yeah, my parents' ranch, I should've said."

"Is there any possibility we could take the children there? How far away is it?"

Johnny laid a finger across her lips. "You didn't answer me."

"Oh, yes, Johnny. Yes, I will marry you." She pulled him down for a long kiss, then said, "And the sooner the better, I'm thinking."

He laughed aloud. "How about right now?"

"Yes," she sighed happily.

Johnny fingered a soft length of her dark hair. "You know, this won't be the wedding you dreamed of, honey. Just simple, plain, and very small."

"And perfect," she added. "I'll be marrying the right man."



**A**fter collecting Derek from the restaurant where he was waiting for them, they all walked to the sheriff's office together.

Amos Bell was glad to accompany them to the preacher's house just off Main Street near the church. He introduced them and stayed for the short ceremony. He and Derek served as the two witnesses.

Though the preacher's wife offered Krissy the use of one of her dresses for the occasion, Krissy declined. She was beginning a new life in this wild land. It was fitting that she would be married in the clothing she'd wear for her last exhibition.

As she solemnly spoke her vows, she'd never been more sure of anything in her life. Looking up into Johnny's serious face, it was obvious to her he felt the same way: certain of this commitment, and truly in love with her, in spite of not having known one another for a long period of time.

Maybe this all would have happened as it had anyway, whether the pink

pistol had mysteriously come to be in her possession or not, but either way, Krissy couldn't be happier with the way it had turned out for her and Johnny.

“You may now kiss the bride,” the reverend intoned.

Johnny leaned toward her and their lips met in a sweet kiss full of promise and hope for their unexpected new future together.

The reverend signed their marriage certificate below where Krissy and Johnny had placed their signature, and when the ink dried, the reverend's wife put the document in an envelope for safekeeping and handed it to Krissy with a smile as the reverend entered their names and marriage date in his official record book.

As Krissy and Johnny walked out together along with Derek and Sheriff Bell, they headed back toward the hotel to their interrupted dinner plans. Soon it would be time for the exhibition.

Oddly enough, Krissy wasn't worried about her performance or getting through it, even with killers in the audience. Before, once she'd discovered what her father had done, she had experienced moments of near panic from time to time as she thought about it all. But learning what Papa had done had made her realize the need for her to take control of her own life, and she was in the process of doing just that.

She guiltily realized she'd not telegraphed Eversby about calling off the wedding. She couldn't tell him she'd already married someone else. That would have to come later on. And there was no time to telegraph him now. Tomorrow would have to be soon enough.

For now, Krissy told herself, she had other business to deal with. But first, she was looking forward to a good meal. It had been a long day that had started well before daylight. She wanted to eat and then rest for a bit before she performed.

They stopped in at the restaurant but when Johnny motioned a waitress over to place their room service order, Krissy impulsively stopped him.

“Let's just go ahead and eat here, Johnny,” she entreated. “It'll be

quicker, and I'll be able to lie down and rest a while before the performance." She leaned closer, for his ears only, and said, "I don't want us to leave Derek to fend for himself. He looks uneasy."



GLANCING AT HIS BROTHER, Johnny had to agree. Derek *did* look uncomfortable. Following Derek's line of sight out the front window, Johnny wondered what was distracting him.

"Well, Johnny, look who's here," Sheriff Bell muttered. "If it ain't the devil himself."

*Malcolm.* He'd always seemed to be an imposing man to Johnny as a young boy. He hadn't changed much during the last twenty-plus years since he'd last see him. Even with their father present, Johnny couldn't forget how terrified he and Derek had been. What if Master Malcolm killed their father? They would surely die, too. Though Alexander Houston hadn't seemed afraid for his life, both Johnny and Derek realized it was because he was unaware of how truly evil Master Malcolm was. He was capable of any atrocity, and feared no one. Not even their father.

But as they'd ridden from the orphanage on that September day, Johnny remembered how relieved he'd been that there was no snow. It would make it harder for Master Malcolm to track them, and he'd said as much to the stranger who was his father.

Alexander had given Johnny a thoughtful look, then veered away from the beaten path. Johnny knew then that his father, though perhaps unafraid, was careful. And that had given him a little peace.

He understood it. He and Derek had both come by those same characteristics honestly. Unafraid, but careful. And ready. Very, very ready.

Malcolm entered the restaurant with four men. He wasted no time, sauntering directly to the table where Johnny, Derek, Krissy, and the sheriff

had just been seated.

“Well, well, well. Look who we have here. My little sharpshooter and her...bodyguards.” Malcolm stood directly in front of where Krissy was seated, Johnny beside her. Derek and the sheriff both moved to turn their chairs slightly so as not to have their backs toward Malcolm and his men.

“Mr. Malcolm, I presume?” Krissy’s tone held a haughty air as if she were Queen of England herself. Johnny hid his smile at her spunk.

Malcolm tipped his hat with a leering grin on his thick lips. “At your service, Miss Donovan.”

“Thank you, but it is Mrs. Houston now. I was recently married.” She nodded at Johnny who sat beside her, watching everything unfold. His hand casually rested near the gun in his holster.

“May I present to you my husband, Captain Johnny Houston, and his brother, Dr. Derek Houston. Sheriff Bell, I’m sure you must already be acquainted with.”

Malcolm paled, and he took an unsteady step back. He stared hard at Johnny, who returned the look impassively. Then Malcolm bent a disdainful look on Derek.

“I see,” he said after a moment. “It seems as though I’m acquainted with your husband and brother-in-law as well, Mrs. Houston. They were once my—my *charges* at the orphanage before their father discovered where they were and came to collect them.”

His eyes narrowed, his smile forced, he asked, “Remember me, boys?”

“Boys no longer, but we remember.” Derek’s words were short, his glare dark.

Johnny let his gaze rest on each of the men slowly, memorizing those faces. Were Thompson and Andrews among them? Surely, Bell would let them know after the men had gone.

“Mr. Malcolm,” Krissy said, “please don’t think me rude, but we’d like to eat and—”



“Perhaps I could join you?”

Krissy’s eyes snapped fire, and when she spoke her voice was hard and cold as ice. “No. That is not possible.”

“Of course, it is. I’ll pull up a chair.” He rubbed his hands together and began to look around the room for an extra chair.

“As I said, that’s impossible,” Krissy said frostily.

“But why—”

“Because I don’t *wish* for you to dine with us. You and I have a business arrangement. This is not business. Please, leave us. I’ll see you at the exhibition. And I’m looking forward to meeting all the children.”

Malcolm’s face burned red. He bared his teeth and leaned toward her.

She met his look head-on.

“*That will not be possible,*” he mocked. “The children won’t be attending. They’ll be at the orphanage, and the exhibition will be taking place here in town.”

“Oh, but I insist, Mr. Malcolm,” Krissy responded cheerfully. “The children *will be* in attendance. If not, we’ll have to move the exhibition back to the orphanage.” She pasted a smile on her face. “Now, exactly how many children will be attending?”

“Ten,” Malcolm ground out after a moment. “The others are too young.”

“*No one* is too young to come have a good time,” Krissy told him steadily. “I expect every one of them to be in attendance. Why did I come so far if you can’t be gracious enough to allow the children to attend their own benefit? I would hate to have to let Miz Oakley know we are even *having* this conversation!”

She turned to Johnny. “Oh, Johnny, maybe we should just insist on having it at the orphanage. I don’t want any worries over breach of contract, and I remember the contract says—”

“*Enough!*” Malcolm stood over her, glaring at her like an angry bear. “We’ll see all the children are in attendance! Just do your part. We—*our*

*children need the money.”*

Johnny and Derek both rose in unison as a human barricade between Malcolm and Krissy. She glanced at them, then met Malcolm’s malevolent silver stare again.

“Why, of course, Mr. Malcolm,” she said sweetly. “That is exactly why I’m here. And I do hope to be able to give Miz Oakley a stellar report so that perhaps we can make this a yearly event!”

“Good day to you, ma’am,” Malcolm snarled. “Until this evening.”

Malcolm turned to stalk out of the restaurant with Krissy calling after him, “The children, Mr. Malcolm! Don’t leave a single child behind this evening.”



KRISSY SEETHED INSIDE, though she kept the cheery smile on her face until Malcolm and his henchmen had mounted up and ridden away.

“News travels fast.” Derek sat down and leaned back as the waitress brought a pot of coffee and went about filling their cups.

Krissy shook her head. “None for me, please, but I would love some water or tea.”

The woman nodded. “I’ll bring both, Miz Houston. Oh, lawzies, we haven’t *ever* seen such a comeuppance for that man! Thank you!” She walked away with a wide smile.

“Well, that’s one way of smokin’ him out of his hole,” Sheriff Bell said, a note of admiration in his voice. “Very effective Mrs. Houston, but you can bet he won’t forget it.”

Krissy turned a stricken look on him. “Why, Sheriff, I never *intended* for him to forget it. Not for one instant.”

Johnny took her hand at her obvious distress. “What’s wrong, honey?”

“I have a very bad feeling about this evening.”

“We’ll keep you safe,” he said bluntly. “You just concentrate on getting through it all.” He squeezed her fingers gently.

“I’m not worried about myself. The children... How will we be certain they’re all out of the orphanage and here in town?”

Bell spoke up. “I know most of them, ma’am. I’ve only been barred from going onto the grounds there for a few months.”

“We can’t leave any one of them behind.”

“Wait a minute. Are you planning to take the children out of the orphanage for good?” Bell took a sip of coffee. “I’m not sure how you’ll manage that, short of all-out warfare. Those kids are their livelihood. Malcolm and his men are strong.” He met Johnny’s eyes. “You and Derek know.”

“We know,” Johnny said curtly. “And it’s past time something was done about this situation. *Way* past time.”

Bell reddened. “I told you earlier why—why that hasn’t happened. I’m only one man.”

“Not anymore. You have the three of us now,” Derek put in.

“You’ve had an entire town, Sheriff,” Krissy couldn’t help commenting. “Will none of the citizens here stand up with you against him?”

“To be honest, ma’am, no. Not for a bunch of Indians.”

Krissy gasped at his harsh, plain-spoken assertion. Her dark eyes held him pinned in place. After a moment, she said, “It seems not only did the town turn its back on those little ones, but so have *you*, Sheriff.” Her voice stiff with anger, she continued, “I wondered why none of the townspeople would adopt these children and give them a home rather than leaving them to rot in a place like that. I suppose it’s ‘out of sight, out of mind’ for those poor little ones.”

Bell looked decidedly uncomfortable, and she knew she’d hit the nail on the head.

Johnny and Derek were silent as she leaned forward imploringly.

“If you aren’t willing to protect them, Sheriff, at least help us do what we must do.”

“How?” Bell exploded. His hands clenched the edge of the table. “Don’t you think I would if I could?”

Their food arrived just then, the waitress all smiles. Krissy took a moment to breathe deeply and calm her roiling emotions. The timely interruption let the sheriff’s temper cool a little, as well.

“Thanks, Alice,” Derek said. “This looks great.”

“A bit early for supper, but I understand.” Alice patted Krissy’s shoulder. “Gotta let it all settle before the big doin’s later on.”

Krissy nodded. “Yes. Thank you for this. We’ve already had a very long day with our travels.”

“Amos,” Johnny said as Alice walked away, “were any of those men the two we’re looking for? Thompson and Andrews?”

Reluctantly, Bell shook his head. “No. He must’ve left them back at the orphanage to oversee things there.”

“Well,” Derek said, wiping his mouth, “that lets us know there are at least six of them we’ll have to—” He cut a glance at Krissy, then looked back at Johnny, “—deal with.”

“Seven, counting Malcolm himself. Maybe more,” Johnny responded. “We could use more help.”

“Yeah,” Bell answered sullenly. “I know that feeling. Good luck finding anyone.”

“*What is wrong with this place?*” Derek muttered.

“Maybe all the brave people left town,” Bell said morosely. “All the good folks went right along with them.”

“I don’t believe that,” Johnny said. “They might have forgotten how to be as good as they’d like to be, or as brave as they once were, but that doesn’t mean they couldn’t come back around to those things.”

Bell raised regretful eyes to Johnny’s steady look.

“What do you think, Amos?” Johnny prodded.

Finally, Bell nodded. “Yeah. I agree. As long as we’re all in it together, helping each other. I’d like nothin’ more than to be rid of Malcolm and his crew, once and for all and have my town back the way it was.”

“Malcolm’s been here a very long time,” Krissy said, in a pointed and understated reminder that the orphanage had been run by a tyrant for much longer than Bell had been sheriff.

“Yeah,” Bell couldn’t hold her gaze. He looked at the table, staring at his half-eaten plate of food. “I don’t know what I can do. I never shouldn’t’ve allowed him to continue what he started.”

“We have a history. You may not be aware of it,” Derek said quietly.

Bell nodded and looked down. “I am.”

“There may be bloodshed,” Derek went on.

Bell remained silent for a moment, then he said, “If you’re asking me to kill him, I can’t say what might happen. But I can tell you, tonight is the night those kids come out of that place. With Malcolm here in town and the kids here, I believe I can round up enough men to make a sweep of that place and be certain there are no children left there. I’m pretty sure their living conditions will warrant closing the place down, and there’ll be plenty of witnesses.”

“We’ll be keeping an eye on Krissy and the kids,” Johnny said. “I’ll start getting them all over to the hotel. Is the owner someone who might be agreeable to helping us? And what about one of the older kids? Do you think one of them could help?”

“Yes to all those questions,” Bell said with a nod. “Dakota, one of the older boys, will gladly help. I’ll go speak to him first. He knows me. I’ll tell him we need some of the ladies to help spirit away the younger ones to the hotel. I’ll get a suite for them for the night.”

“Put it on my tab,” Derek said.

“Got a plan?” Johnny gave his brother a quick glance.

“I’m an army doctor. These kids look sickly, malnourished.”

“You haven’t seen them yet,” Bell said.

“I don’t have to. I remember it, and I’ll never forget that feeling.”



**T**he plan was pure genius, Johnny thought, but there were a lot of things that had to mesh just right to make it work.

Glancing quickly at Krissy, he marveled at how calm and collected she appeared after all that had befallen her in the past four days. But if he thought about it, it had been a hard time for her much longer than that. She'd been born to money, that much was true, but she'd spent her life duty-bound with very little genuine happiness, from what he could tell.

Even with all that had occurred on this journey of hers, he felt she was happier now than she'd ever been. He made a silent vow that it was only going to get better for her. She deserved every good thing he could give her.

She gave him a smile, a sparkling light dancing in her eyes that promised him the same things he was thinking.

They were going to be happy. If they could survive this night.



THE TOWN TRANSFORMED as the afternoon moved onward toward time for the exhibition. Krissy was surprised to see colorful banners hung across the streets, and tables set up for vendors to hawk their wares and tasty food.

The town establishments had banded together to supply seating for everyone. Churches volunteered their pews. Saloons loaned a portion of their chairs and bar stools. From stores, to hotels, to the school, all had done their parts to prepare amenities for the crowd. There was a makeshift wooden stage floor constructed in the center of Main Street for Krissy's performance. Lanterns were hung all along the street on both sides, as well as around the stage for illumination, in case the night shadows began to settle in before the exhibition ended.

It seemed the entire town was working to get all the preparations ready for her performance. Krissy realized this activity had been going on since before they'd arrived, and she had been oblivious to it earlier. Normally, she'd have been curious and anxious to see what was going on with all the preparation for the event.

But today, she was more anxious to see it all come to an end. The faster it was laid out and ready, the sooner it would all be over.

Johnny and Derek walked near her on either side as they made their way up the stairs to her room. She had intended to spend a few moments alone with her husband, but Johnny had told her he and Derek would see her safely to her room, then would help Amos get everything set in place for tonight.

Derek waited on the landing while Johnny unlocked Krissy's door and opened it for her. "Wait here," he told her, as he went inside her room to search for any of Malcolm's men who might be waiting.

When he came back, he gave her a hurried kiss. "Lock up as soon as you shut the door. I won't be gone but maybe an hour, Krissy. Why don't you lie down and rest?"



She nodded, her thoughts running wild.

“Johnny, they’ll be after you and Derek. Malcolm’s men. And you don’t even know what this Thompson and Andrews look like—”

He put a finger to her lips, then kissed her again. “Get some rest, honey. All this will be over soon. I hate to leave you, but there are only two men in this town I know I can trust—Derek, and Amos Bell. Amos is posting a couple of men just outside your door. We’ve all got a lot of ground to cover to make all this work out. Tomorrow will be a new day...a new beginning. We just have to get through this night.”

“I know. But I can’t help worrying for you.”

Johnny gave her a crooked smile. “You’re sounding like a wife, Krissy.”

She couldn’t help but smile back. “The happiest one in the world.”

“Go on in, Kris. Lock up behind you. I’ll be back soon’s I can.”



“YOU KNOW, Mr. Donovan, we’re making pretty good time.” Jason Rivers rode tall in the saddle. He stopped and pushed his hat back, studying the trail ahead of him.

He’d made this trip many times during his nearly-eleven years. Guiding Mr. Donovan to Hugo would be easy enough, though Pa had warned him about pushing too hard with a greenhorn in tow.

Jason’s chest swelled with pride just remembering his father’s words. He hadn’t thought Pa would give him such responsibility, though he’d made this trip so often he could’ve done it blindfolded. He and Pa traveled to Hugo twice a year to buy a few head of beef and fresh horses. Though Fort Smith was closer, Pa always said it paid to make the longer trip to Hugo as the livestock there was cheaper and just as good. Jason had made the journey with him since he was old enough to sit in the saddle.

Pa had told him Mr. Donovan had offered to pay for Jason’s services as a

guide, since he was totally unfamiliar with where he'd be going. It thrilled Jason to think of making some money of his own, but even more exciting to him was the idea of becoming a scout like Captain Houston.

"I'm trusting you, son," Pa had said.

"Pa, why didn't you want to let me go with Captain Houston and help him when the wagon wrecked? That was a lot closer than Hugo."

Pa had smiled. "Silly of me, I guess, but I had all kinds of things runnin' through my mind—outlaws...and so on."

"Did you think it might be Indians?"

Pa had hesitated, then said, "I guess I *did* have that idea run through my head, Jase, but not for long. I just knew whatever had happened meant danger. That's why it gave me a moment's pause. I have to admit, this request of Mr. Donovan's did, too."

"You know, Pa, Johnny is part Indian."

Pa had looked ashamed of himself. He'd patted Jason awkwardly. "I know. And he's a good friend. But son, I've been here long enough to remember other things. But those days are over," he'd declared. "Everything's changed, but sometimes, the memories slip in, you know?"

Jason nodded. "I'm not afraid, Pa. I'll get Mr. Donovan to Hugo."

Pa nodded. "Just keep to the trail. You'll do fine."

Mr. Donovan looked worn out, Jason thought now, watching as the man swigged down some water from his canteen.

"Oh—not too much, Mr. Donovan. We have a ways to go until we come up on more water."

Mr. Donovan nodded. "Yes. Of course. Thank you for reminding me."

"Sure do wish we could see Miss Krissy's performance. I bet she's really good."

Mr. Donovan was looking kind of sick right now, Jason thought to himself.

"Yes, she is very good."

“Maybe we should rest, make early camp.”

“No, I’ll be fine, Jason, if you will. Let’s ride a bit farther.”

Jason nodded. “There’s a creek a couple more hours along, if we can make it that far.”

Mr. Donovan nodded and smiled, but it was plain enough he was worried about something, Jason could see.

There was nothing they could do but ride on and make camp. There was no way to reach Hugo before the performance.

Even though Mr. Donovan had said Miss Krissy was good with a gun, Jason couldn’t help but think that might be the very thing that had the man worried.



KRISSY SLEPT ALMOST AS SOON as she laid down to rest on the comfortable bed. She felt safe, knowing the door was locked and there were a couple of men posted just outside her room. Johnny had told her they’d be handpicked by the sheriff, and sure enough they were there. She’d had her doubts, but now she could hear them speaking in low tones as she slowly came awake.

It was still warm, but the air was cooling marginally.

She indulged herself a moment longer, enjoying the softness of the mattress. A wave of longing swept over her for the companionship of her sisters...her cousin, Natalie...her best friend, Ember...*someone familiar who was her own age*. She missed them all, missed trading confidences and jokes and laughter.

Those days would never come again now that she was a married woman and would be making her home in Indian Territory. At least, they could all come visit her, though she imagined she would never be welcomed back into the Donovan family home again, not after the choices she had made.

But she wasn’t sorry. Not at all. She found herself looking forward to the

future with anticipation unequaled to what she'd ever felt before.

Once she and Johnny settled down together, she'd write Ember and Natalie and invite them to plan to come for a visit. Maybe in the springtime.

But for now, she needed to get up and prepare for her show.

With a sigh, she rose from the bed and began to freshen up. By the slant of the sun, it was close to time for her appearance, and she was ready to have it over and done with.

She'd finished her ablutions and had the three weapons she'd planned to use that evening laid out on the foot of the bed. Her ritual before these performances was to carefully examine her guns, make sure her ammunition was plentiful, and be certain her bag of accessories contained everything she needed for some of the trick shooting set-ups.

On a whim, she'd loaded the pink pistol and secured it in the mahogany case, then added it to the bag of props. Somehow, she felt safer with it packed to come along with her. She wouldn't need to actually use it, but it just felt right to have it in her bag.

She turned her attention back toward the small array of guns displayed on the bed. The two pistols she always used lay side by side. The rifle wasn't far away from them. She'd already checked both pistols, and now, lifted the rifle to make sure it was clean and loaded.

An urgent rapping on the door interrupted her preparations, both physically and mentally. "Mrs. Houston," a man's voice called, "please unlock the door. It's an emergency."

Krissy shoved the pistols in her accessory bag and turned the rifle toward the door. She took the key from the washstand and shifting the rifle, inserted the key in the lock and turned it, taking a few steps back from the door.

"It's open," she called.

The knob turned, and a blond man stepped just inside the threshold, eyeing the rifle she cautiously held. He was followed by a short, stocky man who shut the door behind them as he entered.

“Clay Rogers, ma’am,” the blond said. “This here’s Mort Wiggins.” He nodded to the burly man standing just behind him. “Sheriff Bell said we was to guard you with our lives, and that’s what we mean to do. Right now, we’ve got to move you. You’re in some danger.”

Despair flooded through her. It was almost time for the performance to begin. She took a deep breath, steadying her jangling nerves. “It’s almost time for my exhibition to begin—”

“I know, ma’am,” the man said earnestly. “But your husband sent a boy up to tell us to move you to safety. Malcolm’s got more men than y’all counted on and we need to get you out of here right now.”

“Where will we go that can be safer than right here?” *Especially with only a few minutes left before she had to go downstairs. Something didn’t feel right.*

“We’ll head on over to another room just down the hallway. Malcolm’s men know this room is yours, and that’s dangerous.”

“I’ll get your bag, ma’am,” the short, stocky companion said as he moved toward her and reached for it. “Do you need anything else? We most likely won’t be coming back here before the performance begins.”

Krissy felt a tingle of anxious uncertainty. These men seemed sincere enough, but, how could she be sure they would keep her safe by moving her elsewhere?

She shook her head, her mind whirling. The tall blond man gave her a reassuring smile. “Let’s get on down to the other room, please, ma’am. I’ll take that for you.” He reached for the rifle.

*In fact, there was no way of knowing if they were her protectors or her would-be killers. At the last second, Krissy’s fingers closed around the rifle, but the blond man took it almost effortlessly with a quick twist as he felt her resistance.*

As he cradled the rifle close, he said, “Thompson, this was easier than ever I thought it would be. Good plan, my friend.”

*Thompson. Andrews.*

Krissy's throat went dry at the menacing laugh the short man at her side made. She glanced at him, and he licked his lips in a meaningful leer.

"Almost *too* easy," he said, eyeing her slyly. "I will enjoy you later, *Mrs. Houston.*" He nodded toward the door. "Let's get out of here, partner."

Andrews held Krissy's rifle close as he turned the doorknob and pulled the door open.

Johnny stood ready, his gun drawn and aimed at Andrews's chest.



"YOU CAN LEAVE this room alive and standing or be carried out dead. Your choice. You have five seconds to decide, and I'm counting..." Johnny said coldly.

"You, back there by the washstand," Derek called from where he stood to Johnny's left. "Carefully set the bag on the bed and come on out here."

Johnny motioned for Andrews to step toward him. "Hand me that rifle slow and easy. I don't mind makin' a mess, Andrews."

"I've heard," the outlaw replied curtly. His right hand drifted closer to his gun.

Johnny gave him a slow grin. "Don't. I will kill you. And I won't think twice about it."

Andrews gave a long sigh. "Be better if you just back off and leave me and Thompson be."

"Not gonna happen. Move." He stepped back to allow Andrews to pass across the threshold, his gaze never leaving the other man's.

A flicker of icy purpose entered Andrews's steady blue stare. He dropped the rifle as his hand flashed downward. Johnny pulled the trigger. Andrews looked stunned as he fell, leaving a clear shot for Derek to hit Thompson as he charged forward, throwing Krissy aside like discarded trash.

Johnny vaguely remembered seeing Thompson go for the six-shooter on his hip, but he wasn't sure if the outlaw meant his bullet for Derek or for him. As his mind cleared, Johnny realized Derek had clubbed Thompson over the head with his pistol.

Johnny lay on the floor, the burly Thompson lying motionless atop him, and Andrews crumpled at their feet.

Grimacing, Johnny shoved Thompson off and rolled him to the side, the man's eyes open, sightlessly staring at the ceiling.

"Well, one of us got him, and good riddance," Derek said mildly. "You all right?"

Johnny nodded, glancing at Derek. "You?"

At Derek's nod, Johnny quickly reloaded, then turned to check on Krissy. Krissy stepped into the hallway, and relief flooded through him. He dropped his gun into the holster, then pulled her close to him and held her tightly. Nothing had ever felt more right. Her arms went around him, and he bent his head to kiss her gently.

"Krissy—did they...Are you hurt?"

She shook her head against his shoulder. "No. I'm fine."

As she pushed away to look up at him, he could see she was telling him the truth. She was shaken and roughed up, but nothing else.

"Hey, there's a couple of wounded men in here!" someone shouted from a doorway down the hall.

Derek holstered his gun and turned to see if there was something he could do to help the injured men. A crowd began to gather, and someone ran to find the sheriff and the undertaker. One look at Andrews and Thompson was enough to know they had not survived.

"I suppose I should get downstairs to the business at hand now." Krissy's voice was brittle. She looked up at Johnny, her heart in her eyes. "I don't want to lose you."

He reached to touch her cheek gently. "You won't. And I'm not planning

on losing you, either, Kris.”

“That man, Andrews. He said Malcolm had more men than we thought.”

“Stay right here where I can see you,” Johnny said. “I need to talk to Derek.”

Derek came out of the room at the end of the hallway as Johnny started that way.

“Doc’s here,” Derek said. “He’ll take over so you and I can be free to continue about our way. Those two injured men were the ones Sheriff Bell had picked to guard the door. They’d both been pistol whipped badly, but I think they’ll survive.”

They walked back to Krissy, and Johnny relayed to his brother what Andrews had said to Krissy.

Derek shrugged. “Could be true, might not. We have no way of knowing. We knew going into this that the number of Malcolm’s men was a mystery. We do know there are at least four more. Those men who were with him at the restaurant, remember?”

“Yeah. I remember,” Johnny said grimly. He looked at Krissy. “Honey, I’ll be nearby if you need me. I won’t send anyone in my place except Derek. Don’t trust anyone but us.”

She nodded. “I didn’t. But not soon enough. I was so foolish, but I never saw the men the sheriff put on guard for me.”

“Never mind,” Derek said kindly. “We just won’t make that mistake again. Can’t afford to.”

Krissy gave a long sigh. “Well, shall we head out? The show must go on.”





**S**heriff Bell caught them on their way out of the hotel.

“Johnny!” He trotted down the staircase and hurried to where they stood by the front door. “Just wanted to let you know, me and some of the men are headed out to the orphanage. We won’t all ride out at once. We’ll drift away in small numbers so as not to call attention to ourselves. It won’t take us long to check everything out.”

As Johnny started to speak, the sheriff held up a hand. “I know, I know. Be thorough. Ain’t no tellin’ what Malcolm has set up out there. Secret rooms and such. I shudder to think.”

Johnny gave him a steady stare. “So do I.”

Bell licked his lips, uncomfortably shifting before saying, “Well, I guess we...uh...better get goin’.” After a short pause, he said, “Some of the women have already started moving the kids and winning them over. Y’all better get out there and provide the distraction we need.”

Krissy nodded. "I'll get my things."



As JOHNNY and Derek flanked Krissy, Johnny reached for her bag. "I've asked one of the older boys, Sage, to be your assistant tonight, just to be able to keep him and you safe. He'll know all the players in this game. He can warn you if something's off."

Krissy gave a relieved nod. "Thank you. And Johnny, you keep safe, too."

Derek reached to take the rifle from her, and she handed it over as they began walking.

They walked on in silence, down the staircase, until they reached the lobby door. Outside, a cheering crowd waited with anticipation for the exhibition to begin.

Krissy was thankful her father had contacted Mr. Farley, a prominent banker here in Hugo, and had arranged for him to collect and oversee the contributions, as well as open an account for the donations that no one could touch until her expenses had been reimbursed and the money could be counted and reconciled. This was standard procedure for the way her father conducted business, and, in this case, Krissy was grateful that she would not have any dealings with Mr. Malcolm over that.

Johnny opened the door, and they made their way outside and down the front steps of the hotel porch, then headed toward the makeshift stage. Krissy forced herself to smile at the crowd and make eye contact with some, along with giving a cheery wave, as if she would rather be here than any place else on earth.

Sage met her at the edge of the stage, taking her accessory bag from Johnny and the rifle from Derek.

"Hello, Miz Houston," he greeted her politely.

Krissy smiled at the young man and was comforted when he said, "I'm Sage. Don't worry. I'll warn you if I see anything. I'll do my very best to protect you."

She nodded. "Thank you, Sage. I'm glad you're here to help."

"Just tell me what to do."

Though he was probably no older than fifteen or so, Krissy felt as if she were speaking to someone who was wise and aged beyond his earthly years. And after what Johnny had told her about that orphanage, she was certain that was the case. His expression and demeanor told her Sage was serious about protecting her.

She kept her smile from slipping, turning to wave at the crowd once more as Sage carried her bag and rifle to the middle of the stage where a table and chair had been placed. A band made up of guitars, banjos, drums, and even a trumpet sounded behind her, and she turned to see they had gathered on the porch of the hotel. They must have been there all along, just waiting for her to make her appearance.

How glad she would have been to help this cause if only Malcolm wasn't involved. She was not going to work five seconds and allow that charlatan to steal the funds that were donated for the things the children needed. Thank goodness for Mr. Farley!

Sage's clothing was ragged and tight. His shoes must pinch, too, she thought, glancing down to his poorly clad feet. But he still had his pride. They had not taken that from him, and she imagined he must suffer at their hands for holding on to his self-esteem.

Krissy stepped to the edge of the stage, looked the crowd over, and lifted her voice in greeting. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! I'm so pleased to be here tonight for this wonderful benefit for the Benevolent Home for Orphaned Indians and Others! I can't think of a better cause to represent, and I'm sure hoping we can all dig down deep in our pockets and give your funds to Mr. Allen Farley, President of the First Territories Bank, for safekeeping."

At that, she noticed Hannibal Malcolm sitting in the front row as he straightened in his chair, startled at her announcement. Anger turned his face red and mottled, and he fixed her with a dark, stormy glare that she gaily ignored as she continued with her speech.

“When I was a student at Miz Oakley’s classes, she always taught us to do good for others, but to also protect ourselves from those varmints who would try to take advantage, and let me tell you, there are plenty of that kind in today’s world, wouldn’t you agree?”

The crowd cheered in agreement.

“So,” Krissy continued as the noise died down, “she taught us how to shoot straight and true, and also how to accomplish a few trick shots, as well. I learned quickly and loved every minute of it. I’m hoping I can use my skills to entertain you and earn some money for the orphanage. Should you care to make a donation, please see Mr. Farley at the Hugo Bank. He will oversee the donated funds.”

She gave Malcolm a bright smile as she deliberately said the banker’s name again. Despite the shiver that coursed down her spine under his malevolent glare, she couldn’t have resisted poking the bear if her life had depended on it. And, it just might.

She opened the accessory bag and took out a mirror, then explained to Sage where to set the target, and where he would stand to hold the mirror for her.

The performance began.



TIME SEEMED to stand still for Krissy as she moved through the shooting exercises and tricks she was demonstrating to thunderous applause. She was more than ready for intermission when the time came, which was as the sun was lowering and the air was cooling under a bit of a breeze.

“Ma’am, I’m to escort you to your hotel room,” Sage told her politely.

“Thank you, Sage.”

He took her arm, and they started toward the hotel. At least, she could sit down to rest, and get something refreshing to drink.

They were just a few steps from the front porch of the Territories Inn when a rough hand from behind clamped around her upper arm.

Whirling, instinctively pulling free, she found herself face-to-face with Hannibal Malcolm. The sneer on his face sent another shiver crawling down her back.

“Mrs. Houston, if I may—”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. Malcolm.” The icy frost in her tone didn’t trouble him. His sneer deepened. Krissy drew herself up with all of her Eastern breeding. “I have but a few minutes’ respite before I must conclude the exhibition.” She lifted her chin a bit higher, refusing to break his penetrating gaze. “Please, sir. Leave us.”

Sage tensed, moved closer to her.

Malcolm’s lips twisted; his eyes narrowed. “*This* is what they assigned to protect you?” He glanced at Sage disdainfully and flicked his wrist. “A child. And an *Indian* one, at that.”

“Not only are you rude, Mr. Malcolm, you are boorish as well.” Krissy’s cutting tone, although soft, came from her cultured upbringing. “I’m afraid I will not have one moment to spare for you, Mr. Malcolm. Not now, nor after the exhibition concludes.”

“Is there a problem here?” Johnny asked coolly, joining them from the milling crowd.

“Not at all, Houston,” Malcolm said sourly. “Except for the fact your little missus, here, is trying to abscond with the proceeds of the exhibition. I am not going to let that happen. That little announcement about Mr. Farley handling the money—”

“My father always makes such arrangements wherever I perform, Mr.

Malcolm,” Krissy cut in. “And I don’t intend to discuss it right now or ever. You will get what’s coming to you.”

“Now, listen to me, Miss High and Mighty!” he roared, reaching for Krissy again.

Johnny’s fist connected solidly with Malcolm’s mouth as they both fell into the dusty street from the force of the blow. Malcolm rolled away from Johnny and leaped to his feet with the grace of a panther, his beefy hands raised to strike as Johnny pushed off from the ground and took Malcolm down again in a hard tackle. Men from the crowd waded into the ruckus and separated them.

“*I’ll kill you, Houston!*” Malcolm shouted as three men held him back.

Johnny shook off the men holding him from pounding Malcolm into the dirt and drew his sleeve across his busted lip.

“You can try,” Johnny responded.

Krissy ran to his side. “Are you all right?” she asked, the sight of his blood making her stomach clench.

“I’m all right,” Johnny muttered, not taking his eyes off Malcolm.

“Sage! Come here, you stupid heathen!” Malcolm snarled.

The boy looked toward Johnny, uncertain.

“Sage isn’t going anywhere with you.” Johnny watched Malcolm. “Not unless he *wants* to, and that’s highly unlikely. It’s his choice now.”

Malcolm scoffed and turned as if to leave. Furtively, he reached for the gun inside his coat, but Johnny’s movement was faster.

“*You do not want to do that,*” Johnny said in a low, controlled voice. He faced Malcolm, his gun in hand and pointed at Malcolm’s chest. “*I promise you.*”

“Look!” someone from the crowd shouted. “There’s smoke comin’ from the orphanage!”

Others took up the cry, spreading the word up and down the street. Malcolm screamed a curse, his fight with Johnny forgotten for the moment.

He stood for one brief instant, looking toward the distant orphanage compound, his expression one of disbelief.

“Everyone grab buckets and let’s go!” someone shouted.

The crowd dispersed as every person ran for buckets to try to do what they could to stop the fire.

“What the devil?” Derek appeared at Johnny’s side.

Malcolm sprinted to his horse, forcing his way through the chaos in the street, elbowing people out of his way.

“Could be a signal from Amos,” Derek said quietly.

“Or he could be lying dead in that compound along with the men he took in with him,” Johnny murmured.

“Only bad things happen there, Doctor,” Sage said. “Never good. You best get your bag and hurry with us.” He stopped and looked at Johnny, as if he’d overstepped his place. “Unless you want me to stay here with Mrs. Houston, sir.”

“Oh, no, I’m not—” Krissy began.

“No. I’m not leaving her again, Sage.” Johnny clapped the youngster on the shoulder, giving Krissy a wink. “I think it might take all three of us to keep an eye on her. Let’s go.”



A FIERY GLOW reflected with an eerie malevolence against the darkening sky as people rushed toward the orphanage on foot, horseback, and with wagons loaded with gunny sacks, shovels, and buckets. Despite the short distance between town and orphanage, it was too late to stop the flames that spread with tenacious determination in the fire-wind, forcing everyone back from the heat of the burning inferno as it engulfed, one-by-one, the prairie-dried wooden buildings. The ramshackle fence around the compound was aflame in spots.

Flames crept up the tall poles of the watchtower. For many moments, Johnny watched, transported back to his childhood at this hated place. Searching fingers of fire, insidious in their flickering reach, touched the plank floor of the guardhouse, crossed to the railings, and continued up the sides. Silently, he urged the fire to burn that loathsome tower to the ground. As long as it remained standing, it represented the prison that this orphanage was. Everyone knew the armed men who manned their posts high up in the guard house under the guise of ‘protecting the children’ were there to keep children from running and to discourage anyone else from poking around or never being seen again if they did.

Smoke billowed in waves, interfering with the fire-stemming efforts to keep the flames from also gaining momentum across the prairie grass, which would likely burn the town to the ground.

“The animals!” Sage shouted, his eyes widening as the flames crept closer to the barn and corral at the far end of the compound.

“Come on, Sage. You’ll need help,” Derek said quickly. Glancing at Johnny, he asked, “Are you all right?”

With effort, Johnny tore his gaze from the burning watchtower and looked at his brother. “Yeah. Got lost in some old memories for a couple of seconds.”

Derek nodded. “I did, too.”

Johnny nodded back. They’d endured the hard times at this orphanage together. Words weren’t needed.

Derek said, “Sage and I’ll be back in a minute.”

“I’ll go look for Malcolm,” Johnny said purposefully. “I want to get this settled.” He turned to Krissy. “You go—”

She shook her head at whatever he’d been about to say. “No, I’ll go with *you*. You are my husband.”

He wanted to argue, but from her set expression, he knew that would be a waste of time and effort. He couldn’t be angry. It was plain she’d meant what



she'd told him about dying for each other. That conversation seemed so long ago. At the time, it seemed far-fetched and unimaginable. But now...

One thing about Krissy, she would do whatever she set her mind to. There was no doubt about that.

"Come on. Let's go." He reached for her hand to pull her through the gathering puffs of smoke across the grounds that were still all too familiar to him.

"Where do you think Malcolm went?" Krissy asked.

"I know exactly where he is," Johnny said grimly. "His office. I imagine he's got all kinds of money stashed away that he's worried about losing."

Krissy nodded, a light dawning in her eyes. "That makes perfect sense. It explains why he'd keep this position all these years when he clearly cares nothing for the children."

The compound was built with the boys' quarters and girls' quarters, two long barracks, facing one another, the large water well in the center of the compound between them. At one end was another long building that housed Malcolm's private quarters and office, and also the kitchen and dining hall. While the fire was making its way through the building, many were yet unscathed, but it wouldn't be long. The manpower and water brigade would ultimately fail against the spreading fire.

Behind that building at a distance was the barn where Derek and Sage had gone to save the animals. There were also supply wagons and tack, but the animals were most important.

As Krissy and Johnny approached the door to Malcolm's quarters, Johnny motioned Krissy to fall back behind him.

"Cover me."

There was no need to tell her. She already had her pistol drawn and ready.

"Stand back," he told her. He gave the knob a hard twist, but it was locked, as he'd expected. He backed up and leapt forward, kicking the door off its hinges so that it fell with a crash into the room.

Malcolm whirled from where he stood on the other side of the room, stuffing cash into his jacket pockets until it was hanging out in tufts. He had a burlap bag at the ready nearby on his small dining table, coins scattered beside it, as if he were preparing to cram the rest of the money into the dirty bag.

Malcolm's eyes widened in shock at the sudden noise and Johnny's unwelcome appearance inside his quarters.

"Houston. *You, again.*" Malcolm laid the money down on the table deliberately, his steel-colored eyes speculative. "Go ahead. Take me in. What will the charges be?" he sneered.

"Too many to name."

"None of them valid without proof." Malcolm raised a brow. "Did you forget that?"

Johnny took a step toward him, his gun in hand. "It wouldn't matter in your case, anyhow, Malcolm. You've got friends in high places that have seen you'll get off, no matter what. So I'm not planning to 'take you in'."

Malcolm's sharp laugh to mask his surprise didn't fool Johnny, who slowly widened his stance, never taking his eyes off the other man. He was aware of Krissy standing behind him, just off to the side and safely out of Malcolm's line of fire. He had no doubt her pistol was aimed at Malcolm, and she would use it if she needed to.

"Oh, it'll be fair, Malcolm." Johnny's voice was controlled and steady. "I promise I'll give you a chance. Though you don't deserve it."

"*What the—*" Malcolm broke off. His eyes wide, his expression incredulous, he watched Johnny.

"Draw. I'm ready when you are." Johnny's voice was coldly dispassionate.

The crackling of the fire all around them was the only noise as they faced one another. Peripherally, Johnny was aware of the frantic, and useless, efforts of the townspeople as they raced back and forth past the wide window

overlooking the compound with their buckets of water and soggy gunny sacks.

“I said *draw*,” Johnny told him in a low tone. “We will end this here and now, one way or the other. I’m not taking you in. You’re on your own.”

Johnny sensed Krissy moving in closer toward where he and Malcolm stood in the smoky interior of the room. He knew she’d be cautious, but he didn’t need the distraction—and his worry for her was only natural, even though she was a crack shot. The roof over them began to send spirals of smoke drifting downward faster as the rafters caught and burned hungrily.

“Krissy, get on out of here,” Johnny said, his attention fixed on Malcolm. “I’ll be out shortly, one way or the other.”

Johnny felt the need to argue emanating from her like live energy. But she didn’t say a word. He heard a soft rustling sound as she turned to go, her boots ringing hollowly on the fallen door that lay at the threshold.

“Go for it, Malcolm,” Johnny said quietly. “There are no witnesses now. It’s just you and me.”

“Y-you know I’m no gunfighter.”

Johnny’s lips curved in a wry smile. “Yeah. I had heard that. I’d heard you were a coward. I’ve seen you in action. That’s why you’ve kept this sorry job all these years, where you can order helpless children around. You’re no gunfighter, that’s for sure.”

Johnny cocked his head as Malcolm made no reply. “You aren’t looking very well, Malcolm. What’s wrong?”

The smoke thickened around them, but Johnny kept a keen eye on Malcolm’s hand, making sure he didn’t become suddenly brave or desperate.

“Please, let’s get out of here,” Malcolm said. “I’ll go with you—”

“No, this day will end differently,” Johnny said calmly. “An unexpected surprise for you, I’m sure.”

“I—I am afraid of fire,” Malcolm admitted, looking around, his body trembling with nervous twitches.

Johnny shrugged and pressed Malcolm. “Well, who isn’t? It’s a terrible way to go. I’m still waiting for you to draw.”

“*Please!*” Malcolm begged.

Begging wasn’t in Malcolm’s nature. Johnny wondered what he was up to.

Malcolm clutched at his chest, his face contorting in pain.

*Was this a trick?*

Malcolm fell to his knees, his hands tightly pressed over his heart.

Johnny moved a tentative step closer. “What’s going on, Malcolm? I want to know *why* you’re doing this. We aren’t leaving until I have answers.”



**M**alcolm seemed to shrink down even more. It crossed Johnny’s mind how the tables had turned. He towered over Hannibal Malcolm as the man begged. Johnny couldn’t help but remember how he’d felt as a child—*terrified*. Now, he could see much of that same terror in Malcolm’s face.

“*Why? What’s really going on in this hell-hole?*” Johnny asked, his tone urgent despite Malcolm’s stifled whimper.

“I’ll tell you!” Malcolm gasped the words. “Get me out of here.” Malcolm cast a fearful glance at the smoldering ceiling above him.

“No,” Johnny said flatly. “I want the truth from you. Now. Right here. This is the only way I’ll get it. I want to know what’s in it for you. Being in charge of the orphanage, I mean. Money is all that matters to you. I know that much. So, how do these children tie in?”

Malcolm shifted on his knees loosening his grip on his chest. “*Houston...*” He coughed and glanced up at the ceiling again.

“There’s only one thing I can think of. Almost too *demonic* to even consider,” Johnny said conversationally. “But, knowing you, I wouldn’t put it past you. I’ll make it easy for you. Are you *selling* those children?” Johnny propped his foot on a nearby stool. “That’s what’s running through my mind. And I think...I think it has to be true. There’s just no other explanation.”

“Yes!” Malcolm’s voice held desperation and terror.

Johnny had expected that admission. Still, disgust filled him as if it were something he’d just learned. “That doesn’t surprise me.” But he found that the confirmation of his suspicions made his skin crawl as he stood looking down at the man who had facilitated such cruelty for so many years.

Malcolm’s gaze locked on the gun in Johnny’s hand, his eyes transfixed on Johnny’s finger as it tightened on the trigger. Desperation and fear gleamed in his eyes.

“Please...*please*, Houston. Get me out...out...” Malcolm broke off into a spasm of coughing. He fell forward on all fours, his arms shaking under the strain of keeping himself upright.

Disgust and anger washed over Johnny again, so strong and deep he felt he could rip Hannibal Malcolm limb from limb and smile while doing it.

“Where are they? Who’s your buyer?”

Malcolm dissolved in a fit of coughing, collapsing face down.

Johnny grabbed fistfuls of Malcolm’s shirt and rolled him over, face up. He crouched close. “*Answer me, Malcolm, or you’ll never get out of here. I promise you that.*”

Malcolm’s fair skin was mottled, his eyes bright with terror. His hand went to his chest as he gasped for air.

“*Who?*”

“In Texas...j-just across the border.”

“That’s only about ten miles from here.” Johnny stiffened as realization dawned. “The Bar Double J. John Jefferson’s place?”

“Yes!” Malcolm coughed again, so hard and long that tears filled his

eyes.

Unabated fury coursed through Johnny. He hauled Malcolm to his feet, and half dragged him toward the door.

Malcolm fought to get free. “My money!” he wheezed. “Wait!”

“*Let it burn!*” Johnny flung him through the doorway to sprawl on the small porch. Malcolm tried to push to his feet but didn’t have the strength. Johnny followed Malcolm outside and stood over him.

Malcolm managed to turn over and flopped on his back, his wheezing worsening so that he could barely speak. “I’m begging you, Houston! There’s more than five thousand dollars in there. How can you let it...let it...*burn?*”

Rage flooded through Johnny as he thought of just how Malcolm had come by all that money. “I should *kill* you, Malcolm, for what you’ve done all these years to so many helpless children. I should—”

“Johnny!” The sound of Derek’s voice called him back to reason. He lifted a hand in acknowledgement, but he stood over Malcolm, staring down at him.

“The money, Captain,” Sage said quietly from somewhere by Derek. “So much good could be done.”

“He’s right, Johnny,” Krissy said softly. “A new orphanage will have to be built.”

“Where is it?” Johnny ground out between clenched teeth.

“A safe, under the table.” A piece of the burning roof fell to the porch, emphasizing the point that time was running out.

Johnny’s gaze went to the interior. Flames were taking over, and smoke billowed from the windows, and now, from the open doorway. But Johnny could see the small safe. *That was a lot of money.* No matter how Malcolm had come by it, maybe that cash *could* somehow be used for good.

“Derek, come help me. Krissy, do not take your gun off this snake for one second.”

“I won’t.” Krissy’s voice was filled with determination.

“Nor will I,” Sage agreed, leveling Krissy’s rifle at Malcolm as well.

Derek hurried to the porch and stepped over Malcolm as Johnny turned to enter the burning room. Malcolm crawled off the porch into the dusty courtyard.

Together, they moved the table and pulled the safe toward the door. To be as small as it was, the safe was heavy. It might well protect the contents from the heat, but Johnny didn’t want to take the chance. If nothing else, perhaps this money could be used as evidence against Malcolm to be sure he went to prison. Johnny wasn’t sure he would be able to countenance using it for anything, even for good works, but letting it burn would do no good, either.

Muscles bulging, Johnny and Derek managed to get the safe out the door. At least, if they could get it a few feet further off the wooden porch, with a certainty its contents would be safe from the fire.

At that moment, the ceiling began to buckle over where they’d just stood by the table. Embers and small pieces of flaming wood showered down. Johnny glanced back and gave a worried nod to Derek. With a mighty heave, they got the safe to the edge of the porch and pushed it into the dirt.

As Johnny and Derek stood bent and panting at the exertion, the chaos around them had diminished. There was not enough water available to put the fire out. It had already gotten a good start before the townspeople arrived, and now was out of control.

The buildings were engulfed, with no hope of saving any of them. Many of the men who had come to help now leaned on shovels, stood holding empty buckets or limp burlap bags, and all panting from the frantic efforts to put the fire out. Now, there seemed to be no reason to continue the bucket brigades, but a spark on the wind might well find its way to the heart of Hugo and burn the town they’d worked their entire lives to build.

Derek suddenly straightened and quickly made his way to where Malcolm lay. The man was not moving. Derek knelt beside him and bent to listen to his breathing. “Sage, will you please go get my bag?”



With a quick nod, Sage hurried away toward the milling horses near the center of the courtyard.

Derek began to unbutton Malcolm's clothing and enlisted Johnny's help in removing Malcolm's jacket.

"Way too hot to be wearing such a thing," Derek muttered as they pulled it off of the overheated man.

"Necessary, though, when you need pockets to stuff your spoils into before you make your final getaway," Johnny responded. Malcolm's wads of money had flown loose in their efforts to remove the jacket and rained around him to the hard-baked earth.

Sage came dashing back with Derek's bag and handed it to him. He opened it hurriedly, rummaging for his stethoscope. Pulling it out, he put it on, leaning toward the prone man before him.

He listened intently. "His heartbeat is erratic," Derek murmured.

Johnny gave a short laugh. "You mean he actually *has* a heart?"

Derek gave him a grim look. "He does, but maybe not for long. We need to get him out of this heat and try to make him comfortable."

"There's Sheriff Bell," Krissy said, motioning him over.

"What's happened?" the sheriff asked as he neared.

"We need a wagon, Amos," Johnny said.

"Got a couple on the way, but he'll have to share one with the corpses. Before everyone showed up, we were shooting it out with Malcolm's gang. They're all dead and accounted for, but during all that, a couple of lanterns were broken, and that's how the fire started."

Bell peered down at Malcolm. "He looks dead, Derek."

Derek shook his head. "No, not yet. I need to get him somewhere and see if he can be helped." He shook his head at Johnny's quick glance. "Purely so we can get the information we need. I heard his confession to you. We need to know who these children are, and when they were sold." He paused a moment. "I'm not anxious to save his life for any other reason but gaining

that information.”

Amos gave a nod toward the two wagons that had entered the courtyard. “I’m gonna go help the undertaker collect the dead,” he declared. “We’ll be back for him last, and any other wounded. I doubt they’d want to get on first, in this case.” Amos headed toward the wagons at a trot.

“Malcolm’s not gonna last,” Derek said, glancing quickly at the man’s pallor, his fingers at the side of his patient’s neck.

“What about our wagon, Doctor?” Sage said. “And the horses we let out of the barn.” He looked thoughtfully toward the structure. “I see them a little way off from the barn. I’ll go try to round them up. They’ll come to me, I think, even though they’re afraid.”

“Good, Sage. Go see what kind of luck you have with them.”

Johnny glanced at Krissy. “You okay, honey?”

She nodded. “Yes.” Her eyes narrowed in speculation. “Are you?”

He looked down at the prone man at his feet. “I am, now.”



FOR KRISSY, the short ride back to Hugo seemed to take forever. She rode between Johnny and Derek alongside the wagon that Sage had procured and was driving back into town with a practiced hand.

Krissy was full of questions. She’d heard only bits and pieces of what had been said between Johnny and Malcolm. She was anxious to talk privately with her husband and learn all the details, but those wouldn’t all come to light until—if—Hannibal Malcolm recovered enough to divulge them. *If he would, even then.*

When they reached the hotel, Johnny, Derek, and Sage half-dragged, half-carried Malcolm’s bulky frame up the steps to a vacant room. The proprietors, Mr. and Mrs. Bailey, looked none too pleased to have Malcolm under their roof, but Johnny reassured them it would be a very temporary

stay, however it turned out.

Derek immediately went to work over Malcolm, and it wasn't long before the town doctor, Mark Haskins, stopped in to see if there was anything he could do.

Sage had taken the horses to the livery stable, then would join Dakota at one of the homes where some of the other children were staying.

Johnny took his leave of his brother and Dr. Haskins. Watching over Hannibal Malcolm was not in him. Not this night or any other.

This was his wedding night. It hadn't turned out the way he'd envisioned at all, so far. Nor was it the storybook wedding and luxury honeymoon Krissy had been counting on for so long, either. But wasn't it up to him to provide that? And how would he go about making this night into anything able to compete with what might have been her wedding night had she married the hallowed Eversby?

He chuckled, and shook his head. It might not be as fancy as what she'd have had if she'd married Eversby, but he was determined to make it better in every other way, because no one could love Krissy more than he did.

He walked slowly, lost in his own thoughts and feeling a bit awkward going up to the room he'd paid for earlier. It was a suite the Baileys had moved them to after what Mrs. Bailey referred to as "the unfortunate incident" that had happened with Thompson and Andrews.

He neared the door, hesitating. He and Krissy were married, but Derek's words came back to him about the differences in their societies. She was a lady, in *any* society, and he was... What was he? A saddle tramp before he enlisted, and now, a soon-to-be-unemployed horse soldier. He'd be a saddle tramp again. Other than the army, it was all he knew. He gave a rueful grin at his wayward thoughts. No matter what, when he looked into his lady's eyes, he saw she held nothing but pure love for him—her saddle tramp...her soldier. He was hers, no matter what came their way.

And their union would be a good one, all because of a mysterious pink

pistol that had found its way into her bags and a key he'd picked up out of the dirt, thinking it must belong to her. His heart belonged to her now, without a doubt, and he was positive that pink pistol had been the catalyst that had brought love to them so swiftly.

He raised his hand to knock, then stopped himself. He didn't have to knock. It was his room, too. But...maybe she was shy about...all this.

“Krissy, honey, it's me.”

The key turned in the lock and, this time, she opened the door with no gun drawn. Looking like an angel—one that belonged to him, saddle tramp or no—she went straight into his arms before he could even get the door shut, and welcomed him home to her heart as their lips met in a sweet kiss that let him know he was home, wherever *she* was, and this was forever.



**I**f Brooklyn hadn't been trained in Miz Oakley's classes, she knew she would not have been able to endure the upcoming rigorous days in the saddle headed for Hugo. She strode purposefully toward the barn where she believed Matt Russell to be at the moment, intending to speak to him about escorting her and Narissa.

She heard two men talking in low tones as she entered the barn. Momentarily blinded from coming into the darkness from the bright sunlight, it took her a few seconds to see the men were repairing tack. She'd already spoken with Dave Rivers on the matter of Mr. Russell's character, and whether or not he might be suitable to accompany two well-bred young ladies across the prairie for two days. Mr. Rivers had no hesitation in letting her know he felt Mr. Russell could definitely be trusted. With a wink, he'd gone on to explain that Mr. Russell was a U.S. Deputy Marshal who had been severely wounded a couple of months back and had been taken home to

either die or get better.

Armed with this knowledge, Brooklyn had felt much more confident in approaching the handsome Mr. Russell, but now seeing him relaxed and reaching for another bridle to oil, she felt that confidence drain.

“Mr. Russell?” She cleared her throat, trying to make her voice steady as both men looked up from their tasks.

Dave Rivers stood and excused himself, leaving the two of them to their conversation.

Brooklyn’s heart raced so that she felt breathless. She took a deep breath. “Mr. Russell, I have something I need to speak to you about.”

He laid the bridle aside and stood to face her, a few steps from where she’d stopped, and gave her his full attention. “Okay. What can I do for you, Miss Donovan?”

“I-I need an escort to Hugo. My sister and I, that is. Mrs. Dinwiddie and Mama will be coming along in a day or two, but—”

“Then I suggest you wait and travel with them. They say there is safety in numbers.” His voice was clipped in an odd accent. He wasn’t exactly rude, but he was certainly not interested in her request.

“I—We can’t do that. Papa...well, we desperately need an escort...” Her voice trailed away. How could she explain Papa’s odd behavior to someone like Mr. Russell?

Amusement glinted in his midnight blue eyes and, in a mild tone, he said, “You should’ve gone with your father and young Jason yesterday, then, Miss Donovan. I’ve been gone from my job too long already. It is time I returned.”

“What is it you do, Mr. Russell?”

There was indecision in his face, but in the end, honesty won out. “I’m a U.S. Deputy Marshal,” he said finally. “I got hurt, and I’ve been recovering.” He turned away from her, busying himself inspecting the bridle he’d worked on before.

Brooklyn worried her lower lip with her teeth.

“All right. I know you’re anxious to get back to your job. Narissa and I are in a quandary.” She took a step nearer. “I know Papa is worried about something. It has to do with our sister, Kristalee. He took off. Well, you know.”

Matt gave a low chuckle. “Yes, I remember, ma’am. He had a burr under his saddle, for sure.”

“Well, if you knew Papa, you’d know that is not like him at all. I’m worried about Krissy, but I’m worried about Papa, too, Mr. Russell. And he’s certainly not familiar or accustomed to this wild country.”

“No. I expect he’s not.” Matt moved slowly halfway around to look at her again.

“Narissa and I are *going*, Mr. Russell. We can take care of ourselves as far as handling a gun, we just don’t know the way to Hugo. We’re both excellent horsewomen, and we’ll be able to ride and not slow you down.”

“I’ll take two hard days of riding. No pack animals. I doubt you ladies will want to set off for parts unknown without your ball gowns, will you?”

He looked away from her, but Brooklyn put her hand on his shoulder and pulled firmly, turning him to face her again.

“Someone in your past must have hurt you badly, Mr. Russell, for you to speak so rudely to me. I’m sorry it happened, but I had nothing to do with it.”

His gaze held hers for a long moment, full of surprise at her words and boldness, yet also obviously ashamed at his own behavior. He was not willing to admit anything, especially, she was certain, not to a stranger such as her. But after a few seconds, he nodded.

“My apologies, Miss Donovan. You are quite right. On all counts.” He gave her a curt bow.

Brooklyn barely heard the words he spoke. She was intrigued by his odd accent, a lilting tone she was not familiar with and couldn’t place.

“Please, Mr. Russell. *Please, help us,*” she said softly. She hoped there was more pride than pleading in her tone.

He gave her a quick glance, then watched her openly, as if trying to decide what he would do.

“I want to be sure my father and my sister are safe. Mama and Mrs. Dinwiddie will be very little help in that regard, so it won’t matter that they’ll arrive behind us a day or two. I’m only asking for two days of your time. When we get to Hugo, Narissa and I will find our father and sister, and you can go your own way.”

Finally, he gave her a slow grin. “You have a lot of faith in a man you barely know, *querida*.”

“Yes, but—what does that mean? *Querida*?”

His jaw tightened. He waved a dismissive hand. “It’s not important.”

Brooklyn was disappointed at his response, but she wouldn’t show it. She and Narissa desperately needed his help.

“I’ve taken up enough of your time, Marshal.” She tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “And I do understand about your wanting to get back to work.” She gave him a quick smile, then turned to walk away.

Matt sighed heavily. “If I did this, it would have to be a fast trip for us, and for me, to get back. There’ll be another stage through here in six days headed west, and I plan to be on it.”

Brooklyn gasped in elation. She whirled around, hands clasped in front of her. “Oh, Marshal! You’re going to accompany us? Oh, thank you!”

“Not so fast. We haven’t talked payment yet.”

Embarrassment flooded over her. Of course. How could she have believed he’d do this out of kindness alone?

“Oh...yes,” she said primly. She cleared her throat and steadied her nerves, determined to hold on to her runaway thoughts. “What will you require?”

“Expenses, of course. The horse rentals from Dave and meals. We’ll have to buy supplies here. We won’t have hotel bills.” He paused. “I hope you and your sister will not be afraid of sleeping out under the stars.”



Brooklyn nodded, feeling a flush rise to her cheeks. “Yes...” There was a hint of suggestiveness in his words, a hot huskiness in his voice. But had she imagined that? “Just tell me what kind of money you need.” She tried to make her tone business-like.

“Twenty-five dollars for everything to rent the horses, buy supplies, and compensate for my time and expertise.”

Brooklyn gulped. She had exactly fifteen dollars. Hopefully, Narissa had some money put aside. She nodded. “Y-yes. That—uh, yes. That will be fine. Half now, and half when we arrive in Hugo.” *And hopefully, Papa will have the needed funds if Narissa doesn’t.*

Matt chuckled. “All right, Miss Brooklyn. We will leave tomorrow—”

“No, it has to be today. *Now.*”

Matt’s smile faded, but he didn’t argue. “Today it is. Let me check on Lem and make the arrangements with Dave. You get your things and tell your sister to do the same. Only one change of clothing, nothing more. Meet me back here in one hour.”

“Y-yes. That sounds fine.” Her heart pounded crazily at the excitement of this new adventure she and Narissa were about to set out on. She and her sister must have truly taken leave of their senses, but there was no other choice.

“And thank you...Matt.”

“Don’t make me regret this, ma’am.”

“Please, call me Brook,” she mumbled hastily as she turned to hurry back to her room. She couldn’t wait to tell Narissa the good news.

They had a lot to accomplish in one hour.



JOHNNY AND KRISSY, seated at breakfast in a restaurant down the street from the hotel, enjoyed the warmth of the sun streaming in at their window table.

“I am starving,” Krissy said quietly, leaning close to Johnny, lest anyone else hear that confession.

He grinned and took her hand. “Do ladies admit to such things?” he teased.

She whacked his arm playfully, and he gave her a quick kiss. “Breakfast will be here soon.”

Her gaze strayed to Main Street through the curtain-less window, and her breath caught. A young boy who looked very much like Jason Rivers, accompanied by a man who remarkably resembled her father, came into view and were headed toward the hotel.

“Krissy? What’s wrong?” Johnny followed her line of sight out the window. “Jason...” he murmured. Her hand stiffened in his, and he snapped his attention back to look at her. “Krissy? What’s wrong?”

She turned stricken eyes to his. “Johnny, that man with him—I think it’s my father. I wasn’t positive it was Jason until you said it. The only reason my father would have followed me out here is to bring some kind of bad news. Maybe Mama or one of my sisters has met with...an accident. Or fallen dreadfully ill, or—”

“*Shh*, Krissy, we’re gonna find out, honey. I’ll go have a talk with him, invite them to breakfast with us. You wait here for the food, and tell them we’ll have two more joining us.” As she started to protest, Johnny stood and shook his head.

“I’m done with loose ends, Kris. We will get to the bottom of everything and let him know we’re married. One more thing we can take care of and put behind us.” He turned to head for the door, and Krissy fought the urge to call him back to her. She let him go.

“Miz Houston?” The waitress’s voice brought her back to the present. “Will your husband be returning soon?”

Krissy nodded as the woman began to set the breakfast plates on the table. “Oh, yes.” She forced herself to smile. “We most likely will have two

more guests joining us. They just rode in.”

The waitress nodded and bustled away, saying, “I’ll go ahead and bring some water. They’ll be glad to wash down the trail dust, I’m sure.”

At that, Krissy had to chuckle. “Trail dust” wasn’t a phrase she would ever think of in connection with her father. Yet, here he was. The smile faded as her mind raced. What had happened to bring him out here, so far from home and without Mama and the others?

She stared at her plate, her hunger suddenly deserting her in the face of her worry. Though it seemed as if Johnny had been gone an eternity, she knew better. He would not keep her waiting and wondering a second longer than he had to. And sure enough, just as she thought it, she saw him coming back up the street with Jason and her father in tow.

She watched anxiously for any kind of worry on her father’s face, but he was laughing at something Jason was recounting, Johnny joining him in the laughter. They moved to the boardwalk and came into the restaurant in a few short moments. Krissy stood somewhat stiffly, unsure of what to expect.

Her father paused as he entered the restaurant door, his eyes on Krissy. She saw nothing in his expression but love for her, and pride, and a niggling bit of worry that faded and was gone quickly as he realized she was whole and unharmed. He hurried to her as Johnny and Jason hung back. Her heart beat wildly to see him, and she was started forward to greet him.

“*Kristalee!*”

He hugged her in an affectionate display that was very unlike him, but it pleased Krissy for him to embrace her. He held her at arm’s length, and tears welled in his eyes.

“Papa?”

“*Shh*, my darling. Everything will be all right now. It’s just...I’ve been so worried about you.”

“Papa, I’m fine. But what about the others?” She pushed away gently, looking into his eyes again. “Mama, and Brooklyn and Narissa? Is all well?”

He nodded, regaining his composure quickly. “Yes—oh, yes. They’re fine. I expect them to be along in the next day or two.”

“Here?”

“Well...yes...”

By his answer, Krissy knew there was much more he was not saying.

“Papa, what is going on? If they are all safe and well, why are you here? When I saw you, I thought you were here to bring me bad news of some sort.”

Johnny and Jason had moved forward to join Krissy and her father.

“Krissy, I know you’re familiar with my riding partner, here, Jason Rivers.” Delano pulled out a chair and indicated Jason should sit. Johnny moved to seat Krissy and, reluctantly, she followed his lead, greeting Jason as she sat.

The waitress appeared with a couple of fresh plates piled with potatoes, biscuits, bacon and eggs, and a fresh gravy boat.

Once they were all seated, they began to eat, even Krissy, who was not preoccupied with worry any longer, but rather with curiosity. It was about to get the best of her. Finally, she couldn’t tolerate it another second.

“Papa, where are Mama and the girls? And why are you all out here?”

Delano gave an uneasy chuckle. “Well, honey, we were worried about you, all this way from home. And we’ve never been out west...” His voice trailed away under Krissy’s unwavering scrutiny.

“Honey, I did something so...*stupid*,” he said. He laid his fork down and turned his full attention to her.

“Papa—”

“No, I need to tell you about this.”

“I know *what* you did,” she said gently. “I just don’t understand *why*.”

His eyes widened, and he turned to Johnny with an accusing glare. Johnny met his baleful stare with a hard look of his own.

Krissy reached to take her father’s hand. “Don’t blame Johnny for any of

this. I'd have been dead without him. This was none of his doing."

"But I'd asked that—that they not tell you," he blustered.

"I know you did, but that wasn't possible. Papa, don't you see that keeping a secret like that to protect your pride might have gotten me killed? I *had* to know the truth. I had to know who my enemies were. Otherwise, I couldn't know who to be wary of. Johnny wasn't trying to *shame you* by telling me. He was *protecting me*."

Slowly, Delano nodded. "I admit it was a terrible mistake. I had thought it would protect you if I placed a guarantee on your services. I never even thought of it putting you in danger. I believed it would make you more highly sought after. I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter now. This was my last performance."

A shocked expression came over his face, and he stiffened. Krissy realized he'd not thought about what would happen once she was married. Now, he was being forced to consider it.

"Krissy, no. Why, Eversby has said he has no objections to your continued performances, and I'll set up a good schedule for you. There's no need for you to give this up, not with your talent for it."

"Papa...I know this may come as a shock to you." She stopped and shook her head. "No. There's no 'may' to it. It *will* come as a shock to you. A hard one." She set her shoulders, looked her father in the eyes, and said, "I'm not going to marry Eversby, and I'm not giving another performance, unless it's something I want to do." She took a deep breath. "The fact is, I'm already married."

Delano sat back in his chair, looking as if the breath had been knocked out of him. "*Married*. Kristalee, have you taken leave of your senses?"

"No," she answered quietly. "This journey allowed me to *find* my senses and use them to bring myself happiness."

"Kristalee..." Delano looked at her perplexed, as if he were talking to someone he barely knew. "Wh-Whom did you marry?"

“Me,” Johnny answered, finishing up a biscuit.

“*You*—oh, no, I can’t believe—”

“Believe it. She’s mine now, and I’m not about to let her go. Especially not back to Eversby Witherspoon the Third.” Johnny shook his head in disgust. “Crazy name. You ought to be horsewhipped for agreeing to saddle your daughter with a man who has such a ridiculous name.” He gave a snort of derision.

“You know nothing about him,” Delano halfheartedly defended.

“I don’t *need* to.”

“Now see here, *Captain*. My daughter needs security and—”

Johnny stood swiftly, his chair skittering behind him. He towered over Delano. “Your daughter needs *love*. True, real, honest love. Love that will last all her life. She needs a real man that loves her with everything in him, through good times and bad, and believe me, there will always be those bad times that roll around and have to be dealt with. What does Eversby Witherspoon the Third know about *that*?”

The sudden silence in the room was as deafening as their voices had been moments earlier. Delano gasped and sputtered, “Eversby, well...he’s—”

“Nothin’,” Jason said, reaching for another biscuit. “He doesn’t know nothin’ about hard times, ’cause he’s rich. Mr. Witherspoon the Third, I mean.”

At Jason’s declaration, a giggle rose up in Krissy’s chest. She couldn’t stop it. She covered her mouth with her napkin, but the giggle became a full-blown laugh.

Delano turned his thunderous gaze on Jason, who ignored him as he took a satisfying bite of his crispy bacon.

“And how do you know *that*, young man?”

Jason gave him a hard stare right back while he chewed. Then he said, “Because of his *name*, Mr. Donovan. Ain’t nobody out here named anything ‘the Third’. That’s only rich people that do that. And like I said, rich people

don't know about hard times." He looked at Johnny. "Do they, Cap'n?"

"No," Johnny ground out, his gaze still locked on Krissy's father. "Not usually. Or they've forgotten what they were like, those hard times."

After a moment, Delano gave a long, tired sigh, dabbing the perspiration from his forehead with a monogrammed handkerchief. "Well, I was not expecting this. Not at all."

"Gosh, Mr. Donovan. Ain't'cha happy for Miss Donovan and the Cap'n?" Jason turned an incredulous gaze to his riding partner.

Delano gave him a small, forced smile. "It was a surprise, Jason. If Kristalee is happy, then, yes...I am, too."

Delano turned to give Johnny an apologetic look. Johnny pulled his chair up and resumed his seat next to Krissy as she reached to take her father's hand.

"I *am* happy, Papa. Very."

"If you're not, Kristalee, now is the time to speak up, before—"

"Papa, I know what you're going to say." She squeezed his hand. "That ship has sailed. There will be no annulment, even if I wanted one, which I do not. Please, be happy for me."

Delano hesitantly gave her a nod. "Yes," he said uncertainly. "I will be, if this is what you want."

"It is."

"Your mother is going to be disappointed that she missed your wedding."

Krissy's expression turned grim. "No, she'll be disappointed to have to stop *planning* my wedding to Eversby, and horrified that I've married someone else."

Delano patted her hand. "You've married for love, daughter. How I wish I had done the same."



**J**ust as they were leaving the restaurant, Derek, Sage, and Dakota came through the door. Johnny caught Derek's eye and motioned to him.

"Mr. Donovan, this is my brother, Dr. Derek Houston. These young men are former residents of the orphanage, Dakota and Sage." Once the introductions were made, Delano excused himself, saying he and Jason were going to get cleaned up and change clothes since they'd been traveling for two days.

Johnny turned to Krissy. "Honey, I need to talk to Derek."

She patted Johnny's arm. "Go ahead. I'll walk back over to the hotel with Papa and Jason, then I'll see if I can help the others with the children. I'll start a list of supplies."

Derek and the boys sat down as the waitress came to clear the table.

"Is this the second shift?" she teased.

Derek gave her a weary smile. "Yes, ma'am, and we're hungry as bears."



“I’ll fix you all right up. Coffee all around?”

Derek nodded. “We’d be much obliged.”

As she walked away, Derek turned to Johnny. “Malcolm passed about an hour ago. His heart just wasn’t strong enough to recover.”

Johnny gave a brief nod, not saying anything, and Derek continued. “The sheriff ordered up food for all the kids. They’re eating right now.”

The coffee arrived, and the waitress carried the remainder of the dirty dishes away. Sage and Dakota spoke together in quiet tones in their own conversation as Derek filled Johnny in.

Johnny asked, “Did Malcolm come around before he went? Did he say anything?”

Derek took a swallow of coffee. “He did. He said everything we need is in the safe. Apparently, he left a journal, maybe a record book, with information about the children.”

“*All... as in even as far back as when we were there?*”

“I don’t know. All he said was he kept track of the ones he sold and the ones still there. Well, the ones we brought to safety.”

Relief flooded through Johnny. He’d been thinking about those kids and was determined to go after them and free them from the slavery Malcolm had sold them into. Johnny felt certain Sheriff Bell would accompany him in an attempt to salvage his own conscience, but it wasn’t a job he was looking forward to, especially with so little to go on. The journal was a surprising, and welcomed, windfall, if there was a way to get to it.

“I know right where your mind went as soon as I told you there was a book in that safe with all those kids’ names in it. I saw it in your eyes,” Derek said, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a key and handed it to Johnny. “Here’s the key to the safe. Thought we’d grab Amos and go open it when we get done eating.” He grinned as the two boys watched the waitress coming their way with steaming plates of food. “From the looks of things, this meal won’t take very long.”



THERE WERE TWENTY CHILDREN, Krissy learned, in ages ranging from four to fifteen. Sage and Dakota were the eldest at fifteen; twins Michael and Miri were the youngest at only four years of age. Many of the orphans were some part Indian of different tribes, some with Mexican blood, and some who were purely Caucasian.

*But they all had one thing in common—a broken spirit.*

Krissy was determined to set that right again for each and every one of them.

With the ill-gotten gains Malcolm had in the safe, she was sure they could re-build the orphanage. *But where?* This town had already shown the lack of caring among most of the townspeople. Another area must surely be chosen.

She'd learned that, many years ago, the orphanage had been owned and operated by the Presbyterian Church. But through changes in the leadership and the death of the clergyman who had taken a personal interest in the children and the workings of the orphanage itself, it had been appropriated by the government and used as a place to put children of all nationalities, ethnicities, and religions who had no parents and nowhere to go. The duty of guardianship had been given to Hannibal Malcolm, a man who had seen the chance to make money from the sad circumstances of the children who had come there to live.

With no real oversight and no one to answer to, things quickly went from bad to worse. Malcolm became bolder as the years passed, hiring henchmen to do his lawless bidding both inside and outside the walls of the orphanage compound, until the townspeople had been afraid and ashamed to live in their own city.

Krissy couldn't help but believe building the new orphanage elsewhere would help the children forget some of the bad memories by providing them a fresh start.

Johnny had mentioned his family and, from some of the things he'd said, Krissy imagined that his parents must have a good-sized piece of land with a house large enough for his brothers and sister who were still at home.

Did she dare hope there might be room for the children to stay there until a new orphanage could be built?

She wondered what Johnny's parents were like in that respect. Would it be too much to ask of them? After all, they weren't aware of, or involved in, this situation that she and Johnny were caught up in.

The sound of happy childish chatter and laughter brought Krissy out of her musings. With pencil in hand, she sat at a small writing table, and began making a list of the supplies that would be needed to get to...*wherever* they set out for.

Six-year-old Lily sat at Krissy's feet, a chalkboard and a piece of chalk nearby. After breakfast, Mrs. Turner, the wife of the mercantile owner, had brought over some chalk and slates for the children, as well as soap and clean clothing. She brought several sizes of underwear, dresses, pants, and shirts.

Mrs. Turner and two of the other women were now busily helping the cleaned-up children try on clothing to get them outfitted properly. Their old, ragged clothing would be burned.

Mrs. Turner had cried when she'd seen the dirty, neglected shape the children were in the night before at Krissy's performance. She'd been a big help in spiriting them all away to safety before the fire had disrupted everything.

It was as if no one had been aware of the conditions at the orphanage or bothered to check and see if there was anything they could do to help. In all fairness, Krissy understood these people had been paralyzed by their fear of Malcolm.

Krissy sighed. It was difficult to make a list of the things they needed most when they needed everything, and so much of it for so many people, especially when they didn't know where they were heading.

The easiest thing, of course, would be to stay right here. Krissy hadn't had a chance to discuss much with Johnny yet, considering everything that had happened in such a short space of time. But her own heart told her a new, fresh start for all concerned would be best.

Her thoughts turned to her earlier conversation with her father at breakfast. Things had gone better than she'd expected when he learned she was calling off the wedding and was, in fact, already married to someone else. A smile quirked her lips as she thought about the interaction between Papa and Johnny. She'd been nervous as their argument had escalated, but Jason had brought an end to it all with his childish naïvete. She shook her head at the memory.

Papa had told her he'd send a telegram to Eversby's father and tactfully let him know the wedding was off without mentioning that Krissy was already wed to another man. No need to add insult to injury.

It looked like she and Johnny and their entourage of children were stuck in Hugo, at least for two more days while they waited for the bounty money for Malcolm's hired killers.

She hoped to see her sisters before she and Johnny set out for wherever they decided on. She also yearned to post a letter to her best friend, Ember, and her cousin, Tallie, to tell them everything that had happened.

As she and Papa and Jason had entered the hotel, the undertaker and his helper were bringing the wrapped-up body of Hannibal Malcolm down the stairs from the second floor.

She was not surprised the man had succumbed after his severe heart attack. But, in spite of all he'd done in the past, she knew Derek would have some measure of remorse over not being able to save him.

It seemed as if most everything was falling into place in her life in a way she'd never expected—all because of a pink pistol. Was the legend true?

Her thoughts went to the notes the earlier owners of the pistol had penned. She supposed she should also write one in keeping with the tradition.

Now was as good a time as any. She could write it and slip it into the pocket before Johnny came home. It embarrassed her to think of what she might write or to let Johnny read it. No. She wouldn't tell him what she'd written—whatever it was going to be—until much later.

Just then, Mrs. Turner came around the corner of the makeshift dressing room with Carmen, a ten-year-old Mexican girl. Both of them wore big smiles.

“Look at this new outfit for this pretty girl!” Mrs. Turner exclaimed.

Carmen made a turn so Krissy could see the lovely new pink dress she wore. Krissy clapped and said, “Beautiful, Miss Carmen!”

“*Si! Es muy bueno!*” Carmen stopped and cocked her head. “It is very good, Miz Houston. So beautiful!” She looked up at Mrs. Turner. “*Gracias! Oh, gracias!*”

“You're welcome, dear.” Mrs. Turner bent and hugged her.

“I wanted to let you know I need to leave for a few minutes,” Krissy told the older woman. “I'll be back shortly.”

Mrs. Turner patted her shoulder. “Go right ahead, dear. We'll be right here. Nadine and Marie will help me with this, and we'll get it taken care of.”

Krissy smiled and turned to leave, happy childish laughter ringing in her ears as she pulled the door closed behind her.

The bridal suite Mrs. Bailey had given Johnny and Krissy was only three doors down from the one that Derek had paid for to house the children.

Krissy tried to compose her thoughts about what she'd write in the note she planned to include on the parchment. It hadn't been a full week since she'd met Johnny, yet here she was married to him. And though she'd known him only a short time, she understood him better than she ever would have Eversby. All because of the pink pistol.

She opened the door to the suite and went directly to the case that contained the pistol. She retrieved the key from the nightstand drawer and opened the case, still marveling at the beautiful workmanship of both the case

and the pistol itself.

Gently, she opened the pocket and drew out the folded paper, opening it with great care.

Circumstances being what they were, the only writing tool she had at hand was a carefully sharpened pencil she'd used earlier for her list making. It would do.

***Kristalee Donovan wed Captain Johnny Houston on August 31, 1899, in Hugo, Indian Territory. With a little help from the pink pistol, both of us learned what love really is, and will treasure that love forever.***

Krissy read back over it, debating whether or not to add another line. She finally put the pencil to paper once more.

***How new and bright life has suddenly become. Can there be any adventure more wonderful than this?***

A satisfied smile quirked her lips, and she gave a pleased nod as she refolded the paper and tucked it back inside the pocket, then locked the case and put it back on the nightstand. She returned the key to the drawer.

Every word of what she'd written was true. Although she wasn't sure of anything right now about the future, if Johnny was beside her, they would figure it all out together.

Johnny opened the door and flashed her a smile as he came inside. "Are you here for some peace and quiet? I stopped down the hall and Mrs. Turner told me you'd come on down here for a few minutes."

Krissy laughed. "The children are so excited about their new clothing and the books and toys the Turners brought over." She sobered. "I don't know what kind of money Mr. Malcolm has in that safe, but I'm certainly hoping we can use some of it to pay for all these things. Mrs. Turner hasn't mentioned a price. She assures me not to worry about it. But," she grinned wryly, "I still do."

Johnny came to her and took her in his arms. She melted against him, coveting his touch. He held her close.

“You’ve been through a lot these past few days, Krissy,” he said in a quiet voice. “I know this was not what you ever expected.”

She looked up at him, uncertainty written in his expression.

“Don’t you dare look like you’re getting ready to—to *apologize*.” She gave him an indignant glare.

He shook his head. “Kris, I want you to always have the very best.”

“I want the same for you. And we’re going to make it so.”

He stroked her hair gently. “Twenty kids, a wagon, and no idea where we’re going.”

Krissy wagged a finger as she stepped away from him. “Ah, but we *do* know. Don’t we? We really don’t have a choice right now.”

Johnny sighed. “Yeah. I guess we do know where we’re going. At least, temporarily. My parents won’t be unhappy to see us, even with twenty kids, but we’ve got some tough decisions to make, and they’ll concern everyone, not just the two of us.”

“How far is your parents’ spread from here? It’s been hard to make any kind of list, not knowing how long we’ll be on the road.”

“I’m hoping to be headed toward Durant before the week is out.” He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. “Right now, we’re stuck until I collect the reward money from Amos. Meanwhile, we’ll get our supplies bought, along with a wagon to put them all in.”

Krissy bit her lip, hating to bring up a subject she’d thought of that would require a lot more money than what Johnny had been talking about, but a man wouldn’t necessarily consider such a thing.

“I’m afraid one wagon may not be enough,” she blurted. “The children can’t be expected to walk, and the supply wagon will be loaded down with supplies. We will need at least one more wagon for the children to ride in.” She crossed the room to sit beside him, and he took her hand.

“You’re right. And I had thought of that. I even figured in that cost and talked to the wheelwright here in town about it. We ran into him as we were

leaving the restaurant.”

“I know it’s a lot of money, but—”

Johnny nodded. “There’s nothing else we can do. We will always be able to use it, no matter which way we jump.”

“Johnny, I know staying here would be the easiest course of action, but I don’t think it would be good for anyone. I think we need to move on.”

He watched her, and she tried to quell her agitation under his close scrutiny. She couldn’t imagine how hard it would be for him to come back to this area and try to make a life here, even as seemingly welcoming as the townspeople were.

“Where were you thinking, Kris?”

She laughed nervously. “We have a lot of choices. We can go to any other town out here, or—or even start our *own* town.”

By his surprised expression, she knew that idea had not occurred to him. “A possibility,” he murmured.

She smiled. “And why not? It could be maybe...Houston’s Crossing, or Houstonville, or—” She broke off as he grimaced, then smiled at her enthusiasm.

“I have to say, I never thought of that.”

She went on excitedly. “Or we could stay with your parents until we build our own home nearby. That *is* your home, and all your family is there.” She waited for him to say something, but he remained silent.

“Johnny?”

He gave her a quick look as if he’d been pulled back to the present by the sound of her saying his name. “Sorry,” he muttered.

She had talked too much, she thought. Enough of her ideas. “What’s on your mind?” she asked softly. “Is it the children in Texas?”

He blew out a long sigh. “Yeah. They’re on my mind. I had planned to try to get Sheriff Bell to ride down with me and see to all that mess, but I’ve got my hands full right now. I think it’s going to have to wait, and I hate that.”



“And Derek?”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Derek’s also got a lot to consider right now. I think maybe I’ve somehow made him feel responsible for all these kids, and I wonder if I did that to you, too, honey.”

She shook her head, even as he spoke. “No. *I* brought it up to *you*. Remember?”

“Yeah. I remember. But, is running an orphanage really what you’d planned to do with your life?”

“I can think of a lot worse things.”

He gave her a wry grin. “But can you think of anything *better*? Things you’d rather do. I want you to have the life you want, Krissy. Not something that’s been shoved off on you by chance.”

She leaned against him, and his arm encircled her immediately, as if he’d been waiting for her to make contact. “My love, our lives are made up of chance,” she said. “And during these last few days, I’ve come to like my odds on everything very much.

“I’ve learned that everything changes. But right now, *this* is where we are. It’s our privilege to be able to take these children to a new orphanage, where it’s a nice and comfortable place with good food, clean clothing, and...” Here, she hesitated, almost afraid to voice the dream she’d held so long. “And a place to be educated, not only in the classics and doing sums, and basic courses that will let them expand their knowledge, but they’ll also need to learn how to make their way in the world...how to live. There are so many things they’ll need to know.” Passion inflamed her tone as she spoke, but she sensed Johnny’s doubt.

“Johnny, maybe this is not your dream, but it’s always been mine. We have such an opportunity, and it’s been handed to us, to make of it what we will.” She stopped and took a deep breath before plunging on. “I hope it will become more than ‘just’ an orphanage. I hope someday it will become a school that everyone will want to attend. Not only orphans.”

He chuckled. "You don't dream *too* big, do you, Kris?"

She looked up at him, his eyes dancing with teasing lights of love. Her breath caught. *No man had ever looked at her with such adoration.* She'd never expected to love such a man, and especially had never thought she'd be on the receiving end of such devotion.

She tilted her head up, and Johnny met her lips with a gentle brush of his own. She had never felt so content. He stroked her cheek gently.

"There's one thing you left out."

"I did?" She laughed. "Probably more than one."

He hugged her close. "They'll never know fear again, Kris. Only love."



**B**rooklyn felt like a wilted daisy, riding through this heat, but it was what she'd asked for. Matt had been glad to deliver. In fact, he'd almost seemed to relish what he surely knew was going to be a grueling trip. Brooklyn couldn't blame him, since it had been she who'd insisted.

She and Narissa had packed swiftly and spoken quietly to Mrs. Rivers, letting her know that when Mama awoke from her mid-morning nap it might be best to not say anything unless she asked after them.

Letty had taken headache powders, so perhaps it might be a few hours before she woke up. At least it would give Brooklyn and Narissa a chance to be away from the station with no hindrance, and there was no one left for Mama to send after them.

A small cadre of soldiers would be coming through the next day, and if Mama really wished to join the rest of the family, she could ask for an escort at that time with or without Mrs. Dinwiddie.

A pang of guilt flitted through Brooklyn over leaving Mrs. Dinwiddie behind with Mama. But neither of the older women could have kept up with the pace Matt was setting, and Brooklyn couldn't shake the feeling that Papa or Krissy was in some kind of danger.

They'd been traveling for several hours now, from the position of the sun. They'd left around eleven that morning. It must now be well past four.

Her clothing was soaked through with perspiration. She cast a glance at Narissa, who looked as miserable as Brooklyn felt. Neither of them tried to carry on a conversation. They had to marshal their strength to get through this day, at least, until they could make camp somewhere cooler and get a bite to eat. Brooklyn's stomach growled at the slightest thought of food.

"Are you doing all right, Miss Brooklyn?" Matt's voice sounded near, and she glanced up at him as he rode up beside her. He reached to lay a steady hand on her mount who had shied at her sudden pull on the reins.

"My apologies, ma'am. I did not mean to startle you," he said quietly.

"I was daydreaming, I guess," she responded. "Trying to get out of the heat in my mind." She gave him a quick smile.

"Smart woman," he replied.

Brooklyn glanced down with a murmured thanks, surprised at herself. At home, she wasn't usually shy around men. But Matt was different, like no one she'd ever met before.

"Tell me about your home, Matt," she said, casting about for some topic of conversation.

"Which one?" He flashed a smile. "I have two. One here in Indian Territory and one in Mexico."

"Mexico? Oh, start with that one. I have always wanted to go there. We studied about it in school—Maximilian and Carlota...the French deciding to take over—" She broke off, her face heating with embarrassment. "Oh, dear. I'm so sorry. How thoughtless of me. That is one of your homes, and you may have suffered family losses. Please, forgive me."

Matt nodded. “All that ended a few years before I was born. Yes, my family did suffer some losses, but we held onto our lands, and our home.”

He went on. “My family raises livestock. Cattle and horses. I was expected to participate in the family business. But,” he shrugged, “I did not choose to take that path. I was disinherited and invited to leave, by my *abuelo*. My grandfather.”

“Oh, Matt. I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “My choice. Now, I go to my family home on this side of the border to recover from wounds I received in—” he gave a wry grin, “the job I chose over being a horse wrangler for my grandfather.”

Brooklyn glanced back to see Narissa following them at a discreet distance to allow for privacy.

“What is it you do? You’ve never really said, other than that you were a U.S. Deputy Marshal.”

He laughed aloud. “Are North Carolina ladies always so bold?”

Brooklyn felt the color rush to her face. She had not meant to be so direct. But there was no doubt her curiosity was burning. Perhaps she should have found a more roundabout way to find out about Matt. But something told her, though he was laughing about her blunt question, he appreciated her directness.

She looked away from him. “I don’t think so. At least, probably not as bold as I just was. I apologize. That wasn’t very mannerly.”

“Ah, Brooklyn. I don’t mind at all. It took me off guard.” He paused, as if determining how to continue.

“I am—I was a U.S. Deputy Marshal. I was asked to go undercover, and I agreed. The assignment was to be short-term, but developments in the gang I had infiltrated kept me longer than planned.”

Brooklyn listened intently. There was so much he wasn’t saying; so much she was reading between the lines. He was being overly careful with his words.

“Was that when you were wounded?”

He was silent for so long Brooklyn began to wonder if she'd overstepped her bounds again. “Matt?”

He glanced at her, sighing at the memories. “Yes,” he finally answered. He started to say more, but stopped himself, and Brooklyn could see he was not ready to talk about it. It must have been a very close call, one that was difficult for him to even think about, even now.

“I'll be glad to make camp this evening,” Brooklyn said in an attempt to change the subject. When he met her eyes, Brooklyn could see he was grateful for that consideration.

“Yes. This has been a long day for the two of you—you and your sister—even though we got a late start this morning. Your mama will not be happy.”

Brooklyn grimaced. “She rarely is.”

Matt's good humor restored, he gave a short laugh, then sobered. “I will tell you all about it one day, Brooklyn, about my undercover work and how I was almost killed. But I'm afraid today is not the day. I beg your indulgence.”

“Of course, Matt. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. Thank you again for escorting us. I know it seems silly to you, but I'm very worried about Papa. I've never seen him like this, so anxious to be sure Krissy is all right. There's something we don't know. I'm sure of it. I just can't imagine what it could be. I think he believes Krissy is in imminent danger. Even Mama is unaware. But as I've said, that is not uncommon, either.”

“We'll sort it out, Brooklyn. I'm sure once your mama realizes you and your sister are gone, she'll be on the trail after you quicker than you might have thought possible. Especially when that cadre of soldiers show up. You can bet she'll bend their commanding officer's ear and grab an escort.” Laughter played in his tone and flashed in his dark blue eyes as he spoke. “You can bet the commander of that group will not even begin to think of turning her down. They may even catch up with us,” he teased.

Brooklyn's shock at this possibility registered in her face, and Matt laughed outright. She joined him in his laughter when she realized how unlikely that truly was.

"I hope not," she said on a chuckle. "I need to be able to hide behind my father when Mama and I meet up again. Please, get us there quickly."

Matt sobered. "You will not need to hide, Brooklyn. I will protect you and your sister, even from your mama. That is why you are paying me, no?"

She nodded. "Yes, but—"

He shook his head. "You are safe with me. Have no worries."



LETTY'S extremely unladylike roar of anger resounded through the station quarters. *Those rebellious girls are gone!* They had followed Kristalee's lead, it seemed, taking off on the rugged trail south with no chaperone, *but with a man they barely knew.*

Letty's righteous anger knew no bounds. After all the training they'd had, the stellar upbringing she'd given them, and now, it seemed it was all for naught.

If the Witherspoons ever learned about Kristalee's time alone with a cavalry captain on the trail, all the carefully laid marriage plans of Krissy and Eversby's would be destroyed. Krissy would be disgraced and never be able to marry well because of her sullied reputation. Now, it seemed her other two daughters were following Krissy's bad example.

There was only one solution, and that was to follow the two wayward chits as soon as she and Clara Dinwiddie could get underway. And the day was already over half gone.

When Letty knocked on her door, Clara called for her to come in.

"Oh, Letitia," Clara said as Letty opened the door, "my goodness! Are you all right? I just heard the loudest commotion a few moments ago. It

sounded like a wild animal shouting in the hallway.”

“Oh, Clara, never mind that!” Letty blushed, remembering her outburst. “The girls are gone. Becky tells me they left while I was napping. They snuck off with that young man, Matt Russell, following Krissy’s lead, no doubt, with what she and that cavalry captain did!”

“Come on inside, Letty dear, and sit down. You are positively distraught.” Mrs. Dinwiddie stepped back from the door, and Letty strode inside, immediately noticing the neatly packed bags on the bed.

Clara indicated a chair near the washstand. Letty sat with a *hrmph* as her stout body sank into the stalwart chair.

“What do you plan to do?” Clara asked.

“We must go after them, of course! By now, they can’t be more than three or four hours ahead of us. We—oh, Clara, their reputations will be shredded. Completely ruined.”

“My dear, there is nothing you can do about that now. They are already gone.” Clara’s voice held a tinge of sympathy. “On the bright side, no one in North Carolina will ever know what happened on this trip. And you are under no obligation to volunteer one speck of information.” She gave a decisive nod, her gray curls bobbing.

Letty suddenly broke into tears, sobbing inconsolably.

“There, there, dear. Have some faith that everything will work out, for it usually does. Your girls are all fine young women. Their morals are above reproach. They are very competent. You’ve done a wonderful job in raising them. Don’t imagine the worst.”

Letty sniffed. “Yes...you’re right, of course. I don’t expect the worst of them, but what do we know about these—these *men*, Clara?”

“We know Kristalee was left with no choice,” the older woman replied, raising a brow as if challenging Letty to disagree. “She did what she had to do. Captain Houston was a gentleman, and very capable of protecting our Kristalee. I have no doubt that there was no impropriety on either of their



parts.”

“But—”

Clara held up a hand. “No, Letty. We can’t worry about that anymore.”

Letty sighed. “What did Delano do, Clara? He started to tell me, but I—I stormed off. He said he’d done something he shouldn’t have. I am wondering if it had to do with Kristalee’s performance.”

Clara bit her lip. “Well...Del *was* very adamant about her arriving on time, and she seemed terribly concerned. It would have been nice to have had an extra day or two in case something happened, which it did. If Kristalee had been injured in the accident, she could not have been able to arrive on time for the performance, or capable of going on with the show.”

“Oh...that *man!*”

“Letty, you will do no one any good by getting angry all over again,” Clara admonished.

Letty nodded, giving a sniff. “I must get my bags packed.”

“Only one, Letty. We must travel light.”

“Only one—but—my clothing! I’ll need a few changes—”

“One change, Letitia,” Clara said in a voice that brooked no argument.

“Y-yes...all right. I’ll go.” Letty stood and headed toward the door.

“Buck up, Letty. We will borrow the carriage and head south.”

Letty turned back to face Clara. “But we’ll need an escort, and we have none. We can’t ask David Rivers to leave Becky with her so far along in her pregnancy. I hate to go off and leave her here with no other woman. And still having to do for Mr. Jenkins with his broken leg.”

Clara turned her around toward the door. “Becky’s sister will be here tomorrow. She told me she’d agreed to come take over here at the station for a month after the baby comes, and she’ll be arriving tomorrow to be here when the baby is born. We won’t worry. Becky is not concerned.”

“But what about an escort?” Letty persisted.

“I will speak to Mr. Rivers and have him hitch up the carriage,” Clara

told her with a hint of irritation. “I will tell him we are setting out for Hugo, and when that small group of soldiers arrive tomorrow, we’ll ask that one of them follow and catch up with us. That way, that soldier can escort us on into Hugo. We’ll be traveling more slowly in a carriage, so that should be no problem.”

“We’ll be on the trail *alone*, though, until tomorrow,” Letty wailed.

“*Letitia*.” Clara Dinwiddie drew herself up imperiously, fixing Letty with a piercing stare. “I do not want to hear another word of complaint. I’m beginning to believe you are one of those persons who is unable to find a single bit of silver lining in any cloud you see. *Make the best of this*. It’s all we can do.”

Letty gave her a stiff nod, and left without another word.



“**Y**our money voucher’s approved,” Sheriff Bell said as he seated himself near Johnny in the saloon.

Johnny and Derek had been taking care of getting the wagons ordered, paying extra for them to be ready to go within two days.

“You deserve every penny of it, and more, in my eyes, Johnny,” Bell added.

Johnny gave him a nod. “Thanks, Amos. It’s all going to be put to good use.”

“I wish Malcolm had been worth something, too.” Hesitantly, Bell said, “Some of the townsfolk have asked if they could donate for a reward to give to you—”

“No.” Johnny held up a hand. “It’s not at all necessary.”

Amos didn’t press it. “You’ll be sittin’ pretty with the bounties on those four men and the money from Malcolm’s safe.”

The money in the safe had amounted to close to six thousand dollars. The sheriff had put it all in bank bags and written Johnny a receipt for it, stating it was all his for the purpose of establishing a new orphanage in a place of Johnny's choosing.

Johnny knew this was Bell's way of washing his hands of everything. It solidified his decision to move on from this place. He was grateful to Bell for the trust he'd placed in Johnny to do the right thing, but then again, having suffered through his time in the orphanage just as these kids had, there was no doubt Johnny would be a good steward.

Along with the bounties Johnny was about to collect from Malcolm's hired men, he would be walking out of this town with a total close to \$11,000. It seemed like a fortune, but there was a lot to be done with that money. And it wouldn't last forever. Maybe Krissy's idea of a boarding school wasn't so far-fetched—and could be more necessary than he'd at first believed. They'd have to figure out some way to make the place self-sufficient.

"Wagons should be ready day after tomorrow," Derek said, a worried look on his face.

"What's wrong, brother?"

"I just don't see how we'll be able to take care of visiting the Jefferson place tomorrow. There's just so much left to do."

"I know. I don't think we can work that in, either," Johnny said. "I was thinking about all this earlier. Krissy had a good point about heading to Ma and Pa's place for a short time, just to get a little space and time to think and plan."

Derek smiled. "Ma would love nothing more. That wife of yours is pretty darn smart. Don't worry about Pa," he said, reading Johnny's thoughts. "Leave him to me."

Amos sat silently, listening. At the break in the conversation, he said, "I've been doing some thinkin' of my own. It's not up to the two of you to

have to come here and clean house. I have not been proud of how I—we, the people of this town, turned away from helping the children. I talked to some of the other men, and we agreed that the two of you have done more than we citizens have done to set things right.

“So, I’ve got a posse together. You may not believe this, but there are some good men left here. We’re heading down to the Jeffersons’ spread tomorrow morning after those kids Malcolm sold off. I...wanted you two to know so you wouldn’t worry.

“Dakota and Sage both know how to write, and they’re copying the information out of Malcolm’s journal right now. We’ll take their copies along with us, to show Jefferson we’ve got proof. I’m hoping we’ll be bringing those kids back here with us and also hoping you all can put off leaving maybe an extra day, to give us time to get back with those kids.”

Johnny nodded. “Much obliged, Amos. That’ll free us up to get all the preparations made and be ready to go soon’s you get home.” He sighed heavily. “I just hope Jefferson hasn’t turned around and gotten rid of some of those kids himself, but I don’t hold out much hope for that.”

“It’s a place to start, at least,” Derek said. “I hope you’ll find a good many of them there, Amos. And the list will come in handy in finding each one of them, though it might take a while.”

“Would it be all right to send them up to you whenever we *do* find those scattered ones?” Amos asked uncertainly.

“Sure,” Johnny responded. “We’ll let you know where we end up. For now, we’re headed to Durant, over west of here to our parents’ place. They’ll know where to find us from now on. We’re both leaving the cavalry. My hitch is up this Saturday—”

“Three days away, Captain!” Amos said with a teasing grin, sipping his beer.

“Can’t come soon enough.”

“For me, either,” Derek put in. “My time is up soon after. I’m ready to

start the next chapter.”

Amos nodded somberly. “Well, boys, I ain’t makin’ a huge change like y’all are, but I *am* makin’ small ones right here. Startin’ with goin’ after them kids tomorrow. And I’m feelin’ pretty good about it. I think the men who volunteered to go with me are standin’ taller with their decision, too.”

“We appreciate it, Amos,” Derek said.

Amos pushed his empty glass aside and stood. “I’m goin’ back to my office. Probably won’t see you two before we head out in the mornin’, but I’ll have one of the boys bring that journal back to you this evenin’, Johnny.”

“All right. Thanks. And best of luck tomorrow.”

They shook hands all around, and Amos headed for the door.

“Dr. Haskins has invited me to dinner tonight,” Derek said, covering his glass as the bartender reached to pour him a drink. “You’ll be all right on your own, won’t you?” he teased.

Johnny laughed. “Yes,” he said emphatically. “I feel like Krissy and I have barely had five minutes alone.”

“You’ve taken on a lot, brother,” Derek said seriously.

“*We*,” Johnny corrected. “You, me, Krissy, and I’m going to include those kids in that idea, as well. We’re all gonna have to work together to make this a success.”

“Your thoughts?” Derek questioned.

“Krissy mentioned something I hadn’t considered, but I don’t know how feasible it would be. She said we could start our own town.”

Derek gave a low whistle. “Well, she’s right. And that’s worth thinking about.” He paused, then went on. “There is something to be said for that, and lots of possibilities. We’ve got one of everything in our family—a doctor—yours truly; a lawyer—brother Nick; a scout and peace officer—you; and brother Jamie...we’re not certain where he fits yet.”

Johnny laughed, and Derek smiled at the truth of his words. Jamie, the youngest of the four brothers, still had a hot temper and was still looking for

his place in the world at last count, but it had been six months since either of them had seen him. Things might have changed.

“And sister Vivi?” Johnny asked.

Derek chuckled. “That wild one will be the first of them all to throw in with us if that’s what we decide to do. She’s fearless.”

“That, she is,” Johnny agreed, laughing along with Derek.

They fell silent for a moment.

“A lot to consider,” Derek said quietly. “Because we have to think about where the best place for the children will be—a place that’s already established, or one they help build from scratch.”

“Not just them, Derek. We need to consider what will be best for *all* of us. There’s no reason to make things harder than they have to be if we don’t need to. A place that’s already established still has room to grow, for everyone.”

Derek gave him a thoughtful look. “I’d be all for that if the place was *welcoming*. That’s a must. We’ve already seen the results of being in a town like this one. It’s not healthy for anyone.”

Johnny nodded.

“We’ve got time to consider. The rest of the family may have some input we haven’t thought of,” Derek said.

“Oh, brother, you can bet on that, for sure,” Johnny said with a laugh, suddenly anxious to get home. They’d been away too long. One look at Derek told Johnny his brother felt the same way.



TWO DAYS LATER, two bedraggled-looking young ladies in the company of their escort, Matt Russell, rode into Hugo. He noticed the attention they drew from the people who stopped to watch them. No doubt the two women’s garb of split skirts and that they rode astride their horses were the reasons behind

the frowns and low murmuring of a few townsfolk who stopped to stare. He didn't give their disapproval much credence. This town had seen most everything since its beginning a few years back, and no doubt there'd be many more sights to see that would cause more of a stir than this.

"Hungry, ladies?" Matt asked, giving them a quick smile.

"I just want a bath," Narissa said.

Brooklyn voiced her agreement, adding, "And I want to find Krissy."

"And Papa," Narissa piped up. "Remember, Mama won't be far behind us." She gave a delicate shudder.

Matt squelched his laughter. Watching their mama at the stage station for the little time that he had, he completely understood their worries. "*Mama*" was a full-blown tyrant.

"We'll get you two a room and order a bath," Matt said in reassurance. "I'll take the horses to the livery and get cleaned up, too. Then, we'll go find a good meal."

"I'm afraid we may have to find Papa first, Matt," Brooklyn said, her voice strained. "I have very little money left after paying you, and of course, you'll want to collect the rest of your funds for getting us here safely. Papa should have it—"

"Please, Brooklyn. Don't worry over that. We'll figure it out. Right now, a room and a bath for you two ladies," he responded, trying to alleviate her prickliness from what must be embarrassment over being so short of money.

As they went inside the Territories Inn, Matt gently caught Brooklyn's arm for a private word. "I don't want you to worry. Just try to relax. We'll find your papa soon enough."

Brooklyn looked close to tears from her exhaustion and worry. She started to speak, but didn't. Matt assumed from the emotion written in her expression that she was afraid she'd cry if she uttered one word.

"Come on." He took her arm and guided her to the registration desk.

Once he'd seen them up to their room, Matt went back to the front desk



and registered, taking a room a few doors away from the one Brooklyn and Narissa were in. He wanted no scandal for them, and the desk clerk had given him a sly look when the sisters had registered earlier.

He headed over to the livery stable, after checking in and bringing in his saddle bags. Maybe he could get some information about Mr. Donovan's whereabouts, or that of Miss Krissy and Johnny Houston.

The desk clerk had not been forthcoming with any information when Matt had inquired. There were three hotels in Hugo. The stable owner would most likely be a short cut in finding out where everyone was staying. Matt wanted to surprise Brooklyn with that knowledge. She seemed so worried, and Matt could understand that. She and Narissa had come with him so trustingly. What they'd both done was against their upbringing. They were ladies of good breeding, and they'd gone against all they'd been taught and spent two days and nights on the trail with him. Though nothing untoward had happened, if anyone found out, they would be ostracized.

Matt had been raised with many of the same conventions. His grandfather's household adhered to the old ways, strict and unyielding. Matt—*Mateo*, as he was called there—had run away. He'd suffered many beatings due to his willfulness. But he ran, again and again. Staying would have surely killed him. As it turned out, running nearly had, instead.

His grandfather had finally given up. He settled for disinheriting Matt, and demanding he not use the proud family name of Rivera. That name still carried honor, he'd said. *Mateo* had none. Honor had been replaced by rebellion.

*Mateo* became more American than ever that day, following his mother's family leanings as he made a final run to the southwest part of Indian Territory, where the Comanche, Kiowa, and Apache had ruled for so long.

His mother's American family also carried a proud heritage—as proud as that of his father's Spanish lineage. He began to go by Matt Russell, his mother's maiden name, and counted himself lucky to have a name for either

side of the border that carried a little weight.

Now, he rode toward the livery, leading the two extra horses behind his mount. He stepped down as the livery owner, Josh Greenlee, came out to meet him.

After a short conversation, Matt found out what he wanted to know. As luck would have it, the Houston brothers and Krissy, as well as Mr. Donovan and young Jason Rivers, were all staying in the same hotel where he, Brooklyn, and Narissa had rented rooms.

*Supper should be interesting this evening.* He would be content to sit back and watch...and listen. News traveled fast in a small town, and the livery owner had been a wealth of information. As Matt helped him unsaddle the horses, Josh told him all about the lady sharpshooter and the show she'd put on. When the orphanage had gone up in flames, of course the show had ended abruptly. There had been a shootout between the ruthless gang who had taken over the orphanage and the sheriff's posse, which Greenlee had joined, "to clean the snakes out" as he put it.

It was during that battle that the orphanage had caught fire and quickly burned. Thankfully, the children had all been in town for the performance and were safe.

"What about the cavalry officer—Houston?" Matt asked.

"He and his brother, and even that pretty little sharpshooter wife of his, all came out and took a hand in settin' things straight out there." Greenlee took a curry brush from the hook on the side of the stall where he'd put Brooklyn's horse and began to brush her, and Matt did the same for his horse.

"Malcolm, the leader of that bunch of cutthroats, had a heart attack and died the next day." He shook his head. "I don't mind sayin' none of us were too regretful over that turn of events. He didn't have a gang left anyhow after that night.

"I believe the Houstons are planning to take the orphan children and relocate somewhere with them. Start up a new orphan's home. Gotta admire

them for that. They're real good people."

Matt thanked Greenlee as the big man began to dip cups of feed into nosebags for the horses, giving them an affectionate pat as he put one on each of the animals. Assured the beasts were in good hands, Matt made his way back up the street toward the hotel.

He went inside and ordered a bath, then headed for his room. On the way past Brooklyn's room, he paused, hand in the air, as he prepared to knock and let her and Narissa know that their father and sister were in the same establishment. A happy sound of laughter came, muffled, through the door, and he stopped short of knocking as he listened.

"I can't believe the luck! To already have found you!" Brooklyn exclaimed.

"I'm so thankful!" Narissa chimed in.

"I am, too," a third female voice responded.

Though he hadn't been around Kristalee Donovan that much, the same cultured accent was unmistakable. The three sisters were together again.

He couldn't help but smile at their happy chatter. He turned and walked away toward his own room. Now that they'd found one another, their father and the Houston brothers would know soon enough.

Matt had a distinct feeling they'd be eating early tonight, and he was glad of it. Wrangling two eastern young ladies for a couple of hard days on the trail had been more difficult than he'd thought. He felt a sudden kinship with Johnny Houston, and that brought another smile, just thinking about the last two days, and how he had enjoyed his time with Brooklyn in spite of everything else.

He unlocked his door, barely ahead of the first of the young boys carrying buckets of his steaming bathwater. Suddenly, it seemed very important he make an excellent, memorable impression on Miss Brooklyn Donovan.



**S**upper was served in the private area in the back of Millie’s Restaurant. Krissy, happy to be reunited with her family again, noticed they all seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief that was mixed with a bit of thankfulness.

Though Krissy was anxious to hear about her sisters’ journey from Rivers’ Gap Station to Hugo, she found she was even more cautiously waiting to hear news of Mama and Mrs. Dinwiddie.

Conversation skittered everywhere around that topic, and Krissy realized no one wanted to bring it up. But she had to know.

At a break in the different conversations happening around the table, she asked, “Brooklyn—how did you and Narissa leave Mama and Mrs. Dinwiddie? They can’t have been too happy to see you all leave with—” she cast a quick glance at Matt, who sat at Brooklyn’s right.

Matt grinned at Krissy’s sudden discomfort.

“No offense intended, Mr. Russell, but you *are* a virtual stranger.”

His grin widened, “Yes. No offense taken. I believe perhaps your sisters decided to follow *your* lead, Mrs. Houston, after Mrs. Dinwiddie and Mrs. Rivers told them the tale of how you yourself set out on that same trail with Captain Houston...a day after you met.”

At that moment, two waitresses arrived with some of their plates and began to serve the ladies first, and Jason.

Krissy nodded and started to say something, but what Matt said was the truth. There was no rejoinder she could make to what he’d stated. She looked at Brooklyn, who smiled. Narissa couldn’t help laughing.

“Don’t be angry, Krissy,” Narissa said. “Brooklyn has been worried sick about you and, when Papa took off after you the very day we got there at the station, we both knew something was wrong.”

All eyes turned to Delano, waiting for an explanation, but Krissy cut in. “Papa was having second thoughts about some business dealings with Mr. Malcolm. And he was right to have those misgivings. The man was a criminal. Thankfully, though, Johnny was with me, and Derek caught up with us. When we arrived in Hugo, Sheriff Bell and some of the men here all pitched in to keep the orphans safe and go...uh...*do away* with the gang that had taken over.”

“Oh, Krissy!” Brooklyn gasped. “I was right to be worried!”

“But Papa, how did *you* know?” Narissa asked.

“Well...I didn’t. Not really,” Delano hedged.

“I helped, too,” Jason said. “Got him here safe and sound, even if it *was* after everything happened. Golly! I bet that fire was somethin’ to see!”

The rest of their food came, and talk turned to speculation about when, or if, Letty and Mrs. Dinwiddie would arrive.

“We’ll be set to roll out of here day after tomorrow. Two days after, at the latest,” Johnny said.

Delano nodded. “I’ve sent a wire to Raleigh. I believe that...uh...*situation* will remedy itself without further correspondence,” he

reassured Krissy.

“Well,” Brooklyn said matter-of-factly, “I will say, I believe you and Johnny are much better suited, Krissy.”

Johnny gave Krissy’s hand a squeeze, and she smiled at her outspoken sister’s comment.

“I do, too, Brook.” She glanced up at the teasing light in Johnny’s dark eyes.

“It’s so romantic,” Narissa said with a sigh. She cut another bite of her steak, a pensive look on her face. “It all happened so fast—meeting...falling in love...tying the knot.” Another sigh. “How can that happen, Krissy? You both must have just ‘known’ everything was *right*. Like Romeo and Juliet—”

“Only with a much happier ending,” Brooklyn put in, bringing a chuckle from everyone.

“Who are they?” Jason asked.

“They’re two people who loved each other very much, but they both died young,” Narcissa explained. “That’s why they called them ‘star-crossed lovers’. Thing didn’t work out for them.”

“*Hmm...*” Jason was more interested in his food than further conversation for a moment, then he said, “Well, I’m sure glad it didn’t happen that way for the cap’n and Miss Krissy.”

“Me, too,” Johnny said with a chuckle.

“I imagine we should expect your mother in the next day or two, Kristalee,” Delano said, “...coming back around to your earlier train of thought.”

“I think so, too,” Narissa said with a worried frown. “And I am sure she’ll not be at all happy with Brook and me.”

“Maybe I should head for the hills as well,” Matt murmured.

Brooklyn gave him a wry smile. “We can all protect each other.”

Matt sobered. “I will never let your mother harm you, Brooklyn.” He laid his fork down and gave her a look that promised he would take care of her,

no matter the circumstances. “Sometimes,” he added, “harsh words can wound more than any whip.”

She nodded quickly and dropped her gaze to her dinner plate as if the food was the most interesting thing she’d ever seen. Krissy sensed her younger sister was very near tears at Matt’s kind protectiveness.

After a moment, Narissa said, “You never said, Krissy, how it was you and Captain Houston decided so...*hastily*...that you were in love.”

Krissy stopped eating, giving her full attention to her youngest sister.

“After the stagecoach accident, I found a mysterious, beautiful mahogany case in my bags. Johnny had found the key to unlock it, and gave it to me, believing it was mine. On the way to Hugo, we opened it together.”

“What was inside?” Narissa asked, instantly enthralled.

“A gun. A beautiful pink pistol. Someone made the pistol and the case. The case was lined in deep forest green material, and there was a special pocket with a note in it.

“The note explained that the gun was...very unique, and should be cherished. Once I took it out and gripped the handle, I knew what the note said had to be true. It spoke of love coming to the person who gripped it. Before I read the note, I’d already taken the gun out and handled it. Oh, my... it was so beautiful. The workmanship was perfection.”

Krissy watched Jason for any reaction as she spoke, but there was none. Her belief that he’d mistakenly placed it in her bag dwindled. “I thought perhaps someone had gathered it up from the wreckage and accidentally placed it in my bag.”

“Gosh, Miss Krissy, I never did see that case when I was pickin’ stuff up. Sure wish I would have. I’ve never seen a *pink pistol* before.” Jason’s expression was so open and transparent, there was no doubt he was telling the truth.

Krissy’s mind was suddenly at ease. No matter how she’d wanted to believe everything she’d read on the parchment in the pocket of the gun case,

she'd still carried that niggling doubt. Now, she knew it was all true. And the love she and Johnny had discovered for one another was real—a love that would last forever, just as the note had said, and just as the other women before her had written.

One look at Johnny told her that Jason's innocent declaration had relieved any doubts he held, as well.

However the pistol had come into her possession, it had served its purpose. Whether the first part of the note was true or not was up to each person's own beliefs. It was how one acted upon that belief that made the difference.

Taking such a chance had been difficult. But she'd known Johnny was meant for her. By the way he looked at her now, he'd known the same thing.

The pink pistol had been the catalyst that brought them together and solidified their love. For them, there could be no doubt love had come to stay.

But there was one last hurdle before they could set out on their life together.

And Krissy figured Mama would be hot on her daughters' heels. Tomorrow would most likely be the day.



OF COURSE, Krissy had been right.

Just as she and Johnny were making their final preparations for leaving the next day, Mama, Mrs. Dinwiddie, and Major Jennings rode into Hugo, none of them looking any too happy.

Krissy was occupied, looking at some bolts of cloth and sewing notions on display in the mercantile when she heard Johnny give a low whistle from the front store window.

“Kris...your mother's here,” he said from a few feet away. “She and Mrs. Dinwiddie and...Major Jennings.”



“*Mama—*” she hurried to the window, keeping out of sight as best she could. Yes...there she was, alongside Mrs. Dinwiddie in the small carriage they’d no doubt rented from Mr. Rivers.

Krissy knew from Johnny’s tone he wanted to speak with the major, and with them leaving town soon, it was urgent.

She sighed and gave Johnny a smile as she turned to face him. “You go on, Johnny. I’ll have Mr. Turner tally up what we owe, and then I’ll meet you back at the hotel. That’ll give Mama and Mrs. Dinwiddie a chance to get settled in and rest some before supper this evening.”

Johnny gave her a quick kiss, halfway keeping an eye on the carriage with the two women in it and the major riding beside them.

“See you soon. I better go rescue Steve.”

Krissy laughed as he hurried out the door after his former commander. She wasn’t ready to face Mama, but she would be glad to get it over with this evening. Maybe it would be easier tonight at dinner if she could put it off that long.

As Mr. Turner added up the bill, Krissy was lost in thought. *So much had changed in her life, and she looked forward to what was to come.*

“You’re sure taking on a lot, Miz Houston.” Mr. Turner shook his head. “It’s awful good of you and your husband. We’ve sure been happy to have y’all here. Couldn’t have got the orphanage set straight without you all being around to take a hand.”

Krissy lowered her gaze. She liked Mr. Turner, but it always surprised her to find so many of the men in this town so afraid of someone like Hannibal Malcolm. But he had been pure evil. Why hadn’t the men banded together sooner to run Malcolm out of town? Would he have maintained his iron rule over this place if she hadn’t agreed to the exhibition and her father hadn’t asked for an escort?

Everything had aligned and all had fallen into place just as it should. In Krissy’s heart, she wondered how much, if anything, the pink pistol had to do

with the way all the events had happened.

“Do you think there’s a chance you might stick around here? We’d surely love to have you all.”

Krissy shook her head. “No, Mr. Turner, we’re headed to the Houston ranch west of here.”

Turner nodded. “I know Alex Houston. Do a little business with him from time to time. Good man. A little wild in his younger days, but he settled down.” He looked suddenly stricken. “Oh, Miz Houston, I meant no harm—”

Krissy gave him a warm smile. “Please don’t worry, Mr. Turner. I won’t say a word. No offense taken.”

At his relieved look, Krissy changed the subject. “Mr. Turner, do you have enough peppermint sticks to include for the children?”

“Of course I do! I’ll throw in ten extra for the adults. You never get too old for those.”

“Thank you, sir. If you will, just get our order together, and we’ll come back later this afternoon to load it up. We plan to get an early start tomorrow, if Sheriff Bell has returned by then. If not, it will be the day after, at the latest.”

“Yes, ma’am. It will be here, ready and waiting, when you come for it. Won’t take us any time to load it, if I can get some help from those two oldest boys from the orphanage.”

“Thank you, Mr. Turner. I appreciate you keeping it for us.”



IN PREPARATION FOR SUPPER, Krissy donned the only dress she had brought with her. Johnny had cleaned up and was shaving as she slowly buttoned the front of the emerald material. She met his laughing eyes in the mirror that hung over the washstand.

“You look like you’re about to meet the executioner,” he said, rinsing his

razor.

She grimaced. “I think Narissa and Brooklyn must feel the same way.”

Johnny carefully swiped down his cheek with the sharp blade. “Children grow up...become their own people. They have to make their own choices about their lives, honey, just like you did.”

“Yes. And I don’t regret one minute of it.”

“Well...let’s see what you think when we’re all at the dinner table,” he teased.

She gave a short laugh. “I still won’t regret it. I’m looking forward to our lives together.”

His gaze from the mirror caught and held hers, and he smiled. “I am, too, Kris.”

“It’s plain to see Brooklyn and Matt are...interested in one another,” Krissy said, buttoning the last button.

Johnny rinsed the blade for the final time and wiped his face with a clean, damp towel. Turning to look at her, he said, “Yeah. I noticed that, too. You better keep that pink pistol hidden, or there’ll be another unexpected wedding.”

“Oh, Johnny—” She broke off and hurried to the nightstand, picking up the case and putting it inside the bottom of one of the bags she was packing for the journey, dropping the key down beside it.

He laughed at her expression of satisfaction. “Saved from a marriage she—well, she *may* have wanted.”

“If *she* does, and *he* does, they’ll have to manage without the pink pistol. The main thing is that they love one another.”

“I can’t argue that.” Johnny reached for his shirt and shrugged into it, buttoning it quickly. He tucked it in and offered her his arm. “Ready, Mrs. Houston?”

At her reluctant expression, he gave her a reassuring pat on her arm, heading for the door.

“Don’t worry. We’ve promised to save each other, no matter what. I can certainly handle your mama. You make your own decisions now. I’ll be right there with you.”

Krissy turned her face up to his. “A kiss for luck?” she asked.

He bent and kissed her, love and reassurance in his eyes. “You won’t need luck, Krissy. From now on, you have me.”



**S**upper started out just as dreadfully as Krissy had expected. When she and Johnny walked into the restaurant, Mama, Papa, and Mrs. Dinwiddie were seated at a large table. Since there were glasses of water at every place, including the empty chairs where the rest of them would sit, Krissy could only assume Mama, Papa, and Mrs. Dinwiddie had been there a few minutes.

Krissy and Johnny were seated across from Mama and Mrs. Dinwiddie, with Papa at the head of the table. Johnny took the seat to Delano's right, across from Letty, and Krissy sat next to Johnny across from Mrs. Dinwiddie. From the storm brewing, she was glad Jason was with the other kids tonight for the evening meal.

"Good evening, Mrs. Donovan, Mrs. Dinwiddie," Johnny said with a nod toward each of them. He shook hands with Delano before seating Krissy, then himself. "It's nice to finally meet you, Mrs. Dono—" Johnny began but before he could finish, Letty interrupted.

“I have a few choice words for both of you, young man!” Letty hissed, her eyes narrowed.

Johnny gave her a long stare, then calmly said, “There are some new rules, Mrs. Donovan. One of them is that you will remain civil if you sit at our table. We’ll be leaving early in the morning, so this may be the last conversation you have with Krissy for a long time. Krissy is my wife now, and I’m responsible for her welfare and her happiness. I won’t let her be spoken to without the respect she deserves. That goes for anyone—including you. So please, watch your tone.”

Letty’s eyes widened, and her mouth fell open. She let out a shocked gasp of surprised anger, and her face reddened. She recovered enough to look at her husband. “Delano! You—he—don’t let him speak to me that way, you idiot!”

“Mrs. Donovan.” Johnny arched a dark brow in warning. “I expect you to treat your husband with respect, as well. Your tone is lacking any aspect of good breeding.”

He took a swallow of his water while Letty huffed, her expression a mixture of disbelief and fury.

“If you can’t follow the rules of civil conversation, you’ll have to have a dish sent up and eat alone.” Johnny added, as if he were speaking to a petulant child. “You are not going to ruin this meal for everyone else.”

She stared at him wordlessly, then ripped her gaze away and glared at Krissy. “What have you to say for yourself? You have destroyed your whole future! You’ve married this—this low born scum over a proper man such as Eversby. *Eversby*, who loved you with all his heart. He’s probably drowning in tears right now—”

Krissy half rose from her seat, but Johnny laid a cautionary hand on her arm, reminding her of who she was, and how much she was loved.

“Mama, you will not speak to me of my husband in such a way,” she said tightly. “I’m very happy, and I’m excited about my new life.”

“*Life?* What kind of *life* do you think you have, daughter?” Letty sneered. “Two wagons and twenty orphan children? You were raised for better than this! You deserve much better, and you could have had it! But you’ve foolishly believed you married for *love*—oh, Kristalee, you have no idea what love is. You have thrown your life away—and the scandal you’ve caused for your father and me—don’t you think of anyone but yourself, you foolish, selfish girl?”

Krissy knew in that moment she would never be able to make her mother understand. She wanted to tell her about the pink pistol, and those sweet notes, but it seemed too precious to share with someone like Mama, who would only denigrate its existence and those writings. Krissy would not do it. She *couldn’t* do it. And it wouldn’t make any difference if she did. There was a reason the pink pistol had found its way to her, and not to someone like Mama.

“You will not speak to her that way. Not now, not ever,” Johnny said in a voice as hard as steel. “I hope we understand one another Mrs. Donovan.”

“You have no right—” she began.

“I have *every* right. I’m her husband, whether you like it or not. *I love her*, and I will not allow her to be abused by you or anyone else.”

“A-A-Abused?” Letty stuttered.

“That’s what I said. It would be nice to have your blessing, but we don’t need it. The next words out of your mouth better be *kind* or *complimentary*. *Ma’am.*”

There was stunned silence all around the table.

Letty looked at each face, as if she was quietly hoping to find support. But Delano seemed to have finally discovered a backbone and sat stoically silent, and Mrs. Dinwiddie merely gave Letty a reproachful, wordless stare.

A contentious silence settled over their table, and peripherally, Krissy saw her sisters, Matt, and Major Jennings standing just inside the doorway, observing the interaction amongst them.

She turned her head, looking directly at the waiting group just in time to see Matt's arm go around Brooklyn, Narissa subtly moving closer to her sister, as well, and the major mouth the words, "*Watch this...*", his lips curving upward in a confident smile.

"The others are waiting for your decision, Mrs. Donovan. Will you be staying, or will you be leaving to have your dinner alone? Please decide quickly. We are all hungry."

Krissy sat in awe of her husband and his ability to demand that her mother behave. Even Papa had failed to do that, always taking the easy way out and giving in to her petulant demands.

"*Decide.*" Johnny's voice was controlled, but demanding.

To Krissy, it seemed there was nothing but silence now, as they all waited for Letty to make the next move.

Letty was the first to blink. She must have realized she had no allies to support her against Johnny. She opened her mouth to speak.

"I said kind or complimentary," Johnny reminded her in a voice that left her no alternative but to comply—or leave.

Letty's lips tightened.

"K-Kristalee, you...you are looking...quite well."

Krissy let out a slow breath. *Mama did as she pleased, always, no matter the outcome. No one directed her or told her about 'rules' to be followed.* Yet, Johnny had just proven it could be done. Tears stung her eyes. *How long had it been since Mama had said a kind word to anyone?* She couldn't remember.

Delano relaxed in his chair, visibly surprised at his wife, and even Mrs. Dinwiddie's eyes widened.

The group at the doorway moved forward and took their seats at the table.

With a bright smile, Narissa said, "I'm sorry we're so late. I couldn't locate one of my shoes."

"It doesn't matter, Rissa. We're all here together now," Krissy said softly,



restoring a final measure of balance and ease to the group.

Letty was subdued for the rest of the meal, listening to the conversation, but contributing little.

Krissy tried to draw her in from time to time and was pleasantly surprised at her interest and congenial responses as she rediscovered the manners she'd long forgotten.

Delano asked, "What time will you be leaving tomorrow?"

"I'm hoping the sheriff will make it back later tonight or early tomorrow. If he doesn't, we'll give him one more day," Johnny responded.

Major Jennings said, "Knowing you and Derek, if Sheriff Bell doesn't get back here soon, you two will be heading down to Texas to see if all is well."

Derek glanced up at the major. "In a situation like this, Amos and his posse don't know what they might be walking into. I don't know this John Jefferson, but I *do* know he's got a large spread...lots of workers."

"You sound worried, Derek," Brooklyn said. "Do you really believe the sheriff and his men are going to be harmed?"

Derek shrugged. "No way to know." He gave a short laugh. "Probably not the best dinner table conversation. How was your trip down to Hugo, Mrs. Dinwiddie?"

Clara looked up, surprised, and said, "Oh, it was so kind of Major Jennings to escort us. We set out alone, Letty and I, and he caught up to us. He had some papers for you and your brother."

Steve nodded. "Thank you for reminding me. I've had my head in the clouds. Brought your release papers—yours and Johnny's. I took this opportunity to bring them on down here—I wasn't sure you'd make it back to Rivers' Gap Station, much less on up to Ft. Smith."

"Thanks, Steve," Johnny said. "You're right. With all that's happened here and what lies ahead, I don't think we would have made it back that way for quite a while."

"Matt, you decided what you're going to do? Want to head to Ft. Smith?"

Steve asked.

Matt was silent a moment, then said, “No, I don’t think so. I have been thinking I’d like to live to see my next birthday. Marshaling is no way to assure that.”

“Got any ideas about what you might do instead?” Johnny asked. “You’re welcome to throw in with us on the trail to—wherever we end up.”

Matt nodded. “I have been thinking I would do just that, if—”

“You don’t have to ask. You’re welcome to come along,” Johnny told him.

“Thanks, Johnny. I think that just sealed my decision.”

“Where are you going? I don’t think I’ve heard anyone say,” Brooklyn said with feigned casual interest.

Krissy understood her sister well enough to know that, though she was curious about their destination, she was more concerned with Matt’s plans.

“We’ll be headed to Durant first, to our family home,” Johnny answered. “From there, we aren’t sure yet. But someplace that will make a good home for the kids and us. So, it could be a town that’s already established, or...one we build ourselves from the ground up.”

At this, Letty sat up straighter and said, “Oh—*start* your own town? But, that seems almost an impossibility *here*. This country is so—so primitive. At least even a small town has the beginnings of civilization...a store, a livery stable, a restaurant, a church. Krissy, you can’t just go traipsing out into nowhere and start your own town. You must insist on going somewhere that has some of these things already established!”

“Mama, this was my idea—starting our own town. Being able to make a good place for these children, and more that are yet to come, but also being able to follow our own dreams. By setting the groundwork for a good society, we’ll be able to influence that from now on.”

“But—that will worry me so much to think of you out in this rugged territory at the mercy of...of everything. You are not bred for that kind of life

—”

“Yes, I am, Mama. You and Papa made us all strong in our own ways. You don’t know how capable the three of us girls really are. *I* didn’t realize it until I had the chance to find out what I could do, and I’m still learning.”

“But this is still a territory! It’s not even a *state* yet!”

“I know, Mama. But I want to be a part of all that. And...I’m *going* to be.”

“So am I,” Brooklyn announced.

“And me!” Narissa added.

“Girls—” Delano began, but Brooklyn was stubbornly shaking her head, and Narissa’s chin lifted.

Letty threw up her hands. “I give up! There is nothing I can say.”

Johnny’s lips quirked. “How about, ‘*Donadagohvi*’?”

Letty looked at him blankly.

“That’s Cherokee for ‘Til we meet again’,” Derek said.

“Or, *Hasta que nos volvamos a ver*,” Matt put in, “as we say south of the border.”

“Well...in *any* language, I wish it for all of you,” Clara Dinwiddie proclaimed with a smile. “But in any case, I’m afraid I am going to need to excuse myself and head to the hotel. I have an early start in the morning, as well.”

“But—but Clara—”

“Letty, I must be on my way very early. I won’t have a chance to see any of you in the morning, other than Major Jennings, so I shall say my goodbyes now. It has been a pleasure, this journey, even with everything that happened.”

She looked at Johnny first. “Thank you for rescuing an old lady from the stagecoach wreck, Captain. And Krissy, thank you for your patience with an elderly traveling companion. You have been a delight.”

She looked at Derek next and said, “You’ll be a wonderful doctor, Derek,

wherever you land. You were so kind to Mr. Jenkins—such a blessing that you were there when he needed you so much.

“Major, I will just say right now how much I thank you for your assistance in getting Letty and me here safely. And for getting me and Jason back to Rivers’ Gap Station. I look forward to our upcoming journey back tomorrow. Letty and I appreciate your kindness and your competence. Now that you’re done with military life, you, too, would enjoy a fresh start with your family, I’m thinking. There’s nothing like having good friends nearby to go through life with.”

Mrs. Dinwiddie turned her attention to Krissy’s sisters. “Narissa, Brooklyn—follow your hearts, girls. You’ll have a life full of happiness. Always remember to be kind and love one another—the three of you.” She finished with a glance back at Krissy. “I know you all will.”

“Mateo, your choice to go with your friends is a wise one. Everyone needs to find their place in the world, and I think every one of you will do just that, very soon.” She smiled at Matt. “I believe you will be very happy.”

She turned to Delano.” Del, thank you for thinking of me and asking me to escort Kristalee on this wonderful adventure. It has been one of the best experiences of my life.”

Finally, she stood looking down at Letty. “Letitia, I hardly know where to begin. So, all I will say is, as your new son-in-law stated, ‘Be kind. Be complimentary.’ I’ll also add, be compassionate, and remember, you don’t have to voice every thought that passes through your head.”

Delano rose and said, “But, Clara, I still need to pay you for—”

She waved a dismissive hand. “You do not, and we will not discuss something as *gauche* as money at the dinner table, young man.”

“Where are you going, Clara?” Letty asked, still dazed. “You never mentioned—”

“My dear Letty, there are *many* things I have not mentioned. I’m off to visit some other dear friends in the great northwestern part of our country.

I'm a day or two behind schedule, and Major Jennings has agreed to escort me back to Rivers' Gap Station tomorrow. We'll be taking young Jason back, along with the horses and the carriage.

"So, for now, I will just say, 'til we meet again." She beamed.

"I'll walk you next door," Delano said, but she held out a hand.

"No, I won't hear of you leaving your food to get cold. You stay and enjoy your time this evening with your family, Del."

With that, she turned and walked toward the door. "I shall meet you in the hotel lobby at 4:30 sharp, Major," she called over her shoulder.

"Yes, ma'am," Steve responded with a grin. "I'll be there."



JOHNNY AWOKE around midnight at the sound of a soft knock at their door.

"Johnny, it's Amos," the sheriff said quietly.

"Be right there." He was already up and pulling on his pants.

"What—" Krissy mumbled sleepily.

He bent to kiss her cheek. "It's Amos. Let me see what news he has for us."

He walked toward the door and opened it, stepping out into the hallway and closing the door behind him.

"Oh, good. You're still up," Amos quipped with a laugh.

"Hardly," Johnny muttered. "How'd it go with Jefferson?"

"Went well, actually. I'll tell you about it in the mornin'. We got ten of those kids back and marked their names off our list. So you'll be carryin' ten more toward Durant tomorrow. It ain't perfect, but it's a start. They're bunkin' on the floor of my front room tonight. What time're you leavin'?"

"Early. Why?"

"Before seven? I was hopin' they could sleep till six. They're all worn out."

Johnny nodded. “We’ll wait, Amos. Plan for eight o’clock and give ’em till seven. You look like you could that extra rest, too.”

Amos gave him a weary smile. “I *am* tired. I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow.”

“See you then.”



**T**hat next morning, there was a glad reunion among the children.

Amos took Johnny and Derek aside and told them about the rescue.

“Jefferson didn’t see he’d done anything wrong. He needed workers, and he treated them well—in his words. And, no doubt, their lives were better than they’d have endured at the orphanage.

“I explained to him that these are human beings and are meant to go to homes, not be sold off like slaves. He said he never thought of it that way. He grew up on his own from the time he was eight and was always glad for a meal and shelter.”

Derek said, “Are the children...unharmmed?”

“Oh, yeah. He never meant any harm to them at all. Thought they’d be glad to be at his place with food and shelter.” Amos shook his head. “You just never know. Went down there expectin’ a fight, but he said he was sorry and didn’t intend any ill-will. Makes sense with the way he grew up, I guess.”

“Where are the others?” Johnny asked. “There were more than ten.”

“I’m workin’ on that,” Amos assured him. “I didn’t do what I should’ve for the kids, and I’m sorry about that. I promise you, I will find out where the others are, and when I do, I will send them to you.”

Amos stopped and looked down before he went on. “Johnny, Mr. Farley over to the bank said several people donated to Miz Houston’s exhibition. It was a fair amount of money, but not as much as I would’ve wished. Too little too late seems to be the motto around here.

“Anyhow, it was close to two thousand dollars,” he went on, “and it belongs to you and your missus. You’re gonna need every penny to do what you intend. He’s holding it for you. You need to claim that before you go.”

“Thanks, Amos, I’ll—”

“I took the liberty, Johnny,” Delano said, approaching them from the joyful crowd. He carried a substantial packet of money in his hand. “Here. This is rightfully money that should go to care for the children.” He handed the packet to Johnny.

Surprised, Johnny took it from him.

“You paid for Krissy’s expenses, Mr. Donovan. I want you to have that back, at least.”

“No, no, son. Consider that our wedding gift to you and my daughter.”

Johnny gave him a piercing look and tried to find a delicate way to broach the subject Krissy had mentioned. “Your daughter and I don’t want to cause any financial distress.”

Delano smiled. “Don’t worry, son. Everything is fine now. And the added bonus is that I know Kristalee is in good hands. The only thing I ask is that you remind her to write to us from time to time.” His eyes widened as the next thought hit him. “Good lord, do they even have mail service here in Indian Territory?”

“It’s hit or miss,” Johnny admitted, “in these far-reaching parts of the Territory. Tulsa’s a sure thing, and there are other more local routes, too. It’s



coming along, but slowly. You all may have to travel out this way again to visit us.”

Derek and Amos drifted away, leaving Johnny alone with Delano to speak privately.

“I...wasn’t certain we’d be welcome in your home, Johnny,” Delano admitted. “Letty can be a handful, and—”

“A difference of opinion is fine. But I won’t allow her or anyone else to hurt Krissy,” Johnny said firmly.

Delano wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. “I have something else to ask you. Please, keep an eye on Brooklyn and Narissa, too, will you?”

Johnny’s gaze strayed to where Matt and Brooklyn played with a group of the children, kicking a ball around. He smiled at his father-in-law. “I think Brooklyn already has someone to watch over her. Matt’s a good man. I’ll keep an eye on all of them, and I know Krissy will, too.”

“Good luck, Johnny. Take care of my Kristalee. In my heart, I know she made the right choice,” he said in a confidential tone. “She and Eversby were not a good match. Sometimes, we try to make things work out when they were never meant to be. You and Kristalee are well-suited. I wish you much happiness.”

Johnny nodded. “Thank you. I’ll take good care of her.”

As Delano walked away, Johnny spotted Krissy waiting to intercept her father for a final farewell hug. Her mother stood close by her side, her eyes red-rimmed from crying.

Matt and Brooklyn were getting some of the children loaded up into the third and fourth wagons they’d bought, new ones the sheriff had purchased just a month ago. He’d offered to sell them to Johnny since they found themselves in the predicament of not having enough room for all the children now that they suddenly gained ten more. Johnny had taken him up on his offer, knowing the wheelwright and his helper would be able to make new ones for the sheriff to replace these.

“Let’s get moving!” Johnny called, walking toward the crowd.

“If you’re waiting on us, you’re backing up, *jefe*,” Matt called good-naturedly from where he and Brooklyn sat together on their wagon loaded with children.

Johnny laughed at Matt’s teasing jibe, calling him “boss”. There was no special boss in their group, but Derek took up the tease as well.

“*Jefe*—I like it, brother!” Derek laughed and shook his head. “*Jefe*...” he muttered again.

“Derek—” Johnny said, but Derek just grinned.

“Oh, you’re stuck now. *Jefe* Johnny.” He smiled good-naturedly. “Someone has to be the boss, and it may as well be you, *Captain*.”

“You’re older than me,” Johnny shot back.

“Yes, but I’m a staff officer. You’re able to command. I’m a lowly field surgeon, a doctor. This leadership business falls to you, I’m afraid.”

Derek climbed up into one of the wagons full of children and took the brake off. “You said *let’s go*, Johnny. We’re ready.” He turned to Narissa and patted the seat. “Young lady, I may need some help with these wild ones, if you will be so kind.”

Narissa smiled at the invitation and climbed up beside him to take a seat.

The last of the children jumped in and found places to sit in the wagons. Sage and Dakota took up the reins of the third wagon, leaving the lead wagon to Krissy and Johnny.

Johnny helped Krissy up to the wagon seat, then climbed up beside her, taking one last look at those who had come to see them off.

“Ready, Kris?” he asked, releasing the brake.

“Yes. I’m ready to start our lives together. The very best part of our lives, so far—that’s how I see every day now, Johnny.”

He turned and gave her a quick kiss, reins in hand. “Let’s go see what waits for us.”

As Krissy and Johnny drove slowly away at the head of the procession,

Krissy waved a tearful goodbye to Mama and Papa.

“You know, it’s not really goodbye, Krissy. I invited your father to come back and visit. I think they will come.”

She sniffed, and dried her tears. “I know. I hope they will...in a few years.” She looked away from the past as the crowd faded into the distance, and turned to face their future.

Johnny reached to put his arm around her shoulders. “A few years will be about right,” he said with a smile.

“Something’s been nagging at me,” he said thoughtfully, “about last night.”

“What’s that?”

“Mrs. Dinwiddie.”

Krissy laughed. “After all that’s happened, what could she have done that would give you pause? She’s just an older friend of the family who Papa asked to be my chaperone, and—”

Johnny shook his head slowly. “No. No, Krissy, she’s more than that. She sees and knows more than you think.”

“Like what?”

“She called Matt ‘*Mateo*’. How would she have known he goes by that name in Mexico? No one calls him that here. And the things she said to everyone last night...it was as if she knew things about all of us that—that she would have no way of knowing.” He shrugged. “I don’t know...”

“Like a *prognosticator*? A *fortune teller*?” Krissy tried to think of other times Mrs. Dinwiddie had done things out of the ordinary, but nothing specific came to mind. *Still...Johnny was right.*

He sat silent, lost in thought.

“I guess we’ll never be sure, will we?” Krissy said pensively. “I...really don’t know much about her, come to think of it.” She was quiet a moment, but a feeling that something wasn’t right, now that Johnny had mentioned Mrs. Dinwiddie, wouldn’t leave her.

Now that she thought of it, Mrs. Dinwiddie's sudden departure from the dinner table *had* been odd. Mrs. Dinwiddie never did anything without a reason. Why had she left?

Though Krissy had wondered who the pink pistol might have belonged to before when she'd discovered it in her things, when she'd thought of each of the other passengers, she'd ruled them out one by one. She'd certainly dismissed any connection with Mrs. Dinwiddie immediately. Now...the conversation she'd had that night about how accommodating Captain Johnny Houston had been, and how handsome he was—even so much as to possibly be a temptation to a young woman who was already engaged—came back to her. And all Mrs. Dinwiddie's talk had started Krissy thinking in a different way.

Krissy turned and looked back into the covered interior of the wagon, her gaze roving over the boxes, bags, and cans of provisions they'd bought from the mercantile. Her bags were laid atop some of the barrels. If she could reach the one she'd stowed the pink pistol in, at least some of her suspicions might be put to rest. She clambered halfway back into the wagon, snagging the bag and pulling it toward her.

“What're you looking for?”

By his tone, Krissy knew he was thinking along the same lines as she had been. She half-turned to look back at him as she pulled the bag toward her, already feeling the lightened weight of it.

“Don't you know?”

He gave her a grim nod. “Yeah. I think I do. Is it in there?”

Krissy opened the bag, already knowing that the pink pistol and the beautiful case were gone. She searched thoroughly anyway, but to no avail.

“It's not there, is it?”

“No,” she said softly. “But you already knew that. How?”

He put a hand behind him inside the wagon to help her crawl back into the seat beside him. “I'd be dead a hundred times over if I didn't follow my

hunches. Last night, when she left the table early, I knew something was off. It just didn't seem like her. She needed to be able to get the case out of our room and into her own without being seen by any of us.

"Then, she needed to leave before we did this morning. Before we discovered the pink pistol was missing. She managed to do it all and accomplish it very well."

Krissy settled back into the seat beside him. "I wonder...so many things. And I have so many questions I want to ask her. But," she turned to look at him, "we really don't know for a fact she was the one who took it, do we?"

He gave a short laugh, giving Krissy an indulgent look. "No, honey, we don't. There are a lot of possibilities. And we can't prove a thing. It's just one of the mysteries of life we'll never know."

"One of many," Krissy agreed with a grin.

"Want to know another one?" He held the reins in his left hand, reaching to take her hand in his right one.

She nodded and leaned against him.

"You know, I've wanted to tell you a piece of good news, but I had to save it for this very moment."

She looked up at him curiously. "Whatever could it be Captain Houston? And why, exactly, did you have to wait?"

He laughed, but quickly turned serious again. "I had to make sure it really came true." He glanced down at her. "That wish you said we needed to make on the shooting star the other night."

"I remember. Are you going to tell me yours?"

"Uh-huh. You're seeing it happening right now, Kris," he said quietly. "You and me—together. The future ahead of us. I—know this sounds crazy, because we don't even know where we'll finally end up, but I feel like I'm home already. Wherever *you* are, I'm home."

Krissy's heart was full. She smiled at his revelation. The wish she'd made on that same falling star had been more than fulfilled, and she owed her

happiness to the pink pistol as well as that sweet, fateful wish. Johnny had said there had been no need for a kiss for luck, and never would be again. She had him, and he was all she had ever longed for.

“We both dreamed of the same thing,” she murmured. “And that’s the very best kind of wish of all, my love.”



**T**his has been one of the most important journeys I've ever undertaken, Clara thought. *Epic...*

There had never been a couple more in need of the persuasion of the lore of the pink pistol.

Johnny Houston, with his lifelong stance as a lone wolf, unable to allow himself to truly love anyone outside his close family circle, had been a particular challenge. At loose ends since his time in the cavalry had begun to draw to a close, he'd been especially hard to reach. But Krissy had managed to do it.

Krissy, with her inability to break free from her own family's wishes and expectations, did not have the inner strength to make her own choices. Agreeing to marry a man such as Eversby, who was totally unsuitable as a marriage partner for her, had been a horrible mistake. Any fool could see that except Letitia. Even Del had misgivings, but never voiced them in so many

words.

They were two young people who needed one another, Johnny with too much freedom and Krissy with not enough...And now that they'd found one another, they were sure to be a perfect match and reach a happy medium.

Sometimes, extraordinary measures were needed to make everything work out for the best. And in this case, they most certainly had.

Satisfied with the outcome, Clara closed her eyes and thought of all that had transpired.

Johnny and Krissy and the others should have reached the Houston homestead by now, a week since they'd all said their goodbyes in Hugo.

Clara was on her way to Washington for a visit with old friends there, and the beloved pink pistol was right here with her, where it belonged.

The stagecoach swayed and bounced, but Clara held fast to the only bag she wouldn't allow to be strapped atop the coach with the others. It was a frayed carpet bag that held her treasures—among other things—and the pink pistol and its mahogany case were not going to be parted from her again. Not until the right situation came along.

She held the bag close, feeling the comfort of the hard outline of the case inside. It had all worked out as it should, once more, with the help of the pink pistol, and the love it brought with its possession.

Another love story awaited, somewhere in the great northwest.

*This epic journey was not over...*



# BULLET PROOF BRIDE

By Kit Morgan



*The Weaver Farm Train Stop in Washington, August 1900*

**G**oldie Colson stared at the apple orchards as the train took on water. They'd been here a while. Her destination was Nowhere, a nothing of a town in Washington that was as far from her old life as she could get. On the one hand, that was a good thing. Her life in Kansas City was horrible. She lost her parents in a bank robbery less than a year ago and now her betrothed to a bunch of train robbers.

“Miss Colson?”

She looked at the elderly conductor with eyes red from crying. “Yes?”

“Are you sure you don't need anything? Something to eat?” The folks that live here are bringing food for everyone.”

Before she could speak, she noticed a giant of a man coming down the aisle. He was middle-aged with chestnut brown hair mixed with gray and had blue eyes. He stopped when he reached them. "Howdy ma'am. Name's Arlan Weaver. We heard what happened. Are ya all right?"

A tiny laugh escaped, then another. "I just lost my intended and his father. No, I am not all right." She looked out the window again. True, the men she lost she'd just met at a train station in Boise. She was a mail-order bride, and her betrothed, one Theodore Ferguson and his father, Ben Ferguson, were off to visit Ben's sister in Nowhere. The ride out of Boise was uneventful for a long time and she'd spent it trying to get to know her future husband. It was the same after they left Baker City in Oregon. She was beginning to like the man she was about to marry when they entered the state of Washington. Then the train was robbed but hours ago, and not all the outlaws escaped. "What is this place?"

"The Weaver farm, ma'am," Mr. Weaver said. "Maybe I ought to have my wife take a look at ya." He excused himself and hurried from the car.

Goldie watched him go then went back to staring out the window. She didn't know how many passengers were in the other car. They were spread between two, her car carrying her little party of three and a few others. Theodore and his father had been shot while the rest of the passengers fled into the second car seeking refuge. She had no idea if anyone in the second car had been wounded or killed. She only knew what happened in this one. Four lay dead. Two of them outlaws.

Two more men entered the car, took one look at what lay in the rear seats, then headed that way. A woman followed. She was middle aged, pretty, and had brown hair and kind brown eyes.

"Hello," she greeted. "I'm Samijo Weaver. Why don't you come with me?"

Goldie nodded, too numb to do anything else. How did she survive? She should have been shot too. But fate intervened when her future father-in-law

slumped in the seat in front of her, and she grabbed the gun out of his hand. The rest was a blur. She didn't remember firing the weapon, but obviously did.

"Come along, now," Mrs. Weaver said gently. "Let's get you taken care of."

Goldie's lower lip trembled, and she bit it. She let the woman guide her from the seat and steer her off the train. With no home and no place to go anymore, Goldie had no idea what to do. But she was alive, and for now, that was enough.

There was a bench on the tiny platform, and she sat as the conductor joined them. "I want you to ride in the second car with the others, Miss Colson," he said. "You were getting off in Nowhere. Do you have relatives there?"

She shook her head. "I don't. But the Fergusons did."

"Ferguson?" Mrs. Weaver said. "Were they coming to see Connie Ferguson?"

She nodded. "Yes. She's Ben Ferguson's sister in-law."

"I see," Mrs. Weaver said. "She runs the hotel in Nowhere. She's re-married and known as Mrs. Hoskins now. Perhaps I should accompany you there."

Goldie stared at her a moment. "I ... don't know."

Mrs. Weaver gave her a sympathetic look. "Were they close, Mr. Ferguson and Connie?"

She shrugged. "To be honest, I have no idea. He said he hadn't seen her in years. They were going to surprise her. I was ... his son's mail-order bride. We were to be married in Nowhere then move on to Portland."

Mrs. Weaver sat beside her as another woman came onto the tiny platform, a basket in her hand. She stood off to one side and waited.

Goldie glanced her way. She was beautiful with her dark hair and streaks of gray at the temples.

“Bella, bring the basket,” Mrs. Weaver said. “Arlan?”

The big man came out of a tiny ticket office. “Yeah?”

“I think we should accompany Miss Colson to Nowhere.”

“I’m sending a telegraph to Sheriff Riley now.” He ducked back inside.

Mrs. Weaver smiled at her. “Are you hungry? Bella brought food. She’s married to my husband’s brother, Calvin.”

Goldie forced a smile and nodded. She wasn’t hungry, but also knew she had to eat something. Who knew when she’d get another meal? She had no money of her own and been at the complete mercy of her future husband and his father. They were going to Portland to work in a lumber mill. It was her one chance to start a new life and dare she hope, find love? Now that chance was gone.

Mr. Weaver came out of the little train office. “I’ve sent word to the sheriff in Nowhere about what happened. He’ll want to speak to you of course. And I agree with my wife, we’ll accompany you and help you tell Connie.” He glanced at his wife and back. “Um, do you have any money?”

Goldie shook her head.

“Well, considerin’ yer betrothed ain’t gonna need his, yer entitled to it. I’ll see that ya get it and the rest of their belongings.”

She looked at him. “Shouldn’t Mrs. Ferguson get them?”

“Connie has herself a hotel to make money with,” he said. “What have you got?”

She swallowed hard and looked at the platform. “Nothing.”

“Well, then, there ya have it.” He kissed his wife on the cheek. “Best get what ya need, darlin’.” He headed for the train.

“I can’t thank you enough,” Goldie said softly.

Mrs. Weaver gave her a gentle smile. “You don’t need to. Not after what you’ve been through.” She nodded at the woman called Bella. “The train will be ready to leave soon. Give her the food.”

Goldie rose, a bit unsteady, and took the basket offered. She followed

them to the second passenger car as a tiny flicker of hope ignited in her heart. Perhaps there was still a future for her. But she wouldn't know until she got to Nowhere.

Once she was settled on the train, she placed the basket in her lap and clutched the handle. There was enough food in it to last a few days, and she noticed the other passengers had sandwiches and apples. No one said a word as they ate. Goldie looked at the basket and figured since she lost folks, she got more food.

It wasn't long before Mr. Weaver came with several satchels that held her betrothed's and his father's clothing and effects, plus some money and a note from the conductor. It brought tears to her eyes when she unfolded the note and read it.

*MISS COLSON,*

*USE these twenty dollars as you see fit. Good luck.*

*MR. SCHWAB*

TAKING A DEEP BREATH, Goldie looked at Mr. Weaver. "I don't know what to say."

He smiled. "Ya don't have to say anything. Just accept the kindness and use it to get a fresh start. I'm sure Connie will help ya too."

She bit her lower lip again, jaw trembling, and nodded.

He put the satchels and a pair of saddle bags in the basket overhead, then left the train. No one spoke to her and that was fine. She didn't want to talk to

anyone right now. Her every nerve was raw from the experience, and she wondered what would become of her now. Would her life stop then start in Nowhere? She had no idea. Goldie only knew she lost a chance at love. And she had a lot of love to give.

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Book 1 ~ March 30

***Love on Target* by Shanna Hatfield**

Book 2 ~ April 10

***Love Under Fire* by Cheryl Pierson**

Book 3 ~ April 20

***Bulletproof Bride* by Kit Morgan**

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***Bullseye Bride* by Kari Trumbo**

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***Disarming His Heart* by Winnie Griggs**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cheryl joined Petticoats & Pistols in May of 2010, a relative “newbie” on the writing scene at that time. Becoming part of “the fillies” at P&P was a fantastic experience, and one she is so proud to be a part of almost 13 years later!

Writing westerns and western romance is in her blood, having been born and raised in Oklahoma, the product of at least five generations of proud Oklahomans who first came to the state when it was still Indian Territory.

Cheryl was born in Duncan, Oklahoma, and grew up in Seminole, Oklahoma, both small towns. Reading and writing her own stories were her favorite pastimes as far back as elementary school, which led to earning a B.A. in English from the University of Oklahoma.

She has also served as the President of the Western Fictioneers, a professional organization for western authors.

In the past, three of her stories have been nominated in the Best Western Short Fiction category of the Western Fictioneers Peacemaker Awards.

Cheryl and her husband have lived in the Oklahoma City area for the past 39 years. She has two grown children and two fur babies.

Cheryl loves to hear from readers!

You can e-mail her at: [fabkat\\_edit@yahoo.com](mailto:fabkat_edit@yahoo.com)

For more information:

AMAZON AUTHOR PAGE: <https://tinyurl.com/2p85adzp>

FACEBOOK CONTACT INFO: <https://www.facebook.com/cheryl.pierson.92>

AMAZON PINK PISTOL SERIES PAGE: <https://tinyurl.com/3y96de3b>

PRAIRIE ROSE PUBLICATIONS WEBSITE: <http://prairierosepublications.com/cheryl-pierson/>

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