

• WIND RIVER HEARTS •

MARRYING
Miss
MARSHAL



LACY WILLIAMS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Marrying Miss Marshal

Wind River Hearts

Lacy Williams

Contents

[Exclusive invitation](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus epilogue](#)

[Exclusive Sneak Preview](#)

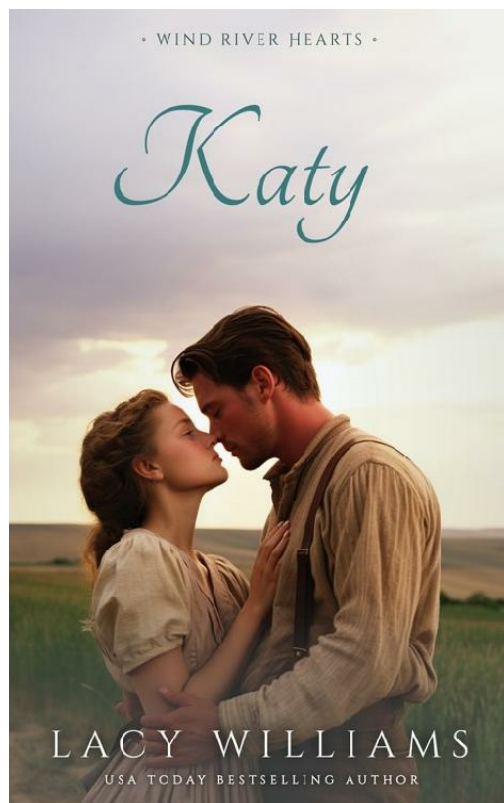
[Read Counterfeit Cowboy next...](#)

[Exclusive invitation](#)

[10th Anniversary - Special Author's Note](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

Exclusive invitation



Are you a member of my new releases newsletter? Right now you can receive a special gift, available only to newsletters subscribers. **KATY** is a 30-page short story and will not be released on any retailer platform—only to newsletter subscribers.

Matchmaking seemed simple for the marshal's adopted daughter. Until Katy's heart got involved...

[Click here to subscribe](#) and get your free gift. Unsubscribe at any time.

Chapter One

Wyoming Territory, September 1889

The report of a rifle echoed through the red-walled canyon, ringing in Marshal Danna Carpenter's chest. A second report sounded soon after the first.

She reined in her mount and pushed back her Stetson, instantly alert and scanning the area for trouble.

The shots could've been someone hunting game, although there wasn't much of it to be found in these washed-out ravines southwest of town. Or it could've been someone discharging their weapon for a more nefarious purpose. As town marshal, she had to be prepared for both possibilities.

Danna's horse shifted beneath her, its movements telling her it sensed something wrong, as well. But what?

Then, in the last rays of sunlight slipping over the canyon's edge, she saw him. A man staggering along the canyon floor, booted feet dragging in the sandy soil. He carried some kind of luggage over his shoulder. From this distance, she couldn't see a rifle...

Too far away to determine his identity, Danna guessed she didn't know him. His clothes were too fine for these parts—dark pants, vest, jacket, and a bright white shirt. Most folks around here wore woolen trousers or denims and plain cotton shirts.

What was he doing so far from town? And on foot? Any halfway-intelligent person knew you didn't traipse around the unforgiving Wyoming landscape without a horse, or a mule at the very least.

Before she could decide whether to waste the last of the sunlight to check on the stranger or to head out of the canyon toward home, her horse's ears flicked back and his shoulder quivered beneath her gloved hand. The ground trembled.

From around a natural bend in the canyon, a cloud of dust rose like steam from a kettle and sent fear skittering down Danna's spine.

The terrible sound she was hearing began to make sense: hundreds of pounding hooves, getting closer every second.

Stampede. She couldn't leave an injured man to be trampled to death. Danna kicked King's flank and gave a shouted "Hiyah!" The horse rocketed

toward the figure still too far away.

Peripherally aware of the canyon walls racing by, Danna watched the greenhorn pause and looked up toward the sky. What was he doing?

A few hundred yards behind him, cattle rounded a bend in the canyon. The beasts bellowed, and that must've jarred the tenderfoot from his stupor, because he turned and faced the approaching wall of horns and hooves. He froze. The item he carried slid to the ground.

Words rose in Danna's throat, but she had no breath to call out, not when all her concentration centered on reaching him in time. He wouldn't be able to hear anyway.

As the cattle closed in, the man's sense of self-preservation seemed to kick in. He turned to flee, caught sight of Danna, and ran in her direction.

Danna fisted her mount's mane with both hands, leaning forward until her torso rested against his foam-flecked neck as she pushed the animal even faster.

The man looked up and, for a moment, time seemed to suspend itself. His eyes—a bright, clear blue—met Danna's, and she saw his fear and surprise.

A solid wall of cattle closed in behind the man. Too close.

Clinging to the saddle horn with her right hand and gripping her mount with her knees, she caught hold of the tenderfoot under one arm and used her horse's forward momentum to sweep him up behind her.

"Hold on!" she cried. The man's arm slung tight around her waist, Danna pulled the horse into a tight turn and fought to keep the stallion from unseating them both. She knew the fear of death in that moment, her twenty-four years playing out before her eyes. So many mistakes made...mistakes she desperately wanted a chance to rectify.

They weren't going to make it. A squeeze of Danna's legs sent the horse into a smooth canter, but it was too late. Several cattle overtook them, one bumping the horse's flank. The animal stumbled but somehow managed to keep its feet.

Fear stealing her breath, gasping, Danna clung to the horse's neck as it sped forward, outrunning the cattle and their thundering hooves.

Thank God. What had the fool man been thinking?

* * *

"Do you have a death wish?" the woman—woman—who'd saved Chas O'Grady's hide shouted over her shoulder. He barely heard the words over the din of the cattle still surging around them.

Her glossy black braid flopped over one shoulder and thwapped him in the chin. "Didn't you hear the stampede?"

Chas sucked in breath after breath of wonderful, fresh air before he could force any words—like, *I thought the racket was distant thunder*—out of his frozen jaw. "You're a woman!"

His arms still around her, he felt her stiffen. But the pounding adrenaline and building anger in his system kept his words flowing. "Are you entirely out of your head? You could have been killed riding straight into a stampede."

"Perhaps you'd rather I hadn't rescued you? Because you would've been trampled if I hadn't scooped you out of there." He felt her inhale deeply, then she blasted him again. "And I certainly didn't see any men around to do the job properly."

The woman's fiery retort stymied him for the moment, because it was true. There hadn't been anyone else in the canyon, and he would never have been able to outrun the cattle.

She'd risked her life. The realization brought bitter memories to the surface. Chas blinked away the images of another woman falling, her blood spilling.

This woman wasn't dead, though. Even though she'd put herself in danger for him. Memories and self-loathing churned in his gut until his rescuer turned her horse up the canyon wall, nearly unseating him with the sudden movement. Chas clung to the woman's waist, eliciting a huff from her.

Her faded denims and wide-brimmed hat had caused him to assume she was a man from a distance, but with his arms wrapped around the curve of her waist, there was no mistaking his rescuer was pure female.

He couldn't get a good look at her features from behind, but she must be nearly as tall as his six-foot stature; the brim of her hat rested inches in front of his nose. Several dark strands of hair escaped from her braid and curled along the nape of her long, slender neck. Her head was in constant motion, darting left to right, and it gave Chas fleeting glimpses of her cheekbones, the soft bow of her lips, the dark sweep of her lashes. She was beautiful. And she guided the horse as if she and the animal were one.

In any other circumstance, she would have turned his head, trousers

notwithstanding.

They pulled ahead of the cattle and edged toward the canyon wall. The cattle veered away and he felt the first stirrings of relief. The woman slowed her horse to a walk as it went quiet around them.

With his detective's nose for curiosity already piqued, his mind swirled with questions. Why was she riding alone in this rough part of the country? And dressed as a man? Could she possibly work for one of the ranching outfits in the area? What rancher or foreman would hire a woman to work on their range? "What are you doing out here alone, anyway?" he demanded, trying to force back his darker emotions. "It's dangerous."

"I could ask you the same," she returned sharply. "You're obviously from a big city. How'd you get lost out here? What happened to your horse?"

Her questions sparked his irritation.

"I'm not lost." That statement was a bit of an untruth, but Chas wasn't about to admit that his sense of direction had been compromised by the winding canyon. He'd been operating as a private detective for several years. Being a little out of place was not the worst situation he'd ever managed to escape from. He would've found shelter eventually, if this female cowpoke hadn't come along. Probably.

"And if you must know, I had a horse. I bought her in Cheyenne, but...well, let's say the man who sold her to me may have exaggerated her condition."

He thought he heard a chuckle from his unusual companion, but he couldn't be sure. He should end this conversation immediately, but his curiosity got the better of him. "Tell me, do all women in the Wyoming Territory dress the way you do? Or are you attempting to pass yourself off as a young man?"

"No," came the sharp retort.

"No to which question?"

She didn't answer, but he felt her draw back on the reins, and the horse slowed.

"Are we stopping?" he asked. "Why?" They hadn't even attained the canyon's rim yet. He'd hoped to make it to the small town of Calvin before evening set in.

"It's getting hard to see." The woman's words were clipped and terse. "I won't risk my horse or our lives trying to climb this shale in the dark."

Chas glanced at the purpling sky and realized how long the shadows had

gotten along the canyon walls. He was no outdoorsman, but even he could tell it would be full dark in minutes.

"We can't just stop, can we?" Chas brought to mind the hotel room he'd hoped to find tonight. With a bed. A chance to wash away the trail grime he'd accumulated since leaving Cheyenne two days ago.

"It looks like there's a level patch up ahead." She nodded, though he couldn't see what she was talking about. It all looked the same to him. An uphill climb. "We'll stop until the moon comes up."

"Are you sure it wouldn't be better to keep going?"

She ignored him. As the last of the sunlight faded into pitch-black, the woman pulled up her horse on a somewhat flat piece of land.

If they were going to spend the next few hours trapped together in the dark, perhaps he should apologize. Certainly, it wasn't her fault her actions had touched on a sensitive memory he spent most of his time trying to suppress.

Best get it out of the way quickly. "Miss, I'm sorry—"

She interrupted him by pulling out of his loose grasp and sliding off the horse's back.

A bit miffed at her dismissal, he followed. And misjudged her closeness, thanks to the darkness. His momentum nearly knocked both of them to the ground, but he steadied her with hands on her forearms.

Her breath fanned his chin, her warmth tangible as the night cooled around them. Chas's heart thundered in his chest, much like those hooves that had been so close to taking his life. This time for a different reason.

"Miss, I meant no offense by my earlier words. I was..." He paused, looking for the right thing to say, knowing he couldn't tell her about Julia's death. "I was simply expressing my surprise to find my rescuer a woman."

She pulled away, but he still sensed her nearness. Her movements as she slid something from the saddle seemed jerky and stiff. It was clear she'd rejected his apology.

He went on. "I am grateful for your fancy riding. I'd rather not meet my Maker today, and I've no doubt those beasts would've stomped all over me if not for you."

"I would've done it for anyone."

Her voice sounded muffled, and he wished for a candle or a beam of moonlight so he might see her face.

"Stay here."

She disappeared into the darkness. Only the muted sounds of boots scraping against stone told him she was still nearby.

Stay here. He mimicked her curt command silently. What did she think? He would wander off in the dark and get lost? She'd already made it clear what she thought of his abilities traversing this very canyon. Agitation and impatience made him restless, and he paced away from her horse.

And stepped right off the edge into nothing.

* * *

Danna heard an indistinct shout, the scrabble of falling rocks, and then silence.

"Hello?" she called, not bothering to disguise her annoyance.

She kept moving toward the small stand of bushes she'd spotted as darkness fell. Where there were bushes, there would be dried twigs to light a fire. If she had to wait until the moon came up, she wanted to be able to see the man she was stuck with.

She tried again. "Mister?"

He'd flustered her with his nearness after he'd landed on top of her while attempting to dismount the horse. She hadn't been so close to a man since her husband's death. And even during their brief courtship and the early days of their marriage, Fred Carpenter hadn't caused turmoil in her gut like the warmth from this man's hands did. What was wrong with her? Fred had only been gone a few months. And she didn't even know the stranger's name.

Irritated with herself, she spoke once more. "Tenderfoot?"

No answer. Her extended boot met some resistance, and she knelt to gather the dry undergrowth from the bushes. Using the flint and steel she'd retrieved from her saddlebags, she had a small fire burning quickly. She turned toward her horse, standing right where she'd left it, but the man was nowhere to be seen. She resisted the urge to groan. After making sure the fire had enough fuel to burn for a few minutes unattended, she returned to where she'd left the tenderfoot just moments before.

Past her placid mount, the rocks on the edge of the slope had been disturbed. She frowned and walked over, noting this area had a bit of a drop-off instead of a gentle slope. It was hard to see in the dark away from the fire, but by leaning over the edge and squinting into the darkness, Danna was able

to catch sight of the tenderfoot several yards away. He lay still, one shoulder cocked in an awkward position.

"Oh, no," she breathed. Louder, she called out to him, "Mister, can you hear me?"

A soft moan erupted from his lips, but he didn't move other than to roll his head toward her.

Forcing calm she didn't feel, Danna retrieved her rope from its tie behind the saddle and looped it around the saddle horn before tossing the length to where her unlikely companion lay.

"Mister? Can you reach the rope?" She didn't expect a reply, so she wasn't too surprised when none came. Keeping one hand on the rope, she scrambled down the steep incline as best she could. She slipped twice, and rocks bit into her palms as she fought to keep from joining the tenderfoot in a tumble. She wouldn't do him any good if she injured herself, too.

When she reached him, Danna knelt at his head and studied the man.

His hat had slipped to one side, and his sweat-matted hair was dark next to his fair skin. "Mister, you've sure got a way of getting into scrapes," she muttered. She probed his scalp and neck gently with her fingertips, searching for injury. Though obscured by a few days' growth of stubble, he had a strong jawline. He gasped when her palm brushed his right shoulder. Keeping her touch as light as she could, Danna ran her fingers over the arm and shoulder, and he moaned again.

"Hurts."

"I know. Looks like you've knocked it out of place." She prodded his torso and legs but found no additional trauma. She did find a gun belt and weapon at his hip. She ignored those for now. "I can reset it for you. But we need to get you up the hill, so I can see what I'm doing."

"I'll try." He clenched his teeth as he rolled onto his good side.

She helped him to his hands and knees, but he shook his head and collapsed onto the rocky soil. "I can't..." he wheezed "...make it."

"All right." She smoothed a hand over his forehead as if she were comforting her almost-niece, Ellie. "Tell me your name."

"Chas." A breath. "O'Grady."

She filed the name away. O'Grady sounded Irish. She nodded absently and murmured, "I'm Danna Carpenter," as she considered the best way to get his shoulder back into the socket. "What brings you to Wyoming?"

"My job."

"Not cattle."

One corner of his mouth quirked upward. "How'd you know?"

"Lawyer?"

He snorted a laugh, then grimaced as if the movement pained him.

"Railroad surveyor?" she guessed, and gave a mighty tug.

O'Grady's upper arm and shoulder slid into place with an audible click. She was impressed when he didn't cry out, just rolled his head and looked at her with those blue eyes.

"Thanks. You're a doll."

Then he passed out. Danna sat next to his unconscious form in the darkness, willing away the blush that had flamed across her cheeks at his words. Stunned.

Something had happened inside her when he'd looked at her, when she'd heard the endearment he'd spoken.

Something inside her opened, like a flower unfurling. Attraction? Whatever it was, she didn't like it, not one bit.

Chapter Two

C has sat quietly near the small fire his rescuer had built. With nightfall a chill had fallen, and he was thankful for the warmth the crackling fire generated.

“How's your pain?” His companion asked as she propped herself against a barrel-sized boulder and removed her hat, loosing a spill of dark hair that had come out of its braid. She stretched her trouser-clad legs in front of her, eyes on her boots. Was that a blush on her cheeks? It was hard to tell in the dim, flickering firelight.

He rotated the shoulder, wincing a little. “Bearable. Better than before, thanks to you.” He didn't want to think about what would have happened to him if he'd been left on his own in a haze of pain, shoulder dislocated.

He was grateful to Miss Carpenter for saving his hide, twice, but embarrassment was the primary emotion that registered.

He'd never had this much trouble with a case before, and he hadn't even made it to the town where he was supposed to scare up a group of cattle rustlers. It didn't matter that his cases usually took him to large cities like Chicago, St. Louis, or Austin; he'd been a private detective long enough that he shouldn't have required help.

And his shoulder still ached, though not with the piercing pain he'd felt before she'd knocked it back into its socket. The pain was enough that he sat back while Danna Carpenter had spent several minutes scouting for more firewood. His mother would have had a conniption if she'd seen him allowing a lady to perform such a task without offering to do it himself. His mother had subjected him to extensive training during his youth, preparing him for a life as the second son of one of Boston's prominent Irish families. A life he

would never live, not after the disaster he'd made of things.

"Do you live near here?" he asked, because he needed to keep his thoughts away from Boston and everything he'd lost.

"In town."

"Really? Hmm. How far?"

She grinned softly at his question. "Calvin is a few miles still. North, if you were wondering."

Her smile did funny things to his insides, left him feeling like he'd fallen off the edge of the cliff a second time.

"What's your business in Calvin?" she asked after a moment of quiet not long enough for Chas to gain his composure. "Are you visiting family?"

"You're a nosy one, aren't ya?" He didn't want to react to her. And his irritation that he couldn't seem to help himself made the words sharper than they ought to be.

Her eyebrows pinched, and she looked away from him, one side of her face falling into shadow, "Comes with the territory."

What did she mean? Chas didn't have time to consider the meaning behind her cryptic words. She looked back at him with unabashed curiosity, obviously waiting for him to answer.

"I don't have family here. I'm a businessman."

Her eyebrows pinched briefly before her face cleared. "What were you carrying with you? It looked like luggage."

He groaned. "A pair of saddlebags." With his letter of introduction for the local lawman inside. Passing his good hand over his face, he huffed a breath. "I don't suppose there's any way we could go back for them..." Then another thought occurred. "Do you think they could have survived being trampled?" How much more misfortune could befall him?

"I don't know if they'll still be intact. But to be honest, I wasn't too keen on climbing this hill in the dark." She motioned behind her. "Even after the moon comes up. We can wait until morning and try to find them."

"Thank you."

She stood and went to her horse, untied something from behind the saddle, and tossed it to him. A dugan—a bedroll, he'd heard them called.

"Sure you don't need this?" he asked as she pulled another object off the horse.

"I'm sure." She shook out a slicker, a large one that could have belonged to a man, or at least someone taller and broader than Danna. It made Chas

wonder if she belonged to someone else. Was she married?

Returning to her seat against the taller rock, she swung the coat around her shoulders and tucked it underneath her chin. Her dark eyes met his, and he felt a spark sizzle between them before she looked into the fire.

What was this? He'd never felt this...connection with anyone else, not even with—

He spoke quickly to keep the thought from its finish. "Will your husband be out looking for you? I'd hate to fall asleep and wake with a gun in my back."

Something flickered across her face. Pain, maybe? "No."

"A father? Brother? Uncle?"

Now her mouth flattened into a grim line. She tossed the twig she'd been playing with into the fire and dusted her hands together. "No. No husband, no father. Not anymore."

Her words hinted she might've been married at one point, but her closed expression told him it would be best not to continue that line of inquiry. Suddenly, she straightened her shoulders and met his gaze head-on. "Where are you from? Back East?"

"My accent?" he asked with a rueful smile.

She nodded. "You're Irish?"

Intrigued, he leaned forward, resting his elbow on his bent knee. "How did you know?"

"A good guess." She shrugged, and he followed the motion of her hands as she folded them over one knee. "And I believe your hair is red as well, although I didn't get a good look in the dark."

"It is."

He wanted to keep talking to her, wanted to know why she dressed as she did, why she was alone out here. But he also wanted to protect himself from this tenuous tie they seemed to share. He who always pried for every piece of information from any person he came into contact with, feigned a yawn and rolled himself in the dagan.

"Thank you again, and goodnight."

* * *

"Mister."

The sound of gunshots rang in his ears, blood covered his hands. Pain speared his right shoulder. Had he been hit?

"Tenderfoot." A boot nudged his ankle and drew Chas out of the nightmare. Memory.

He blinked, trying to dispel the images of the woman he'd loved dying under his hands. He rolled off his injured shoulder, shook his head to clear it, and took in his surroundings.

Muted gray light threw Danna Carpenter into silhouette as she knelt over the embers of last night's fire. The sight of her calmly going about her business quieted the raging maelstrom of emotion and memories bombarding him.

At least she had her back turned, so he could shake off the trembles his nightmare always left behind without an audience.

He couldn't help groaning as he pushed himself to his elbow. Danna turned back and helped him sit upright on the hard, cold earth. The dugan still covered his legs.

"Here, this should help with the stiffness in your shoulder."

Before he realized what she was doing, she'd opened his coat and unbuttoned the first two buttons on his shirt, exposing his injured shoulder. She hesitated—must've seen his gunshot scar—but then a welcome heat seeped into his skin. She'd warmed a folded square of wet cloth to make a compress.

Her eyes met and held his as she pressed the hot bundle against his abused muscles. He couldn't decipher her expression in the semidarkness, but a connection sparked between them. She was too close.

As if she'd had the same thought, she backed away.

He looked down to hide his confusion and immediately noticed his rumpled state. He was a mess. Needed a bath and a shave, and his clothes were covered in dust.

"Coffee." She pressed a tin into his hands and retreated again. "I'm not much of a cook. I think I scorched it."

A sip of the black sludge confirmed her words. He swallowed when what he wanted to do was spit it out. It did warm his insides.

"Thank you," he said, voice rusty.

"Thought your pain might be bad after a night out in the cold. You were moaning in your sleep."

His back teeth clenched. He often thrashed around because of the

nightmare, but he wasn't about to admit to it. She'd probably ask questions, and he couldn't afford to share the answers. Not when he'd been responsible for the deaths of the two people he'd loved most in the world.

"Thanks," he muttered again, forcing himself out of the bedroll and into the bracing morning air. Taking a moment to stretch the kinks out, Chas absently rubbed a particularly twinge-worthy knot in his lower back while he watched his unusual companion as she used her boot to kick dirt over the graying embers of the campfire.

She looked up at him, this time with her hat pulled low over her brow. He couldn't read her eyes.

"If we find your things quickly, we can make it back to Calvin by breakfast."

His rumbling stomach thought that was a good idea.

"Your shoulder might act up a bit when we're jostling around on the horse's back, so you'll just have to tell me if you need to stop for a while."

He was ready to have some distance from this confusing woman and the draw he felt toward her.

"I'm sure I'll be fine. Let's go."

* * *

Nearly two hours after the tenderfoot's declaration, Danna wasn't so sure his wounded arm was holding up. She'd kept her mount to a plodding pace, though both she and the animal wanted to move. Even this slowly, she felt Chas O'Grady's body grow progressively stiffer as the morning wore on.

The sun finally peeked over the canyon's rim, but finding anything in the torn-up ground left by the stampeding cattle was proving impossible.

The tenderfoot shifted in the saddle, a soft gasp making her turn her head for a glimpse of his face. A muscle ticked in his jaw. With her late husband, that had been a sure sign he was either mad or hurt. "You want to stop for a while?" she asked.

"No. I'm sure you need to get home."

She did, but she kept quiet.

"My saddlebags had some important documents in them. If they somehow survived, I'll need them."

"Fine." She knew he was hurting, but if the man wouldn't admit it, what

could she do?

Danna kept her eyes on the chewed-up ground. Just looking at how the sandy canyon floor had been marked by the thousands of hooves, she doubted there'd be anything left to find. However, she understood his need to keep looking. She knew what it was like to lose something important and never get it back.

And what had those cattle been doing in the canyon anyway? She'd mulled it over all night, awake in the dark, while she'd tried to keep her gaze and her thoughts from straying to the man who'd slept just across the campfire.

She'd spent far too long staring at his broad shoulders, the only part of him not wrapped in the blanket, trying to pinpoint what it was about him that unsettled her.

For now, she chose to ignore that unruly flash of emotion last night. She couldn't be drawn to the near stranger. He made her uncomfortable. That was all.

It wasn't danger. She was well acquainted with the prickling at the back of her neck, beneath her hairline. No, this was more of an intensity. She'd been aware of his every movement, even after his breathing had settled, signifying he'd dozed off.

She almost thought those prickles of sensation were...attraction. But that couldn't be right. She'd never felt anything like this with Fred. Maybe she'd been too young when she married Fred, or maybe she had felt something similar at the beginning of their acquaintance, and she'd forgotten. She'd been married to Fred for eight years, after all.

The tenderfoot groaned, stifled it, and shifted again. "Maybe I should walk for a while. I might have a better chance at spotting my saddlebags that way."

He must be hurting something fierce by now. She shrugged and reined in her mount. She'd have a better view from her horse's back, but if he wanted to walk, he could walk. The tenderfoot huffed softly when his shiny boots hit the ground.

"You sure you don't want to stop for a while?"

His only answer was a silent frown. The tenderfoot wore the same closed expression that Fred had worn when she'd asked too many questions. Fine. She wouldn't ask about his arm again, even if it fell off.

She forced her thoughts back to the cattle and what they'd been doing in

this canyon. The roundups and cattle drives should have already been completed in this area. The ground above the canyon was dry, not terribly good for grazing. So what had that many animals been doing here?

It was a mystery. "Did you happen to see any brands on those cattle last night?"

"What?" The tenderfoot glanced up at her, focusing those intense blue eyes on her momentarily. "Oh. No, I didn't get a good look at any of their markings. Why? Did you recognize them?"

"No." Danna scanned the landscape, aware that his eyes remained on her, uncomfortable with his scrutiny.

"Why do you want to know?"

"It's a bit unusual for the cattle to be in this area this late in the year." And she thought she'd heard gunshots immediately before the cattle had stampeded. But in the confusion, she couldn't be sure. "Most have already been driven to Cheyenne for market. The vegetation starts to get scarce."

"Hmm..." He didn't sound terribly interested, but she supposed he wouldn't be.

Slowly, they drifted apart as they searched the ground.

She guessed he was a professional cardsharp, a gambler. He'd told her last night he was a businessman. Only, who would come to the tiny town of Calvin, Wyoming, to do business? And his fancy city clothes didn't fit in around here. It was a good thing she wasn't interested in him. A gambler.

Her thoughts distracting her, she almost missed the mangled piece of leather half-buried under the sandy dirt.

"I think this is it," she called out, and he joined her as she dismounted from her horse. He picked up the leather bags, juggling a pouch and canteen when they fell out of the hole torn in one side.

"I can't believe it. The saddlebags are ripped, but everything inside appears to be intact." There was wonder in his voice as he riffled through his belongings.

He took what looked like an envelope out and tucked it into his breast pocket beneath his vest. A second item quickly followed the first. Danna couldn't see what it was, something wrapped in leather and tied with a thong.

Were these two things important? If so, why hadn't he kept them closer in the first place?

"God must be watching out for you, Mr. O'Grady." The instant Danna spoke the words, his expression closed.

"I sincerely doubt God has spared any thoughts for me lately."

* * *

Chas tried to ignore the pain that throbbed up his arm and through his shoulder with each movement the horse made as they headed to town, but it proved impossible, even when he closed his eyes against it. He knew his companion was trying to make the ride as smooth as possible. She held her horse to a walk and traversed more ground to avoid the gullies. He appreciated her efforts, but he still ached something fierce.

He just wanted to get to town and soak his aching joints in a tub of hot water. And find something to stop the growling in his stomach.

He and Miss Carpenter hadn't spoken since he'd gotten back on her horse. Her comment about God's favor had thrown up a wall between them, and he was glad for the distance. The sense of connection he'd felt with Danna since their chance meeting had him off-kilter.

After the horror of Julia's death and his part in it, he'd vowed not to allow another woman close. Not ever. Six years had gone by, and his vow hadn't been difficult to keep. He hadn't met any woman who'd compared to Julia.

Until now. And Danna Carpenter couldn't be more different from his first love. She was tall and slender, where Julia had been of average height and curved in all the pleasant places. Julia had been femininity personified, always dressed immaculately, with lace or jewels accenting her best physical attributes. Danna Carpenter dressed like a man and didn't seem to care about her appearance at all. Not that she had to, with her expressive brown eyes and that crown of long, black hair.

Julia had used her feminine wiles to manipulate him.

And it had cost her life, because he hadn't been able to resist.

Chas shook himself from his thoughts, noticing that the horse seemed to move faster now, although Danna held it in check. Chas locked his eyes on the horizon, hoping they were getting close to Calvin. A small speck appeared, then another and another, and finally they got close enough that he could make out the individual buildings.

His heart sank. The town was even smaller than he had imagined. It might pose a challenge to get the information he needed to make his case and find the rustlers. He wasn't likely to blend in.

Miss Carpenter's horse crossed one dusty street, passed the railroad tracks, and turned onto the second. He supposed this must be the main thoroughfare.

Perhaps the town did have some charm, though none of the buildings matched. About half were brick, the rest wooden. Most of them were unpainted, as if they'd been constructed hastily and occupied quickly. Likely they had.

Several houses had been built on the street behind the buildings, one larger than all the rest. A mansion, in this small town?

Danna reined in her horse in front of the second-to-last building on the street, the most unique one. Its first level was rock, but the second, constructed of wood, looked as if it had been added on later.

Unless he was mistaken, a dog bayed from inside. Strange. Perhaps it was a child playing.

Danna shifted toward him. "The livery is at the end of the street. I've got to go in and check—"

"Help! Marshal!" A high-pitched, female voice cried out.

Someone needed help. Chas jumped from Danna's horse, jarring one ankle and his injured shoulder when he landed. The horse shied at the unexpected movement.

"O'Grady!" Danna voice followed him, but he didn't have time to stand around and help her, and she was a good horsewoman anyway.

Chas darted across the street. His heart thudding in his ears made it hard to determine which direction the cry had come from, but he thought maybe from the left, so that's the direction he turned. He stalled at the first corner, where the boardwalk ended at an alleyway between buildings. Which way?

"Help," the voice warbled now, sounding a bit muffled.

"O'Grady." Danna clapped a hand on his forearm, her expression fierce under the brim of her hat. "Don't ever do a fool thing like that again. My horse could've—"

"I have to—"

"Marshal!" the distant woman shouted.

Danna stuck two fingers in her mouth and issued an ear-splitting whistle. Instantly, the shouting stopped.

While Chas gaped at Danna, a small nut-brown head popped up from behind a pile of crates on the boardwalk in front of the nearest building.

"Missy McCabe, come here," Danna ordered. The head turned into a pair

of shoulders, and a little girl emerged from behind the stack of crates. She stood in front of Danna with her head down.

Chas calmed the chaos in his head, now that it became apparent that there wasn't a true emergency.

"What is going on?" Danna asked, her voice sharp.

"Sorry, Marshal," the girl said. Her shoulders slumped even more.

Marshal? A sick feeling stole over Chas.

"My brothers stole my dolly, and I thought—" her lips quivered "—thought you might put them in jail. Or help me get her back."

Danna knelt to the girl's level, gentling her voice. "Missy, you know I'm busy dealing with important business. I don't have time to chase down your doll."

Chas looked at the woman he'd spent the last twelve or so hours with. Really looked at her.

And was astonished he hadn't seen it before. The gun belt slung low on her shapely hips. The trousers and man's shirt. The flash of sunlight from a badge pinned to her shoulder, just visible inside the lapel of her jacket.

She was a marshal? She glanced at him, and he realized he must've spoken out loud.

"Why don't you see if your ma can help you?" Danna advised the girl.

"She won't," the girl mumbled to her bare feet. "They ain't gonna listen to her."

"Perhaps your brothers will tire of playing and bring your doll to you after a while."

The little girl sniffled, eyes pleading with Danna. Danna sighed. Pulled a penny out of her pocket, and held it out. "Why don't you buy some candy?"

The girl's eyes lit up.

"And no more screaming around town, all right? Mr. O'Grady thought you were really in trouble."

The girl ran off. Danna watched, wearing an expression he couldn't decipher. Maybe longing?

He couldn't contain the words inside him any longer. "You're a marshal?"

Chapter Three

Danna heard the disapproval in O'Grady's voice. After a night without sleep, plus the other troubles she'd been dealing with, her temper flared.

She hiked up her chin, pinned him with the same stare she'd used on what seemed like every male in town. "I haven't been hiding my badge."

His eyes flicked to the tin star at her collarbone, then away. "You didn't introduce yourself as a lawman."

She hated feeling defensive. Shouldn't have to feel that way. Tried to keep her voice calm. "If you recall the circumstances surrounding our introductions, it didn't come up. Good day, Mr. O'Grady."

Without a look back, Danna strode back to the boardwalk and down two doors to the combined jail and marshal's office and unlatched the door. A large blur of fur and teeth nearly knocked her onto her backside and took off down the street, howling at the top of his lungs. Fred's dog. She didn't bother to go after it, not as exhausted as she was. He'd come back when he got hungry. Unfortunately.

Dismay filled her as she stared at the chaos inside.

Wanted posters were strewn across the floor, some with muddy pawprints obscuring the writing on them. The desk chair had been knocked over. The desk itself appeared not to have suffered, and that was all Danna cared about. She hung her hat on a peg next to the door and slid her arms out of the sleeves of her coat.

The sound of firm footsteps on the boardwalk just outside her door alerted her that Chas O'Grady had followed her. "Did someone put an animal in here? A prank, perhaps?"

She bristled at his insinuation that someone would play such a prank on her, and that she couldn't handle it if they did.

She crossed her arms over her middle. "It's my dog. Was there something else I could help you with?" She had to work at keeping her tone businesslike. Fred had always said her temper would get her in trouble. Now, as the marshal, she couldn't afford to let it get the better of her.

O'Grady stared at a spot on the floor for a long moment. So long that she wondered if he was going to say anything at all. Finally, he sighed and pulled something out of his shirt pocket. It was an envelope, the one he'd put there earlier when they'd located his saddlebags. He handed it to her, then waited as if he expected her to open it.

So she did, only to find a letter inside. Her mind spun, trying to figure a way out of this situation gracefully. After his earlier disdain at her profession, she had no intention of revealing to him that she couldn't read.

Fortunately, he seemed not to notice her hesitation but spoke quickly and quietly. "I'm a private detective hired by the Wyoming Stock Growers Association to look out for the interests of cattlemen in this area."

Danna looked over the top of the letter she couldn't read. O'Grady had half-turned and face the window to the street outside. Not much to see; the jail was one of the last buildings on the street. Most of the interesting happenings in town centered around Hyer's General Store or in the street in front of one of the three bars.

Not a gambler, then? "So, you're a Pinkerton? I didn't think they took jobs this far west."

His eyes remained on the window. He didn't crack a smile. "I'm on contract with a different agency, but yes, similar to a Pinkerton. There have been reports of cattle rustling in these parts, and I've been sent to find the criminals behind it."

Now she raised her brows. "I haven't heard anything like that." She thought back to the spring cattle drives, shaking her head to clear the pain of missing Fred as much as to stir her memories. "A few missing cattle earlier this year, but that could be explained by predators or natural causes. Wandering off. Nothing recent."

His eyes narrowed, but he still looked out the window. "My employers are concerned with more than a few missing cattle, Marshal. If there's something going on here, I'll find it. I'm very good at my job."

She didn't doubt it, but he seemed too citified for Calvin.

He turned, reaching out a palm. She slapped his letter into it, and he stuffed it back into the envelope.

"I've done my duty and notified the local law." She easily read the derision when he spoke the word. "And I'll expect you to stay out of my way."

Danna worked at curbing the anger that formed a tight knot in her chest. What would Fred have done when faced with a nuisance like Chas O'Grady? Probably turned the other cheek.

"If there's anything I can do to help..." she gritted the words out through clenched teeth.

Chas gestured to the mess covering the floor. "You appear to be plenty busy. I'm sure I can find my way around town. Good day."

With that, he strode out of the office. Danna slumped into the chair behind Fred's old desk. For a moment, when he'd first stated he was a detective, she had hoped that Chas O'Grady might be her ticket to winning the townspeople over. If they saw a man working with her, would they start to trust her to take care of the town? They'd been remarkably cool toward her since she'd been appointed as marshal. But no, he wouldn't help her. It seemed by his abrupt dismissal, he'd be working against her.

Frustration boiling, she curled her hands into fists on top of the desk. She'd proved herself those first two years Fred had let her be his deputy. They'd accepted her in that position. Why was being marshal different? And why did it hurt so much to find that Chas's reaction was the same as everyone else's? She didn't feel anything for him. Wouldn't.

Weariness swamped her. All she wanted to do was go upstairs to her small room above the jail and sleep. Instead, she rounded the desk and picked up the loose papers strewn across the floor.

She'd moved the mess to the top of her desk but hadn't started sorting yet when a commotion outside had her rising from the desk chair.

"Marshal—"

"—that varmint—"

The door burst open, and Wrong Tree ran in with tail lowered and droopy ears, followed by Will Chittim, the young livery stable hand, and Martha Stoll, one of the crankiest women in town. Wrong Tree scooted behind Danna and underneath Fred's desk until just his tail was poking out.

"What's the trouble?"

The barber's wife pointed at Danna, face flushed and emotions running

high. "Your dog. Your awful, no-good varmint of a dog, that's what the trouble is!" Her voice rose throughout the rant, and she ended with a screech.

"Danna—Marshal—" Young Will's voice cracked when he rushed to speak. "I put the dog in your office last night to keep him from runnin' the streets, but someone must have let him out today."

"I did."

Martha drew in a deep breath. "He was digging up my prize rose bushes. That's the third time this week! One of them was completely ruined. Ruined!"

"Mrs. Stoll—"

"Don't offer me any more of your empty platitudes, young lady."

Danna bristled, both at being spoken to as if she were a child and at the childish title. "Mrs. Stoll, I apologize—"

"I don't accept it!" the other woman said with a stomp of her foot that would've suited little Missy McCabe more than it did the forty-something adult female. "I want that mongrel eliminated. If you won't do it, I'll make a complaint to the mayor. The dog is a menace to this town."

"I'll take care of it, Mrs. Stoll."

"You'd better." With those parting words, the woman stomped her way out the door and slammed it behind her.

Will ran a shaking hand down his face. "I'm sorry, Marshal. I saw the pup trot by, on up the boardwalk, but I was talkin' with a gent who wanted to rent a horse, and I couldn't go fetch him. By the time I got away, he was in Mrs. Stoll's garden. You're not really going to hurt him, are you?"

"Of course not." She didn't like the dog. They'd never gotten along in the eight years she'd been married to Fred, but she couldn't do a thing like that. She had too much respect for her husband's memory.

"Not because of you," she told the dog when he stuck his head out from under the desk, looking up at her with falsely innocent eyes.

"He hasn't been the same since Marshal Fred's been gone." When the mutt approached him, Will obligingly knelt and scratched under its chin.

"Mmm..." Danna hummed, watching the two interact. None of them had been the same since Fred's death. The dog was the least of her worries. "I suppose I should try and find him a good home out in the country. With lots of space to roam."

"And a nice, big garden to dig up?" Will asked, attention still on the dog.

"We'll see."

* * *

Chas strode down the boardwalk, ignoring the curious glances of passersby. He probably should stop into some of the stores and start making contact with the owners, but his thoughts were too chaotic and his shoulder ached miserably. Instead, he headed straight for the hotel.

What kind of town made a woman its marshal? It was a dangerous job. Dangerous for a man. How could a woman handle it?

All Chas could think about was Julia and how she'd died. And how her death had been his fault. He'd brought her into a situation fit for men only, and she'd been killed.

Being a lawman was a man's job. What was the town thinking?

He secured a room at the hotel. It wasn't as grand as he was used to, but it would do. He had a long soak in a hot tub that loosened his shoulder, and only then did Chas feel moderately better. Well enough to venture out and find something to eat.

The hotel clerk recommended the café down the street. This time when Chas walked down the boardwalk, he nodded and smiled at the men and tipped his hat to the ladies, soliciting giggles and smiles behind gloved hands from some of the younger women.

In the café, he was seated by a matronly woman and served a cup of coffee by a slender girl of about fifteen.

It was midafternoon, and the café was mostly empty. Only one other patron was seated across the room, an older gentleman dressed in denims and a clean light blue shirt. He had a white hat on the table at his elbow. A wealthy rancher? Chas nodded to the man but chose not to interrupt his meal. Perhaps he would introduce himself when his stomach wasn't so loud.

"Thank you," Chas said when a steaming plate of roast and potatoes was set in front of him.

"Anything else?" the girl asked.

"Mmm." Chas hurriedly swallowed the coffee he'd sipped. "I'm new in town and seeking employment. Do you know of anything?"

"Ma might." The girl went into a rear room, and the older woman appeared in her stead.

"Ya seekin' work?" She eyed him skeptically. "Not a cowpoke?"

He shook his head.

Chas's heart sunk as she frowned. "Don't know anyone in town needin'

help.” The café matron left with a shrug.

The door swung open, and another man entered, this one in a ruffled, untucked shirt and brown trousers. His fingers were stained with ink. A shopkeeper? The second man joined the first at his table.

Chas went back to his meal, trying to remember his manners. The food was delicious and he wanted to inhale it.

"Marshal's back in town," the new man said to the rancher, the low words piquing Chas's attention, though he kept his face downturned as if he hadn't heard.

The rancher grunted but didn't speak.

"Seems she didn't find no help for hire over in Cottonwood Creek. Still no deputies to work with her."

Danna Carpenter was marshal alone? She didn't have any deputies? Surely that couldn't be right.

"That's a shame," the rancher said. "A real shame." The grin on his face belied his statement.

The lunch Chas had consumed suddenly sat like a boulder in his gut.

* * *

Two days later, Chas was back at the café, this time during the lunch rush. Frustration over this case had cost him a sleepless night.

He'd hoped to find a temporary job. Working for someone local would lend him credibility and pave the way for his investigation.

But no one in town needed help. He'd avoided the dressmaker and the livery but spoken to every business in town that was a viable option. All he got were resounding "no's."

However, one suggestion he'd received over and over again was, "The marshal needs deputies."

It seemed to be a joke around town, though how anybody could think it funny that a woman was in charge of maintaining order, he couldn't comprehend.

He'd entertained the thought of working with Danna for scant moments before he'd rejected it. He couldn't work with a woman. Couldn't get close to one, even though she'd saved his life. It was too much of a risk.

His dreams of Julia's death had returned, as if the event had happened

only yesterday, another reason he hadn't slept last night.

There was no way he could be a deputy for Marshal Carpenter.

But he didn't know how else to stay in the area, and he needed a reason to stay in town, or folks might start getting suspicious.

He needed to gain the trust of at least a few of Calvin's citizens, get the lay of the land and find some clues to the missing cattle.

"We can't wait any longer..." Low but heated words from the table next to his floated to Chas's ears.

"We got our orders. The boss said wait."

Chas threw a casual glance over his shoulder, hand on his coffee mug as if he were looking for the waitress.

Three men at the next table over shoveled their meatloaf into their mouths. The layer of dust covering their denims and chambray shirts and the shaggy haircuts and scruffy facial hair marked them as cowboys, but these men had a look to them that was rougher than the typical cowboy.

Chas's senses went on alert. It might be nothing, but usually his instincts were good. He snuck glances out of his peripheral vision, trying to memorize their features without catching their notice.

Two had beards—brown and black—and the third a long, sand-colored mustache that trailed all the way down the sides of his face to his chin. The brown-haired man had a scar running down one side of his face, from temple to jaw. The man with the black beard and hair had dark stains on his trousers that appeared to be spittle from chewing tobacco. The sandy-haired man had unusual pale-blue eyes.

"The other boys'r getting restless. Ready to move on."

The first voice answered, "Boss says wait, we wait."

"But the grass is all dryin' up now."

The door opened, and Chas dared a glance at the other table, as if he were looking to see who'd just come in. The man with brown hair was speaking. "The cattle—"

A sharp grunt from the pale-eyed man silenced whatever the speaker would have said. Chas's ears were attuned to every word now.

The blond-mustached man caught Chas's eye. Chas gave him a nod, hoping the other man wouldn't notice that he'd been listening in on their conversation.

"Afternoon." The man said, lifting his coffee cup in salutation. "Ya new in town?"

The other two men looked up. With all three pairs of eyes fixed on Chas, his discomfort grew, especially when he noted the gun belts on each man's waist.

He nodded. "My name is Chas O'Grady."

The man with black beard and hair curled his lips in what should've been a smile, but just looked as if he bared his teeth, two of which were missing in front. "Earl."

"I'm Big Tim," drawled the man with brown hair. He was big indeed, looming head and shoulders over Chas. Big Tim did not smile a greeting, just stared at Chas with an unwavering gaze.

"What brings you to our fine town?" the blond man asked. Chas couldn't help but notice he hadn't offered a name. "You sound like a city fella. You got family here?"

This was where things could get sticky. As a rule, Chas tried to keep to the truth as much as possible. That way, there was less chance of trapping himself in a lie.

"No, no family here," Chas said easily. He used what was left of his roll to sop up the red gravy on his plate. "I'm a businessman of sorts. Got bored in St. Louis and wanted to see some of the West. The horse I bought in Cheyenne expired in the badlands, just the other side of your town. So I'm here now until I find something new. You don't happen to know of any open jobs in town, do you?"

The two dark-haired men went back to their food as if they'd weighed Chas and found he wasn't dangerous, and wasn't of consequence. The blond man didn't seem convinced and watched Chas with narrowed eyes as Chas dug a coin out of his pocket to pay for the meal.

"'Fraid not," the blond said. "We're just local cowhands. Trying to make a buck of our own. About the only time we get to town is to find us a little female companionship, if ya know what I mean."

From his correspondence with the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, Chas knew there were two major outfits in the area. Most of the smaller ranches only hired cowboys during the spring and fall, when it was time to drive the cattle to market. "Do you work for Parrott or Brown?"

"Brown."

"Parrott—"

Big Tim and Earl spoke over each other.

The blond glared at both his companions. "We're between outfits right

now," he said. "And dead broke. Sorry we cain't help ya."

Chas nodded at the obvious dismissal and rose to leave. As he walked away, he heard a hiss, "Ya idiots!"

Emerging into the sunshine outside the café, Chas crossed to the general store and waited for the three men to exit the eating establishment. If he could see which direction they headed, perhaps he could follow.

Of course, their hard appearances and conflicting answers didn't necessarily mean the men were involved with the cattle rustling, but something didn't ring true about them.

Problem was, how could he follow them without being noticed? Although the small town of Calvin had a bit of foot traffic on its dusty thoroughfare, it wasn't enough for Chas to disappear, should the need arise. Perhaps he could invent an errand in the same area of town, once he determined the men's intentions.

He didn't have to wait long. The three men stepped out onto the boardwalk moments later, arguing. He was too far away to hear what about.

Chas pushed off the post under the general store's awning, intending to follow them. A commotion in the other direction pulled his attention away.

Two men tumbled out of the nearest saloon, dust flying as they rolled into the street. Shouts and men followed them out—wasn't it a bit early for the saloon to be so full?—and Chas spared a glance back toward Earl, Big Tim, and the blond man. They'd ignored the ruckus and continued down the street. He stepped off the boardwalk in that direction.

A new shout, this one in a different octave, met his ears. He stopped, watched in growing horror as a slender figure ran up to the fight. Marshal Danna Carpenter.

From the looks of things, she was going to jump right in.

And then he saw the glint of silver in one of the fighting men's hand.

"Knife!" The word ripped from his lips.

Chapter Four

Danna looked around at the faces lining the street outside the saloon. Most men watched the fight, but some watched her. Waiting to see what she'd do. Like always. Waiting for her to prove herself.

No one joined her just off the edge of the fracas created by the two drunks who'd burst from the saloon. She needed to separate them before they got hurt.

"Stop!" she shouted, but it didn't faze the men. "Ellery Hamilton. Stop fighting this instant!"

Nothing. She took a breath and waded into the conflict, getting an elbow in her shoulder as she broke the hold the men had on each other. She kept her feet, but barely, getting between the two men.

A flash of metal alerted her to the weapon, and she blocked the swipe of Ellery's knife with her forearm against his wrist. The blow hurt, but not as much as a stab wound would have.

"Put the knife down," she ordered. Still no reaction from either tussling man. It was as if she wasn't even here. Hamilton got one arm wrapped about her midsection, cutting off her air with a huff.

She had no choice.

Danna stomped on his instep.

When Hamilton's restraining arm went slack, she used all her strength in an uppercut against Ellery, who stood in front of her. Pain radiated through her fist and up her arm. Ellery slumped to the ground in a satisfying heap, though Danna could see he wasn't completely unconscious.

Using a move Fred had taught her, she gripped Hamilton's arm—still around her waist—spun around so she was behind him, and jerked his arm up

tight against the center of his back, immobilizing it and hopefully letting him know she meant business. It was helpful she was almost as tall as he was—it gave her more leverage against his arm. Inebriation slowed the man's response, but he finally stiffened against her hold.

"Did you see that?" someone in the crowd asked.

"Not bad for a gal who put curtains up in the jail," a second voice called out.

"Blue, flowery curtains," came a hiss, followed by several snickers.

"You finished?" she asked the men in front of her, doing her best to ignore the onlookers. She hoped Hamilton couldn't feel her shaking. That swipe with the knife had been too close for her comfort.

"He shtarted it," Hamilton slurred.

Ellery groaned from the ground, stirring.

"I don't care. You're both coming down to the jail to sleep it off. Then I'll check with Billy Burns about any damages you'll have to pay."

"Whoossh gonna help ya drag both of us down there?" Hamilton's belligerent question resulted in chuckles from those nearby.

Ellery pushed to his hands and knees, still gripping the knife. He looked up at Hamilton, malice on his face.

Without warning, Hamilton jerked his arm free, bucking against Danna's hold. His other elbow rammed backward, catching her in the shoulder. She lost her balance and stumbled. But she stepped between the two men once again, determined to end their fight. Meanwhile, Ellery lurched to his feet and lifted his knife.

Danna swung her arm out wildly, praying she wouldn't be cut, when someone close yelled, "Hey!"

The interruption was all she needed. She slammed an elbow into Hamilton's gut behind her, and he folded. From her peripheral vision, she could see someone knock down Ellery a second time.

Danna gritted her teeth. She'd had the situation under control.

Ellery tried to get up again. A shiny black boot came down on his back, sending him sprawling. A matching one kicked his knife away.

Danna looked up and straight into the unsmiling face of Chas O'Grady.

* * *

Chas was going to be sick right here in the street. He rapidly blinked away his memories of Julia's body, broken and bloodied on the saloon floor, but the sight that greeted him was not much better.

Danna Carpenter had handled the two ruffians, both drunk, with finesse, but he still couldn't erase the memory of that knife slashing toward her. Did she know how close she'd come to dying right here on this dusty street?

He desperately wanted to rebuke her, make her understand exactly how dangerous a position she was in, but he couldn't force the words past the fear lodged firmly under his sternum.

"If you don't mind, I'd appreciate your help getting that man"—she nodded to the drunk underneath his foot—"over to the jail."

Still unable to answer, he pulled the man to his feet and followed the marshal as she prodded the second man toward the two-story jail building on the edge of town.

Thoughts and memories colliding inside his head, he marched his prisoner along with her. Once both men were locked in adjoining cells, they continued arguing through the bars, though neither got close enough to touch the other.

Chas rounded on the marshal. "What did you think you were doing?"

"My job." Her words were said stiffly. Something was wrong. Was she hurt? He looked her up and down but couldn't detect blood on her clothing.

"You all right?" He asked the question without thinking, and stepped closer as she rolled up one shirtsleeve. A large red mark shaped like a palm bloomed on her skin and made him tremble more. He wanted to pull both men out of their cells and give them a thrashing like his older brother had given him once.

"I'm fine. Probably a bruise is all." She lifted her shoulder and didn't look at him as she ran her fingers over the skin on her forearm.

It would turn into a nasty bruise, if the red mark was any indication.

"What did you think you were doing?" she asked, eyes flashing when she finally looked at him.

"What?"

"I had everything under control."

He shook his head. In his mind's eye, all he could see was that knife coming toward her.

She slapped her hat down on the desk, stirring a stack of papers sitting on one corner. "I would have been fine." She clapped one hand on her hip. "But

you had to step in, and now all those men probably think I can't take care of things myself."

"That's not what it looked like. One of your assailants had a knife." He blinked. Again. Still, the image persisted behind his eyes. She'd almost died.

"I know." She knew?

"He almost stabbed you."

"He didn't—"

"Because I stepped in!" Didn't she understand? She'd needed him!

She needed him. The realization sent him reeling. He sat in the hard-backed chair against the wall, silent. Danna still spoke, but Chas couldn't hear her words for the rushing in his ears.

How had this happened? He'd been drawn in by another female, when he'd vowed to stay away from all persons of that gender. He couldn't do this.

He couldn't be her deputy. Could he?

A knock sounded and the door opened. The well-dressed man Chas had seen in the café two days past sauntered in.

"Shut up!" Danna ordered the two prisoners, still arguing. When they didn't listen, Chas rattled the doors of the nearest cell. The men subsided, each sitting on a bunk.

"Mr. Parrott." Danna greeted him with a deferential nod. Her shoulders were suddenly straighter.

So, Chas's guess in the café had been correct. This man was a wealthy rancher, one of the two who owned the largest spreads around. No wonder Danna adopted such a respectful manner.

Chas scrutinized the other man as he took off his white hat and tucked one hand in the top of his vest. He was tanned, probably mid-forties.

"Marshal, I heard you took care of a little dustup down by the saloon." Parrott spared a quick glance for Chas. "Everyone all right?"

"Yes, fine," Danna said quickly. "How's the missus? Anything I can do for you today?"

"The wife's doing well. She asked me to make sure you're planning on attending the dance we're hosting this Friday."

Danna glanced at Chas, but as far as he was concerned, they still had talking to do; he crossed his arms and stretched his legs out in front of him.

Her smile, when she turned it on Parrott, was forced. "I've been thinking on it. I'm not sure I'll be able to get away."

"You work too hard, Marshal. A night of relaxation will be good for

you.”

The marshal's frown showed she didn't agree with him, but her voice remained level and calm. "I don't know that I should leave the town unattended.”

Her statement almost sounded like a question. Why was she showing Mr. Parrott such deference, when Chas had seen her talk down to other men? Chas had learned there were four men on the Calvin town council. They appointed the marshal. Mr. Parrott must be one of them for Danna to speak so respectfully to him.

“Ah. Still no luck with the deputies? I'm sorry to hear it. Well, be that as it may, you can't work every hour of every day. Besides, the wife has a few eligible men she wants to make sure you meet. You are considering remarrying, aren't you?”

Chas's breath stuck in his chest. The marshal was a widow? What else didn't he know about her?

She cleared her throat, her feet shifting and her downturned face indicating her discomfort. She gestured toward Chas, who hadn't joined the conversation. “Mr. O'Grady and I were in the middle of something, Mr. Parrott. I'll try to come to the party if I'm able. If there isn't anything else, I'm afraid we'll have to speak later.”

She hadn't given the older man a straight answer about remarrying, but the rancher accepted it with grace as Danna ushered him out the door.

After he left, she leaned against the portal, her head clunking against the wood.

“Your boss?” Chas asked.

"One of them." She huffed and blew a strand of dark, curly hair off her face, then turned her head to look at Chas. “What are you still doing here?”

"Marshal, you can consider us even," Chas said.

“What do you mean?”

"You saved my life. I saved yours.”

Her lips twisted. Not a smile. They pinched together. If she didn't like that, she probably wouldn't like Chas's next statement either.

He glanced at the two men in adjacent cells. They hadn't spoken since Parrott's arrival. One looked to be nodding off, the other staring at the wall.

"I think you should hire me on as one of your deputies.” Had those words really come out of his mouth?

Her jaw dropped, then her eyes narrowed. She pushed off the door. “You

want me to deputize you? Why?"

He lowered his voice, so the prisoners couldn't hear. "I need a job, a reason to stay in town. Plus, it will give me some leeway to investigate without any potential cattle thieves being the wiser. And you need help."

She looked as if she would protest, so he quickly went on.

"I've been talking to people around town and found out a couple of families are missing cattle. Problem is, I don't know the lay of the land."

She half-smiled at that, probably remembering his unfortunate tumble down the ravine.

"You can relax a little, go to that party—"

"I don't need a deputy so I can attend social functions. If you want to pin a tin star on your chest, you'll have to realize that I'm the marshal."

"I do realize that." Chas's temper burned in his middle, and he rose out of his seat and stood face to face with the marshal.

"That means I'm the boss. I make the schedule. I'm in charge. If you can't handle that—"

"I can." He hoped. "I have to put my investigation first, but as long as you stay out of my way..."

Danna shook her head and stepped back. "This isn't going to work."

He blinked and again saw that knife coming straight for Danna's heart. "We'll have to make it work. I'll be in town until I find my rustlers. You'll be my boss"—he almost choked on the word— "until then."

She started to say something else, but the door opened again, and a very pregnant woman bustled in, followed by a toddler, a blond-haired girl in a stained dress.

"Fine," Danna said, resigned. "Be here first thing tomorrow."

Chapter Five

Danna tucked her chin into the upturned collar of her coat, the chill in the early morning wind stealing her breath. She made this journey to the small cemetery just outside of town almost every morning. It never got easier, standing in front of Fred's grave.

This morning she was especially discomfited, thanks to her new deputy, Chas O'Grady, private detective.

She shook off her distracting thoughts. She shouldn't be thinking about another man, even one she planned to work with, while visiting her husband's grave.

"I'm sorry I haven't found your killer yet," she whispered, the wind snatching her words away. Three months, and she hadn't turned over one clue that would lead her in any helpful direction. As his deputy, Fred had believed she could solve any crime. So why couldn't she solve his murder?

She could still see his body lying prone in the field of dry summer grass. Shot in the back. And no one in town or out was talking.

Her only hope was to find the horse that matched the funny-shaped hoofprints she'd found near the scene of Fred's murder. The horse was shod, but not well. Something was wrong with one of its shoes. Its tracks made a crescent shape instead of the traditional horseshoe. She'd made a sketch in the leather book Fred had insisted all his deputies carry to take notes on pertinent information.

Since she'd never learned to read or write, Fred had taught her to sketch the important things about crimes she investigated.

But she hadn't been able to track down that horse anywhere.

With a sigh, Danna turned to town. She had one more stop to make before

she faced O'Grady this morning.

With the sun barely up, the streets were still quiet. Not many folks stirred this early. Danna wouldn't usually, but she hadn't been able to rest this morning. Too many thoughts crowding in her head, keeping her awake.

She banged on the wind-faded door of a shanty on the edge of town. When her friend Corrine opened the door, Danna lifted the dead rabbit she'd snared with her slingshot. Why waste a bullet if you didn't have to? "Brought you a present."

"You've been out to the cemetery again." Corrine didn't sound surprised. She didn't sound much of anything, her voice emerging a monotone. She edged inside, motioning for Danna to follow.

"Lots of game out there, with the tall grasses." Danna didn't have to make an excuse to her only friend. Corrine knew about loss, too.

The smell of fresh bread wafted through the small shack. Three places were set at the table against one wall, under the only window in the house. Two of the plates were untouched and had what appeared to be last night's supper still on them.

Corrine faced Danna, unshed tears reddening her eyes. She twisted a towel between her hands, then one hand moved to cover her large-with-child belly.

"What's this? Did you eat last night?" Danna asked.

Corrine shook her head, visibly upset. "I-I made a plate for Brent, just in case he came home. But then I got so upset thinking about him that I couldn't eat."

Danna nudged her friend into a chair and sat down herself. Another failure on her part. Corrine's husband had been missing since the same night Fred hadn't come home. Unlike Fred's body, Brent had never been found. Danna, and most of the town, couldn't help thinking the two events were connected.

Patting her friend's hand, Danna did her best to comfort the distraught woman. "You need to eat. You've got to think about the baby."

Corrine nodded but put her face in her hands and snuffled. "I don't know how much longer I can keep going. Wh-why doesn't he come home?"

Danna hugged her friend's shoulders, a little afraid to touch the swell of the other woman's stomach. "I don't know. Shh." She knew better than to offer promises she couldn't keep, so she kept silent while she rocked the slight woman.

Movement from the bed in the corner caught Danna's eye. Ellie, Corrine's daughter, was asleep, but maybe not for much longer. She had to get Corrine calmed down or risk upsetting the three-year old.

"I don't know what happened to Brent," Danna said softly, still rubbing Corrine's back. "But I'll do everything I can to find him." Dead or alive. She didn't say the words, but Corrine shuddered against her shoulder.

"Do you...?" Corrine had to snuffle and swallow before she could continue. She spoke in a voice so low it wasn't even a whisper. "Do you think he killed Marshal Fred, and that's why he left?"

Most of the town did. But not Danna. "Brent might be a laggard and a bum, but that doesn't mean he killed Fred. Even if he does have a habit of running off. He's always come back before." Corrine's husband was out of work so often that his wife had to take jobs in order to feed the family. But just because someone was lazy or absent didn't mean they had it in them to commit murder.

And Corrine always took him back. Even after weeks apart. Danna couldn't believe her friend would stay in a marriage like that, but what could Danna do, other than help her friend out occasionally? Corrine wouldn't accept help from anyone else.

"You're right. I know you're right." Corrine pushed away and went to the washbasin. "Not the part about Brent being a bum." Her voice came muffled from the scrap of towel she scrubbed her face dry with. "But that he always returns."

Danna hated that her friend's lousy husband had done this enough times that she could say that. "Is there anything you need?"

Corrine busied herself wrapping one of the two loaves of bread warming on the stovetop. She shook her head quickly. "No. No, we're fine. Thank you for the rabbit, though. I'll make a nice stew with it."

"Auntie, auntie!" A joyful shout erupted from the bed.

Danna barely had time to scoot her chair away from the table and catch her nightshirt-clad *niece*, Ellie, as the girl vaulted from the bed in the far corner of the room and launched herself at Danna. Holding the three-year-old's small, sleep-warm body in her arms fueled a rush of emotion that brought tears to her eyes.

She wanted a family of her own. It was her biggest dream and her deepest regret from before Fred had passed. She'd always wanted to give him a son.

Danna shoved away the familiar longing, stowed it in a deep corner of her

heart, and made a funny face. "Good morning, Elf. You're late for breakfast."

Ellie giggled, as she did every time Danna used her pet name. Danna set her down, and Ellie hefted herself up into her own chair at the table and settled her worn rag doll in her lap. "Ma, can I have jam?"

Corrine smiled at her daughter, but when she turned away to slice a piece of fresh bread, Danna could see fresh tears in her eyes. The bulge of her stomach became more defined when she reached with one hand to rub the small of her back. She didn't have long before the baby came. Would Brent return before then?

A sense of urgency sent Danna to her feet. She reached for the cloth-wrapped loaf of bread Corrine had placed on the table before her.

"I heard about your new deputy. You rushing off to him?"

She froze.

"Ya got a new dep'ty, Auntie?" Ellie's question echoed her mother's, but her blue eyes held an innocence that Corrine's did not.

Danna sagged against the table. "Don't tease, Corrine. I can't imagine this working out."

Not with Chas O'Grady, only concerned about one thing, his case. Maybe his presence would allow her to make inroads with the other men. She hoped.

"You'll be fine," Corrine said, reversing roles and patting Danna's shoulder comfortingly. "It can't be different than working with the other deputies back when Fred...was still here."

"But when Fred was marshal, I wasn't in charge. And this isn't the same at all."

More of a trial period. Chas O'Grady would leave once he'd found his outlaws. Danna only hoped she would get the respect she deserved from the people of Calvin, and maybe the help of a couple more deputies.

Corrine narrowed her eyes. "Why? Because he's a handsome fellow?"

"What? No!" A hot flush stole its way up Danna's neck and into her face, mocking her denial. "Even if he is handsome, I have no intention of noticing. He's a city dude. Likely, he won't make it long in our small town."

Corrine shrugged. "I don't know why you're getting all bothered. It almost sounds as if you want him to leave."

Danna waved her hat in front of her still-warm face. "I don't know what I want. Just to find Fred's killer and find some peace."

She was tired. Tired of working alone. Of facing the censure that nearly all the town showed for her. The town council had thought she could do the

job of marshal. Why didn't anyone else? Carrying a gun, enforcing the laws, those were the things she was good at. The only things.

"Maybe that's not all that God wants for you," Corrine said softly.

Danna couldn't help it. Her eyes dropped to her friend's pregnant belly. She'd always wanted a family...until she'd made herself stop thinking about that impossible dream.

"I have to go," Danna said when she could find words again. She reached down to hug Ellie, who'd watched the exchange with huge blue eyes.

"Bye, Auntie!"

Corrine pushed the forgotten loaf of bread into Danna's hands. "You're plenty smart. You'll figure out what to do."

* * *

An hour after she'd left Corrine, Danna strode out of the saloon, disgusted. She'd stopped in to find out what the owner would charge Ellery and Hamilton for damages to his properties. She'd thought a morning visit would be a mite more respectable. And she'd been the epitome of professionalism, but the proprietor had insisted on leering at her the entire time and offered her a job as one of *his girls* on her way out.

She was steaming mad, fighting to hold on to her temper.

And that's when she saw Chas O'Grady leaning casually against the wall outside the jail in what looked to be a cheerful conversation with two of Calvin's eligible young ladies, Penny Castlerock and Merritt Harding.

Still fired up, Danna stomped toward the little group.

Penny Castlerock, the wealthy banker's daughter, stood in her frilly gown with her hair cascading in copper ringlets from her bonnet. A parasol bobbed over her shoulder. She was the picture of femininity.

Even Merritt, the schoolmarm who was a little too old to be on the marriage market, was pretty in a slightly faded gingham dress, her blond tresses bound up in a bun like Danna could never achieve.

She would never be like those women. She didn't want to be like those women. Did she?

The question stopped her in place. She turned toward the general store, pretending to admire the two gowns in its front window.

When she'd become Fred's wife at age sixteen, she hadn't known how to

do any feminine things. Keep house, sew a quilt, cook...all those things had been beyond her capabilities.

And Fred had never made her learn. He'd seen her skill with a rifle and how she could track a coon in a snowstorm, and he'd made her his deputy instead. They'd shared the chores. He'd cooked most of the time, because he was better at it. She was no good at wifely skills. She'd never fit in with the other women in town, and he hadn't asked her to.

She didn't really want to be like all the others, did she?

In the reflection of the glass she could see Penny leaning flirtatiously close to O'Grady. She couldn't help straining her ears to overhear their discussion.

"Perhaps we need a man's opinion. Mr. O'Grady?" Penny's query was accompanied by a flutter of her eyelashes so big Danna could see it from here.

"Yes?" He sounded politely interested.

"I'm trying to decide between these two hats." Penny pointed to the window of the milliner's shop, right next to the jail. "Pink or yellow?"

O'Grady considered the store window for a few moments, then said, "I'm afraid I don't know much about ladies' fashion. They both look fine to me."

Danna felt a little gratified he didn't seem to be falling for the girl's overeager manner.

Penny giggled, a shrill sound that had Danna clenching her teeth.

The young woman leaned toward Chas to murmur, "You must not know much about ladies either. You never tell a woman she looks 'fine.' She may look 'lovely,' or 'pleasing,' or even 'handsome,' but never simply 'fine.'" Then she oh-so-casually placed her gloved hand on O'Grady's forearm.

The flirt. Danna stifled the snort that wanted to emerge, but she must've made some noise, for Penny and Merritt turned toward her, and Chas's head came up.

"Well, hello, Marshal." Penny said. "Are you shopping for a new gown?"

Danna narrowed her eyes. The girl's question seemed innocent, but everyone in town knew Danna never wore dresses.

"I'm not." Danna nodded to the group and considered whether she should walk past them to the jail. Since they'd engaged her in conversation, it seemed rude to go on. She stepped forward, but not close enough to be considered part of their group.

"Do you know Mr. O'Grady?" Penny asked. "Oh, of course you do.

Merritt and I were just commenting how terribly brave he was yesterday to stop that horrid fight in front of the saloon.”

The fight Danna had stopped?

Merritt shook her head, and Danna wondered if she was embarrassed for her friend's flirtatious behavior.

Color crept into Chas O'Grady's cheeks. "Marshal Carpenter—”

"You're coming to the dance next week, aren't you, Marshal?" Penny asked. "Papa said I could have a new bonnet and dress. Which do you like better, the pink or the yellow?"

Danna took a cursory glance into the shop window. Honestly, they both looked the same to her. Fussy frills and ribbons. "The yellow is nice.”

"Hmm.” Penny appeared to be lost in thought for a moment, leaning her head on one gloved hand while she gazed into the window. "Perhaps I'll wait to buy the bonnet.” Penny said, giving her parasol a twirl.

Merritt, who hadn't said a word to Danna yet, grasped her friend's elbow and leaned close to murmur something in Penny's ear.

"Miss Harding reminds me that we're committed to tea with my mother this morning,” Penny said. "Mr. O'Grady, it was a pleasure to meet you. I hope we'll meet again.” She nodded to Danna. "Marshal.”

The two women walked off arm in arm, Penny shooting a final saucy wink over her shoulder toward O'Grady.

Danna shook her head as she moved past her new deputy and opened the jail door.

"I knocked earlier but there was no answer. I wasn't sure if I should go in and wait for you. I wasn't trying to engage those young ladies in conversation.”

"You don't have to make excuses to me.” She stepped behind her desk.

"I wasn't. I don't... I'm not interested in female companionship”

Danna shot a look at him and noted his face had flushed so darkly that his freckles were entirely obscured. "What you do when you're off-duty is none of my concern.”

"I'm not interested.” His words emerged stiffly now. "I have a job to do, and that's all I care about.”

"Fine.” She shrugged and pulled open the top desk drawer. The items inside it clinked together, and she drew out one of the tin stars. She flipped it onto the desk. "Yours.”

He picked it up, looking down at the silvery badge for a long moment.

"Why did you become marshal, anyway?"

"Because I was asked." She didn't mean to be short with him, but the events of the morning had worn her nerves thin.

O'Grady exhaled loudly. "I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot this morning. Shall we start over? Morning, Miss Marshal."

She glanced up at him quickly, at his teasing reference to her title, but he didn't seem disrespectful. He extended one hand for her to shake.

She took it, and warmth ran all the way up her arm. She couldn't keep her gaze from meeting Chas's, and his blue eyes reflected the same awareness that was in hers.

She dropped his hand and hurried to fill the coffeepot Fred had always kept going on the stove. The familiar motions soothed her, and when she finally sat behind the desk, she looked composed. She hoped. Chas took the chair near the door, clearing his throat.

She shuffled the stack of Wanted posters on the corner of the desk. The silence now stretching between them was awkward, but she didn't know how to bridge it.

"Where'd the two yahoos from yesterday go?" Chas asked, jerking his thumb toward the two empty cells.

"I had to let them go once they sobered up."

He nodded, drummed his fingers on his knee. "It seems like a hard job for a woman."

She answered him in a softer tone than she'd used earlier. "My husband used to be the marshal. I was one of his deputies."

"How did he die?"

"He was murdered."

Chas didn't ask if she'd caught Fred's killer, for which she was thankful. She didn't want to talk about Fred.

"And you were asked to be marshal? What about the other deputies?"

What about the male deputies? That's what he meant.

"I'm sure the town council considered all options, but when they came to me and offered me the job, I couldn't refuse."

"Did none of the other men want to work with you?"

She gave him a look. If they had, she wouldn't need him, would she?

"Did you do something to them? Alienate them somehow?"

She threw her hands up. "Other than being born a woman? I worked mostly with my husband, but I have worked with the other men on occasion.

Either they think I'm not competent to be marshal without Fred's support, or they've been paid off." She said the last part in jest. No one in Calvin would do that. Why would they?

She turned the tables on him. "Tell me about yourself, Chas O'Grady. I should know something about my new employee, shouldn't I?"

He shrugged, but his gaze dropped to the leg he crossed over his knee. "I'm from Boston. I've been a detective the past five and a half years. My mother and father still live in the East."

"No siblings?"

"One living. A younger sister. May we get down to business now? What would you have me do today?"

His choice of words was telling. He'd had another sibling who had died. And who he clearly didn't want to talk about. She didn't push it, though. She had enough subjects she'd rather were left unexplored.

"I thought we could ride out to some of the smaller homesteads today and ask about missing cattle. If there really is rustling going on, I have a responsibility to find out."

And it still irked her that the ranchers hadn't reported any missing cattle to her. She was the marshal. She was supposed to take care of those kinds of things. Plus, by making the rounds of the ranches in the area, she would have a chance to watch for those funny-shaped tracks she'd seen at the site of Fred's murder.

"Fine." He stood and pinned the tin star to his chest. "I'll need a horse."

She'd already thought of that. "My husband's horse is stabled at the livery. You can borrow her until you leave town."

It was best to remind herself that he'd be leaving soon. That way maybe she could keep her heart from getting too attached to her attractive new deputy.

Chapter Six

Chas maneuvered his horse to walk beside Danna's. "Perhaps this time we should try something different. That last man, Gill, knew something. I'm almost sure of it." Chas tried to affect a tentative tone as he offered the suggestion, but he was afraid his irritation had leaked out.

At the last two small farms they'd visited, Danna had insisted on accompanying him out to the barn to talk with the men. Men who hadn't wanted to give any information in her presence. They'd been polite but hadn't offered one piece of information helpful to Chas or his case.

"What do you mean?" Danna's terse question echoed his own frustration.

"This is just a suggestion, but what if you remained inside and visited with the woman of the house?"

Danna's looked at him askance. "You want me to pay a social call?"

He lifted his shoulders. "Not exactly. Just talk for a bit. She might even offer some news."

"You don't really think that. You just think he won't talk to me."

He lifted one shoulder. "It might be easier to get somebody to without a woman present."

"I'm the marshal."

"I know that. And I'm on your side. But we can't change everyone's mind at once. And the women probably do know as much as the men—maybe more."

She paused, her mouth set in a frown. "But I've never gone visiting in my life!" she burst out.

"Never?"

How was that possible? Wasn't that what women did? His sister loved to

gossip with her friends. She never missed a chance to pay social calls.

Watching Danna's trim figure out of the side of his vision, he still couldn't believe he'd first mistaken her for a man. Even in the men's trousers and shirt, there was no disguising her womanly form. She was too shapely. She moved with the horse, her natural grace evident.

She flushed under his scrutiny. "I'm not like other women."

"Of that, there's no doubt in my mind."

She sucked in a breath, face creasing, and he realized how she might have taken his statement.

"Wait. I didn't mean..." Chas stifled the urge to curse. "Let's not have another misunderstanding like the first night we met."

She glared at him.

"Let me explain."

Finally, she nodded.

"Obviously, I've never met a woman who dressed"—he waved a hand to encompass her from head to toe—"like that. Or can break up a fight between two drunken men. And I'd be willing to wager you can outshoot me, as well."

She gazed at him, a question in her eyes.

"You are an original, Miss Marshal. I like that." He liked her, even though he didn't want to.

"Have you ever...?" He hesitated to ask, but he found he had to know. "Have you ever wanted to dress like the other women?"

She stared ahead for a long time. Eventually, he realized she had no intention of answering his question.

She nodded ahead, and Chas saw a couple of buildings grow larger as they approached.

"Here's the Early place."

Had he touched a sore spot? He hadn't meant to. It seemed he couldn't keep from saying the wrong thing around Danna Carpenter.

* * *

Danna stood behind one of the four kitchen chairs surrounding the small table in the Early kitchen, gripping its back with white-knuckled fingers.

"Thank you...um, for inviting us in. It was very kind."

Mrs. Anna Early glanced at her with creased brows as she bustled to brew

a fresh pot of coffee. "Is there sumpin' wrong?"

"No, no." Danna placed one hand flat against her stomach. "I'm just nervous. I'm not—I don't make very many social calls."

The woman turned and smacked one hand onto her ample waist. "I meant in there sumpin' wrong that you want to talk to my husband about. He ain't a thief or nuthin'."

"Oh. Oh, of course not, Mrs. Early."

"Anna. We don't stand too much on formality round here."

"All right, Anna. No, I don't think your husband has done anything wrong. Mr. O'Grady and I are investigating a possible case of cattle rustling in the area." Danna released her death grip on the chair back. "Is there—Can I help with anything?"

"Don't know nuthin' about any missing cattle. Here." Anna plopped a loaf of bread and a knife on the table. Grateful for something to do with her hands, Danna did her best to carve slices of the bread without smashing it too badly. Judging from the slightly pinched look on Anna's face, she didn't succeed.

The other woman offered Danna a cup of coffee and sat at the table. With a soft sigh, Danna sat, as well. "Neighbors have been in a ruckus lately, but I don't know no details. Mrs. Bailey and me don't get along so well."

"Mam! Mam!" A small girl raced into the kitchen through the back door, followed closely by a boy only a little bigger. "There's a dep'ty talking to da!"

Anna turned in her chair and shushed the children. "Shh, you two. Cain't you see we've got comp'ny?"

The two children faced Danna with wide eyes and dirt-smudged faces.

"Hello." Danna held out her hand.

Faces solemn, they slowly rounded the table and, one by one, shook her hand with their grubby ones.

"Are you goin' to arrest my da?" asked the little boy, who seemed unable to look away from the badge pinned to Danna's vest. His voice lowered even more. "He didn't shoot that no-account, thievin' Timmy Bailey, ya know. Even though he tried t'other night."

"Joey!" Anna stood and clamped a hand on her son's shoulder. "He didn't mean—"

"It's okay." Danna did her best to hide her smile. "I'm not here to arrest anyone," she reassured the boy. "Just to visit. Do you want to eat with us?"

For once, she'd said the right thing. Anna's shoulders released their tension, and she allowed the children to sit at the table and have a slice of bread and a glass of milk.

"Mmm..." Danna hummed as she bit into her slice. "This is delicious. I wish I could bake bread like this."

"Thank you." Anna accepted the compliment with a flush. "My own mam taught me." She sipped her coffee.

"I'm learning, too!" chimed in the little daughter.

"That's wonderful," Danna said.

"Did your ma teach you?" the girl asked.

"No," Danna said slowly. "My ma died when I was littler than you. I never learned how to cook or sew or anything."

Anna looked a little more sympathetic after that. It gave Danna the courage to ask, "So, you're having problems with your neighbors?"

* * *

Frustrated that Mr. Early had been uncooperative, Chas waited near the horses for Danna to end her visit.

When she finally stepped out of the Early's small farmhouse, she squinted in the bright afternoon sunlight. Chas was graced with a view of her glorious dark head before she smashed her worn hat on.

He offered her a leg up to her horse. She accepted the boost into her saddle with a twinge of her fine black brows and a flash of curiosity in her coffee-colored eyes. She wore a small smile as they guided their horses down the rutted lane toward the edge of the Early property.

"Did it go better than you thought?" he asked.

"You were right." Her body fairly vibrated with energy. Her smile grew until he saw a flash of white teeth. The first real smile he'd earned during their brief acquaintance.

He liked it more than he should.

"The neighbors?"

She tugged on her hat brim, and the smile faded. "The husband told you?"

"Not in so many words. He was remarkably close-lipped. What did you find out?"

"It seems the Baileys have been riding across the Early property, which

wouldn't normally be a problem..."

"Do go on."

"Apparently, they've been driving cattle in the middle of the night. Some got loose and knocked down a lean-to. The Earlys lost some chickens."

"Seems a little suspicious. Why would they do it at night?"

Her eyes shone at him. "That's what I thought, too. The husband didn't say anything at all?"

Chas approached a fork in the road and drew in his horse to stop. "Said he'd heard some rumors of missing cattle, but nothing important enough to remember. Said he wasn't missing any himself. But said he thought someone in the area had been moving animals."

"The Baileys."

Chas knew his admiration showed in his eyes. The marshal was perceptive and intelligent, two things he could appreciate. He nodded to the dilapidated house not far up the lane. "Let's go."

As they approached the house, he noticed there were no animals in the corral. One of the barn doors was open and waving slightly in the breeze.

He and Danna shared a glance before they split up. She would check the house and he would check the barn. Minutes later, they met back at their horses.

"Barn's empty."

"House, too. They must've left in a hurry, because the furniture and some of the clothes are still in there."

Disappointment sliced through Chas. He'd been convinced they were on the right path to finding the missing cattle and the rustlers, but there wasn't a man or beast on this place.

* * *

Danna's frustration rose as she and Chas mounted up again.

"We should ride down their back pasture toward the Early property and see what we can see," she said quietly, trying to rein in the emotions that wouldn't help her solve this mystery any faster.

The afternoon sunlight would last another couple of hours. The breeze tickling the curls that escaped her braid was chilly, but not unpleasant. Sky was clear. They should have plenty of time to scout the Bailey property and

get back to town before sundown.

As they neared the creek that the Earlys claimed as their property line, the grass changed from dry and brown to just tufts and then dirt, pockmarked by many hooves.

"This looks familiar," Chas commented, riding up beside her.

"Umm-hmm. Like in the canyon? Not quite so bad. Fewer cattle, I think. See how the tracks don't spread very wide?"

"I see it."

"In the canyon, the hoofmarks were spread across the whole canyon floor."

"Is it possible it was the same number of animals, just driven in a narrow bunch?"

She considered it for a few seconds. "Doesn't seem likely. You'd need more cowboys than a small outfit like the Baileys could afford."

But what were they doing moving cattle this time of year? And where had the family gone?

Chas followed Danna across the creek, but she reined in her mount before she reached the bank.

"Look." She pointed to the impression visible in the mud just above the water's edge. "It's a crescent." She hopped down from her horse, boots splashing in the shallow water as she crossed, and squatted next to the single track, peering closely to be sure. She started to shake.

It was the same. She knew it was.

"What is it?" Chas rode up the bank before he stopped his horse and dismounted. Probably didn't want to get his boots wet.

Danna waded through the creek to her horse and dug in one of the saddlebags, finally locating the small leather-bound book. She flipped pages to the middle, to the sketch she'd made. She turned the book so Chas could see the drawing. "This was found near—" She choked on the words, had to swallow hard before she could say it. "Near my husband's body."

His gaze went from the book to her face, and she drew a deep breath, struggling to maintain control of her emotions. She wanted him to know she could do her job, didn't get distracted by feminine emotions.

When she thought she could speak again, Danna worked to make her voice even. "I'm going to track them. You can go back to town if you like."

"I won't let you go alone."

No, she hadn't really thought he would.

* * *

It was after nightfall when Chas and Danna rode up to the livery and dismounted. Chas watched Danna's slow movements, her disappointment evident in the droop of her shoulders.

The tracks she'd wanted to follow had vanished not long after they'd picked up the trail. She had not been happy.

They'd ridden home in silence, Chas allowing her the time to get her emotions under control. He was impressed that she had held back her tears earlier. And he knew what it was to be disappointed a lead hadn't panned out.

Now she reached for his reins. "The stableboy will have gone home for his dinner. I'll rub these two down and make a patrol of the saloons. Come by the jail in the morning."

Chas flipped the reins into her hand, but didn't let go. He tugged against her hold until she looked up at him, her eyes dark and unreadable. "You take care of the horses, and I'll make a round of the saloons."

"I'm the boss."

"I haven't forgotten."

There was something in the air between them, though the only physical connection was the reins they both held. "Let me help you."

"Why?" she whispered.

To keep her out of danger. That was one reason, but another he couldn't voice. He couldn't tell her that he liked the look she was giving him—a look that said he was offering her a kindness no one else ever had.

She nodded gravely, and he left before she could ensnare him even more.

* * *

Except for the piano music and raucous laughter coming from the four saloons, the town was quiet. Chas stuck his head into each of the first three to make sure things were relatively calm. They were, and he was looking forward to an early night as he headed to the fourth saloon.

It was there that things changed. Chas stepped inside and stood with his back to the wall next to the door, perusing the main room. He was about to turn and leave when he caught sight of the man with the long hair and the blond mustache sitting at the bar.

The suspicious man from the café. Chas glanced around, but didn't see Big Tim or Earl. Pale Eyes seemed to be talking to a man with a scruffy goatee and dark hair. Chas waited to get a good look at the second man's face, and when he did, everything seemed to stop around him.

A long, jagged scar down the right side of the man's face left no doubt that this was the same person he'd come to hate in Tucson.

The man who had killed Joseph and Julia.

Hank Lewis.

Rage roared through Chas, filled his head, pounded in his ears. His hand went to the gun at his belt. Then he realized two of the men at the table closest to him had turned to stare at him. What was he doing?

Even though he'd been made deputy, he couldn't shoot a man in cold blood. He'd hang for murder, even if the scoundrel did deserve to die. He would wait until Hank Lewis went outside, and then he'd do it. It wouldn't make it legal, but he wouldn't get caught.

He nodded to the men at the table and settled in a corner, waving away the bartender when the pot-bellied man approached.

Nearly an hour later, both Hank Lewis and the blond man stood. Chas waited until they'd left before he rose from the small table. The crowd had grown by then, and he had to side-step a couple of fellows on his way out. By the time he pushed through the swinging doors, neither man was in sight.

Rushing around the side of the building, Chas scoured the shadows, pistol in hand. Nothing.

Back into the street. Empty.

Hank Lewis was gone.

Chapter Seven

A *man in her rooms.*

Danna craned her neck, trying to get a look at the speaker over the heads of the partygoers at the Parrott's dance.

This was the third comment she'd overheard about a man being seen in her rooms. *Hers!*

Which was ludicrous, because she wasn't aware of any man in Calvin—or Converse County for that matter—who thought of her as anything other than The Marshal. Certainly not as a woman, not with her job and the way she dressed.

Who had started these horrible rumors?

“Ah, just the woman I wanted to see.”

Danna turned at the booming voice of Joe Parrott as he approached through the crush of people. He had two of the other three town council members in tow.

“Mr. Parrott, lovely party. Mr. Hyer. Mr. Castlerock.” She nodded to the owners of the local general store and the Calvin Bank and Trust respectively. Neither man smiled at her.

“It's, ah...” Hyer started, “come to our attention there are some rumors going around about you.” He looked uncomfortable with the topic.

She stifled the groan that wanted to escape and swallowed the anger that made her want to lash out. It wasn't their fault someone had started malicious gossip about her.

“I haven't had anyone up to my rooms, male or female,” she said, working hard to keep her voice level. But she must've spoken louder than she intended, because a woman nearby turned to look. Danna glared until she

turned around.

“We mustn't have even a hint of scandal amongst the leaders of our town.” Castlerock managed to look condescending, though he didn't meet Danna's eyes. She knew he'd been the only one of the four council members to vote against her appointment.

Parrott patted her shoulder, giving her a smile. “My dear, we know you're trying your best.”

Castlerock snorted softly.

Danna eyed him but kept her mouth closed while she tried to think. What would Fred have done in this situation?

"If she can't maintain a good reputation, perhaps she shouldn't be marshal,” said Hyer to Castlerock, as if she weren't standing right there.

Castlerock nodded agreement.

This was getting out of hand.

Danna kept her voice even when she spoke, but it was not without effort. "Gentlemen, I haven't done anything inappropriate. As I'm sure this will not be the last time malicious gossip is spread about a woman in a position of authority, I would advise you to ignore it.”

Hands shaking, she turned on her heel and escaped into the crowd.

* * *

Chas reined in his borrowed horse, slowing to move through the wagons and horses gathered outside the impressive ranch house. He hadn't known where the dance was to be held, but he'd managed to find a few stragglers leaving town late and followed them.

He wasn't supposed to be here. Danna had tasked him with watching over the town while she attended the dance, but he'd had a little situation and needed her.

Plus, he wanted to mingle in the crowd and see if he could spot Hank Lewis again. He'd patrolled the entire town of Calvin in the last week, become overly familiar with its three main roads and smaller, grassy lanes. He'd memorized most of the nooks and crannies behind each store. He'd found no sign of Hank Lewis.

Each day, Chas's rage and desire for revenge had grown. He'd barely had patience to deal with the marshal, and he could sense she'd been frustrated

with him, as well. There'd been no further leads about the cattle rustlers. He could no longer bring himself to care about his case. All he wanted was to get revenge on the man who had murdered Julia.

Chas took a moment to adjust his horse's saddle, eyes taking in the yard filled with buggies and horses. The dance appeared to be in full swing, the sweet sounds of a fiddle and banjo floating over the din of many voices.

The six-shooter at Chas's waist seemed heavier than usual. He kept touching it, reassuring himself he was ready to do this.

Even as his urge for revenge built, he'd been struggling with his conscience. He wanted to do right, but he couldn't forget the promise he'd made to himself when he'd awoken on the doctor's table after Julia's death. He'd promised himself if he ever came upon the man who killed her, he'd return the favor.

Chas was out for revenge, plain and simple. Lewis deserved to die. An eye for an eye. That was biblical, wasn't it?

Chas shrugged off the distracting thoughts and approached the house.

The porch spanned the width of the building, and Chas was halfway up the steps when a shadow moved near the far corner. Suspicion had Chas jumping into one of the dark patches between the rectangles of light shining from the windows. Could it be Lewis? No one with good intentions would be hiding outside.

Crouching close to the outside wall of the house, Chas crept toward where he'd seen the movement. Subdued voices reached his ear, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. He moved closer, careful not to make noise.

"...boys are getting ready to move the cattle after they take care of this other matter. They'll have to take 'em to Rock Springs instead of Cheyenne, or someone might notice the brands, but it shouldn't be a problem."

Now, that sounded promising for his rustling investigation. Chas settled one knee on the wood planks of the porch, giving his other leg a reprieve from the uncomfortable crouch.

"And what about the marshal?" This was a different voice, another male.

"She don't have any idea what's goin' on," the first man replied.

Chas didn't think either of the voices was Lewis.

"Besides, the marshal's got other things to worry about. She's goin' to be tied up with the robbery. This gossip about her is an extra bonus."

What robbery? What gossip? Were these men involved in the cattle

rustling?

He had no idea if they were armed, but they could be dangerous. Chas leaned his head against the wall behind him, unsure what to do. Two against one wasn't the best odds, and what if Lewis was here and he missed his chance to kill him?

Maybe if he could get a look at the men... He shifted closer until he could see a boot and a dark pair of trousers. The man seemed to be leaning on the adjoining wall, around the corner, so Chas couldn't see his face, but he held an expensive-looking black bowler hat against his leg. In the dim light, Chas thought he could make out a mark of some kind—a tattoo?—on the man's wrist, but he couldn't be sure. The second man wasn't in sight at all.

Just then, two horses rode up into the yard, hooves thundering. If they approached the house, they would see Chas. He had no choice but to scramble across the wooden planks and go inside.

Once in the front door, he slipped into the crowd. There were plenty of people around. No one seemed to notice him. He skirted the room, torn between returning outside to try to find out the identities of the two men and staying inside to find the marshal and look for Lewis.

He was concentrating so hard on his dilemma, he nearly missed the familiar dark braid on the woman with a badge on her chest.

* * *

Danna had sensed O'Grady the moment he walked into Parrott's front parlor, even though the room was filled with people. So many people, she was having trouble making her way toward the door.

What was the man doing here? Couldn't he follow instructions? She wanted him available for any emergencies back in town.

He'd been moody and distracted since they'd ridden out to visit the Earlys and Baileys last week, but coming to the dance tonight was outright defiance.

She wasn't sure if she was more irritated by that or by the distance he'd been building between them. If only her awareness of him would fade, but it had only grown stronger in the past few days.

She'd spent much too long finding her hostess to thank the woman for inviting her, and now all she wanted to do was return to her rooms. She had no desire to confront her deputy right now; she could talk to him in the

morning.

Other than the three town council members, hardly anyone had spoken to her all evening. She'd thought she had learned to be tough while being Fred's deputy, but she found herself close to tears at the rejection of the people who had been, if not friends, then acquaintances for the last seven years.

And now O'Grady was blocking her exit. She didn't want to see his admiration for Penny Castlerock or the other ladies in lovely gowns who would undoubtedly flock to him.

Unfortunately, he saw her heading toward the door.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Light from the gas lamps highlighted the red in his auburn hair. Sandy stubble covered his chin, making him look disreputable and a bit dangerous. Because of the press of bodies in the crowd, she stood close enough to smell him. Leather and soap and man. She didn't want to feel the tingle of awareness that trembled deep in her belly. She focused on glaring at him for not following her instructions.

"We've got a situation in town." His gaze slid right over the top of her head, as if he was looking for someone else. Her insides pinched to think it was the banker's daughter he searched for. His indifference shouldn't matter to Danna, but it did.

"You couldn't handle it on your own?" If her words were on the caustic side, she hoped it couldn't be heard above the voices surrounding them.

Chas looked down at her, his eyes glinting in the lamplight. "Not this one. What say we switch places? I'll stay here and you head back to town?"

She'd been prepared to leave the party, but his request ignited her ire and made her question him. "What kind of situation are we talking about?"

"I've detained someone." Again, his blue eyes swept the room above her head. Was the person he looked for so important he couldn't have a conversation with her?

Irritation surged, and she tried to push past him. "I'm sure Miss Castlerock is around somewhere so you can admire her new gown."

He grasped her elbow. "That's not why I came—"

"I shouldn't have said that." She tried to shake his hand away, but he held fast to her arm.

"Dance with me, Miss Marshal." His demanding tone sparked something inside her, like iron on a tinderbox, and she opened her mouth, but her refusal was muted when she noted the set of his jaw.

"Please," he murmured.

Without waiting for an answer, he swept her into the crowd of dancers. Reacting quickly, in order not to be stepped on by the swirling couples, she clutched his shoulders to keep her balance. The fiddle seemed muted now, or was that the blood rushing in her ears? Though he was only a couple inches taller than she, his very presence seemed larger. Almost protective. Like she could lean on his broad shoulders and be safe.

Belatedly, his hand met her waist, and she jumped. No one had touched her since Fred. And how did this touch, in the middle of a crowded room, feel so intimate?

"What's the matter?" she asked, struggling to focus on her words instead of the unsteady feeling he evoked in her.

"Do you know that man? There, in the corner. With the long blond hair?" He twirled her, and she caught a glimpse of a man with stringy blond hair and a long mustache standing near the food tables in the second parlor. Her quick glance revealed he was dressed as many of the cowboys were, in their nicest denims and starched white shirts.

She shook her head. "Who is he?"

"I've seen him in town a couple of times. Last time with...a suspicious character."

Danna could feel the tension in his grip. There was something he wasn't telling her. But what?

* * *

Chas knew he'd made a mistake the moment he took Danna in his arms. Holding her felt natural, right, the same way it had on horseback when she'd rescued him. And it scared him.

But when he'd seen Hank Lewis's crony across the room, he'd faced an irrational urge to keep her near. If Hank Lewis was here, anyone in the room could be in danger, including the marshal.

If he blinked, he could imagine Danna sprawled across the floor in a pool of blood—just like Julia had been at the hand of Hank Lewis. He couldn't let that happen.

He hadn't counted on what the feel of her in his arms would do to him. The simple smell of soap and woman rose above the other scents.

For a brief moment, he forgot about Hank Lewis. He couldn't stop himself from gazing upon Danna. He let his eyes roam her face from forehead to chin. She was flushed with the exertion of swinging and stomping around the dance floor, Wisps of her dark hair had come loose from her braid and curled at her temples and over her forehead. She wasn't looking at his face, more like his shoulders, and her dark lashes contrasted with the golden skin of her cheeks. She hadn't dressed up like the other ladies here tonight. She still wore her trousers.

She was vibrant.

And he wanted her as far away from Henry Lewis as he could get her.

The music ended, and they stepped away from each other.

"We probably should head back to town," she murmured, not looking at him now. "And see about this situation of yours."

He cleared his throat. "Yes."

When he regained his senses and looked up again, the blond man was gone.

* * *

The situation was...a girl locked in one of the cells. Danna stopped in the middle of the floor, shock holding her immobile. Dark, stringy, unwashed hair obscured Danna's view of the girl's face, but the slight person huddling on the cot behind bars was certainly female, even if she were disguised by the tattered man's shirt and trousers.

Was this what Danna looked like in her marshal's clothes?

"Let me out of here!" the girl shouted when Danna and Chas walked inside. She stood, and Danna got a good look at her dirt-smudge face. Not familiar.

The girl shook the cell door, rattling the metal. "You can't keep me here!"

"You were caught stealing, so yes, we can keep you here." Chas spoke calmly, ignoring the girl's ire. Again, almost distracted.

Danna turned to him with raised brows. "Which store?"

"Hereford's Grocery. I caught her myself when she ran out with a half a ham in her hands."

Danna walked up to the bars, and the girl backed away. As if she were afraid.

"I don't know you." Danna said quietly, hoping to calm the girl. "Do your parents live in town? What's your name?"

The girl crossed her arms over her middle.

"If you don't talk to me, I can't get you back home."

"Store owner didn't recognize her either," Chas said. "She can't be more than fifteen. I would've turned her over to her parents, but there was no one else around, and I couldn't get anything out of her." Chas sat in his now customary chair and propped his feet on the desk. Danna frowned at him. She'd told him twice not to put his boots there. He ignored her glare and went on. "I wasn't sure you'd want to leave her locked up all night."

The girl's face blanched at his casually spoken words.

Danna considered it for a moment. "I don't know that we've got a choice. She's a minor. I can't just turn her out on her own. Maybe a night in that cell will make her want to tell us who she belongs to."

Now the girl's shoulders slumped.

Danna felt sorry for her. She approached the cell and touched the bars. "If you're afraid your parents are going to be angry, I could talk to them. They're probably worried about you right now."

The girl curled up on the cot, giving Danna her profile. She swiped at her face with one hand, and Danna thought she saw a bit of moisture before it was whisked away. But what choice did she have if the girl refused to cooperate?

Moving to the pot-bellied stove in the corner, Danna stirred the coals and fed in two sturdy logs. The autumn nights were getting cooler, and the girl didn't have a coat. Danna didn't want her to get chilled overnight.

Chas's booted feet hit the floor with a thump.

"You heading out?" Danna asked, intent on her task. His attention had been diverted all evening. She didn't want him to know it mattered.

"Mmm-hmm. See you in the morning." And he was gone.

Danna turned to give the girl one more chance. "I want to help you. Won't you tell me who you are?"

Still no answer. The girl only sunk her chin into her folded arms, a ball of misery.

* * *

Climbing the stairs to her room, Danna considered what she could do. The mystery girl couldn't stay in the jail indefinitely, especially if any men were arrested. But who was she? Why weren't her parents looking for her? Was she an orphan?

The questions had no answers, at least not tonight. Danna toed off her boots and changed into her nightshirt, but her thoughts stayed with the girl below. If she was an orphan, was she lonely?

Like Danna was? Maybe that was the key to getting the girl to open up. Just spending time with her. Showing her that Danna could be trusted.

Danna pulled on a pair of pants, tucked her nightgown into them, and threw her coat on over that. She pulled the extra quilt off the end of the bed and added Fred's pillow on top.

She ducked back outside and made her way down the steps without really looking, even though the moon was mostly hidden by clouds. She was pushing open the door to the jail when a hulking figure loomed over her.

Resisting the urge to shriek, she reached for her pistol and realized she'd left it upstairs when she'd started getting ready for bed. Could she run back to get it?

The moon came out from behind a cloud and threw the face of Chas O'Grady into relief. Danna's shoulders dropped, and she let out a silent breath. It was just her deputy. But...

"What are you doing here?"

* * *

Chas grinned at the marshal's discomfited expression. "Scare ya?"

She shook her head, but he didn't believe her. Seeing her vulnerable put a hitch in his stomach, just like he'd felt when he'd seen the mercantile owner grab the teen girl Chas'd taken into custody.

Women. They brought out the best in him—his desire to protect, take care of them. And also the worst—he seemed unable to stay away, even when he knew he should.

He spotted the bundle in Danna's arms and couldn't help his smile. Something warm unfurled in his chest. Danna had the same idea about making friends with the mystery girl.

"You felt sorry for her, too," he whispered. "Figured she'd have to be

pretty desperate to steal from the grocery. So I brought some things from the hotel." He held up the burlap sack.

She nodded. "Perhaps, if we show her that we care, she'll open up."

His thoughts exactly. He could put aside his quest for vengeance for a few hours. On his walk down from the hotel, the town had been almost deserted. Most folks were probably still at the Parrott's party. Finding Hank Lewis could wait until morning.

Chas pushed the door open and allowed Danna to brush past him. In the warmth and light inside, he held up the burlap sack he'd filled with the goods begged from the hotel manager.

"So you brought some leftovers from the hotel?" Danna asked, probably for the girl's benefit, since they'd just discussed this in whispers outside.

"Unfortunately, the hotel's kitchen was closed. I had to bribe the manager for some eggs and bacon from tomorrow morning's breakfast."

He waved the cast-iron frying pan in the air, moved across the room to the pot-bellied stove. "I borrowed this, as well."

The girl did her best to appear disinterested, but Chas saw the way her eyes tracked both his and Danna's movements across the room. Danna moved to the desk, putting the bundle of cloth and pillow she carried on its top.

The girl's head came up off her folded arms.

Danna reached for the coffeepot on the shelf near the stove. "You want me to make some?"

How could he cushion his answer? He didn't have to.

Danna's eyes narrowed at his hesitation. "You don't like my coffee." It wasn't a question.

"Your coffee is a little...ah..." He started to say *strong*.

She shook her head, cutting him off. "Don't say it. I'll fetch some water. You can make the coffee."

When she brought the pot back in, he had to push back the skillet to make room. The stove was made for heat, not cooking, but it would work for their purposes. The food should be edible, at least.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Danna asked as Chas cracked several eggs into the skillet, where they sizzled.

"I've been a bachelor long enough to know how to fry a couple of eggs." He added some bacon to the far side of the pan, and the scent of cooking meat wafted through the air. When he looked up at her, Danna's mouth was pinched and white.

"My husband used to say that."

"He cooked?"

"One of us had to," she said, a bit of humor in her soft smile.

Chas jerked his focus back to the frying pan and away from her mouth.

A glance from the side of his eyes revealed the girl had sat forward on her cot and was watching them. If they kept the conversation going, would she eventually say something?

"I thought most mamas taught their daughters how to cook."

"My ma died when I was little. And my pa."

She said the words so matter-of-factly that the fork scraped across the bottom of the frying pan with a screech. "Sorry."

Was he apologizing for the noise or for her mother's death? She always tangled his emotions until he didn't know which way was up.

"Who raised you?" He hadn't meant for the words to come out of his mouth, hadn't meant for the conversation to turn serious, but he couldn't take them back now.

"My brother. Until I was sixteen and he sent me away."

"Let me guess. He sent you to a finishing school, but it didn't take?" he said it with a hint of a smile.

She shook her head stiffly and sat on the edge of the desk. "He sent me away to get married."

The sound of bacon grease popping was the only noise in the room.

Finally, not knowing what to say, Chas scraped the bacon and turned it over. "Almost done."

Danna popped up from the desk and scurried to the door. "I'm going to run upstairs and get a plate for our...guest." She nodded toward the girl now sitting on the edge of the cot.

"Bring a couple," he said, not looking away from what he was doing.

"Hmm?"

"I got a glimpse of that fancy spread at the party, but I didn't get to partake." He pointed the fork he was using to turn the bacon at the girl in the cell. "I can hear her stomach growling from here. I think you're the only one who ate supper tonight."

"I didn't eat either."

"Why not?" When she didn't answer, he looked up from the popping grease in the pan to see her turn for the door with a faint trace of a flush on her face.

"I'll get the plates." She closed the door behind her with a snap. A few moments later, Chas heard movement above his head.

Chas tried to make sense out of Danna's comment. From the way she'd said it, it seemed her brother had pushed her into marriage. But why? And was it inappropriate for Chas to ask more questions of his boss?

The door banged open again and Danna reappeared holding tin plates and cutlery in her hands. "Are you burning that bacon?"

She was going to ignore his question if he let her. So he didn't. "Why didn't you eat supper at the dance?"

She shrugged, but she wouldn't meet his eye as he waved her over. He scooped eggs and bacon onto the plates.

"Goodness, there is a lot of food here. I was too busy avoiding rumors to stop and eat," Danna said, all in a rush. "Someone believes they saw a man in my rooms, and it has scandalized everyone in town. Even the council members cautioned me about my behavior."

The thought of someone calling on Danna put a hot rock in the center of his chest, but he instantly knew she wouldn't allow any inappropriate behavior. She was too straight-laced for that.

He tried to make a joke out of it. "I'm sure once the idea of you accepting callers gets around, things will settle down."

If he'd hoped to calm her ire, he'd failed. She sputtered, "I haven't had any callers. And I don't want another husband."

The pressure on his chest eased a bit. Chas took the girl's plate before Danna could dump it on him and carried it to the cell. The teen still sat on the cot, her eyes fastened on the food in his hands, hope shining from their depths.

"For you."

She was slow to get up, hesitated before she accepted the plate from his hands, but then shoveled the eggs into her mouth with her fingers, not even using the fork.

Chas turned away to give her privacy, leaned against the wall. He was too tense to sit down, even to eat.

Danna sat behind the desk, eating slowly, staring at a point across the room. Had he offended her by his teasing comment? He could easily see her getting remarried. She was uncommonly beautiful with her dark hair and eyes. The men's clothes couldn't hide it. The attitude she carried couldn't hide it. And her sense of duty was strong. Her dedication to the people of this

town proved it; as a wife, she would never betray her husband.

Scooping the last of his eggs into his mouth, Chas let his gaze linger on Danna. As he watched, she slid open the top drawer and fingered something just inside.

He'd snooped one afternoon when she'd been out visiting a sick friend and knew that the only thing in that drawer was a worn leather journal. Her husband's journal. He'd glanced through the first few pages then decided it was too personal to keep reading.

This wasn't the first time Chas had seen Danna touch the object. Did she miss her husband? Did she keep the journal near as a reminder of him?

It was another reminder of how deep her loyalty ran. Even after the man's death, she sought to uphold his honor by defending this town.

"I suppose your sister is a good cook? Pays lots of social calls?"

Danna's quiet question surprised him. He didn't want to talk about his family, about home, but he could feel the teen's eyes on him.

"Erin? Yes, I suppose my mother has been instructing her on how to best run a household." Although his wealthy Boston parents would have a very different opinion on what that entailed from anyone in this small town. "She was only fourteen when I left home. Still having lessons with her tutors."

And it made him ache to think about home. He couldn't speak of it any more.

"It's late," he said, pushing off the wall. "Wouldn't want any more rumors to get started about you, Marshal." He winked at Danna.

Chas collected the frying pan and fork he'd borrowed from the hotel kitchen and moved toward the door.

Danna gathered the plates and utensils on the desk and took the bundle from her desk to the cell.

"I brought you a blanket," Danna said, offering the girl a folded quilt. "I know the cots in those cells aren't the most comfortable, but this will have to do if you won't tell us your name or where you come from"

The girl slid her hands through the cell bars and accepted the quilt and pillow.

She went to the cot and began spreading out the quilt.

"My name's Katy."

* * *

The next morning at the office, Danna finished a quick sketch of the man Chas had pointed out to her at the dance, She wanted to put his likeness on paper while it was still clear in her mind. If Chas thought the man was a suspicious character, perhaps she had a Wanted poster on him.

Her next task was to flip through the stack of hand-drawn faces and see if she could match her sketch to any of them.

It was a little hard to concentrate with Katy humming a bawdy tune that she only could've learned in a saloon.

Seated with her elbows propped on the desk, Danna flicked her eyes up to watch the teen.

Katy seemed much more relaxed today than she had last night. The shadows behind her eyes had lifted somewhat, and her humming showed her mood had lightened. Now all Danna needed to do was find out where she belonged and get the girl out of her jail.

"I brought breakfast." The cheerful, masculine voice preceded Chas into the jail as he backed through the door, two piping plates in his hands. How kind of him to bring breakfast to share with Katy.

She looked down at the Wanted poster, but she couldn't make her eyes focus on the face it depicted. Chas's casual statements last night about his sister's tutor and running a household had thrown another obstacle in the way of her silly emotions. He obviously came from money. Somehow, he'd ended up here in the West, but his roots mattered, even if he didn't talk about home much.

If she was right and his family was well-off, she would never fit in with them. She was no lady. That was if her silly, female emotions ever came to anything.

Who was she kidding? Those silly emotions would never amount to anything.

A gilt-edged china plate, much nicer than the tin ones she owned, plonked onto the table, and her head came up.

Chas quirked a half smile, just a corner of his lips turned upward. "I grabbed breakfast at the hotel. Didn't figure you had."

His kindness flustered her. She could feel a flush creeping into her cheeks. He didn't seem to notice as he crossed the room to glance out the window.

* * *

Chas kept one eye on Katy, who was again shoveling the food into her mouth, ignoring the fork he'd put on her plate. Was she still that hungry? Or had she never learned basic manners?

In the reflection of the window's glass, he caught a glimpse of Danna with her head bent over the papers on her desk. Before he'd turned away, he'd seen her blush.

She was sweet on him. The thought was terrifying—and crazy. Surely, he was mistaken. She couldn't be.

"I think I've found your man with the blond mustache."

He turned to find Danna waving a piece of paper in his direction. "You're kidding."

Surprised, he took it from her outstretched hand and looked into the face of the blond man he'd seen first in the café and then in the saloon with Hank Lewis.

"Well, what does it say?" Danna demanded.

"Jed Hester." Chas read aloud. "Wanted in Kansas, the Indian Territory, and Colorado. For robbery. There's a reward."

"Robbery? Not rustling? Are you certain it is the same man you've seen around town?"

"I'm sure," he replied grimly.

"But what is he doing around this area?"

And what was his involvement with Hank Lewis? Hank had been a cardsharp in Arizona before he'd killed Julia and Joseph.

"How many times have you seen this man?"

"Three."

"Then he isn't just passing through."

"It would appear not." What did it all mean? "Do you mind if I borrow this?" Chas wiggled the Wanted poster. "I might check around and see if he is staying at the hotel or boardinghouse."

"Do you think that's likely?" From her skeptical frown, it was obvious Danna didn't think so. Someone with a wanted poster wouldn't stay out in the open, would they?

"It wouldn't hurt to ask."

* * *

“Marshal?” The quiet voice from the girl huddled in a blanket next to Danna's bed brought Danna from the brink of sleep instantly. It was the first time Katy had spoken since telling Danna and Chas her name the night before.

“Hmm?” Danna levered herself up on the bed with an elbow in order to see the girl. In the dim light, she could only make out an outline. Katy appeared to be curled in on herself, even though the room was warm.

A barroom brawl earlier in the evening had filled the two cells, and Danna's conscience wouldn't let her leave the girl in the jail with the men. Danna'd brought Katy into her room, telling her sternly that she was still under Danna's custody.

“Did your brother love you?”

The question was utterly unexpected. Stunned, half-asleep, she spoke before thinking. “I suppose he must've.”

“Then why did he send you away?”

Danna had asked herself the same question for years after she'd married Fred. She'd never come up with a satisfactory answer. She barely spoke to her brother.

“My brother had lived on the ranch his whole life. Didn't even go to school. I don't think he knew what to do with a sister. A girl.”

Katy was quiet for so long that Danna almost drifted off to sleep again. When the girl finally spoke, her voice was almost a whisper.

“What would have happened to you if...if there wasn't a husband to take you in? If you had nowhere to go?”

Danna took a breath and reminded herself to tread carefully, hoping she could get more information on the girl's identity.

“Well, Katy, I guess if I hadn't married Fred, I probably would've found a family that I liked and that liked me, and I would've stayed with them and helped work their farm. I was used to outdoor work from being on my brother's ranch.”

“What if you didn't know how to work?”

Danna followed her instinct and reached down to rest her hand on the girl's shoulder. Katy flinched, but she didn't pull away. A moment passed, and she seemed to relax.

“Honey, if you're worried about what's going to happen to you, you don't need to.”

Danna felt more than heard the girl take a shuddering breath.

“Do you have any family?”

"N-no," came the whisper. "My p-pa died."

"What about schooling?"

"I can't read, but I can cipher some."

"Well, come tomorrow, we'll see if we can find you a place to stay and some work to do. You promise not to steal anymore?"

The girl grunted, and Danna decided to take it for a yes. She should probably feel good that she finally had a plan on what to do with Katy, but something about it sat like a stone in her stomach.

Was it because the girl reminded her so vividly of herself at that age? Alone, uncertain, unloved? Because despite her automatic answer to Katy, despite all the times she'd told herself that of course her brother loved her, Danna could never quite convince herself.

It was a long-time before she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Eight

The next night, Danna moved wearily up the stairs to her room above the jail, looking forward to her bed and some rest after breaking up a barroom fight after one gambler had declared the man playing against him was cheating.

She'd nearly taken a broken bottle to the ribs. Chas would've been upset if he'd seen her in danger, but this was his evening off. Finally, in the wee hours, the saloons had closed, and she was free to get some sleep.

She pushed open the door, careful not to wake Katy, whom she'd settled earlier in the evening. A sliver of moonlight from the open door fell on the blanket Katy had used the past two nights.

The girl was gone.

A horrible feeling clenched Danna's insides. She struck a match and lit the oil lamp she kept on the small round table in one corner of the room and found the entire space was empty.

The blanket was folded neatly and sat with the extra pillow in the middle of Danna's bed. No signs that the girl had ever inhabited the room.

It had been dark when Danna had brought her up here for the night. If she'd left, she probably wouldn't have gotten far. But why would she leave? And where would she go?

Questions swirled in Danna's mind as she raced back outside and clomped down the steps, her boots echoing loudly in the darkness.

She slipped in the small space between the stairway that led up to her rooms and the outside wall of the milliner's building, pausing before she reached the boardwalk.

Something felt wrong. Call it instinct, call it something else, but her skin

crawled. Something was going on. Something she hadn't felt two minutes ago when she'd gone upstairs.

Taking her time, just like Fred had taught her, Danna peeked around the corner of the building, but the street was empty, the buildings dark.

Danna crept down the street, taking care to stay in the shadows under the building's awnings, keeping her footsteps muted against the boardwalk.

As she crossed Third Street, she thought she glimpsed a flash of light from inside the Calvin Bank and Trust. She froze, eyes glued to the front window. Was someone inside? Straining her ears, Danna heard a soft whicker. A horse?

Everything was still. Then—*there*. The flash of light came again.

From this distance, she couldn't make out any details through the bank windows. She needed to get closer.

A prickle of unease skittered up the back of her neck.

She needed to be sure, needed to see into the bank.

She crouched down and crept along the boardwalk, keeping close to the front of the grocery. She jumped when something warm bumped into her leg. She barely stifled her scream.

"Wrong Tree." She hissed the dog's name, and he sat in front of her. He was supposed to be at the livery with Will. "Go home."

His tongue lolled and his tail swept the dirt-packed lane.

"Go. Home."

He whined and turned away from the jail house toward the saloon across the street.

"I don't have time to deal with you right now." She tried grasping the piece of rope around his neck to usher him toward the jail, but he turned back toward the saloon, and this time he barked.

"Hush." Danna released him and let him gallop away. She couldn't worry about him. She had work to do.

The bank had two entry points. The main customer entrance at the front and the employee entrance at the rear. Both of those doors were to the east side of the building, so it was possible someone could be watching both exits at once from the alley between the bank and the doctor's office next door. That would make it harder for her to get near the building. And the bank's entire front wall was composed of large windows. If they had a sentry inside, there would be no sneaking up on the building from Main Street. The closest she could hope to get without being seen was the doctor's office. And it had

no windows that looked toward the bank.

But the doc's office was only a single story tall. If she could get on the roof, she could use her field glasses to see into the bank. And she'd have her rifle in case she needed it.

It wasn't much of a plan, but she had to try. She didn't have time to track down Chas at the hotel if the bank was being robbed.

* * *

Chas had had a bad feeling all evening that Hank Lewis was still in town. This was his third patrol through Calvin's streets tonight, and he was exhausted, his eyes heavy from scouring the shadows for trouble. He'd been having a hard time sleeping, knowing Hank Lewis was nearby, he'd been taking extra patrols on his own.

Everything was quiet, the streets deserted, the saloons finally closed down for the night.

Then he saw movement on top of one of the buildings a few blocks down.

Heart pounding, Chas pulled his pistol from his gun belt and ran across Main Street, then jumped up onto the boardwalk.

At the corner of the bank, he paused with his back against the bricks beside the windows that stretched all the way across the front of the building to the door.

Noise from inside surprised him into stillness. Scuffling...and voices.

From here, Chas couldn't get a look at the roof of the building next door. To do that, he'd have to cross in front of the large windows overlooking the boardwalk. Was there a lookout up there? Was this a bank robbery?

Chas peeked around the corner and through the window closest to him. He thought he could make out some movement, but the inside was too dark for him to be sure.

The soft neigh of a horse brought his head up. Ready for escape?

He didn't have time to rouse the marshal from sleep.

Ducking low, he half-crawled, half-shuffled across the boardwalk toward the front door of the bank, pistol in hand. He needed a glimpse inside, to see the layout of the bank, see if there was a sentry standing just inside the windows.

Halfway across the front of the bank and from his crouched position, he

could see the roof of the building next door. He caught a flash of movement. Was that a hat? A glint of moonlight on metal told him there was weapon up there. Then the figure shifted, and he caught a glimpse of a dark braid.

Danna? No. He blinked, straining his eyes for another look, but he couldn't see anything. Had it really been her, or just an illusion prompted by his imagination?

Before he could raise his head above the windowsill to see inside, a shot rang out, then the sound of breaking glass.

He froze.

Julia fell to the ground at his feet, blood seeping from underneath her crumpled body. He followed her to the ground, moaning her name.

But she didn't hear him. She was already gone.

* * *

Danna ducked when she saw the muzzle-flash from the darkened back door of the bank.

Okay. It definitely wasn't the bank manager inside. Not if someone'd taken a shot at her.

If they'd seen her, she'd lost the element of surprise and the chance to go get help.

She couldn't let them get away.

She quickly rose on her knees and fired a shot at the person-size shadow in the bank's side window. Glass shattered. Had she hit him?

A man on horseback below held the reins for three other horses. She could hear the animals stomping and whinnying their agitation. The man probably had a gun. Could she trust that he was adequately distracted by the horses?

She stuck her head over the roof's edge for a look. A blur of snarling dark fur launched across the alleyway.

Wrong Tree! All four horses whinnied and then thundered off, hoofbeats fading. The lookout shouted but couldn't get control before they disappeared into the night. *Thank you, Wrong Tree!*

She left her rifle on the doc's rooftop and dangled her feet off the edge, then dropped. Landing in a crouch, she fumbled for her pistol, moving toward the broken window. With a little hop, she vaulted the window's lip and inside

the building. She slammed into a moving body.

* * *

Chas fought the mental and physical paralysis that held him pinned in a ball on the boardwalk. All he could see was Julia's form crumpled before him, see his bloodstained hands.

“We got comp'ny!”

The muffled shout shook Chas from the dark place.

A woman's shriek brought him to his feet, though it almost cost him his last meal. He shook with the adrenaline and revulsion coursing through him.

He clutched his pistol against his shoulder, breathing hard. A glance at the rooftop showed it was empty. Shards of glass were scattered across the boardwalk. Someone had broken the far window.

Had Danna gone inside?

He had to go in there. He couldn't save Julia, but he could rescue her.

He used his elbow to break the glass in the nearest window and then rolled over the sill.

It was even darker inside the building than out. Something—someone?—scrabbled over to his right and he stepped in that direction when he was tackled from behind.

* * *

Danna grappled with the man trying to take her arm off, using both her shoulder and elbow to get some leverage. The man grunted, but instead of releasing her, he shoved her into the wall, and she cried out.

Her gun had been knocked from her hand when she'd barreled into this human ox, and she could really use it right about now.

Over the sounds of their struggle, she heard glass breaking and a muffled shout. “Danna!”

Chas?

The large man's rancid breath hit her full in the face, and she knocked her head into his. He let go of her arm, cursing.

She dropped to the floor and scrambled for her weapon. The ox-man walked into her, knocking her flat. Where was her gun? It couldn't have

gotten far.

"Let's go!" A third voice rang out from behind the wall separating the bank's teller area from the vault room.

The man Danna had been struggling with turned, but she swept her leg out and caught his ankles. He stumbled, but didn't go down. She tackled his knees, and he fell.

* * *

Chas and his assailant were evenly matched. He couldn't get the guy to go down and stay there.

"Shoot her!" someone shouted.

"No!" The cry ripped from his throat. The exchange was enough of a distraction for him to lose track of the fight. He registered a sharp pain in his temple and knew no more.

* * *

Danna heard the sound of a body hitting the floor, but she was too busy struggling with the human ox to do more than hope someone on the street would hear the ruckus and come to her aid.

Something metal clanged against wood. Oh, no! Had the big man somehow gotten hold of her gun?

He shoved her away, and she rolled to one side. Light from a torch glinted off the barrel of a pistol, which the man held in his beefy hand. Pointed right at her.

She leapt to her left. The crack of the bullet whizzed by, but it didn't hit her. She ducked behind the teller counter.

A deep thud and soft moan turned her head. The light illuminated two bodies lying on the floor. Was one of them her deputy?

"Get out, get out!" shouted the voice from the back.

From her vulnerable position crouched on the floor, Danna saw the huge shadow of the man she'd been grappling with move away. The robbers were leaving? Two pairs of boots thumped against the wooden floors, one with a noticeable drag to one of his footsteps.

Silence fell.

Danna knelt behind the desk, trembling. She'd nearly been shot. In all the years she'd worked at Fred's side, she'd never been so close to dying before. Correction, never except two weeks ago, when she'd nearly been run over by a stampede.

Her heart drummed in her ears about as loud as the gunshot had been. She was alive. That's what mattered.

Another moan from nearby drew her gaze up from her shaking hands. The body closest to her was moving, his head rolling from side to side.

"Mama," he whispered.

She crawled toward him, frowning when her palms met with something warm and sticky on the floor. Blood? She hadn't been shot, but apparently this man had.

The body she reached wasn't her deputy's, but she saw Chas's tousled head a few feet away and sucked in a quick breath. What had happened? How had he known something was wrong and come in here? Had he been shot?

A shaft of moonlight filtered through the shattered window and illuminated her deputy's face, slack and unconscious. No blood marked his body, thankfully.

The unknown man groaned again, and she crouched next to him, kicking away the weapon lying nearby. Even a wounded man could shoot.

A quick examination told her he was in serious danger. Blood seeped from a wound in his abdomen.

Danna bit back a cry and reached into her pocket for her bandanna. She pressed it against the man's stomach, trying to stanch the flow of blood. Wounds in the torso were almost impossible to treat. If she didn't get help, he might not make it.

"Marshal?" came a wavering voice from the vault room. Danna wished she'd found her pistol, but there wasn't time to locate it now. She held pressure on the man's wound.

A light appeared behind her, and its beam bounced and shook on the walls until she could see the face of Zachariah Silverton, the bank manager. Danna swallowed a groan. Zachariah was not known for his calm.

"Silverton, I need you to bring the light closer, then run for the doc. This man's in a bad way." She used her marshal's voice, the one Fred had taught her to cultivate on a laughter-filled afternoon so many years ago.

"Th-th-they made me open the vault. They held a g-g-gun on me. Said they'd sh-shoot me."

Splendid. He was so shaken he didn't seem to have heard her.

"Zachariah. Zachariah!" He started and looked up at her. The lantern he held wobbled so much, she was afraid he might drop it.

"Bring the light here. Put it on the desk." His eyes grew large when he saw the bloody body under Danna's hands. The lantern banged against the corner of the desk, and he nearly dropped it before he settled it on the edge. He backed away, overturning a wooden chair and almost falling.

"Zachariah." She waited until he focused on her face before she went on. "I need you to go find Doc."

He nodded, his head bobbing awkwardly. He edged toward the door.

"Hurry! This man needs help."

He turned and bolted, shoulder banging into the doorframe before he passed out of sight. The sound of his boot steps faded, and Danna could hear Chas's deep breathing and the wavering breaths of the man underneath her hands.

Her handkerchief soaked through, she looked around for something else to help stop the flowing blood.

She needed the doc now. This man was dying.

* * *

Chas heard noises as if from far away. Shouts, voices, then moaning. A ringing filled his ears, his head ached.

He remembered. Following Danna into the bank right into the middle of a scuffle—a robbery. Was she alive?

It took some effort, but he cracked one eye open. Light sent shafts of pain pulsing through his head, but he refused to close his eye now that he had it open. He rolled his head to one side and saw the broken window he'd busted.

Where was the kid now? He turned his head in the other direction and forced both eyes open. There was a body, lying on the floor And Danna leaning over him.

He closed his eyes against the intensity of his relief. She was all right.

But the kid didn't appear to be. What had happened? Had Danna shot him?

Confusion and pain beat at the inside of his head, muddling everything.

He tried to push himself up with one hand, but throbbing pain made it

impossible, and he slumped to the floor.

"Stay still for now." Her voice sounded curt, angry. "Are you hurt?"

Was he? All he could feel was the pounding in his brain. "Took a wallop on the head."

"It's a good thing, too, or you might've ended up shot."

"Like him? Did you shoot him?"

Her lips flattened. "No."

Chas's throat closed. More bloodshed. He hadn't been able to prevent it. Gingerly, he sat up, head spinning.

"O'Grady, stay where you are."

Hurried steps pounded on the boardwalk, and Chas turned in time to see two tall forms pass the broken window. They clattered inside.

"M-marshal, I got the doc." The nervous man hung back while an older man with a bushy white mustache and full head of silver hair came to Danna's side.

"Can't get a good look. Need more light," mumbled the man that must be the doc.

"Silverton," Danna barked. "Bring the light down here."

Silverton didn't move. His face was a pasty white, and Chas wondered if he was about to faint. Chas stood, fighting for equilibrium.

"O'Grady," Danna barked his name, but the rushing in his ears made it hard to tell if she said anything else.

He used one hand to hold onto the desk, to make sure he didn't embarrass himself and fall. With the other, he picked up the lamp and handed it to the doc.

"You don't look real good either, son."

That's when Chas blacked out for the second time.

* * *

"—robbed—"

"Four or five men..."

"—headed out of town—"

An irate voice yelled over all the other chatter.

"Where's the marshal?"

The other voices receded into more of a whispered murmur. Chas forced

his eyes open, noting that the pain in his head wasn't as bad as it had been before.

The bank was lit up now, several more lamps joining the first. A short, balding man stormed through the front door, past Chas where he lay half-behind one of the desks, to where Danna stood conversing with a man Chas didn't recognize and the man named Silverton near the rear of the building.

"Marshal—"

She ignored the balding man, continuing her conversation with the two other men in low tones.

Chas pushed himself up to a sitting position.

The man Danna had ignored obviously wasn't used to being treated that way, because his face turned a deep shade of purple, and he began to splutter.

Danna nodded at something the doc said and turned. "Yes, Mr. Castlerock?"

Ah. The owner. "Marshal, why aren't you out catching the men who did this to my bank?"

"I've been tending to a man with a bullet wound in his gut. My deputy is injured. I'm doing the best I can."

She walked past him toward Chas. "I'll let you know when I have something to report."

The man spluttered, but Danna's gaze was fastened on Chas as she crouched next to him.

He couldn't look away from her face. Unscathed. She was perfectly unharmed. He had to swallow back the emotions that wanted to burst from him.

He realized her hands were covered in blood.

It unnerved him. Look at what had almost happened to her. He'd frozen up, let her down. Couldn't protect her. She hadn't been killed, but she could've been.

He needed distance. Forcing himself to stand, he closed his eyes to counteract his roiling stomach.

"All right?" Danna's soft-spoken question came from too close.

"I will be. You?" He opened his eyes but didn't look at her. The dizziness began to fade.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her shrug. "Maybe a little bruised. No worse than breaking up a saloon fight."

It made him itch that she spoke of throwing herself into danger so

casually. What could he say? She was the marshal.

He followed her out the front door, boots crunching on glass from the window he'd broken.

Danna knelt in front of one of the watering troughs. She spoke as she scrubbed her hands. "I'm going to take a swing around town, make sure they haven't holed up anywhere. I doubt they would, but best to make sure. I'll gather a posse and ride out at first light."

She hadn't looked at him the whole time she'd been speaking, but now she glanced up. He could see weariness etched in the lines bracketing her mouth. "You should have Doc check out that bump on your head. Maybe rest a while. I want you to sit in the doc's office until the wounded robber comes around. Assuming he survives."

Chapter Nine

The door to the jail half-open, Chas picked his aching head up off his arms when he heard a distinct set of footsteps approaching.

Danna was back.

Then a second set of footsteps, this one much heavier than Danna's, thudded on the boardwalk, coming from another direction.

"Marshal, did you catch the men who robbed my bank yet?"

The bank owner. Castlerock.

"Not yet, sir." Weariness was evident in Danna's voice.

"I want my money recovered and the men apprehended."

"They will be, sir."

"Soon, or I'm going to call for your job."

Now her voice lost what was left of its politeness. "I'll be in touch when I have more information to share."

Through the open doorway, Chas saw her push past the larger man. She stepped through the door, her huff of annoyance audible as she closed it with a snap.

"Problem, Miss Marshal?"

She was apparently so tired she didn't even react to his teasing use of her title. She moved to her desk quickly and started opening drawers, making a pile of items on top of the desk. He recognized the leather journal from the top drawer, a pair of field glasses, a length of rope.

Chas glanced out the window. The sky was lightening. Dawn would be here soon.

"When's the posse get here?"

"There won't be one." Her actions contradicted her flatly spoken

statement. She seemed to be preparing to leave for a length of time.

"You found them, then?"

She laid her hands flat on the table, closed her eyes, and tucked her head so her chin rested on her vest. "No one will ride with me. But I'm going anyway."

"Alone?"

She must have heard the sharpness in his tone, because she looked up with a glare. He didn't care if he'd offended her. The thought of her chasing down Hank Lewis alone made his stomach roil.

"Is it such a surprise? You didn't want to work with me either. You're only here because you need my help getting around the countryside."

She went back to her packing as if he hadn't lodged a protest. "The tracks close to town were obscured, but I picked up four sets of hooves outside of town, heading toward the mountains."

"You'll be outnumbered."

She muttered under her breath as she loaded a pair of saddlebags.

Something whined outside the door, and Danna stomped across the room to open it. The ugly mutt he'd met on his first day sauntered in.

"Wrong Tree. Where've you been, boy?"

She patted the top of the dog's head, ruffled his ears. "You helped me last night, didn't you? Chased off that lookout. But how did you get loose from Will Chittim?"

The dog only lay at her feet and offered his belly to be scratched.

"He likes you," Chas said, the only words he could force past the lump of fear lodged in his throat.

"He never has before." After a cursory pet of the dog's belly, she returned to the desk. "He was Fred's dog before we married. He's been staying at the livery."

The dog lolled its head toward Chas, as if inviting him to take Danna's place. Chas knelt to oblige, and the dog grunted its appreciation.

Chas stood when Danna finished packing her saddlebags and turned for the door. "I'm going with you."

"Your head still hurt?"

Her eyes were too perceptive not to catch him if he lied. She could probably see the pulse pounding on his temple.

"I can ride."

She shook her head. "There's a storm threatening, and I've got to move

fast. If you get dizzy and fall off your horse... You're too much of a liability.”

"I'm not letting you go alone. We should really have more men, too."

"You're welcome to try. Go talk to the same men I've just been to see. Maybe they'll listen to an outsider instead of a woman.”

The bitterness in her voice scared him; she was normally even-tempered, even in the face of the others in town doubting her. If she was giving chase to Hank Lewis and a gang of violent men with her emotions leading her, she was liable to get killed.

The thought Chas. He grasped the marshal's arm just above her elbow. "Would your husband have faced multiple armed men alone?"

It was the wrong thing to say. He knew it as she clenched her fist against the wooden door. She looked over her shoulder, her face set and fierce.

"Fred would've done whatever he needed to do to apprehend these men.”

"And you need my help," he said it softly, as close to pleading as he'd ever come. "I'll ride with you. I won't take no for an answer.”

* * *

Danna rode a few paces in front of her deputy, eyes on the terrain in front of her horse. She might be watching for tracks in the brushy foothills, but she remained extremely aware of the man behind her.

He'd been vehement about not letting her do this alone, and he was probably right. But she worried about that bump on his head. Head injuries could be tricky. What if he hurt himself worse on the hunt?

So far, he'd not fallen, but his face was gray with the strain. Of course, that could be from the chill. The temperatures had been falling all day.

They needed to round up the bank robbers and fast or risk getting caught in the snowstorm banked in gray clouds that were getting closer with every hoofbeat. A stinging cold wind, strong enough to cut through her leather slicker, had descended about the time they'd ridden out of town.

She hated riding into the mountains. When she'd still lived with her brother, she'd ridden after a lost cow and calf and had gotten injured and lost. Ever since then, the mountains had spooked her. After following tracks all day and into the early afternoon, they were already well into the foothills, and she was starting to get jumpy.

And even though it irked her to admit it, her deputy had been right when

he'd said Fred would never have walked into a situation like this alone.

It still hurt that the men from town denied her request for help. The same men her husband had counted on. Hadn't she proved herself enough yet? Would she ever?

Chas made a low sound, and Danna looked back to find he was hunched in the saddle with the collar of his jacket turned up.

She drew up on the reins. Chas followed suit.

"You okay?"

He nodded, but it didn't reassure her, not with the strain on his face. She knew he most likely wouldn't be able to find his way back to town on his own, and she didn't want to leave him when he had a head injury. If he lost consciousness and fell without anyone to assist him, he could die out in the elements.

But if they stopped now, they'd lose the trail. There were no good options.

He rested the reins against his thigh and raised his hands to his mouth, blowing on them. "Just cold," he said, voice muffled by his hands. "Do you really know where we're going?"

"I'm tracking them," she said.

His expression remained skeptical.

She dismounted, her joints protesting after being in one position for too long, and motioned Chas to do the same. "It won't hurt to get down and get some blood flowing, warm up a bit."

When her deputy hit the ground, she beckoned him to her side, a few feet in front of the horses. She squatted and pointed to the leaf knocked from its branch about a foot off the ground.

"See how it's broken off? This jagged edge here? Something stronger than the wind had to do that." She walked forward a few paces before bending over a patch of soft dirt that showed a partial print from a horse's hoof. "This track didn't come from a wolf or a bear."

Chas knelt beside her and traced the imprint with his forefinger. She tried not to be aware of his close proximity. She failed.

"How did you even see it?" He looked up at her, his hat shading his eyes so she couldn't read them.

"The more time I spend in the woods, the easier it is to spot things like broken leaves or footprints."

"Where did you learn all this? Following your husband around?"

She shook her head. "My granddad taught me and my brother a lot before

he died. The rest is a matter of staying in practice.”

She pointed to another pair of hoofprints a few feet further along. "These are shaped a little differently. See here? It's a different horse, but the tracks are just as fresh. I've seen four different prints, best I can tell.”

"Amazing,” O'Grady muttered. His tone reminded Danna of his voice when he'd called her a doll on the first night they'd met. But surely his sentiments weren't tender toward her, not after seeing her do a man's job.

Her emotions toward her deputy certainly didn't need to get any more tangled. She knew he was leaving when he completed his assignment. He was a city boy. She was happy in Calvin. At least, she had been before Fred's death.

They would never suit. But her heart didn't seem to want to listen. "We need to keep going if we've got any hope of catching up with the robbers.” Danna swung her foot into the stirrup and boosted herself into the saddle, not looking back.

* * *

The sky kept getting darker and darker, and Chas watched Danna get jumpier and jumpier the farther they rode into the foothills.

She hadn't spoken to him since they'd taken off for the second time. He couldn't get a good look at her face, couldn't tell if she was getting antsy because of her tracking or for some other reason.

Her constant reactions to little things, like the snap of a branch in the wind, put him on edge. Plus, he was bone-aching cold, and the wind seemed to keep getting worse the longer they were in the saddle.

"Can we stop for a rest?" he called out when he couldn't take her silence or the cold any longer.

She wheeled her mount around but showed no signs of getting off.

Her jaw was set tight, almost like she was holding back a scream. "I hate to stop now. Once it starts snowing, we'll start losing the trail.”

"Do you think we're close?"

"I don't know." Her fatigue and frustration were evident as she shifted in the saddle and wiped her face with a gloved hand. "I've lost two of the sets of hoofprints. I don't know if they've split up or if I'm so tired I'm not seeing straight anymore.”

Part of him wanted to comfort her, to make everything all right again. Another part wanted to find Hank Lewis at all costs, to enact his revenge.

"Danna," he said quietly, and she raised her eyes to meet his. "Why don't we rest for a few minutes, and you can catch your breath?"

She tapped her thigh with a fist. "I'd rather keep moving."

Something cold stung his cheek, and he raised his face to the sky. Snowflakes whipped downward in a crazy dance toward the ground. He looked to Danna to see her face fall. "I think we're out of time."

"Not if we hurry!" She jerked on her mount's reins and kicked him hard, spurring him into a gallop.

Chas followed, but his heart wasn't in the chase any longer. He still felt an urgency to find Lewis, and he would find him, but his concern for Danna was more pressing.

He concentrated on keeping pace with her, not an easy feat, since her horse's legs were so much longer. Her braid flew out behind her, the tails of her long coat flapped in the wind. Snow and sleet stung his face as they raced through the trees and hills.

He was forced to fall back, his mare lathered and getting winded. He managed to keep Danna in sight but fell farther behind.

He'd topped a ridge when he saw her lying on the ground, a dark shape against the gathering snowdrifts.

Chapter Ten

Chas kicked his horse, riding past Danna's horse, which limped on three feet, several yards away from where her body lay. He threw himself to the ground before he could stop the beast.

"Danna." He dropped to his knees, took her shoulders, and turned her over as gently as possible. Other than a scrape on one cheek, her face was unmarred. Her dark eyes blinked open and focused on his face.

Her hat had fallen off, and her hair fell loose in the wind, dark strands tickling his fingers as he clutched her shoulders. She gasped for breath.

"Danna."

She struggled against him, and for once he was thankful for her stubborn independence. "I'm all right. Just winded."

She pushed his arms away, tried to sit up, finally catching her breath.

The sense of relief he felt nearly crippled him. She was all right. Again. Did the woman have to constantly put herself in danger?

"Let me..." His throat threatened to close. He ran his hands through the hair that had come loose, checking for bumps on her head. Large, fluffy snowflakes landed in her hair, stark white against the dark locks.

"I'm all right, Chas."

Her quiet words stopped his erratic movements but not the frantic beat of his heart. Before he could think, he leaned in and took her mouth in a kiss.

He felt her surprise in her utter stillness, was conscious of her hands trembling against his chest. When he pulled back, hands on her shoulders, she stared at him with large, dark eyes.

"What...was that?"

"Relief," he said quickly. "Probably shouldn't have done that. We work

together—”

She stood, cutting off the rest of his words. Good thing, since he had no idea what he would have said next.

She moved toward her horse.

* * *

Danna couldn't stop shaking. Not from adrenaline or fear from when her horse had thrown her.

From Chas's kiss. The kiss that he thought was a mistake.

She went to Thunder. Something was wrong. A quick examination revealed it had thrown its shoe. She patted its neck, intensely relieved that nothing worse had happened.

"He won't be able to carry a rider, not with a thrown shoe.”

Chas had moved to his horse, too. He wouldn't look at her. She closed her eyes, realizing he must regret kissing her.

“So, what do we do?” Chas asked.

"We can both ride on your mount, but the snow's getting worse.”

It was coming down in clumps, the cold wind buffeting it in all directions.

She hated that it had come to this. “I think we're better off buckling down here for a while. We wait until the worst of the storm is past.”

She wouldn't be able to track the bank robbers in this weather. It galled her to have lost them, but even Fred and a team of deputies wouldn't have been able to stop the snow.

Shelter was scarce this high in the mountains, but Danna scouted for their best option. She showed Chas where to look for dry kindling in the wet weather, then picketed the horses in the driest spot she could find.

Nearby, she found a hollow between a hill and a large fallen tree. It would give her and Chas the most protection possible. Hopefully, they wouldn't be stuck for long. Especially with the awkward tension between them.

He'd pulled away so quickly. Had he been able to tell how it had affected her? Her heart had beaten like a big bass drum she'd heard once at a parade in Cheyenne. She hadn't been able to breathe correctly.

It was nothing she'd ever felt before. Not even with Fred.

She couldn't be falling for her deputy.

She got a fire going with Chas's twigs and motioned him to sit close to the flames after they'd hauled their gear over, including the saddle blankets that they would use to keep warm.

* * *

Chas watched the marshal settle in to their campsite. She was agitated, but tried to hide it. He couldn't miss the dip of her frown, the set of her shoulders turned slightly away from him.

All because of that kiss.

He wished he hadn't done it.

He would never forget it. How she'd felt in his arms, her scent... His head pounded, but not with pain.

He shook those traitorous thoughts away as she sat, near enough to touch.

She tipped her head back and glanced at the sky. He watched, entranced, as snowflakes fell on her face and into her dark hair. She didn't seem to realize the long tresses had come loose from her braid.

"Snow's coming down faster." Her voice was hushed, awed. "It's a good thing we didn't try to go back. If we couldn't find our way, we might freeze to death. Your head all right?"

"Fine." He didn't know what to say. He was completely off-balance.

She tucked her knees up toward her chest, wrapped her arms around them, and loosely clasped her hands toward the fire. "It's my fault." The words were so soft, Chas barely heard them over the popping of the fire. "We should've turned back earlier. I wanted to race the snowstorm."

"Do you think the bank robbers holed up somewhere? Why would they come up into the mountains like this?"

"I don't know. There are lots of caves in these mountains, even some old trappers' shacks where they could've taken shelter."

She was silent a long time. Chas watched the fire until he finally felt compelled to say, "It's not your fault we got stuck here. The weather..."

She shook her head. "Fred would never have gotten in a pickle like this."

"You compare yourself to him too much."

Her eyes flashed up to his, and he saw the surprise in their depths. "I do?"

"All the time. You make coffee like Fred used to make it. Patrol the town at the hours he used to patrol. What's wrong with making the job your own?"

A flush ran up her jaw and into her cheeks. He hoped he hadn't offended her.

"I don't know." She unclasped her hands and held them toward the fire. The air was biting cold on his exposed skin, mostly his face, and he shifted closer to the fire's warmth.

"Fred was a good marshal. He'd been doing it for years. And he was a good teacher."

The affection in her tone when she spoke of her husband wasn't surprising, but his reaction was. Jealousy. "You're not the same person he was. No reason you have to be marshal the exact same way he did. The town council appointed you for a reason."

"Why did they?" Her abrupt question seemed to surprise her as much as it did him. She went on a rush. "You asked me that, and once I started thinking about it, I realized it really didn't make sense. Why me instead of any of the other deputies? Why not hire someone from another town?"

"Maybe none of them wanted to be marshal."

Her brows wrinkled in skepticism. "I can think of at least two men who would've taken the job."

"Perhaps the council considered all the candidates and decided you were the best."

Something changed in her eyes, some softer emotion that he didn't recognize. Didn't want to recognize. "I doubt that. And anyway, I'm still sorry you're caught in this snowstorm with me."

He shrugged. "I guess there could be worse things than being stuck in the wilderness with a beautiful woman."

She turned her face away, but not before he saw the flare of hurt in her expression. "I'll thank you not to mock me, even though we shared...even though you stole that kiss earlier."

What? She thought he was jesting? The cold, and his still-roiling emotions, made him scoot across the damp ground, reach out for her, and pull her flush against his chest. He braced for an elbow or a fist he was sure would come his way.

"I wasn't mocking you," he said quietly.

"What are you—?"

"It'll be warmer this way." He settled his arms loosely around her and rested his cheek against her brow. The softness of the hair at her temple made him close his eyes. He forced them open, forced away thoughts better left

alone. "Who'd have thought this city boy would be camping with a pretty marshal in a snowstorm?"

She was silent for so long he thought she wasn't going to respond.

"I'm not...pretty." Her whisper was nearly inaudible. He looked down at her. Was she blushing? Yes. Warm color lit the side of her cheek. How could she doubt herself?

"You are. Why, at least half the men wanted to dance with you the other night at that rancher's shindig."

She didn't speak, but somehow, he knew she didn't believe him.

"Didn't your husband ever tell you how pretty you are?"

He nearly bit his tongue as the words escaped. He didn't want to talk about her dead husband.

"Fred told me that I was a good shot. That I could outride him most days, and that I had a good memory for details. He told me the truth."

"Well, he didn't tell you everything. Your eyes and your smile are...incredibly lovely." His voice stuck on the word, so caught up was he in making her believe him. He went on, voice lower. "And your hair is like silk."

He didn't dare touch her hair, not the way he wanted to, although a few strands tickled his chin and neck.

One of the horses blew, and Danna turned her head, her temple grazing Chas's jaw. They both remained quiet for a long while, Chas simply enjoying the marvel of the falling snow, enjoying the heat of the fire, enjoying the opportunity to be close to her.

The woods were silent until she burst out, "If they wanted to dance with me, why didn't they ask?"

* * *

Danna felt Chas's breath catch in his chest, and she thought he was going to laugh at her.

"Maybe they're a little afraid of you," he suggested. "Or it could have something to do with that weapon you carry and the badge you wear."

"Or because I don't dress like the other women?" she asked, knowing her curiosity betrayed that she cared more than she let on.

She ached to belong. To walk into one of the stores and be welcomed like

the other wives and daughters, not with the grim, condescending smiles she always received.

"Maybe. Although I can't really picture you jumping into a brawl at the saloon in a skirt."

She tilted her head to see his face. Was he mocking her now? He wasn't smiling. He was staring out into the night. Why was it that being close to her deputy made her want to open up to him? He wasn't even holding her tightly; his arms loosely covered hers. His head rested against hers in an almost brotherly way.

But the thrills coursing through her veins didn't feel sisterly at all.

He blew out a breath. "If you want to blame anyone, it's really my fault we're stuck out here."

Her brows scrunched as she followed his change of topic. "How so?"

"Outside the bank. I was there sooner, but...I froze."

"I wondered how you came to be there."

"I was patrolling. I've been...anxious since that blond man has been around town."

Something about the way he finished his sentence was off. She sensed that he'd started to say something else.

"I saw a light in the window. And I thought I saw you...on the roof?"

She nodded. "I was there. I was out looking for Katy. Katy..." How could she have forgotten the girl? Yes, Danna had been extremely busy with the robbery and its aftermath, but—

"What about her?" Chas asked.

"She'd disappeared. That's how I stumbled on the bank robbery. I was looking for her. I'd tucked her in and left, and when I came back she was gone. I haven't even thought about her." Guilt pressed heavy. Danna should have remembered the girl, should have told someone before she'd left town.

"She'll be all right. She survived until we found her."

"I hope so." It was true, but it didn't make her feel any better. "I interrupted. You were telling me why you thought the robbery was your fault?"

He shrugged, eyes on the fire. "I heard your shot, heard scuffling, but before I could make myself go inside, I just...couldn't move."

Again, she sensed he hadn't said what he'd wanted to say. She waited for a moment to see if he would.

When he didn't speak, she said, "Even if you'd come into the building

right away, we were outnumbered. And since I didn't know you were there, I might've shot you."

"How do you do it? Walk into dangerous situations like that alone? You could've been killed."

"I wasn't alone. God was with me."

He snorted, and she drew away. He let her go easily.

"It's true," she said. "He is with me every day, every moment. You don't have to believe for it to be true. It just is."

He didn't reply.

"When He calls me home, I'll go. But I'm not going to stop living life—that includes doing my job—until then."

He flipped a twig into the fire. It sizzled until it was engulfed in flames. "I used to be religious."

She stifled the urge to tell him that her relationship with God was more than "religion," but something held her silent.

"Then someone I loved, someone I was close to, died."

A wife? She couldn't bear the thought. "God didn't make her die."

He was silent for a long time. "No. No, he didn't."

Had he realized she'd assumed it was a woman. But his words were confirmation and made her insides twist.

He didn't say more, and with the closeness between them broken, she shifted to reach the saddle and opened one of the saddlebags. There was hardtack and jerky inside a wrapped pouch. Fred had always insisted on traveling with a little food in case of emergency. It wouldn't be much, and if she needed to hunt up a rabbit for supper, she could. At least it gave her a distraction right now. She handed a portion of the dried meat to Chas, who took it and ate silently.

Where was the canteen? She reached back into the saddlebag, but this time her fingers brushed against soft leather, and she pulled out Fred's journal. She'd forgotten sliding it into her bag this morning.

She flipped open the journal and ran her fingers over the writing. How many nights had Fred sat at his small desk in their room above the jail, writing in this book?

She blinked away her memories and returned the journal to her saddlebag, where it would be safe from the snow.

"You ever read that, or do you just like touching it?"

Danna looked up to find Chas's eyes on her.

"I've seen you handle that book several times, but never read it."

It was already a night for sharing confidences. What would it hurt to reveal this, too?

"I can't read," she answered, ashamed by the admission. "It's one of the many things I don't know how to do. Cooking, sewing, keeping house. It was good my husband was a bachelor for years before we married, or we'd likely have starved."

* * *

Chas felt the tension crackling in the air between them. It mattered to Danna how he reacted. He could feel it.

He noted the distance she'd put between them when he'd scoffed at her mention of God, saw how she stared into the fire with her arms crossed protectively over her middle, a shiver coursing through her.

She thought he would think less of her because she couldn't read? Or cook?

"Not knowing those things hasn't stopped you being marshal, hasn't stopped you doing a good job of it, either."

"You really think so?"

"Yes." He was surprised to find it was true. He did think she did a good job. Her loyalty to the people of Calvin couldn't be questioned. She'd ridden into a blizzard to chase down those thieves.

Now that he took the time to think about it, he should have recognized the clues right in front of him. The way she'd squinted at his letter of introduction from the detective agency, the way she'd pushed the Wanted poster for Jed Hester to him to read.

"Come back over here. It's cold," he said when a second shiver shook her shoulders.

She shifted into place at his side, and he couldn't ignore the brush of their shoulders. She spread one of the horse blankets over both their legs. Chas knew it was just to keep them warm, but the intimacy of the action had him scrambling for a distraction.

He choked out the words, "Now that I know you a little, I can't imagine you doing anything else."

Sitting so close, he had only a profile view of her face, but still he saw the

wry smile. "Can't picture me as a seamstress or cook?"

"Perhaps a ranch foreman...or running your own spread."

Her lips quirked but didn't quite form a smile this time. When she spoke, her words held a wistful quality. "When I was a child, I often dreamed of having my own homestead. Raising cattle."

"What changed?"

She was quiet for a longtime. "I got married."

She'd told him her brother had sent her away, not to finishing school but to get married, and he desperately wanted to ask what had caused the rift between them. She seemed to sense his question.

"When I was fifteen," she started, "I took a horse from my brother's barn to chase down a heifer that was due to calf any day. I ended up in the mountains alone, and my horse threw me. I broke my leg."

"Is that why the mountains bother you?"

She looked at him, eyebrows lifted.

"You've been jumpy all afternoon. Reacting to little noises, shadows."

A flush crept up her cheeks, and she rested her head lightly on his shoulder. So he couldn't read her expression?

"Maybe I am a bit anxious. Anyway, because of my leg, I couldn't get home. It took my brother nearly a day and a half to find me." She inhaled deeply, her shoulder moving against his chest. "I'd never seen him so angry before."

"And that's why he sent you away? Because he was angry?"

"I think...I think he didn't know what to do with a sister. If I'd been born a boy—or maybe if he'd had more time with my parents—he might have known how to handle me."

She yawned. He knew how she felt. Neither of them had slept the night before, and as the sky was darkening, he struggled to keep his eyes open.

"Should we rest a while?" he asked. "The blizzard doesn't seem to have slowed."

Her head came off his shoulder. "One of us should probably keep watch. We don't know if the bank robbers are nearby. Once night falls, our fire will be a beacon in the darkness."

She sounded bone-tired.

"I can stay awake," Chas said, shifting his arm to support her shoulders a bit more.

"You're sure?"

“Yes.”

Her head lolled against his shoulder, and her breathing evened out. That quickly, she'd fallen asleep. It told him just how much she trusted him. It was a sobering thought.

Mind whirling, he watched the flames flicker, watched shadows dance against the trees.

He was getting too entangled with the marshal. The things she'd shared tonight had served to open his heart toward her. Before, he'd thought her crude, out of place as she fought to be marshal, but that impression had been completely wrong.

He couldn't imagine her brother sending her away. She was so strong, unbelievably beautiful, independent. She'd taken the circumstances life had given her, like the loss of her parents, and gone on. Not just existing, but living. She'd made a place for herself, provided for herself.

She was amazing. How could someone who claimed to love her abandon her?

His thoughts went to his sister Erin back in Boston. Hadn't he done the same thing? He'd left her to the devices of their overbearing father and matchmaking mother? What if she needed him?

Not for the first time, he thought of sending for her. He could make a home for his sister in St. Louis or another western town. The question was, did she hate him the way his parents surely did?

He thrust thoughts of Boston, of home, away, and focused instead on his growing feelings for the marshal.

He genuinely liked her. But he still hadn't told her about Hank Lewis or his thirst for revenge. Danna was a straight-shooter. She'd never approve, but Chas couldn't give up on his mission. Lewis had taken everything from him.

Including a chance at winning the marshal's heart.

Chapter Eleven

Dawn arrived with a lightening of the steel-gray sky and the absence of snow falling.

Chas woke to a hand on his shoulder to find himself wrapped in one of the horse blankets and the fire already extinguished.

"You all right?" Danna asked, crouching near. "Is your head paining you? You were mumbling in your sleep."

The nightmare. Just before Danna'd woken him, he'd watched Julia fall away from him, lifeless.

Chas scrubbed a hand over his face. "I'll be all right in a minute." It was a lie. He'd never be all right again, not after what he'd let happen to Julia.

He squinted up at the sky, then back at Danna, who'd moved to the horses, one of which was already saddled up. She was ready to move.

He remembered waking her several hours into the night, when he could no longer keep his eyes open. She'd gone after more firewood, and he'd wrapped himself in the blanket to wait for her. That was the last thing he remembered. Had he slept through? And only had the nightmare there at the very end?

It seemed impossible. The dream usually recurred multiple times, waking him often.

With the return of his nightmare came the return of his hatred for Hank Lewis.

"Any chance of finding fresh tracks in this snow?" Chas gestured to the several inches of powder on the ground. A smaller layer dusted his blanket.

She considered him. "Depends. If they were nearby, it's possible we could pick up their tracks. We should get back to town soon, but we could spare a

little time scouting.”

Too soon Danna declared they had to return to Calvin. The disappointment was sharp in his chest, but he had no choice but to follow orders. Plus, they only had the one uninjured horse between them. Danna's original horse followed behind, its reins held loosely in her gloved hand.

By midday, they had descended the mountain and were only a few miles out from Calvin.

Riding double in the silent, snowy landscape was much different than when they'd ridden into town coming out of the canyon.

He was different. The dynamics of their relationship had changed last night. They were no longer simply marshal and deputy. Two people couldn't share the things they had and remain in a cordial working relationship.

But were they friends? He cared about what happened to Danna and wanted her to be safe in her job, but there couldn't be more than that between them.

He couldn't allow it.

Because the only other woman he'd loved had died, and it was his fault.

Safely back in town, Chas and Danna parted ways at the livery. He desperately wanted his bed, but a grumble of his stomach had him stopping in at the café first.

He still didn't know what to do. He needed to find and kill Hank Lewis. He needed to protect himself, protect his heart. And that meant distancing himself from Danna Carpenter.

Inside the café, he was greeted by the smell of frying meat and the familiar waitress.

“Afternoon, hon.” She set a mug of coffee down and motioned him to sit at one of the few empty tables. “Meatloaf or stew?”

He grunted what must've been a satisfactory answer, because she smiled and left.

How could he find Lewis? At this point, he didn't even care about the job he'd been assigned. The WSGA could send someone else to find the rustlers.

“Marshal come and claim that boy yet?” a male voice asked from a table nearby.

“He's still in the doc's office. Heard he's in bad shape,” another voice answered.

A plate appeared in front of him, and Chas tucked in to the fare, trying not to listen to the talk swirling around him.

Someone slurped their coffee. "...said she gut-shot him. Poor soul didn't have a chance."

Chas choked back words in Danna's defense. She'd been alone for most of that robbery. It was a miracle she hadn't been killed.

"I've seen her shoot. Wouldn't want to be on the other end of her gun, that's for sure."

"Nor her temper. I heard she let it fly at Harold's wife once for no reason a'tall!"

The young waitress from before rushed through the door and joined her mother a few tables over. "Mama! You'll never guess who I saw riding into town this morning, proud as could be. The marshal!"

Chas's head came up. The mother was carrying two plates to a table at the far side of the room while her daughter followed at her elbow.

"Put your apron on. We've got a full crowd," the waitress said, not appearing to pay attention to her daughter's words. She stopped for a moment at Chas's table to refill his coffee.

"But, Ma! She was out all night with her deputy. Everyone saw her leave town." The girl looked at him and must've just realized who she was gossiping about. She turned red.

The men sitting nearby who'd been talking about the marshal now sat silent, staring at Chas.

Danna would be furious.

* * *

Danna darted toward the jail and the safety it represented. How could those awful rumors have spread through town so fast?

Her visit to the doctor hadn't provided any good news. The outlaw was still in serious condition and hadn't roused except for a few lucid moments. After she'd left the doctor's office, she'd heard two people talking about her going out overnight with Chas. Disparaging her reputation.

She couldn't help the anger that clenched her fists. She neared the jail and quickened her steps, wanting nothing more than to escape to the privacy of her room upstairs.

She hadn't paid any attention to who might have seen her yesterday when she'd left town. No one else would help her. What was she supposed to do?

She'd been so relieved to have his help, she probably wouldn't have cared if the town had staged a parade to see them out of town. And she'd never expected to be caught in the snowstorm. Hadn't even considered she had a reputation to be damaged.

Nothing inappropriate had happened. But rumors were swirling through town. She'd never had to worry about rumors or inappropriate behavior when she'd worked with Fred. No one would have dared start a rumor about her then. Fred wouldn't have stood for it. But now, she was on her own. And how did she stop something like this?

Chapter Twelve

Up early after a restless night, Danna came down the stairs from her room, intending to run a quick patrol. She'd let the gossip scare her into hiding last night, afraid of coming face-to-face with her deputy. It would be bad enough to know he'd heard the rumors, worse if she saw an inkling of humor in his eyes. The thought of him realizing her feelings for him and feeling sorry for her made her physically ill.

But she needed to find Katy and make sure the girl was okay.

Boots hitting the boardwalk, she drew up short at the sight of two men obviously waiting for her outside the jail.

One of them cleared his throat. "Mrs. Carpenter." Mr. Castlerock.

"Marshal." Mr. Parrott.

Two members of the town council.

"We need to speak to you for a few moments."

She motioned them toward the door and unlocked it. They filed inside behind her.

Still dark due to the early hour, Danna lit the lamp on her desk and the two that hung on each side of the room.

The men stood inside the door, Parrott looking decidedly uncomfortable. Castlerock wore the familiar scowl.

She didn't know whether to sit or stand, so she did what Fred would've done and perched against the side of the desk with her hands clasped in front of her. "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

Surprisingly, it was Parrott who spoke. "We're, er...that is, the town council is..." He took a deep breath.

Danna braced for the worst. They were going to demand her resignation.

They'd warned her not to be a subject of the gossip, but this hadn't been her fault.

"Well, let's just say there is a bit of concern that you haven't made much progress on the bank robbery." He glanced at Castlerock and left Danna no doubt as to who was really worried. "The people of Calvin need to feel they're safe in this town."

The people of Calvin her foot. This was about Castlerock and his desire to get his money back. "Have there been any complaints about the job I'm doing?" Danna asked.

Parrott's eyes shifted to Castlerock again, and away. "Not officially, but —"

"Perhaps the town council could show its support by recommending that able-bodied men volunteer to be deputies." She forced her voice to stay even, not betray her emotions. "More manpower would certainly help."

"Yes, well—"

"Have you contacted the sheriff?" Castlerock put in.

Even in the dim light from the lamps, she could see his face had begun to flush. He shifted on his feet.

"Of course," she replied, though it was getting harder to keep her tone calm. "I wired over to Glenrock just after the robbery. I haven't received a reply, but I assume he'll get here when he can."

She hadn't wanted to ask the sheriff for help. He had a whole county to watch over. And Fred had never relied on the sheriff for help. But she'd wired him anyway, knowing she didn't have much choice.

"You lost their tracks?" Castlerock's eyes were hard. "What are you going to do next?"

Danna stood, propelled by her anger. "I don't recall the town council ever questioning Fred about how he did his job."

He took a step closer. "Answer the questions, Mrs. Carpenter. I want my money back."

Danna registered that this was the second time he'd called her by name instead of Marshal. Had a decision already been made about her career? Or was Castlerock simply trying to intimidate?

Parrott was no help to her now as he stood stoically behind Castlerock, though his expression seemed a little apologetic.

Danna expelled a rough breath. "My deputy and I tracked the robbers as long as we could, but we lost the tracks when the snowstorm hit—"

Castlerock exploded. He turned to Parrott, nearly yelling in the other man's face. "Do you see? She shouldn't even be marshal. My money is no closer to being found."

"Hold on—" Danna started.

"I want her resignation."

Silence descended in the wake of Castlerock's demand. Danna froze, unable to believe he'd said the words aloud. Until now, she'd thought she still had time. That she would be able to find the robbers, that she'd...what? Be a town hero, like Fred had been?

What would she do now?

Parrott stepped between Danna and Castlerock and held out a hand toward each of them. "Now, George, we'll proceed as the council already decided."

Danna wanted badly to sit on the desk behind her. In her exhaustion, and with emotions stampeding over her, her legs threatened to fold. But she refused to give either man the satisfaction of seeing her weak. She would hear the remainder of what they had to say standing.

"Marshal," Parrott said, "The town council is concerned. We'll give you a few days—"

"Three," Castlerock said.

Parrott shot a quelling look at the other man. "A few days to find the bank robbers. If you can't, I'm afraid we'll have to start looking for a replacement."

Surprise, along with a renewed sense of hope, surged through her. There was still time to solve this.

Parrott cleared his throat. Apparently, he wasn't done. "There is another matter we need to discuss."

Castlerock's eyes gleamed. "I can't wait to hear her excuse for this."

"Hang on." Parrott tried to calm the other man. "I'm sure there's an explanation. Marshal? Did you spend the night alone with a man?"

Danna couldn't believe it was coming down to this. "We had no choice." she lifted her chin. "We were caught in the snowstorm. But nothing inappropriate happened."

The two men shared a glance. "I'm afraid it doesn't matter if anything happened, Marshal," Parrott said. "We can't have even the appearance of impropriety. Where is this man now? Because I'm afraid he's going to have to marry you."

* * *

Chas rapped on the door and pushed it open. "Mornin', Miss Marshal. I know it's early—"

He froze. Danna stood between two older men, one he recognized as the owner of the bank. The other looked vaguely familiar, probably from the dance several nights ago.

"O'Grady." The growl from Danna didn't sound too pleased to see him.

"Hello, hello." The taller of the two men moved toward him and extended his hand for Chas to shake. "I assume you're the groom. Joe Parrott. Nice to meet you."

"Groom?" What? He couldn't have heard right. He looked to Danna and saw the answer written on her face.

Deep lines were etched around her eyes. Had something else happened last night?

The banker moved forward, appraising Chas with a flickering glance. "I'm afraid the marshal's reputation is tarnished beyond repair, thanks to your little jaunt out into the woods. If the two of you don't marry, she'll be removed from her position."

The man's supercilious manner irritated Chas even more than Joe Parrott's false cheerfulness. Then he registered what the other man had said.

"What?"

Danna started. "Chas—"

"Perhaps we should leave the two of you to discuss what arrangements should be made," The rancher said. "Mr. Castlerock and I will notify the preacher. Shall we meet at the parsonage at, say...two o'clock?"

They must've taken Chas's silence and Danna's pale skin as agreement. The two men excused themselves, Parrott sending a shrewd glance over his shoulder.

Once they'd gone, Danna slumped in the chair behind her desk and rested her head on folded arms. "What are we going to do?"

Numb, Chas dropped into his usual straight-backed chair near the door. "We can't get married."

"Thank you very much for that," she sniped, but her words were muffled by her arms, and was she... It almost sounded like she was...

"You're not crying, are you?"

She raised her head far enough to glare at him, and he was enormously

grateful to see that she wasn't crying, but the terrible emotion revealed on her expressive face didn't do much to relieve the ache in his stomach. She laid her head back down on her arms.

A racket started up outside. A dog bayed. Someone pounded on the door. Danna called a somewhat muffled "Come in," without raising her head again.

The bank manager, Silverton, pushed the door open and shoved Danna's ugly dog inside the room. The mutt stopped his baying and howling and moved to Chas's side, sitting on his boot.

"Um, Marshal, I'm real sorry to bother you, but your dog was, um, serenading me from my front porch this morning. I thought you might be looking for him."

Chas idly scratched the top of the dog's head. His brain was still spinning. Marry the marshal?

"I'm sorry about the trouble," Danna said, still not raising her head.

Silverton shared a glance with Chas, brows furled. "Marshal...um...are you...? I hope you don't mind me asking, but are you all right?"

She didn't respond. Chas had never seen her this hopeless. Even when she'd planned to ride out after the bank robbers alone, she'd been determined.

It was as if she were giving up. But he couldn't marry her. He liked her, admired her even. But he couldn't marry her.

Could he?

* * *

"Married?" Silverton echoed as Chas finished an abbreviated retelling of what had just happened. Maybe it was because she'd come to his rescue during the bank robbery, but Silverton had seen her upset and refused to leave. Chas had told him everything.

Danna couldn't look at either of them. Did Silverton have to sound so appalled? Was she that undesirable?

"Yes," she said, hiccupping a little as she finally sat up. "Hitched. Wed. United. Till death do us part."

She stood, shaky, and paced across the open floor in front of her desk. Silverton wisely moved out of the way.

"They said I am no longer above reproach." She laughed bitterly. "Other towns have made marshals out of criminals, killers even, but Calvin's town

council is going to remove my badge because of a scandal.” No wonder no one else had wanted to partner up with her. Who’d want to get trapped with *her*?

"But they can't do that," Silverton said. "They can't force you to marry."

"They want to."

"I could leave," Chas said.

Danna froze, facing the wall, so neither man could see the hurt she knew etched her face.

"That would solve your problem," Silverton said, "but what about the marshal? If she doesn't marry you, they'll call for her job."

Why did Silverton have to sound so reasonable about it? She wanted to rage at the unfairness. She'd just been doing her job. She and Chas hadn't done anything immoral. And if she were to bow to the council's demands, then it might seem as if the gossip were true.

Oh, God. The cry came straight from her heart. Her breaking heart.

"Danna." A touch on her shoulder. She turned to face Chas, doing her best to keep her emotions from showing in her expression.

He looked more serious than she'd ever seen him before. "I can't leave. I have to see this case through," Chas said, voice low. "I—"

There was something behind his hesitation, but her mind was too muddled to sort it out right now.

She rubbed a hand over her suddenly aching eyes. "But you don't want to marry me."

His silence was answer enough.

He didn't get a chance to answer because Silverton spoke. "You could have the marriage annulled later. Coercion is a valid reason for annulment in this state. I'm not a lawyer, but it could work."

And then what? Chas would leave. Go back to his life, be a detective somewhere else.

And she'd still be in Calvin, probably without a job.

Right now, what choice did they have?

* * *

Danna turned in a slow circle, perusing the room that had belonged to her and Fred. After tonight, it would belong to her and Chas.

They were going to go through with the wedding. And hope that the marriage could be annulled later.

Problem was, she didn't know how to keep her heart from getting involved. She was already half in love with Chas O'Grady. And now, he'd agreed to this crazy farce of a marriage in order to help her. Because he could stay in town, find the rustlers, and be on his way regardless of what happened to Danna. But instead, he'd chosen to marry her, even if it wasn't real. He'd chosen to risk his future on her, just to protect her job. Nobody had ever been that kind to her.

She closed her eyes, forced the thoughts to the back of her mind. When she opened her eyes again, she focused on her surroundings. What would Chas think of this place?

The room wasn't very homey. In fact, it was almost bare. She'd never had the inclination to weave rugs or hang curtains—the ones she'd hung in the jail downstairs had been out of necessity, to keep folks from looking in. The quilt on the bed had been a gift at her wedding to Fred.

Plain writing desk, table and two chairs, stove, small cupboard. Nothing frilly or womanly here at all.

The one decorative item was the wooden chest sitting at the end of the bed. It had been her mother's and was the only thing she'd taken from Rob when she'd left home at sixteen.

Sitting on the end of the bed, she ran her hand over the smooth wood of Mama's chest. She flipped the lid open and clutched the side of the box as memories rushed over her.

She couldn't remember her mother, except for a sense of warmth and a vague, feminine scent. But she remembered being about five years old and going through this very chest. She knew that under the wedding dress were a few letters tied with a ribbon, a family Bible, a portrait of her mother and father, a partial piece of lace. Each one was a piece of her mother.

Rob had come in as she was going through the contents all those years ago, and when he'd seen what she was doing, he'd erupted in a fit of anger. She hadn't realized at the time that he'd been hurting, too, missing their parents. She'd only known she'd done something wrong.

She hadn't touched the chest again, not until Fred had moved it into the tiny cabin they'd lived in at the time. A wedding present from Rob, after he'd shipped her off to Fred, made her Fred's problem.

Now she touched the pale blue fabric lightly, then picked up the dress.

Her mother's wedding dress. She hadn't worn it when she'd married Fred. It had been too long, and at the time, she couldn't bear to have it hemmed.

But she'd grown two inches in her seventeenth year, and she'd filled out some, too. It might fit now. And a woman shouldn't be married in pants, should she?

Danna considered it for a long moment before sliding out of her shirt and trousers and slipping the dress over her head. Her hands trembled as she buttoned it up, then smoothed out the lines from where the dress had been folded.

She turned to the small looking glass Fred had used for shaving, almost afraid of what she would see.

A woman with large, dark eyes stared back at her. Glossy hair, almost black, pulled back from her face. Skin tanned by hours outside. But in the dress, she no longer looked like the marshal. She looked like a woman.

Danna slowly unbraided her hair and ran her hairbrush through the thick, long locks. She watched the mirror, the play of light on her hair as it shifted over her shoulder.

Chas seemed to like her hair down. When they'd been trapped in the snowstorm, with her hat gone and braid unraveled, he'd touched her hair more than once. She tried to imagine walking through town with her hair down past her shoulders, like this, and couldn't do it. It would have to be enough that she wore the dress. She searched in the trunk until she found a piece of ribbon. She pulled her hair into a bundle and tied it at the nape of her neck. When she looked at the mirror, a few tendrils had come loose, but most were held by the tie.

She smoothed a hand over her brow. Her hands were shaking.

Was marrying Chas really the right thing to do?

* * *

Danna delayed long enough past the appointed hour that Chas wondered whether she'd come at all. A soft knock sounded, and he halted mid-pace in the center of the preacher's parlor.

The minister ushered her inside.

Danna wore a delicate blue dress. She'd pulled her hair out of the braid, and soft pieces framed her face now.

A soft gasp came from behind him from either Parrott or Castlerock, but his senses were filled with Danna. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

He'd been attracted to her when in trousers, but with a long skirt swirling around her legs and the bodice of her gown clinging in all the right ways, she took his breath away.

Danna was focused on the preacher, who was speaking quietly to her. Chas used the time to examine the two curls trailing down her cheek, following the line of her jaw and down her neck.

He swallowed hard.

"Thank you," she said, and turned to face him.

Grateful she hadn't caught him with his mouth hanging open, Chas cleared his throat and prayed his voice wouldn't crack when he spoke.

When she looked up and met his gaze, he knew she wasn't as calm as she seemed. Her eyes shone with panic, then flicked to the two council members standing behind Chas. She schooled her expression.

"You look lovely," he said, and his voice emerged steady. Nothing like the raging turmoil he felt inside. How had it come to this?

Her hands shook when the preacher directed Chas to take them. His might be shaking, too. It was hard to tell.

They faced the preacher, who held the Good Book in his hands. The vows they spoke only took a few minutes, and it was done.

"You may kiss the bride," the preacher said. Danna's eyes met his—the first time she'd looked up during the whole ceremony—and he could easily read the trepidation in their depths. She started to shake her head. "We don't —"

He stopped her protest with a gentle touch of his mouth. It was nothing like the way he'd kissed her on the mountain. That had been a kiss of relief, a way of expressing the emotions that had pounded through him. And yet...when he brushed his lips against the velvet softness of hers, raised his hand and cupped her jaw...it was the same.

The emotions bursting in his chest were enough to make him feel like he was in front of that stampede again, with his heart drumming in his ears. Sweat popped out on his brow. He stepped away, unable to take his eyes from her face, the contrast between her lashes and her cheeks.

Beautiful. His wife. For now.

"I'll need you two to sign the marriage license, and we'll be done."

The preacher had a document in front of him on the table. Chas took up

the pen the other man had produced and scribbled his name on the line the man indicated. He passed the pen to Danna, and she squinted down at the paper, hesitating.

Something inside him opened, wanting to protect her from the men who stood close and who probably didn't know she couldn't read.

Chas touched a finger to the line where she needed to sign. It was a simple gesture, but she looked up at him with something other than the panic or anger that he'd seen in her eyes since the men had left her office this morning. The look she gave him was pure appreciation.

Chapter Thirteen

Danna approached the jail, fingering the simple silver band on her finger. She'd removed it a few weeks after Fred's death. Chas had returned it to her finger today. It felt foreign. New. Strange.

Their marriage was a farce.

She slowed her steps as her feet hit the boardwalk. She supposed Chas would be back soon from gathering his things at the hotel.

She'd needed some space after the wedding, and the kiss, so she'd changed clothes and gone on a patrol, keeping her eyes open for any signs of Katy. She hadn't found the girl or any sign of her.

And now she had to face her new husband. Who hadn't wanted to marry her. Who was planning to leave.

She didn't want to be married again either, she reminded herself.

Except she loved Chas.

A boy she recognized as belonging to one of Corrine's neighbors came running down the street as she neared the jail.

"M-miss Marshall," the lad stuttered, "Missus Jackson needs you. Her baby's comin'."

Corrine was indeed in labor, crying out in pain, as Danna let herself into the shanty. A neighbor stood over the kitchen table, but the instant she saw Danna, she turned for the door.

"Glad you're here. I've got my own young'uns at home. Cain't stay. I'll take that'un for the night."

With that, the other woman swept out of the shack with three-year-old Ellie in tow, leaving Danna with the wailing Corrine.

"What—"

“Danna.”

"I'm here!" Rushing to her friend's side, Danna saw the face creased in pain, the sweat on Corrine's brow, the marks where she'd obviously clutched the sheets in her fists. "What can I do?"

Corrine let out a long breath, muscles easing. "Nothing yet. I think we have a bit to go, even though the pains have been coming all day."

"Should I get the doctor?"

"He's tied up at his office. The young man from the robbery took a turn for the worse. He's in surgery."

That was bad. The wounded thief was quite possibly the only lead Danna had to find out the outlaws' location.

"What about your neighbor...?" And why had she rushed out like that?

Corrine clasped Danna's hand as another pain came. Her lips pinched white. "She doesn't... She thinks...Brent killed...your husband." The words came out in spurts and gasps as Corrine panted through the contraction.

Danna found a clean cloth on the end of the bed and dabbed at her friend's forehead. "Shh. Shh. It's okay."

The contraction eased, and Corrine relaxed again. "I don't suppose there's any news...?"

Danna wished she had something positive to tell her friend, but there was nothing. "I'm sorry."

"And Mrs. Burnett"—the preacher's wife—"is visiting her sister out of town," Corrine spoke as if the question about her husband hadn't been uttered. "So I sent the neighbor boy to fetch you. Will you stay with me? Help me labor this baby?"

Tears sparkled in Corrine's eyes.

A lump formed in Danna's throat. "You don't even have to ask," she told her dearest friend.

* * *

It was dark outside when, hours later, Danna trudged toward her room above the jail.

She hadn't wanted to leave, but Corrine insisted she and her new baby boy would be all right for a few hours—long enough for Danna to get some rest.

The labor had been grueling. Danna had done her best to distract Corinne from the pain, telling her about the recent events as marshal, even about the wedding. But Danna had seen it in Corrine's eyes that her friend just wanted her missing husband.

And it hurt that Danna hadn't been able to produce him. The guilt ate away at her.

In those last few moments, the baby had come quickly. He'd been a squalling, wriggling mass of flesh and goo. He'd been the most handsome thing Danna had ever seen.

Even now, the memory had her clutching her empty hands together.

For so long, Danna had wanted a family of her own. More than just a husband. Fred had wanted sons and she'd wanted to give them to him. She'd wanted to be more than just the marshal's wife.

And, yes, a part of her thought that if she had a child she would be able to relate to the other women. Not be so much of an outsider.

But she'd never so much as missed her monthly time, never suspected she was pregnant. Fred had never spoken his disappointment aloud, but she knew he must've felt it. Oh, he'd never come outright and say he regretted marrying her, but sometimes she wondered.

And then he died. And she had no one. And she'd been fine with that. Just fine. But this business with Chas O'Grady, this temporary marriage, was stirring everything up in her heart again.

She wanted children of her own. Why wouldn't God give her even one dream of her heart?

She rounded the corner past Hereford's Grocery and looked up. A light shone out the window to her room. So her new husband had made himself at home already.

And had left a light on for her.

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning, Danna watched Chas charm Ellie over a bowl of porridge, a little glad for the distraction.

Last night, he'd been wrapped in a bedroll on the floor when she'd entered the room. Asleep, or at least pretending. With his back to her, she hadn't had the courage to find out. She'd quickly snuffed the light. And then lay in the bed for a long time, listening to his breathing.

This morning had been awkward. Sharing the washbasin. Stumbling over each other in the small space. The keen awareness she had of him, though he'd avoided mostly her eyes.

When he'd offered to accompany her to check on Corrine, she hadn't known how to refuse. At least Ellie and the new baby were proving a much-needed distraction from the tension between Danna and Chas.

Not from her longings for a family of her own.

Danna tried not to imagine what it would be like to hold a son of her own the way she cuddled Corrine's son next to her sternum. But the image wouldn't be shaken.

The little one stirred and fussed, which roused Corrine, so Danna left the boy to be fed and joined Chas and Ellie at the table.

"There's some more porridge left," Chas said, glancing at her, then pushing a bowl in front of her. "You look exhausted."

Danna flushed.

"Did you not sleep well last night?"

His concern was disconcerting.

She shifted her shoulders, trying to remove some of the knots. "I'm all right."

He rose, stepped behind her, and closed his large hands over her shoulders, making her jump. Their warmth burned through her shirt. His thumbs made comforting circles, fingers relaxed her aching muscles.

His touch made her feel as if he cared. And that was dangerous to her emotions. When was the last time she'd been touched like this? Tears burned her eyes when she couldn't remember.

"All right?" Chas asked.

She couldn't answer. The intimacy of the moment was suddenly too much for her. She wanted it to be real.

And knew that it couldn't. She pulled away, returning to Corrine in the corner. Her friend watched with weary, wide eyes, but thankfully remained silent.

* * *

Danna watched, Chas at her side, as the doctor woke the outlaw who'd been shot. Doc thought the young man had made it through the worst of his injury, but Danna knew that type of wound could be tricky. She couldn't wait any longer to question him.

"He's conscious," the doctor said over his shoulder, and she and Chas stepped closer.

"Where were they going to take the money? From the bank?" Chas asked quietly.

The other man spoke, his voice so soft and raspy that Danna could barely make out his words. "Cabin... mountains."

"Where?"

"A little stream," he paused, his head rolling to the side. He groaned. "Big, gnarled oak tree."

The description was too vague. Danna knew the mountains, the terrain, but she needed more landmarks than that.

"Who was leading the gang?" she asked, leaning down a bit so the boy didn't have to strain so much to talk.

"H-hank...Lewis."

Chas inhaled loudly. A glance at his face revealed a muscle ticking in his cheek. Who was Hank Lewis? And why did Chas react to hearing his name?

The kid closed his eyes. Moaned.

"Anything else?"

"Supposed to...meet with..." That was it. He'd fallen unconscious again.

"Sorry, Marshal," the doc said, and sounded it, too. "If he comes awake again later, I'll send someone for you."

Chas turned away, his blue eyes dark as a coming storm.

Danna was disappointed, too. The kid was their only lead, and she was running out of time.

* * *

Danna allowed Chas to steer her into the café for a midday meal.

Instantly, all eyes were on her. Eugene Hamilton, who ran the freight office and was one of the drunks she'd arrested last week, raised his brows. The milliner's spoon clanked against her bowl. The nearest conversations stopped.

She wanted to go right back out the door. But Chas had crowded in behind her, and she had no choice but to move toward an empty table in the corner. She lifted her chin high, reminding herself she'd done nothing to be ashamed of.

Chas's hand branded her lower back. She reached for a chair, only to have her hand swallowed up in his. His shoulder brushed hers.

"I'll get the chair for my wife."

She sank into the chair he'd pulled away from the table. His wife.

Marilee, the teenaged waitress, stopped short from their table. "You got married?" The girl gasped the question, then seemed to realize what she'd done. She came the rest of the way to the table, stammering. "I-I'm sorry. Didn't mean to be rude. C-congratulations."

Heads at the two nearest tables turned. Chas smiled widely. "Thank you."

The girl set two menu cards down, and Danna saw her hands were trembling. "Would you like coffee or water?"

Danna mumbled her response. She looked at the next table over and saw the two men staring. She nodded pointedly, and they had the good grace to look away.

She hated this. Hated all the eyes on her.

Chas reached across the table with his palm turned up. Danna raised her brows, and he wiggled his fingers. "Give me your hand."

“What?”

He lifted his eyebrows.

She gingerly placed her hand in his, and his fingers closed around hers. The strength and firmness of his hold reminded her that she wasn't alone in this. She met his eyes across the table, and they held.

They would take on the robbers together. Take on the rumors together. A team, like she and Fred had been. Only, this was temporary.

A shadow fell over her shoulder, and Danna looked up to see the one person she least wanted to see right now. Castlerock.

"Marshal." He nodded to her, then Chas, his lips a thin line. "Any news?"

Danna tried to reclaim her hand, but Chas clasped it too tightly, and she didn't want to draw more attention than they already had.

“Not yet.” It was too much to hope the banker would leave them in peace. He tapped on the edge of the table.

"While I am *delighted* that you've resolved your personal issues, there is still the matter of my missing money."

Danna bristled, but it was Chas who answered, his voice cool. "The marshal hasn't forgotten about your money."

"Is that so? And how is her investigation going at the moment? Well enough for her to dine with her new husband, is it?" Castlerock's voice was rising, as was the blood to his face, which began to mottle red and white.

Danna stood, extracting her hand from Chas's. He stood beside her and touched her side lightly, but she moved away from him.

She was the marshal; she would handle this. "I don't remember my first husband being questioned during an investigation, and I'll thank you not to question me, either. I will apprehend the men responsible for the theft, or you and the rest of the council can fire me."

“You can be assured, I'll see to it. You're on borrowed time, Marshal.” Castlerock's threatening words weren't spoken very loudly, but Danna knew every ear in the room had heard.

She sensed Chas shift next to her. They'd spent enough time talking, so she sat. Castlerock stalked off.

Their food arrived, the waitress whisking it on the table and leaving quickly.

Chas stared down at his plate while he ate, a contemplative look on his face. After a while, he commented, "The banker seems awfully interested in muddling with your investigation."

Appetite gone, Danna played with her fork. "He's interested in looking out for himself," she murmured, not wanting others to hear the disparaging comment.

"I didn't see it before..." Chas said softly, as if to himself. He lifted his gaze. "Can you remember specifically what all those men who refused to be deputies had to say?"

What did that have to do with Castlerock? "No, not really. Why?"

"In the beginning of my own investigation, I started asking questions around town. About the rustling problem."

She knew her face showed the puzzlement she felt.

"And the responses I got were a bit...unusual."

"In what way?"

"Everyone I spoke to seemed loath to share information. I could understand if one or two didn't want to talk to me, but this was every person I talked with."

She'd gotten the same response, but attributed it to being a woman.

Chas was staring off into space again, and she cleared her throat.

"Sorry." He shook his head. "I'm trying to put together how it might be related. Perhaps we should..." He nodded toward the door.

They settled their bill and were soon on the boardwalk heading toward the jailhouse. Chas offered his arm, and she took it. Anyone who looked at them would think they were out for a stroll, but when he spoke, his urgent tone belied the casual air he put off.

"At the dance. I overheard two men talking about it."

"About the robbery?"

"Yes, before I came inside. I didn't recognize the voices, and I couldn't see faces, but they seemed to know an awful lot about what was happening with the rustling. Unfortunately, I had to go inside or risk being found out.

"And the other day, in your office, something seemed...I don't know, off about Joe Parrott. I couldn't place it at the time, and then we got distracted by the wedding, but does he have a tattoo or a mark on his left wrist?"

She nodded. "There's some sort of mark, yes."

"I think he was one of the men I overheard at the dance. What if the town council has set you up to fail? And they've bribed the former deputies not to help you?"

"Why would they do that?"

"To keep from being found out, maybe?"

She slowed her steps. “Then why would they threaten to fire me?”

“I don't know, but there's something going on in this town that's bigger than some missing cattle and a bank robbery.”

Chapter Fifteen

Danna perched on the edge of the bed, flustered and ill at ease. Last night, after helping Corrine birth her baby, she'd fallen into bed exhausted. Chas'd already been settled on the floor.

Tonight, she was alone with Chas. And it was completely different than when they'd been stuck in the snowstorm. They hadn't had a choice that night, and they didn't have one tonight either, but she still felt...discomfited.

A soft knock on the door announced his presence. She called, "come in," and he stepped inside, filling her small upstairs room with his broad shoulders, his very presence.

He took off his hat and ran his hand through the auburn curls plastered to his head. She'd seen him do that before. Did it mean he was as nervous as she was?

Chas looked around the rooms, and Danna refused to be ashamed of the simple furnishings. They might not be as fancy as something he'd find in Penny Castlerock's home, but they were functional.

Chas reached into his chest pocket and withdrew a small bundle, distracting her from her thoughts. "I...this is for you."

He stepped forward and handed her the cloth-wrapped item, then stuffed his empty hand in his trouser pocket. "It's not much of a wedding present, but I thought perhaps it was something you'd get some use out of."

Heart pounding, Danna unwrapped the small bundle of cloth to find a pair of spectacles with round lenses and thin wire frames. She looked up at Chas, puzzled.

"What—?"

"To help you read." The words stretched in the sudden stillness between

them, the last thing she'd expected him to say. He'd been so kind, so considerate all day.

And now he'd touched on the one thing she'd never been able to accomplish, no matter how hard she'd tried. Would he be ashamed of her, like Rob had been? She averted her face, set the spectacles on the desk, and gripped the wood.

"I've seen you...the way you squint sometimes..." His voice trailed off, and she glanced at him to see his gaze focused on the wall, as if remembering something. "Just like a friend I used to know."

"There was no school here when I was a child." Danna said, her eyes trained on his shoulder. "Fred tried to teach me for months after we were married. I never took to it."

He turned to her, watched her face. He picked up the spectacles from the table to hold them out to her again. "My friend could see fine at far distances. Maybe better than I could. But up close"—he held his hand about a foot in front of his face—"everything was a blur."

She didn't take the spectacles from him; neither did he lower his outstretched hand.

"I can't do it," she said.

"Wouldn't you like to read your husband's journal?"

She glared at him. "That book is not your concern."

"Will you just try?" His hand remained extended, his eyes serious.

Exasperated, she took the spectacles from him, expecting him to gloat, but he watched her in silence.

She slipped them over her nose, tucked the curves behind her ears. She reached for the sheaf of papers in one of the desk drawers. When she looked down at the top sheet, she expected to see the same thing she always saw, blurry lines that made no sense. To her surprise, the words came into sharp focus. She could make out each individual letter clearly.

She looked up at Chas in amazement. "I can see!"

* * *

Chas couldn't take his eyes off her that night. Danna slept with her face to the door, one hand tucked under her cheek. She looked so young. Not old enough to have been married twice or in charge of keeping the peace in this town.

Chas watched her for a long time, this woman he...had feelings for. He'd been fighting against himself all evening, against the greed inside that claimed her as his.

She was his, but not forever. Just for long enough that she didn't get herself killed. They would ferret out whatever secrets the town council was hiding, and she'd be free. Then they'd get an annulment, and he'd leave.

He still felt warm from the giddiness she'd shown when she'd tried on the spectacles. They'd sat at the small table, heads together, reviewing the alphabet and sounding out some small words. Each brush of her hand against his had sent his senses spiraling.

Now he looked down at the leather-bound book he'd palmed as Danna had readied for bed earlier. Part of him felt guilty for what he was about to do, but the other part wanted to know if her first husband had left them any clues.

He flipped the book open, toward the end. The writing was cramped, but legible. It seemed to be the middle of an entry.

...when will she understand that she is loved, both by her Heavenly Father and by me? She is so alone. She needs to be able to rely on someone greater than herself. But she won't open her heart—I still can't find a way inside, not after searching for the key all these years.

Neither can anyone else. I saw Mrs. Poe approach her in the general store today, but Danna ignored the older woman's overtures of kindness. It is as if she can't see her own worth. She still won't talk about Rob. The man was my best friend but didn't know anything about females—not like I knew much either, before I married Danna.

Chas slapped the book closed. It felt wrong to read the inner thoughts of the man who'd been Danna's husband. And yet a part of him wanted to know more. More about what this other man saw in Danna. Part of him seethed with jealousy that Fred had known Danna intimately, had known her secrets.

But not all of them. Chas remembered the night—was it just two nights ago?—he and Danna had spent tucked next to the small campfire she'd built. She'd told him her brother had basically thrown her away. From her first husband's words, it didn't sound like she'd ever told him.

And several things she'd said about herself made him think she didn't know her own worth, like the late husband said. She saw herself as a deputy, a friend. Not as a woman.

Chas slapped the lid closed on his wishful thinking just as he'd closed the

journal a moment ago. He wasn't here to woo Danna. He was here to help her with her problem. Then he was gone. Once he enacted his revenge on Lewis, he'd need to make a quick escape. He'd likely never return to Wyoming.

That was it. No happy ending for him. He didn't deserve one.

* * *

Danna woke with a start, instantly alert. What was that noise? She shifted her gaze to the floor and saw that Chas's head was rolling, tossing, though he appeared to be asleep. His face was creased in a frown.

What did a man like Chas dream about? He still hadn't revealed much of his past.

Had he moaned? Or had she imagined the noise? No, there it was again. She slid off the edge of the bed and quickly pulled on her overshirt and trousers. She tiptoed to where he sprawled across the floor. She didn't want to wake him if she didn't have to.

His head thrashed on the pillow, his lips moving, his brow wrinkled.

She reached out her hand to touch him, wake him, but she froze when his moan turned into a word.

Julia.

Feeling as if she'd been punched in the stomach, she backed away until her calves hit the bed.

Who was Julia? A sister? Friend? Wife?

She was shaking. She clasped her hands together in front of her to try and stop them trembling. She'd known he'd lost someone, but for him to call out another woman's name...

A noise from the street made Danna jerk her head toward the window. That had definitely been a horse's whicker. It was the middle of the night. Who was out there?

She carefully pulled the edge of the curtain back. The moon was only half-full, but it was enough to see the three men on horseback, just below her window. They wore bandanas over their faces.

With no time to categorize her emotions, to stifle the hurt that Chas's Julia had caused, she fell back on the training learned from years of working with Fred.

She darted across the floor, slapped her husband's shoulder, and held a

finger to her lips when he started awake.

“There are masked men downstairs. I don't know what they want, but I don't wish to be trapped up here with only one way out.”

He rose without a word and reached for the weapon he'd left on the table.

He glanced at her over his shoulder, and she prayed he couldn't read the turmoil in her face.

"I'm going out the window," Danna said. "You'd better sneak down the stairs. Now."

Quick and silent, Danna slid the window all the way open and swung one leg over the sill.

"Wait!" Chas had found his voice. He grasped her arm above the elbow. She flinched but forced herself not to pull away. She couldn't read his face in the darkness, but the rasp of his breath was rapid, almost anguished. "Please be careful."

She nodded, not sure if he could even see her in the dark, but she couldn't make words emerge from her suddenly parched throat. He sounded as if he cared.

She pulled away from his grasp and slipped out the window.

* * *

Chas woke from one nightmare to be thrust into another.

The stench of blood and death was strong in his mind, and he didn't have time to shake it off before Danna was halfway out the window.

He clung to her for too long, afraid this whole thing was going to end badly. He couldn't watch another woman he cared about die.

He opened the door with a soft snick, but he didn't even have a chance to step outside before he heard the thump of boots on the staircase. He shut the door with another near-silent click and latched it, for all the good it would do.

Now what?

He made for the window, swung one leg over to try to find the footholds Danna had used a moment ago. Where was she?

"What are you doing?" A sharp hiss from above his head answered his unasked question. She was on the roof.

"How did you get up there?" Before she could answer, a loud thump sounded on the marshal's door. Chas needed to get out of the window. He

swung his other leg over the windowsill and supported his weight with his posterior and a white-knuckled grip.

“Chas—” He didn't hear the rest of Danna's words, because the sound of wood splintering obscured her whisper. He slid off the windowsill and hung by his fingertips, dangling like a monkey at the circus.

He didn't think it would hurt too much if he fell to the ground. He couldn't be more than eight or ten feet up. He was more afraid of the noise he'd make when he hit the boardwalk.

Angry voices from inside the room preceded the sound of boots stomping, moving toward the window. Chas had run out of time.

He let go.

* * *

What a disaster.

She could make out two voices from inside the room. The two men weren't making any effort to be quiet. Their rapid, pounding steps told Danna their exact location inside. They swore when they realized the room was empty.

Where was Chas? He hadn't followed her onto the roof. Clouds blew in and covered the moon, limiting her visibility to the ground. But the men didn't sound like they'd found him inside. Where was the third guy?

She couldn't call out again.

How she wished Fred were here. She could trust Fred to cover her flank. But her instincts and Chas's seemed to always be at odds.

She closed her eyes. No more time.

Careful to stay light on her feet, she darted across the roof and hopped down to the platform at the top of the stairs. She slammed the door of her apartment closed. A muffled curse came from inside.

The door rattled under her hands as someone tried to wrest it open. It wouldn't hold them for long.

She ran down the stairs and paused behind the corner of the building. She strained to hear over the pounding of her heart.

Hearing nothing, she skirted the building, keeping to the shadows close to the wall. She unholstered her pistol and held it at her side.

Where was Chas?

Three horses stood saddled in the alleyway between the jail and the saloon behind it. One of the shadows behind the horses moved, and she was able to make out a head and shoulders of someone standing on the other side. She edged closer.

"Hold up a minute." The harsh, deep voice, undeniably male, came from behind the horses.

There was a thud from upstairs, and in the silence that followed, Danna heard the unmistakable sound of a pistol hammer being cocked. She froze a few paces from the horses, crouching close to the ground.

"Where's the marshal?"

"Don't know." That was Chas's voice.

"You was jest in her room. Saw you twist yer ankle comin' out the window."

Oh no. It sounded like Chas was hurt *and* caught.

Danna tucked even closer to the ground, moving toward the horses.

"I'm gonna ask ya one more time. Where's the marshal? I aim to get my colleague outta jail. Tonight."

He'd come for the injured outlaw? He must not know how badly the kid had been injured or that he was being kept at the doctor's office. Not if they were trying to break into the jail looking for him.

Wood splintered loudly. The door. Loud footsteps sounded on the stairs.

She crept beneath the hooves of the first horse, moving as slowly as possible. She prayed nothing would spook the horses. If they startled, they'd crush her.

She could also see her husband's booted feet near the corner of the boardwalk by the clothing store.

Danna sprang up between the horses, vaulted over the nearest one, and used her foot on its saddle as a springboard to launch herself across the back of the second one. All the way over. Her momentum took the outlaw to the ground, and she pinned his gun arm with her weight and both hands.

The horses shied at the unexpected movement and trotted out into the middle of the street.

Chas kicked away the outlaw's gun and rushed to kneel next to her. He stuffed the other man's hat against the lower part of his face as a gag.

"That was crazy," he said, voice low. "You could've been killed."

At this close proximity, she could see the anger in his drawn brows and clenched jaw.

“So could you!” she returned. She took one of the rawhide strips she had tucked into her pocket and tied the man's wrists together.

The man continued to struggle as booted footsteps drew closer.

“What's going on?” A voice and flickering light came from the saloon.

Shouts from farther down the street alerted Danna that the other two robbers had seen the horses in the open. She yelled, “Watch out!” to Mr. McCabe as she ducked behind the corner of the building, pulling her deputy with her.

Multiple shots rang out, and fire ripped through the inside of her upper left arm. Stifling a cry, she turned to check on Chas. “You okay?”

“Fine. What do we do now?”

“I doubt they've figured out that the kid's at Doc's office, so we're good there.” The pain in her arm throbbed, but she ignored it. “But if they keep shooting, innocents are liable to get hurt.”

“What should we do?”

“Let's herd them toward the railroad tracks. Hopefully, one of us can cut them off in front. If they manage to escape, I can track them down, as long as the weather holds.”

Chapter Sixteen

"Can we please stop now?"

Chas pushed his hat off his forehead to get a glimpse of Danna. Icy rain snuck down the back of his neck and he winced.

He may not know much about tracking, but surely the driving rain had erased any tracks that might have been left from the two men who'd disappeared last night. It was well into the morning now, dreary and wet.

Danna wheeled her mount toward town without speaking. She'd been silent since they'd mounted up outside the livery.

At least they had one outlaw in custody. This one uninjured. He was one of the men Chas had spoken to in the café on his first day in town. If they could just get him to talk.

Chas was the first to admit he didn't know much about women, but he was smart enough to know her silence meant she was upset. But what was she upset about? Losing track of the two other outlaws?

Still wrapped in his thoughts, he barely noticed when they arrived in town and dropped their horses off with the boy in the livery. He did notice when Danna stomped off down the boardwalk without him.

"She's sure got a bee in her bonnet this mornin', huh?" the livery hand said as he took the bridles of both horses. "I'm guessin' y'all didn't catch up to them robbers." He seemed disappointed. Was he one of her admirers?

Chas frowned. Danna hated people in town talking about her. "That's the marshal's business."

"I reckon everyone's going to be in the marshal's business if she came back to town without them."

That's what he was afraid of. He hurried off after her.

"Danna. Danna!" He shouted her name the last time, his frustration making his temper spike.

She spat her next words over her shoulder, her eyes inscrutable under the brim of her hat. "Please refrain from spreading my business all over town."

He caught up to her in front of the jail and grabbed her arm to force her to face him. Something flared in her eyes, and she jerked her arm away. "Don't —"

"Why are you angry with me?"

"Who is Julia?"

He blinked, stepped back, and looked down, unable to contain the surprise and pain he knew would show in his face.

Before he could answer, he noticed a stain on her white shirt inside the flap of her jacket. "Are you—?" He swallowed a lump of fear. He could barely force the words out, so sudden was the sensation of the breath being squeezed from his lungs. "Are you hurt?"

She shrugged off his hand, and it was only then he realized he was still clutching her shoulder. He forced himself to focus, deny the roaring in his head. Danna was injured and needed his help.

"Let's get you to the doctor." He tried to steer her toward the doc's office, but she jerked away from his hand.

"It's just a scratch. I'll take care of it myself."

He didn't believe her, but had no choice but to follow her up to her room.

Was she angry enough to deny him entrance? Apparently not, because she left the door ajar.

Danna turned her back and took off her long coat, revealing a bloodstain along her left side.

Chas bit off a curse and strode toward her. He gripped her shoulders and spun her so she faced him. He wanted to see her eyes, needed to gauge how bad it really was.

The sight of her blood did things to his insides he hadn't felt since Julia. But having tender emotions for Danna was impossible, wasn't it? He'd promised himself he was never going to fall in love again.

Danna half turned away from him and shook loose of his grasp. "I'll undress and take care of this, if you don't mind." She twirled her finger, and he turned his back to her.

Staring at the wall, Chas began methodically taking off his coat, boots, vest. He left the rest of his clothes on, even though his pants were soaked

through, his shirt nearly so.

"How did it happen? Where is it?" he asked, not sure he wanted the answer. It seemed everything had gone wrong last night. How much of it was his fault?

"Upper part of my arm. On the inside."

A drawer opened and closed behind him, and then cloth rustled, and a soft tinkling noise came. What was she doing?

Her voice sounded muffled. "When that first volley of shots came"—now clearer—"the bullet grazed me. It's not that bad." But her voice was tight, and he wasn't sure he believed her.

"Not that bad," he repeated. Not that bad. Only shot a little. A scratch. He felt as if the top of his head floated away from the rest of him as his temper ignited.

She was so quick to put herself in danger...

What if he asked Danna to give up her quest to apprehend the robbers? Bad idea. But what if he put her on a train to Boston? He hadn't talked to his parents in years, but they wouldn't turn away his wife.

Too bad Danna would never agree to go. He did know her well enough to know that.

He wanted to hunt down Lewis's gang himself, to show them as much pain as they'd showed him—and now Danna. He'd longed for revenge before. Now he hungered for it in a way he'd never known. Lewis needed to pay.

"I can't quite..." Danna's voice interrupted the roaring tempest of his thoughts.

"Do you need help?" He waited for her answer before he turned.

Danna sighed, a little huff of air to let him know she wasn't happy about it. "I can't reach the wound."

He faced her and had to swallow hard. She wore an undershirt and had the quilt from the bed wrapped around her, so only her shoulder and injured arm emerged. It was her hair that unmanned him, the dark locks falling in waves down her back. She must've loosed them from the braid so they could dry.

His knees threatened to knock together as he approached. She flushed under his gaze and averted her face, pointing to the array of doctoring supplies she'd laid out across the bed.

"You'll need to clean it out first," she said. "The wound isn't bad, but if infection sets in..."

"Yes, I know." And he did know how bad infection could get. He'd met plenty of men missing limbs or on the brink of dying because of infection from injuries. "I can't believe you went all morning with a bullet wound and didn't tell me."

He located an antiseptic and some clean cloths and moved in front of Danna so her crown was at his chin. He wiped the blood off the inside of her arm. He was too conscious of how soft her skin felt against his palm, and how she smelled sweet, even though the rain must've washed away any scent of soap or perfume.

"There wasn't anything you could have done, even if I had told you."

"You would've told your first husband."

"Fred—" She bit out the one word. That was it.

He kept his gaze on what he was doing, but he could see her jaw flex from the corner of his eye.

He leaned away so he could look her in the face. He didn't release his hold on her upper arm. "Fred what?"

Her gaze didn't waver from his. "Fred would've known without me telling him."

Well. Chas looked down to apply the antiseptic to a rag, pretending her words hadn't stung. He dabbed the rag against the bloody furrow in her skin and heard her soft intake of breath. She was lucky the bullet hadn't entered her flesh.

He hated that she was injured. Hated that they hadn't been able to capture the outlaws. Hated that he had no control over any of this.

He shifted behind her to get a better look at the other side of her wound.

"This was my fault," he muttered. Maybe he never should have come to Calvin in the first place.

"It's not." Danna's soft but firm words startled him. He didn't realize he'd spoken aloud. Their eyes met in the small looking glass hanging above her desk.

"What?"

"It's not your fault I got shot," she said, and the look in her dark eyes confirmed her words. "It just happened." She took a deep breath and said, "What about Julia? Who is she?"

Chas closed his eyes. He should have known Danna wouldn't forget. But what should he tell her?

The truth. The simple words reverberated in his head. "She was a

childhood friend.” The words stuck in his throat like molasses, gummy. He had to push each one out. “Our parents traveled in the same social circles. When we got older, we became sweethearts.”

Danna had been sitting still before. Now she was motionless. Chas tried to control the bitterness seeping into his voice. She'd asked, after all.

“And then...and then our parents arranged a marriage.”

She nodded.

But he wasn't finished. “For Julia and my brother.” Now her spine went rigid beneath the hand he'd placed there as he doctored her arm.

“She was my brother's wife.”

“But you loved her.”

He had. It had been his downfall. “Yes, and I killed her, too.”

* * *

Chas's words, so casually spoken, turned Danna's world topsy-turvy.

She spun and pushed away from him, creating distance between them while he watched her with stormy eyes.

He set his rag on the table and turned his shoulders so she couldn't see his face.

“Julia and Joseph hadn't been married for six months before he came up with some hare-brained idea to head west and make his own fortune, even though he was in line to take over our father's empire.” He looked up for a moment. “In Boston.”

Danna sat on the bed.

“He sent Julia a couple of letters, and then all correspondence stopped. She was sure my brother had been caught up in something immoral or illegal, or both.” He paused. Ran a hand through his damp hair. “She asked me to find him for her.”

“And you said yes?”

“Of course. At the time, I thought it would be a better choice. It was too hard to be near her in Boston, knowing I couldn't be with her.” He stared at the wall. Lost in the past?

She couldn't imagine him hurting a woman. Not one that he claimed to love. Not any woman, actually.

“So you came west looking for your brother. Did you find him?”

He turned back to her. His eyes had gone from stormy turquoise to darkened sapphire.

"I made the mistake of telling Julia what train I was taking out of Boston. She showed up, sat down right next to me a few minutes after the train left the station."

"She traveled with you?"

He nodded, a small smile quirking the corners of his lips. "I didn't know she had that much gumption. She'd always done what her parents wanted."

Even marry Chas's brother, came the unspoken emphasis.

"I tried to put her off at the next station, but she would have none of it. She insisted she could handle the travel, the long hours. She said she'd stay in the hotels and let me find Joseph. She said she just wanted to be there when we found him."

"And you gave in."

"I was stupid," Chas spat, his brows slashing downward. "I should've known she was fibbing."

"Most women have certain...wiles they can use to get men to do what they want."

Chas looked up at her as if surprised she was defending him. She was a little surprised herself. She motioned for him to go on, but he continued to stare at her. She prompted him, "So when you found Joseph..."

He shook his head, eyes again going to the floor, to the past. "I found him in a saloon, in the middle of a poker game, surrounded by—"

He cut himself off and flushed a little. As if she didn't know what sort his brother would have been surrounded by in a saloon. She nodded for him to go on.

"He didn't even look like Joseph. The Joseph I knew was fussy about his clothing, always neat and groomed. This Joseph had a scraggly beard and unkempt clothes. His shirt was torn in two places, and he smelled like he hadn't bathed in weeks. I barely recognized him."

Danna knew that feeling, knew how it burned inside. Like when the person you thought would always take care of you suddenly didn't want you anymore. You couldn't help loving them, but oh, it hurt.

"Before I spoke to him, the man sitting across the table accused Joseph of cheating. He probably was." Chas went silent again. Danna saw the muscles move as he swallowed hard.

"And Julia came into the saloon behind you." She could guess the rest.

Maybe he needed to tell it.

He nodded, his throat still working. Finally, he continued. "The men had their guns drawn before I even knew she was there. Several men started shooting. It was wild. Julia was shot twice. There was blood everywhere." He rasped the words now, rushing, as if he couldn't stop. "I got hit, too, but I didn't even feel the bullets. I tried to save her, but I couldn't."

Again his throat worked. Danna expected to see tears on his face, but though his eyes were luminous, no moisture fell.

What would it feel like if Chas loved her the way he'd loved his Julia? Would she feel treasured, the way she never had with Fred?

Finally, she had to ask. "And your brother?"

"Dead before he hit the ground." Chas rubbed both hands down his face, and Danna worried there was more to the story. He spoke evenly now, the words seeming to come easier. "I haven't been home since it happened. I promised myself I'd find the man responsible and kill him. And now I'm so close."

Close. He'd been searching for cattle rustlers when he got here, but it was the way he'd reacted to the name spoken by the injured outlaw that had her speculating. "Hank Lewis?"

He nodded. No wonder he'd been so fixated on the man, enough that he could draw an accurate portrait.

"You should've told me he was a killer."

Chas simply shook his head.

"You know I can't let you kill him," she murmured.

He shook his head, not quite meeting her eyes. "Then you'd better hope you find him before I do."

The air crackled between them. Danna stood, breaking the awful tension between them. "Will you wrap my arm? I want to talk to the man we locked up last night. Maybe see if our boy over at Doc's is awake."

He returned to her side, and the heat of his hand on her bare skin made her wish things were different.

"Would you really arrest your husband?" He didn't look up, but his words held a tinge of amusement.

She shrugged. "I'd prefer not to have to make the choice."

"I know. I know. Your first husband was perfect." He said the words as if he were joking, but it sounded as if they were tinged with a hint of jealousy. Chas was jealous of Fred?

She tried not to examine the warmth spreading through her.

"I never said that. Fred never would have told me what you just shared with me."

"Really?"

She shrugged. "We didn't talk about our feelings, or...things that were difficult for us." Like Rob.

"I haven't told anyone else."

"Not even your parents?" she asked.

"I told you I haven't been home since it happened."

"How long ago?"

"Four years."

"You haven't even sent a letter or a telegraph to let them know you're all right?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I just can't. Leave it be."

She wanted to press further, but the answer was so obvious, she didn't bother. Obviously, he blamed himself for Joseph's and Julia's deaths. His guilt was keeping him from his family, and it didn't sound as if he'd found any healing.

"Do you think your husband wanted to talk about those other kind of things?" he asked.

Chas's words brought her out of her thoughts. What a funny thing to say.

"Fred wasn't the type of man to keep things inside. If he wanted to say something, he usually did."

"Maybe he wanted to, but he wasn't sure how you'd react."

Chas tied off the white cloth he'd used to wrap her arm. His hand remained on her shoulder, thumb brushing the edge of the cloth. His touch sent shivers down her spine.

"Thanks." Was that really her voice, that breathy whisper?

Their eyes met and held, and Danna wished for a repeat of the kiss they'd shared in the preacher's parlor.

Chas must've seen her wish reflected in her eyes, because he leaned in until his chin brushed hers and his breath warmed her lips.

But at the last second, as her eyes were closing, he jerked away and moved to the opposite side of the room.

"We shouldn't."

“Oh—” Her voice emerged broken, so she cleared her throat before speaking again. “Will you go down and check on the prisoner? I’ll finish getting dressed and join you in a minute. We should check on the wounded outlaw, too.”

He nodded, already half-turned toward the door.

She dressed quickly and then stood inside the door with her hands pressed to her stomach, trying to breathe.

She felt as if she would fly apart with one wrong breath, one wrong move. Her husband was in love with a dead woman. A woman that Danna would never be able to compete with. It sounded like this Julia had been cultured, refined...and manipulative.

Danna shook the jealous thought away. She needed clarity. She had no hold over Chas. They’d agreed to annul their marriage after they’d found the robbers and the cattle thieves.

She couldn’t go back on their agreement, not now. No matter what she’d started to hope in the last two days.

She needed focus, needed it desperately. What she really needed was to catch the remaining two or three outlaws, keep Chas from killing Lewis, sleep for two days straight, and then work through her feelings about Chas.

She needed divine help. Danna turned and fell to her knees at her bedside. She poured out her heart, begged for God to help her with the tasks she found to be insurmountable. What she couldn’t ask for in words, for Him to love her, she secretly hoped He heard anyway.

When she got up to face the town and her job again, she found her cheeks were wet, but a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Until she got to the bottom of her staircase, and it dropped right back in place. A crowd of people jostled between the jailhouse door and where she stood, murmurs rippling through it.

“Gone.”

“Marshal’s done.”

“...resignation.”

She found Chas in the center of the crowd, pushing his way toward her. In tow was the man she both did and did not want to see.

Sheriff Halverson.

Chapter Seventeen

The crowd parted for Danna's passage. She met Sheriff Halverson in the middle. Over his shoulder, she could see Chas's grim expression.

"I'm afraid we've got a bit of a problem," the sheriff murmured.

The crowd went silent around them, but the last thing Danna wanted was to discuss any business in front of the town busybodies.

She nodded toward the jail. "Let's go inside."

She followed the sheriff through the group of residents, using a strategic elbow more than once. The townspeople knew better than to ask her for details, but several men shouted questions at the sheriff.

Thankfully, he didn't respond.

Once she stepped up on the boardwalk, she noticed Chas had halted outside the doorway. She motioned him toward the door. "I'd appreciate it if you'd—"

Come in. Support me.

The words stuck in her throat, but Chas must've known what she meant, because he stepped right behind her and placed a hand at her hip as she entered the jail.

The sheriff stood at the cell. The door stood open. No outlaw in sight.

"Oh, no." The words fell from Danna's lips as a near silent whisper, but Chas was close enough to hear. He squeezed her waist before he let go.

The outlaw was gone. Halverson was bent over, examining the lock mechanism, and Danna stepped up beside him.

"I rode up about twenty minutes ago and came in here to find you." The brim of the sheriff's hat shaded his eyes, and she couldn't make out his expression. "I've been on a case and only got your telegraph yesterday."

She nodded, words still failing her as panic gripped her throat. The town would call for her badge now for certain.

The sheriff continued. "Some scratches here, like someone tried to pick it. See here..." Halverson pointed to the outside of the locking mechanism, where there were indeed several deep gouges in the metal.

"They're impossible to break into," she returned, finally finding her voice. "Fred had a friend who could get through any kind of lock or safe, and he couldn't break through these."

She looked over to Chas, who stood behind the desk. He bent and reached for something behind the desk. What was he doing?

"Was there a spare key, then?" the sheriff asked, diverting her attention from Chas for the moment.

"Yes, it was—"

"In the third desk drawer, in a hidden compartment," Chas finished.

She'd never told Chas that. "How did you—?"

Words failed her again as he held up the desk drawer, revealing the broken compartment.

"But who could've done it?" Danna wondered aloud. She crossed to where Chas stood behind the desk and groaned when she observed the mess of Wanted posters, papers, and other paraphernalia strewn across the floor. Apparently, whoever had released the outlaw had felt it necessary to dump the contents of all the desk drawers.

Their best chance of tracking down the bank's money had waltzed right out the door.

"Perhaps you should've left a guard," Halverson said, and his tone had Danna looking up to examine his face. Instead of the concern he'd shown up until a few moments ago, his expression and voice were hard as steel.

She knew it was over. "I didn't have anyone to leave behind."

* * *

Two hours later, it was done. Danna had surrendered her badge and her responsibilities at the request of the town council. Sheriff Halverson was taking over the bank robbery investigation. She'd shared her suspicions about the town council, but Halverson had laughed it off.

Maybe he was right. Maybe she wasn't the investigator she'd thought she

was.

She and Chas had three days to vacate the room above the jail.

Chas stood silently by her side, aching to do something. Knowing that at least part of this mess was his fault. His only consolation was that Danna hadn't gotten herself killed.

They'd returned to her room without speaking. Once inside, she'd wilted onto the bed, not looking at him. He stared out the dingy window, trying to figure out a way to comfort her that didn't involve touching her. He'd nearly kissed her earlier, and that would've been a grave mistake. He had to leave soon, and pulling her—or himself—deeper into this would only cause more heartache.

What he needed to do was figure out a way to track down Hank Lewis, exact his revenge, and move on to the next job. Alone.

Problem was, he was tired of being alone. Spending time with Danna had shown him how lonely his life had become. He wasn't sure he could return to the way things had been before. Without Danna in it, his life seemed empty. His life *was* empty.

But he'd made a deal with himself. Ensure Danna's safety, then leave so he didn't endanger her again. He had never reneged on a promise, and he wouldn't now, not even if fulfilling it felt like a bullet to the gut.

He just needed to figure out a way to extricate himself from the situation gently.

“...for me?”

He started, realizing he'd missed Danna's words. He had to clear his throat before he could speak. "Sorry. What?" He faced her and leaned against the windowsill.

"I said, why didn't you speak up for me?"

The pain on her face hammered him. He'd never seen her so vulnerable, and somehow he knew he was the only person she'd shown it to. It made what he had to say so much harder.

"I thought...I thought their decision was best."

Her lips opened in a silent gasp. "Why?" Tears glittered on her eyelashes. It cut him to the bone. She'd stood silent and proud while her job, her entire life, had been stripped away. But now he had reduced her to tears.

He was a cad. The worst sort.

* * *

Danna had the strangest urge to shake some sense into Chas, but her muscles had atrophied in the short time since she'd slumped onto the bed, and she found she couldn't move.

In light of everything that had happened in the past few days and weeks, she should've been too numb to feel any more hurt.

On the mountain, during the snowstorm, he'd said he thought she made a good marshal.

"If you didn't think I should be marshal, why did you marry me?" Her voice betrayed her emotions. "It was only to save my job."

He was silent for a moment. "I needed you to help me find Hank Lewis. I have to... He killed Julia. I can't forget it."

"Julia," she whispered. She should have known.

It had all been for her. He'd loved Julia—still loved her—so much that it colored all of his decisions. Danna would never be able to compete with a memory.

"If you want, I could write a letter to my parents in Boston. I have a little money left, and I can send you to them. I know they won't turn you away."

She knew it cost him to make his offer, considering he hadn't made contact with his parents since his brother died. Still, it was a worthless offer.

"What would I do in Boston?" she asked with a little teary laugh. She stood and turned away, wiping at her cheeks. She didn't want him to see how much this was hurting her. Not now.

"You could see the sights." He lowered his voice. "Remarry."

She laughed again, and this time it was bitterness coloring her voice instead of tears. "If no one in the Wild West will have me, I doubt I could find a husband in a city like Boston."

"Danna." He spoke her name like it hurt him to say it, but she couldn't bear to face him.

"Thank you for the offer, but I can't accept." She turned to face him, and looking into his craggy face hurt as much as she thought it would. She forced a small smile to her lips. "I think I'll stay with Corrine for the time being, if she'll have me."

He swallowed once, his eyes never leaving her face. "And if her husband returns?"

Finding Brent would give her something to work on. "Then I'll find something else."

"What about your brother?"

The thought of going to Rob and admitting her failures tasted a lot like dirt. She shrugged anyway. "It's a possibility."

He looked like he wanted to say something else, but she couldn't handle much more of this.

"You don't have to worry about me, O'Grady." She teared up at the distance she was putting between them. "I'll be fine."

A sharp twinge in her shoulder and arm had her clutching it.

Chas's brow wrinkled. "You should have the doctor look at your wound." She couldn't help but notice he didn't offer to look at it again himself.

Maybe it meant he'd felt something when he'd doctored her before.

"What will you do? Hire a tracker to go after your outlaw?" The words were out before she could catch them.

"Maybe." He opened the door, turned, met her eyes. "Goodbye, Danna."

Chapter Eighteen

Danna waited in a chair in Doc Crittendon's outer room, ignoring the room's two other occupants. She didn't want to talk to anyone in Calvin right at this moment. Not while the shame still made her cheeks color at each knowing look people gave her. She'd been too upset to visit Corrine. She didn't want to disturb her friend's fragile happiness with the new baby. So she'd come here instead.

And waited. Finally the doctor emerged from one of the two examination rooms and motioned her inside. She showed him her injury and told him what Chas had already done for it.

The doctor hummed low under his breath as he re-cleaned the wound and wrapped it again.

"Not any worse than you've had before," he said when he was done, moving to the counter to pump fresh water to wash his hands. It was true.

"No sign of infection," he continued. "Just keep it clean."

She nodded. "How's the outlaw who got shot up?"

The doctor frowned. "Somewhat better. The sheriff fetched him, even though I recommended keeping him here for observation for a while longer."

"What?" Shock held Danna immobile. "Halverson took him?"

"Hours ago. Said he was taking him to the jailhouse."

Suspicion tickled Danna's overwrought brain. She hadn't heard any movement or voices in the jailhouse when she and Chas had been talking or after he'd left. Had she been so wrapped up in her own misery that she'd somehow missed activity beneath their feet?

Surely he hadn't meant to take the outlaw to the county lockup in Glenrock, not in his injured condition. An awful idea had begun to dawn on

her. What if Halverson was in on it? She'd suspected the council, but could this conspiracy have reached him?

The doctor wrinkled his forehead. "I'm sorry you didn't get to question him again. He did say some things in his delirium last night...something about a hideout in a big cave. He mentioned Glenrock. I told the sheriff when he was here."

Her heart thrummed. She knew that cave. It was near where she'd hurt herself, a few miles from her brother's ranch. If it was true, there was a chance she could still recover the bank's money. She probably wouldn't get her job back, but it galled her to leave the job undone. Especially because of how Castlerock had treated her. If he hadn't thought she'd be able to handle the job, why had he appointed her?

The doc must've seen the change of attitude in her expression, because his hand tightened on her arm. "You aren't going to do something foolish, are you?"

She smiled a wan smile. "More foolish than anything I've done in the last few days?" *Like marrying a man I barely knew? Or worse, falling in love with him?* She knew her voice held a tinge of desperation, and she worked to remove it as she reassured the doc. "No, sir."

The thud of her boots sounded heavy and final on the boardwalk as she made her way to the livery. She would find that money or die trying.

* * *

Chas had gathered up all his belongings and now stood in the doorway to Danna's room, looking over the small, bare area.

It didn't even look like a female lived there. No frilly embellishments or fine china to be seen. Knowing Danna the way he did now, he wasn't surprised at the lack of femininity. She was much too practical to waste time on frippery, and she would see it as showing weakness, which she couldn't afford to do.

But underneath her strong exterior existed a sensitive, beautiful woman.

Why else would she have donned a dress for their wedding day?

Was he making a mistake, going to Cheyenne to hire a tracker?

He didn't know. Every choice felt wrong. In his attempt to protect Danna, he'd ended up betraying her. He didn't know anything anymore.

Except that it had scared him—absolutely terrified him—to see the blood on her blouse earlier. She put herself in harm's way too often. As marshal, she would do so every day.

His heart couldn't take the strain, the worry, knowing how vulnerable she was. How close to danger she lived. He couldn't stay here and watch her risk her life. Couldn't leave knowing she still would. But now that she'd given up her badge, she should be safe. She'd never forgive him for not sticking up for her. And now she knew she couldn't count on him, not really. It was better this way. The distance between them would grow when the annulment was filed. Better to cut ties now.

Only it didn't feel better. It felt wrong.

The sound of approaching boots on the stairs alerted him to her presence. Perhaps that's what he'd really been waiting for—one more chance to see her again.

She was focused, her mind busy with whatever was putting the determined frown on her face. She didn't see him until she'd stepped into the room and kicked the door partway closed.

When she realized he was there, she froze, surprise and something else flashing over her features. Hurt, maybe?

"You're still here?" Her voice held no emotion.

He raised the saddlebags in a salute. "I'll be back from Cheyenne in a couple days. With the annulment."

"Fine. Goodbye." She didn't look at him.

He winced at the curt dismissal. Stopped in the doorway for one last look.

She crossed to the bed and tossed her hat onto the coverlet, followed by her coat. She pulled a sweater from one of the drawers in the stand next to the bed and yanked it on over her shirt, causing several tendrils of her dark hair to escape the braid hanging past her shoulders.

He remembered the way her hair had looked as it cascaded down her back in those thick, rich curls. He'd never forget it.

He watched her yank off first one boot, then the other, and add a second pair of thick wool socks before jamming the boots on again.

Where was she going? Worry slithered down his spine.

Not his business. Not anymore.

He turned to go, whispering, "Goodbye, Miss Marshal."

* * *

Danna's entire body shook as she scooted down the stairs and untied her mare from the hitching post out front.

She gulped air, working to calm herself because the horse would be able to read her agitation, and she had no desire to fight it. Judging by the clouds darkening the sky, she had a few hours to find the outlaws before the storm hit. She'd need the animal's cooperation to make it into the mountains on time.

Danna didn't speak to anyone on her way out of town. Contrary to what she'd told herself all this time, their acceptance *did* matter. Once she captured the bank robbers, she would move somewhere else. Maybe try her hand at ranching. Fred had left her a little savings, and she hadn't spent much in her short tenure as marshal. She could buy herself a little homestead and a few cattle.

But she didn't know if she could do it. After all, it had been years since she'd worked with Rob on his ranch. After the way the town had treated her, maybe a solitary life was for her.

A shout came from down the street. She looked up to see a man on a horse trotting down the end of Main Street toward the open prairie.

"He stole my horse!" came a second shout from a man running down the boardwalk.

Danna kicked her mare and took off after the thief. The rider looked over his shoulder once, then spurred the stolen horse to a gallop.

She heard another yell as she raced past a group of people on the boardwalk, their faces a blur. It sounded an awful lot like, "You get him, Marshal!" but that couldn't be right, because her badge had been rescinded.

As she passed the edge of town, she urged her mare for more speed, and they gained on the stolen horse and its rider. A cold wind ate through Danna's long coat and the sweater she'd added beneath it.

Drawing abreast of the rider, she was astonished to see Sam Castlerock at the reins. What was the banker's son doing? Why would the boy steal a horse when his father was rich enough to buy him as many as he wanted?

Sam caught sight of her. His face paled.

"Stop!" she shouted, but the boy hunched forward in the saddle and used the end of the reins to whip the horse to move faster.

She considered launching herself onto the other horse, but at their speed, one or both of them might break something when they hit the ground. And she still had to catch Lewis's gang, so that wasn't an option for her.

Instead, she slipped a length of rope from atop her saddle horn and fashioned a lasso, Sam saw what she was doing and tried to steer his horse away, but she watched the movements of his torso and guessed his next move. She drew closer to horse and rider and, with a quick flick of her wrist, tossed the lariat over the other horse's head. She slowed, and so did the horse, even though the young Castlerock continued to kick its flanks. The horse's lather and tossing head told enough of the story. It wasn't used to running like this, nor did it appreciate the boy's treatment.

"Your little jaunt is over," she shouted. "Stop!"

When it became apparent his horse was no longer obeying his commands, Sam threw himself out of the saddle and raced away on foot.

Danna growled low in her throat. The boy was causing her an unneeded delay. She left the stolen animal behind and took off after the boy. She fashioned a second lariat from another length of rope out of her saddlebag and within minutes had looped it around the boy's shoulders. In no time, she had him trussed like a turkey and slumped over the saddle in front of her. They returned to the stolen horse at a slower pace, and she tried to talk some sense into the young man.

"I don't think you're going to get away with this, Sam. Horse thievin' is a hanging offense." And with the number of witnesses on Main Street, there was little chance of his father buying his way out of this. "Why'd you do it?"

"You wouldn't understand, Marshal." He spat the title in a mocking voice and didn't say another word. In the distance, she could see riders heading toward them.

She made the boy dismount from her horse and waited as several men from town rode up.

"I thought he'd get away for sure," said Dodie Bennett. "You sure didn't waste any time, Miz Marshal. Thank you." She ignored him when she should have corrected him. She wasn't marshal any longer.

"You'll want to take him to the jail," she told the blacksmith. She left it up to him whether he'd make Sam walk or allow him to ride.

"Too bad the town council wasn't here to see this." Undertaker Burr McCoy almost sounded impressed. But that couldn't be right.

"Yep, maybe they'da changed their minds about firin' ya." That from Ellery Pyle.

Danna frowned, "I didn't run him down for recognition." She removed the lariat from around the horse's neck.

“Why'd she do it then?” another voice asked as she wheeled her horse to the open plain.

Someone answered, barely audible as she rode away. “She did it because it was the right thing to do, ya goose. Hey, where’s she goin’? Town’s the other way—”

Soon enough, the prairie gave way to small conifers, and she was crossing the foothills. Before the disastrous ride up here with her deputy, she hadn't been closer than viewing distance to the mountains in over a year. She hadn't had any desire to return to the place where she'd broken her brother's trust, where her life as a little sister on his ranch had ended. She wasn't superstitious, not really, but ever since that night, she'd felt like her life was one long mountain journey, her feet just inches from a cliff she couldn't see.

She guided her mare around an outcropping of rock, thankful for the horse's surefootedness on the changing terrain.

Her mind whirled. How was she going to sneak up on the outlaw camp by herself?

What was she doing?

Was Chas right? He'd agreed with the town council that she shouldn't wear the badge. Since she'd met him, she *had* taken unnecessary risks. Charging into the bank building alone. Tracking outlaws in a snowstorm.

She glanced up at the menacing slate-colored sky. And winced.

Tracking outlaws in a snowstorm. *Twice.*

Fred wouldn't have taken risks like she had. But Fred had had support from both his deputies and the town council.

It had been her choice to stay on as marshal with no deputies. Had her pride gotten in the way of this investigation? Because she'd had something to prove. To the town council. To herself.

Why hadn't she asked the men who'd ridden out after Sam for help? She'd assumed they wouldn't ride along with her.

Chas had conjectured that someone was paying off the former deputies and any other men in town who might be obliged to help her. If he was right, she should've ridden to Bear Creek or even Ash Grove to round up some help.

Instead, she'd galloped out of town to take on a gang of outlaws. Alone. Without a plan.

She was going to get herself killed.

No. Not today.

She reined in her horse to turn back.

At the sharp crack of a pistol's hammer being cocked, the mare faltered and whinnied.

"Hands up," a thin, menacing voice snapped. A familiar voice.

Heart hammering, Danna turned in her saddle to find herself staring down the barrel of a mean-looking Colt .45, not a handful of yards away. Even a bad shot wasn't likely to miss from such a short distance. Her gaze followed the pistol's barrel back to a craggy face. Halverson.

"Do it, or I'll shoot." His voice brooked no argument, but she considered reaching for her own pistol anyway, until she saw the second man a few paces behind Halverson. Pale and trembling, it was the injured outlaw. He, too, had a gun trained on her, a rifle that lay across his horse's shoulders, balanced against the saddle horn. She had no choice but to release the reins and push her hands above her head. There would be no chance to ride for help now.

Chapter Nineteen

Standing on the boardwalk as he waited for the stagecoach, Chas let his gaze roam over the town. That was no good. Every place he looked reminded him of Danna. Trying to keep his mind off her, he dug through his saddlebags, looking for the letter with the name of his contact at the WSGA in Cheyenne.

Instead, his hand closed over a smooth leather item, and he drew it out so he could see it. Fred Carpenter's journal. How had it ended up in Chas's things?

In all the chaos of the previous night and this morning, the journal must have been tucked into his saddlebag by mistake.

He snorted. Mistake, or subconscious desire to be close to Danna in any way he could?

Well, it wouldn't work. He could return the diary when he brought the annulment papers, after all the trouble with Lewis died down.

Idly, he flipped open the book to a spot near the middle. Anything to help pass the time.

Danna and I spent the day picnicking and then several hours of target practice. It was a nice break from our normal routine. We watched the sunset down by Pa's Crik, and she started to open up to me.

It's been years since she's revealed her inner thoughts, and that she felt comfortable to do so today meant the world to me.

Chas closed the book with a snap. He didn't want to read about Danna and Fred Carpenter's relationship after all. The man had obviously never meant for this to fall into the hands of Danna's second husband.

Morbid curiosity had him flipping the book open again, searching for that

same entry. He had to know what happened next. Spying a familiar name on a different page stopped him cold.

Halverson in town again. I wish I had firm proof he was behind the rustling, or just proof of his involvement, but in the six months since Stevenson saw him settling a sale of cattle at the Cheyenne train station, he's proved more wily than I thought.

Perhaps he has help?

Reaching the end of the entry, Chas stared down at the page and let the words blur out of focus.

Chas knew lawmen weren't above reproach—he'd taken down a marshal near Houston, Texas, who'd murdered several men in a gambling den and had almost gotten away with it.

Fred Carpenter suspected Halverson?

In the distance, thundering hoofbeats and the rattle of the stagecoach signaled its approach. Chas was running out of time.

He flipped through the book rapidly, looking for more entries that mentioned the sheriff or suspicious activity. Several mentioned suspicions of a gang of rustlers, most likely the very same ones Chas was hunting. Carpenter didn't know identities but had found the prairie cabin. On the last page, Chas came upon an underlined entry.

Halverson's involvement confirmed. Meeting tomorrow at 3:00 p.m. Will follow Halverson to cattle holding location then return for backup. Will tell Danna when I'm sure. No need to put her in danger before then.

There were no further entries. Fred Carpenter must have been spotted as he'd tried to take down the gang. Danna said he'd been murdered in cold blood, but nothing about his suspicions. Because he hadn't told her, Chas realized. And she couldn't read his journal for herself.

He couldn't go to Cheyenne. Not with Halverson out there gunning for Danna.

He needed a horse. He needed help, but he wasn't likely to find it in Calvin. Not when everyone here had turned their backs on Danna.

Outside the livery, a small group of men were giving a teenaged boy a talking to. He paid them little attention until,

“—can't believe she rode out toward the mountains,” a voice said.

Chas drew up short. There was only one woman he knew who would dare ride out alone.

And then he remembered her donning a heavy sweater and socks. Like

she was getting ready to ride out.

He was an idiot.

He grabbed the man who'd spoken by the arm, not caring that it was rude. "The marshal?" he demanded.

The man shook off Chas's hold, frowning.

"The marshal," Chas pressed. "Is that who you're talking about? Who rode out alone?"

"Yeah, bud."

She'd gone after the gang alone.

All the blood rushed from his head in a dizzying rush.

"And none of you went with her?" Of course they hadn't.

One of the nearest men bristled. "Whatever she was doing, it ain't our business."

Chas shook his head, anger rising. "I know some of you rode with Danna when her first husband was still alive. You know her abilities."

The first man who'd spoken—the blacksmith?—shifted his feet.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves. Danna has worked herself to the bone, lost sleep, and now put herself in danger. All for this town that doesn't even appreciate her."

"A woman shouldn't be marshal," someone from the back of the crowd called out.

"She cain't handle the job!"

Not exactly the response Chas wanted.

The teenaged boy who ran the livery sidled up to Chas. He hadn't even noticed the boy. Had he been listening from inside the livery? "The marshal can do just as good a job as any man," the boy said. "Last week she broke up two fights at the saloon before things could get out of hand. She's the best tracker around, and y'all all know it."

They were wasting time. Danna was out there, tracking the outlaws. Alone.

"I'm riding out after her," Chas said. "And I need help. Anybody willing to ride with me?"

The men grumbled. No one raised a hand. Most of them wouldn't even look him in the eye.

"Is there some other reason you won't ride with Danna?" he asked, desperate now. "Is someone paying you off?"

Heads lowered, no one said a word.

He growled under his breath. Turned to the stablehand. "Will you loan me a horse?"

The boy nodded, face grave. "I'll ride with you."

Was he serious? Chas supposed one teenager was better than no one. "What's your name?"

"Will Chittim."

"I'd be obliged if you'd ride with me."

The kid nodded and ducked into the livery.

As the crowd of men started to disperse, a group of eight rough-looking men on horseback thundered into town. They reined in nearby, horses blowing.

The man out front pushed his stained Stetson off his brow, allowing Chas a good look at his face. Dark stubble covered his cheeks and chin while a full mustache hid the man's mouth. His coffee-brown eyes were familiar, but he couldn't place the man.

"I'm looking for the marshal," he called out to

Chas bristled. He didn't like the looks of these ruffians. "Who's asking?" he demanded loudly.

The man wheeled his horse in the street, his dark gaze honed in on Chas. Dangerous.

Someone else spoke from the boardwalk, breaking the tension. "Ain't got no marshal no more."

The man on horseback looked at the speaker, face going white beneath his tan. "What?"

"She resigned."

"She was forced to resign," Chas muttered.

Will appeared in the stable doorway holding two horses by the reins.

Chas nodded to him. "Let's go find my wife."

He swung up on his mount and turned the horse toward the mountains, visible over the roofs of the town buildings. He didn't make it far before the sound of hoofbeats joined those from his own. The stranger with dark hair came abreast of him.

"We'll ride with you," the stranger said, and made it sound like a command, not a request.

"Thank you, but I don't know you."

"I'm her brother." The man's terse words were offset by the jumping muscle in his jaw. "Rob Darcy. Sounds like we're family now."

A kernel of hope bloomed in Chas's chest.

Darcy motioned to the six men following. "These are a few of my hands. One of my men heard about Danna's troubles while passing through. I came when I could, but it sounds like it wasn't soon enough. So Danna's taken off to chase a group of outlaws on her own?" Darcy didn't sound surprised.

"It's worse than that," Chas told him, itching to move faster, to get out of town, but knowing it would be impossible to talk once they let the horses go. "I think the sheriff is involved. Danna doesn't know."

With a glance to the rapidly darkening sky and the snowflakes swirling around them, the set of the cowboy's mouth turned even grimmer. "We don't have much time. I don't suppose you know where she was headed?"

"I can take you there," a female voice called out.

Katy. She shied from Darcy when his horse sidestepped toward her. Approached Chas instead.

"I can take ya right to the hideout. It's in a cave in the mountains."

"How do you know it? Who are you?" Rob demanded.

"We can trust her," Chas put in. She might've run away, but he knew she liked Danna.

When Katy spoke, it was to Chas. "My pa used to run with that awful Jed Hester. Then a few months ago, that lyin', no good snake shot him in the back. Tried to come after me, too, but Pa had taught me how to disappear in the woods."

So, she'd been on her own for months, probably near to starving when Chas had caught her outside the grocery. No wonder she'd eaten as if his eggs and bacon had been her last meal.

"Anyways, I want that no-account varmint dead, and I guess hangin's the next best thing to shootin' 'im when you lot catch up to them."

Even though he was used to Danna and her trousers, the violence spewing from this girl surprised him. He supposed she was only expressing the same thing he felt about Hank Lewis.

Right now, he'd kill Hank Lewis with his bare hands.

* * *

Danna's mind whirled as the three horses neared the crude campsite spilling out of the mouth of the yawning black hole of the cave. With her hands bound in front of her, it had been all she could do to cling to the saddle horn and not topple as her horse followed Halverson's mount, traversing the difficult terrain in the foothills. Never mind reaching for a weapon to help her escape or to overpower Halverson.

She looked over her shoulder again. The kid who'd been shot wasn't doing well. His complexion matched the color of the snow swirling around them. If his injury was getting worse, maybe she could convince Halverson to let her help him. And if she could get close to him, maybe she could get his weapon loose.

It was a risky plan, relying on an awful lot of maybes. But it was all she had.

Halverson reined in outside of the camp and dismounted. He hauled her off her horse, none too gently. Her ankle jarred when she landed on the ground, but he didn't give her time to even catch her breath before he shoved her in the direction of the cave.

She stumbled forward. "Halverson—"

"No talking," he ordered. "I've got a job for you. Now move it." He unholstered his gun in an obvious silent threat.

She didn't argue. She ducked through the mouth of the cave, carefully stepping over a man laid out on the ground, snoring, and had to start breathing through her mouth at the overpowering stench of unwashed flesh. Halverson kicked the sleeping man, who roused with a disoriented huff.

"You're supposed to be on watch, Wilson. If I catch you sleeping again, I'll put a bullet in you."

The man didn't respond, but Danna read anger in the set of his mouth before he spit a stream of tobacco juice against the cave wall. He stood and stomped outside the cave.

Halverson motioned her farther inside with his pistol. She walked around the small fire in the center, noting how little warmth it exuded, and moved toward a man with a distinctive handlebar mustache squatting next to a bundle of rags. Jed Hester.

"He any worse?" Halverson asked, and the man looked up, his face grave.

"No change." That's when she realized the bundle of rags was a man. One who was seriously injured. Between the flickering firelight and shadows, his pant leg appeared nearly black with slick blood. It seemed to have come from

a wound in his upper thigh.

That answered her question of why Halverson hadn't killed her outright.

The sheriff glared at her. "Fix him up. No funny business or you're dead."

"I can't—I'm no doctor" she stalled. The injured man already appeared close to death. He was so pale, she didn't know if there was anything she could do for him.

"I know you ain't a doctor, girl. But you saved yer Freddie-poo when he got shot up a coupla years ago, an I 'spect you to do the same for my boy here."

She knelt next to the injured man, wobbling, since her tied hands put her off balance. She pushed aside the ripped shirt used to bind the wound, and blood poured from the leg. Hastily, she re-covered the wound as best she could.

"You're going to have to untie me. There's a few medical supplies in my saddlebag. And we'll need some clean cloths. How long has he been like this?"

"Stu, get the woman's saddlebags." Halverson nodded to the other outlaw. "Take off his gun belt. Then untie her."

He didn't answer her question, but she could guess. He must've been shot last night during the melee in town.

Once her hands were freed, she shook them, and pinpricks like needles of ice ushered the return of feeling to her fingers. Holding her emotions in check, she rummaged in the saddlebag that was thrust in her face. It was hard to think with the gun barrel mere feet away, focused directly on her. Was there anything in her bag she could use to escape?

Even if there was, could she leave the man to die?

"Hurry up," a voice from behind her warned.

She had to find a way out of here.

"What's your name?" she asked softly as she removed the blood-soaked cloth from the wound.

He didn't respond, instead focusing his pain-glazed eyes above her head.

"His name's Hank," grunted the man who now squatted near the fire, gun in hand. Danna glanced around the small cavern, but Halverson was nowhere to be seen.

Danna's muscles tensed as she returned her gaze to the man beneath her hands. So, this was the man who'd killed Chas's sister-in-law, the woman he loved. The outlaw's breathing was irregular, his face pasty. He was obviously

in a lot of pain, and if Danna couldn't remove the bullet, there was a strong possibility he would bleed out.

It wouldn't take much to let nature take his course. To let him die.

Chas thought he deserved to die. She was inclined to agree.

If she let him die, would God forgive her? If she let him live, would Chas forgive her?

Whatever she chose, Halverson would kill her once she was no use to him anymore.

Chapter Twenty

Night had fallen and bitter wind cut through Chas's coat and all the layers he wore. After hours of hard riding, the mountainous terrain became difficult and Darcy had insisted the search party stop until the blizzard waned or morning light, whichever came first.

Chas chafed at the delay.

Most of the cowboys were asleep, but he remained sitting near the large campfire Darcy had built, staring into the flames.

His soul felt frozen. Danna was out there somewhere. In danger. Because of him.

The tracks she might have left were quickly obscured by the blowing snow. Katy assured them she knew where the outlaw hideout was. Were they already too late?

Sitting so near the fire reminded him of sharing another fire with Danna. He remembered how she'd trusted him with her past, with feelings she hadn't even shared with her first husband. And he'd thrown that trust in her face when she needed him most.

He loved her. And he'd failed her.

"So, you're married to my sister."

The quiet statement shook Chas from his musings. He hadn't realized the other man was still awake, but with a shift of his head, he saw Rob Darcy's eyes shining in the light from the campfire, though the man didn't look at him directly.

Chas didn't know what information the man was fishing for. He went with the simple answer. "For a few days."

"She's a special woman."

No argument there. "She is."

"And a lot to handle."

Chas couldn't contain a rueful quirk of his lips. "I don't think there is any such thing as handling your sister. She makes her own way."

"You're probably right." Darcy shifted under his horse blanket. "Is that why she went off after this gang alone?"

Chas's guilt made him unable to look at the other man. "I'm not good with women. I thought she'd stay in town. If I'd known she'd go after Hank Lewis's men alone, I never would've planned to go to Cheyenne."

"I ain't real good with women myself. She tell you I was the reason she left home?"

"She told me."

"I didn't know what to do with a kid sister. It wasn't that I didn't want her around. She was a pretty good kid. Hardheaded, but then, so am I. I didn't know nothin' about raising a girl."

Darcy's voice grew softer. "She scared the life out of me when she went off into the mountains by herself. I knew what could happen to a grown man alone, and she was just a girl. And then she got hurt. It terrified me. But I never would have sent her away."

Chas had guessed as much after reading Fred Carpenter's journal entries. Darcy went on talking.

"Fred loved her so much. Even then. I remember him telling me he wanted to marry her. I lost my temper when she got lost in the woods, and I told him he could have her and good luck. She was a handful at sixteen. I couldn't imagine what she'd do at eighteen.

"Then, the next morning, she just marched out of her room—well, hobbled with that broken leg—and announced she was ready to marry Fred. Right then." He shook his head, a sad smile on his lips. "I had a time convincing her to wait a couple of weeks while her leg healed. She was determined. Never did know what the rush was."

"She overheard you and Fred talking the night you rescued her. She thought you didn't want her around anymore."

"She told you that?" Chas nodded, and the other man was silent for a long time. "Things weren't the same after she married Fred. Didn't see her much at all, and then they moved away. I stayed away because she didn't seem to want me around. It makes sense now, if she thought I wanted to get rid of her.

"Fred wrote once a month, kept me up to date on how she was doing. But

he never said she asked about me.”

It was obvious the man cared about Danna, even if he didn't know how to show it.

"One thing I know about your sister," Chas said, "is that she hides the most important things close to her heart. She misses you. I'm sure of it."

Rob Darcy stared into the fire. "I hope you're right. I feel like I've lost too much time with her already."

"Well, let's find her, and you can tell her."

Darcy grunted in response, but Chas was only half-joking. The waiting was killing him. His feeling that Danna was in danger intensified by the minute. But the snow continued falling, and he knew he wouldn't convince the others to leave until it let up.

His inner turmoil was compounded by Darcy's presence. On one hand, he was grateful the man was here to help him find Danna. On the other hand, Rob's presence meant that Danna had someone to take her in once all this craziness was over. If the town wouldn't return her badge, it sure sounded like her brother wanted her to come back to the ranch with him. Which would be great for her, once Chas got the annulment and they'd gone their separate ways.

So why did the thought leave him empty inside?

* * *

Danna shifted on the frozen ground and brought her knees up to conserve her body heat in any way possible. Her hands had been tied again, this time behind her back. Around a tree. Tightly.

She was going to freeze to death if she couldn't get loose.

Hank Lewis's wound had been deep, and with her every move being scrutinized by the outlaw Halverson had left behind, it had been nearly impossible to snitch anything that might help her escape.

Nearly impossible. But she'd done it. She had a small knife up her sleeve, and Halverson hadn't found it when he'd brought her out here, well away from the cave, and tied her up.

She couldn't imagine why he hadn't shot her outright. Maybe he wanted her to clean Hester's wound again in the morning? Or maybe he was afraid someone would hear the report of the gunshot. When Halverson had returned

to the cave, he'd been acting cagey. Like maybe he'd seen signs that someone was on their trail.

She could only hope.

Hope was all she had left.

She was alive, for now. She had to escape.

* * *

Hours later, Danna hadn't managed to free the knife from her shirtsleeve, no matter what she tried.

She was settled in a small dip at the base of the tree, and snow had been piling up against her left side, providing insulation against the colder night air. It wasn't enough.

She was getting sleepy, but she couldn't give in to it. She knew better. How many times had Fred told her that, once a person dozed off, hypothermia would set in, and then they'd be goners? Probably dozens.

She was going to fail. She was going to die.

If only she hadn't rushed out of town alone. If only she hadn't been so careless that she'd allowed herself to get captured.

She hoped Chas would remember her with less pain than he remembered Julia. She didn't want him carrying around another load of guilt for something that wasn't his fault.

She wished she could see him one more time. If she saw him, she'd tell him she loved him. She'd never told Fred, and even though her first love had felt more like a comfortable friendship, she regretted that Fred hadn't known before he died.

She also regretted that no one had ever told her the same. All these years, she'd thought she didn't need the softer things in life, didn't need love. But she'd been wrong.

She wanted it. And if by some miracle she got out of this mess, she was going to find it. Even if she had to make herself into the most ladylike woman in the West. Wear dresses. Learn to read.

She might not have all her toes by then, but she'd make do. Danna kicked both feet against the ground to keep the blood flowing, keep them from going numb. It wasn't working.

She would try one more time. She bent her wrist to a nearly impossible

angle, biting back the cry of pain that wanted to slip past her lips. There. Somehow, she'd managed to wedge the knife into her palm. Now if she could just angle it around...

The tip of the knife slipped off the frozen rope, and she almost dropped it. Her numb fingers weren't working right. The ties were so tight that her circulation was nearly cut off. She couldn't operate the knife like she needed to.

She wouldn't give up! She had to stay awake. So she began to sing. Loudly. All the hymns she could remember. The effort it took to sing sent blood pumping through her veins and made her feel more awake.

And she remembered the last time she'd been trapped on a mountain. Back then, she'd believed the words to the hymns. Believed God was faithful. Believed He would take care of her. Maybe it had been naive. Had she been blind in her faith?

Was Chas right that God didn't really care about individuals?

Just like she couldn't give up, she couldn't believe that, either.

Hadn't He kept her from freezing in these mountains once before? He'd brought Rob to her in time, and her leg had healed from the fracture. She hadn't suffered any lasting effects from her near-disaster—getting tossed from her horse. And marrying Fred had been a blessing in her life, even if she hadn't seen it as such in the beginning. Fred had taught her about being a lawman, about being a wife, even though she hadn't been a conventional one.

But what about all of the bad things that had happened lately? Fred's death, getting fired from her job?

All of a sudden, a sharp whine broke through the silent blackness and shook her from her thoughts. Danna sang louder, determined not to get eaten by a wolf, either.

The sound of a branch breaking nearby had her craning her neck to try and see where the intruder was coming from. A shape took form, a shadow darker than all the others. It grew bigger as it neared, and she prepared to kick it with her feet.

It came even nearer, and the whine turned into a yelping bark. One she recognized.

"Wrong Tree?" Her dog came nearer, right up next to Danna, and snuggled to her side, offering its furry warmth and comfort.

"Good boy," she cooed, and for the first time since Fred had brought the mutt home, she meant it. "How did you find me?"

The dog whined again, a pitiful sound.

If he'd come all the way from Calvin, was it possible someone else was out there?

"Hello?" she called out.

Nothing.

And the hope that had sprouted when she'd recognized the dog waned as precious minutes ticked by.

"Okay," she said, when it was obvious no one else was coming to her rescue. "I guess you're better than nothing."

The dog barked. He moved away, taking his warmth with him, then turned back a few feet away, as if beckoning her to follow.

"I can't, boy, I'm stuck here." She pulled against her bonds, then shook her head. Why was she reasoning with a dog?

Wrong Tree tipped his head, looking at her with a quizzical, lopsided doggy grin.

"Come here, boy," she urged, shivering as another gust of wind sliced through her clothing and made her insides quake.

For once, the animal listened to her, scooting so close she got a noseful of wet, smelly dog.

"What a good boy," she cooed. "You'll keep me alive."

Thank you, Father. Maybe with Wrong Tree, she could survive the night.

She nuzzled her face into the ruff of fur on his neck. *God, please don't let him leave again.*

With renewed hope and the bit of warmth she took from Wrong Tree, Danna tried the knife again. Her frozen fingers ached with each draw of the knife against the cords.

She might've drifted off.

The dog shifted, and cold blasted through the layers of Danna's clothing, jarring her into wakefulness.

The dog grunted and moved away, leaving only freezing air to take its place.

Had she fallen asleep? She'd been sawing against the frozen ropes binding her hands for what seemed like forever—hours, at least.

The first fingers of light showed slate-gray against the horizon. She'd survived the night. And it had stopped snowing.

A limb snapped behind her, cracking like a gunshot in the early morning stillness. Wrong Tree turned, hackles rising.

“Danna?”

Chapter Twenty-One

At first, Danna thought she must be imagining Chas's voice. But the shock of heat when his hands touched hers was real. He untied her ropes, and her hands fell to the cold ground, free. She stretched them, rubbed at her sore shoulders, and watched as the man she loved rounded the tree and crouched in front of her.

Time seemed to suspend itself as she stared into his impossibly blue eyes, and all she could think was, *he came for me*.

“How did you find me?” she asked in a hushed voice, afraid to disturb the silence that surrounded them. Afraid he was an apparition she'd conjured with the strength of her wish to see him again.

Chas nodded to the side, toward a figure as he moved into her line of vision.

* * *

“Rob?” Chas watched Danna's brother rush to her and gently wrap her in a hug, and still he couldn't make his feet move.

Danna was alive.

She and Rob didn't speak. She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. Over the hill? Was that where the outlaws were? He could only assume she'd been captured by Lewis and left to die of exposure.

Brother and sister moved toward Chas. Rob held her tightly to his side, supporting her weight, and Chas feared that maybe she'd been hurt. He jogged to the horses, just over the crest of the hill.

He pulled down his bedroll to wrap around Danna. He was still facing his horse, trying to school his rioting emotions into submission, when he sensed her approach.

"I can't believe you came." The soft-spoken words threatened his composure. He spun to face her, needing to see for himself she was all right.

Tears sparkled in her brown eyes, and he threw the blanket around her shoulders and pulled her to his chest. One hand clung to her waist while the other cupped the back of her head, his fingers threading through her hair, "I never left." In his arms, she felt fragile, but he knew it was an illusion. She was strong and capable. She'd almost cut through the ropes. Another quarter inch and she'd have been able to pull free.

"We should get going and meet up with the others," Rob said quietly from where he'd already mounted up.

"Others?" Danna wiped her face with the corner of the blanket and stepped away from Chas. He didn't like being so close to the outlaws without the rest of their backup and carefully slid into the saddle.

Rob answered. "There were ten of us crazy enough to come out here after you. We got halfway up the mountain last night and had to stop because of the snow. Your husband refused to wait until morning, though. He dragged me away from a warm fire and my bedroll to get to you sooner."

Danna's upturned face revealed her surprise. When Chas reached for her, she used his boot in the stirrup to boost herself into the saddle in front of him. Chas wrapped his arms around her, unable to keep from noticing how perfectly she fit there. He didn't ever want to let her go. Careful not to bump her, he guided his horse to follow Darcy's down the same way they'd come. Danna's dog followed a little off to the side, silent, its tongue lolling out of its mouth.

"Men from town?" Danna murmured over her shoulder, giving Chas a good look at her profile. She didn't have a single bruise on her face.

"I'm afraid not. Your brother brought several hands from his ranch. And your stablehand friend brought a little gal who happened to know where this cave was located."

He read her disappointment in the tightening of her lips before she nodded and turned her face forward again.

"The girl was Katy."

Her face lit up. "You found her?"

"She found us. Just before we left town. Said her pa used to run with

Lewis's gang until Hester killed him. She ran away. I think she's been afraid all this time that they'd track her down and kill her, too." His thoughts jumped from the outlaw gang killing Katy to what he'd feared the most since yesterday afternoon—they killing Danna. He hated riding away. He'd never been closer to enacting his revenge on Hank Lewis than right now.

"How'd you know where I'd gone, though?" Danna's asked.

"Bunch of men from town saw you ride out. And I ... found a passage in Fred's journal that implicated Sheriff Halverson as part of the rustling ring."

"You read the journal?"

He couldn't tell if that made her angry. He had invaded her privacy.

"I would've come anyway, once I learned you'd gone off alone."

She wiped her face with the blanket. Laughed a little. "I'm a mess."

He squeezed her waist. She had a right to cry after being out in the elements all night, after surviving Halverson.

"I was coming back to town," she admitted. "To get help."

* * *

They rode into camp to find Darcy's cowboys saddling up. The scent of coffee had her stomach gurgling before Chas let her down from the horse.

A little embarrassed by her teary breakdown, Danna wiped her face with the blanket again and averted her eyes. But Chas wouldn't let her hide. He tipped her chin up, kissed her cheek gently before he propelled her to the blazing fire and urged her to sit on a log. Wrong Tree settled a few feet away.

The fire was almost painful in its warmth. Her limbs and extremities were still bone cold.

"Let's get some coffee into her," he called out, and men jumped to do his bidding.

He pulled off her gloves. Her hands were chapped but not discolored like they'd be if she had frostbite. Chas chafed her hands between his, and the warm that infused her came from more than just from the fire and his hands.

It felt like he cared.

Wrong Tree butted his head under Chas's arm, looking for attention from the man he'd liked from the beginning. Chas gave the mutt a playful push out of the way and settled close to Danna's side.

"All right. So what's the plan?" Rob squatted next to Danna's other side.

He handed her a tin cup, steam rising from its rim.

The rest of the cowpokes stood near enough to listen without intruding on their conversation.

"The plan?" she echoed.

"You mean to tell me you weren't working on a way to round up those outlaws while you were tied up?" Rob's voice held both a teasing quality and a note of seriousness.

"I'm sorry." She shook her head, feeling as if it were stuffed with cotton. "I'm not thinking real clearly yet." She drank a big gulp of the coffee, hoping it would help.

"You didn't think we came all the way up here just to save your hide, did you? We're going to help you bring in those outlaws."

She risked a glance at Chas, who was staring hard into the fire, his jaw tight. Had that been his intention? She couldn't tell. But she had a job to do, even if she didn't have the official title, and if these cowboys were willing to help, she'd be foolish not to take them up on it.

"I saw four men in the cave last night, plus Halverson. Two are injured. The way they were talking, there might be another man, but I never saw him."

"Who are the two injured?"

She couldn't look at Chas when she told them. "Hank Lewis and the man who was shot during the robbery."

Chas stiffened. "How bad is Lewis?"

She shrugged. "He'd lost a lot of blood. The gunshot was in his upper thigh. He was alive when I got done patching him up, but I don't know if he made it through the night."

"You patched him up?" Chas vaulted to his feet. His face and neck had gone red, making his freckles disappear. "After what he's done? He murdered my—" He cut himself off, but she could still hear the words, as if he'd said them aloud. *He murdered my love.* The reminder burned a hole in her gut.

"He killed my brother and his wife," Chas said in a slightly more controlled voice. She could still hear the undercurrents of anger in his tone. "He doesn't deserve to live."

She'd known his temper would blow when he found out she'd helped Lewis.

"I'm not a judge," she replied. "I can't make the decision whether he should live or die. Plus, they had a gun on me. If I refused to treat him,

Halverson would have shot me.”

Chas's face paled, all the red seeping out of his cheeks, but he still stared at her as if she was a stranger to him. Slowly, he shook his head, then ran a hand from forehead to chin. The action wiped all the expression from his face, leaving only a hard-set jaw and empty eyes behind. "So, what do we do now?"

Rob shifted in his crouch, clearly uncomfortable to have witnessed their conversation. "We can assume they've figured out Danna's disappeared. We need to move fast."

After a moment of tense silence, Chas said what was on all their minds. "If Halverson knows his cover is blown, he's going to want us dead."

Rob's hands all murmured their agreement. They all looked to her, and their gazes were like a weight on her chest. She'd wanted this responsibility?

Chas turned to her, one hand massaging his neck. He hadn't looked her in the eye since he'd blown up about Lewis. "Tell us what to do, boss lady. You wanted deputies. Now you've got 'em."

* * *

Danna took command of the situation, like Chas had known she could. She sent four of Rob's men to scout for anyone who might have left the camp after the snow had stopped. She instructed them to fire a sequence of shots if they caught the men or needed help. She ordered Will Katy to stay put and to keep her ornery dog tied up with them. That left five of them to figure out a way to approach the outlaw's campsite without getting shot.

Anger simmered in his gut. Hank Lewis was close. This was his chance to enact his revenge.

He still couldn't fathom that Danna had doctored the man. If it would have been him, he'd have let Lewis bleed out. It was an easier death than the man deserved.

"We came in from the south last night, and there wasn't much cover at all." Danna seemed to have regained her equilibrium. She paced a tight ring around the fire, alternately clasping her hands in front of her and waving them around when she spoke. She was adorable.

"Is there another way into the cave?" Rob asked as he checked his weapon.

Danna shook her head. "The inside walls are solid rock. I couldn't see any other way in or out, and believe me, I looked."

"From what I could tell, we'd have the most cover approaching from the east," one of the cowboys said.

"Or we could hang a rope, and someone could shimmy down to get to the cave," a second cowboy countered.

It was risky. Chas hadn't gotten much of a glimpse of the cave through the trees this morning, as Danna had been tied pretty far from the entrance, but he'd seen enough to know it was a sheer drop of thirty feet.

"Danna could do it," Chas said. "She likes to climb things. Like roofs." He couldn't find the humor in it today.

He glanced at Danna and tension arced between them.

"I guess you never grow out of some things," said Rob, shattering the moment.

Danna averted her face, but then she turned to Chas. "Do you have Fred's journal with you? And a pencil?"

He'd thought she would be angry that he'd violated her husband's memory, but did what she always seemed to do when faced with a situation that needed to be handled—she put aside her emotions to work.

He retrieved the book and a stub of a pencil from his saddlebag and brought them to Danna. She flipped to a blank page near the end of the book and completed a quick sketch of the area around the cave, including trees, rocks, larger impressions in the hills. Her memory was impressive.

She tapped a corner of the page. "If your two hands come from this direction, and I slip down from above the cave, you"—she nodded to Rob—"and Chas can approach from here." She indicated a thick stand of trees. She shook her head. "I think this is the best we can do. Y'all ready?"

She didn't wait for an answer as she strode to her horse and swung up into the saddle, confident they'd follow. Chas hopped up behind Danna. It didn't take long to retrace their route to where they'd found Danna in the woods. The storm clouds had dissipated after sunrise, and now the sunlight sparkled off every surface, almost blinding in its intensity.

Shortly before they reached the place where Danna had been tied, Rob and Chas broke away from the other two men to circle around the other side of the little valley.

Letting Danna down from his horse and watching her slip away into the snowy mountain was difficult for him. Especially when she'd come so close

to death the night before. Chas clamped his teeth together to keep from calling her back.

He had to remember how capable she was. And she was armed this time, with one of Rob's pistols.

Chas and Rob moved quietly into place, hobbling the horses a fair piece away, in case gunfire erupted. They snuck through the winter-white landscape together.

Not as comfortable as Rob was at sneaking, Chas followed the other man and tried to stay behind barren trees or outcroppings of rocks. Once, he even crawled in the snow, so as not to be seen.

When the mouth of the cave was in sight, Rob slowed his pace. He found a spot he liked and pointed out a covering of brush not far away, mouthing instructions for Chas to go over there and wait for Danna's signal.

Lying there with his belly wet and cold wasn't Chas's idea of a good time, but he did as he was told. He wouldn't endanger Danna as he had the other night. Sighting his rifle, he drew a bead on the cave, black against the white landscape.

In minutes, a length of rope unfurled down the ledge above the cave. He saw Danna's dark head at the top of the cliff, and then her backside as she began to lower herself hand over hand, right down the wall of rock.

Chas's heart drummed in his temples at her being so exposed. If any of the outlaws were in the woods, they'd have an easy shot. He sent up a desperate prayer that no one with nefarious intentions would be near enough to do her harm.

For a moment, his breath cut off, and he thought he was going to get caught up in a memory of those few moments before Julia and Joseph died, but instead of the images he expected, all he could see was Danna hanging off that dangling rope, her life in the balance.

After she was out in the open so long he was beginning to feel sick to his stomach, she braced her legs against the rock wall and raised one hand in a prearranged signal.

"Halverson!" Rob roared, and Chas jumped, even though he'd been expecting it. "We've got you surrounded. Toss your weapons outside the cave and walk out with your hands up!"

No sound emerged from the cave. The woods were eerily quiet without the normal sounds of birds and small animals moving about, as if even they knew something was happening. The snow muffled everything, but Chas

knew the layer of pure white could be hiding death and danger.

Danna fisted her hand and pumped it once in the air—the signal they were waiting for—and a voice from across the clearing called out this time. "We know you're in there, and we'll wait you out."

Still no answer, no movement. Had the men discovered Danna was missing and left?

Chas watched breathlessly as Danna found footholds on the rocky cliff face and leaned until she was nearly horizontal. Her braid hung down like a pendulum as she peered into the cave. A shot rang out, and she scrambled a few feet up the rope.

His heart pounded erratically.

There was at least one man in the cave. Chas squinted, cursing the bright sun glinting off every surface, as he tried to determine if she'd been hit. He couldn't see any blood on her face or neck. That was a good sign, right?

"Stop worrying so much," came Rob's voice, this time so quiet, Chas knew it was meant for his ears alone. "She knows what she's doing."

That might be true, but he didn't know if he could accept the risk. Chas knew how quickly a life could be snuffed out, and Danna was putting herself in danger. And she did it every single day.

"You have to let it go," Rob said. "Her life is in the Lord's hands. If He wants to take her home today, He will, and nothing we can do will stop it."

But I need her, Chas wanted to cry out, and he would've, if he could've wrenched his mouth open.

If only Danna had a safer job. Of course, just living out here in the West was more dangerous than his parents' home in Boston. But he couldn't picture her living in his parents' world, with their society parties and boring lives. If she sat down to tea with his mother, Danna would likely send the older woman into a swoon.

He loved her the way she was.

He loved the marshal. He just didn't know if he could handle her dangerous job. He was so afraid of watching her die, like he had Julia. And although Julia's death had devastated him, Danna's would rip him to shreds. Because he loved her. Not the love of a childhood friend, but the deep, abiding love of the woman he wanted to spend his life with.

As they watched, a lone man walked out of the cave, arms raised to the sky.

"It could be a trap," Chas said to Rob. "A distraction to get us out in the

open so they can shoot us.”

He nodded. “My men’ll be careful.”

Chas watched as the other two cowhands came into sight on the far side of the clearing. He kept his rifle aimed at the cave, waiting. His finger tapped the trigger, nervous anticipation mounting.

Nothing.

Rob’s men reached the outlaw and yanked his arms behind his back.

“How many more are there?” one of the cowboys demanded.

“Just the two hurt ones.”

One of those was Hank Lewis.

Chas dared to go out in the open. He approached the cave. He had to know if Lewis was alive. Danna’s boots scraped against rock as he passed beneath her.

He slipped in to the cool darkness, keeping close to the wall, and let his eyes adjust. The kid sat against the farthest wall, unconscious, though a gun lay near his thigh.

Lewis was there, too. Unarmed, from the looks of it, lying prone on the ground.

Which meant there was nothing to stop Chas from killing him. Chas stood over the man who'd taken so much from him, and pointed his pistol at Lewis's heart.

* * *

Danna dropped to the ground as Chas ran into the cave.

Foolish man. They didn’t even know if the outlaw was telling the truth. Halverson could be lying in wait inside.

She rushed in after him, foolish herself. She had to stop Chas before he did something he'd regret.

Her eyes adjusted, and she saw Chas standing over the prostrate Lewis, his pistol aimed. His hand shook, but the tension in his shoulders told her everything she needed to know.

He was ready to shoot the man that had killed two people he loved.

Heart in her throat, she started toward him.

“You deserve to die,” Chas said.

“Chas.”

He didn't acknowledge her.

She prayed he wouldn't shoot. She'd have to arrest him if he did.

Lewis didn't respond. She was nearly there, but from this distance, she couldn't tell if he was even conscious.

As she drew near, she saw that Chas's whole body was trembling.

"Chas."

This time he turned his head, and even from the side, she could tell he was struggling with himself.

Please, God, don't let him do this. Slowly, feeling as if she were swimming through molasses, she touched Chas's arm.

And he let her push it down until his weapon pointed at the floor.

Chapter Twenty-Two

They rode into town to a hero's welcome, the three surviving outlaws strapped to the saddles of three horses.

Rob's men had made the difference. They were experienced operators and had tracked and captured Halverson and Big Tim. If Danna'd had men like them to help her, she wouldn't have lost her job in the first place.

And the best part was, Rob's cowhands had agreed to go with her to track down the last outlaw, the one the kid had admitted was probably guarding the rustled cattle. Before they could go after the cattle, they had to get the outlaws they'd already captured locked up in the jail.

Big Tim wouldn't shut up and had revealed that it'd been a chance sighting Danna riding in the ravines that had made them attempt to get rid of her. They'd caused the stampede that had nearly killed Chas and Danna.

Earlier in the day, Danna had realized that Halverson's horse created a crescent-shaped hoofmark. She'd been riding behind the animal when she'd noticed it. Her husband had been killed by a man who'd sworn to uphold the law. She would do her best to prove it to the judge when he came to town, and to see Halverson receive what he was due—the noose. To her surprise, people lined the streets and clapped as they walked their mounts through town to the jail. Several people called out to her, and one child even cheered and called her “the marshal.”

It sounded like they respected her, or at least respected the job she'd done, bringing down the bank robbers.

But too late.

Castlerock waited with Albert Hyer, one of the other town council

members, on the steps of the jailhouse.

“Where's my money?’ he demanded before she'd reined in.

She wanted to tell him off so badly that she had to grit her teeth to keep the words inside.

“The marshal's brother has custody of it,” Chas said, pulling his mount to a halt next to her and jerking his head to indicate Rob. “Kindly thank the marshal, and you can take your cash right over to your bank.” His voice brooked no argument.

Why did he keep calling her that? She hadn't gone after the robbers to reclaim her job, and it wasn't likely the council would agree to give it back to her. She hadn't been able to do the job alone, after all.

Castlerock looked a mite green, but he uttered the words, though it was obvious by his demeanor he didn't want to. “Thank you, Miz Carpenter.”

“That’s Mrs. O’Grady or Miss Marshal to you,” Chas said.

What? She shook her head even as Castlerock stalked off. The banker’s words were a reminder that her marriage was almost over. But what was Chas’s statement about? He’d been the one ready to go to Cheyenne for an annulment.

She looked away from him and waved to Katy, who rode in the back of the pack of riders, and pointed to her room above the jail. Danna had offered to let the girl stay with her as long as she needed to. She remembered the girl's questions from before. Danna also remembered how Fred had taken care of a similar teen who was lost and alone...and she determined that she would make Katy her family, like a little sister.

Rob tied off his mount at the hitching post across from the jail. She needed to talk to him, as well, to find out why he'd come for her. Maybe she'd get her brother back, too.

But she wanted a husband...a particular husband.

Will joined their group in front of the jail, but he ignored the group of businessmen. She warmed at his loyalty. “I'll take your mounts over to the livery, Marshal.”

She dismounted and handed the reins over to him, but she didn't let him leave without an impulsive hug. Without his help, Chas and Rob might not have reached her in time.

Hyer cleared his throat and stepped forward to the edge of the boardwalk. “Mrs. O'Grady, we'd like to reinstate you as marshal. We made a mistake in firing you.”

Her heart thudded in her ears. It seemed too good to be true.

"Where's Parrott? And Shipley? Did they agree to this, too?"

Hyer shook his head. Castlerock looked away. It was Hyer who spoke.

"After yer husband made such a passionate plea for deputies, several people came forward and admitted they'd been threatened not to help ya do your job. Parrott and Shipley ran outta town pretty quick. A coupla fellas went after 'em. We didn't have no part of their plan, and we want ya back as marshal."

She looked to Castlerock, who nodded. He still looked green, but his mouth was set and he didn't argue.

"You've got some loyal friends," said Hyer. "They made quite a case for you yesterday evening,"

She shot a look to Chas and mouthed *they*? But he shrugged.

"We've got three men who've agreed to work as your deputies." He listed three men who'd worked for Fred "And a possible fourth, as well. We've agreed to pay them a salary—not much, mind you—and they'll answer to you."

That would change everything. Make her life a whole lot easier. She wouldn't have to be in charge of the whole town, all day and all night. She'd have some help, men she knew she could trust.

Chas stepped to her side. "You should take the job back," he said quietly. "You deserve it. You'll do a good job."

She looked up at him, her hat brim shading her eyes and hopefully hiding them from the watchful gazes of her bosses. She could read the truth on his face, that he wanted her to take the job, and that he couldn't stay.

Not with a wife who had such a dangerous job. They needed to have a serious conversation, but this wasn't the place or the time. She looked at the councilmen and nodded. "Calvin is my home, and I'm proud to protect it."

She shook their hands, and they left. Rob's men were already untying the outlaws. She went to the jail to get their cells ready, leaving her temporary husband behind.

* * *

Chas meandered down the boardwalk, vaguely heading toward the hotel, his saddlebags over one shoulder.

Danna disappeared into the jail to lock up the three healthy outlaws and Hank Lewis. She wasn't willing to take the chance of putting Lewis at the doc's office, not after what had happened with Halverson springing the kid. He'd followed, but she didn't need his help, not with all these men available.

She'd looked exhausted. He hadn't wanted to add to her strain by trying to have a serious discussion after the night and the day she'd had.

So he'd slipped out, figuring she wouldn't even notice he was missing.

What was he supposed to do now?

When he'd become a deputy, the arrangement had been beneficial to both of them. He'd needed her help conquering the Wyoming terrain. She'd needed his support.

Now that she had all these other men to help her out, and now that his case was wrapping up, he was free to go.

But he didn't want to. The realization was powerful.

He loved his wife, and he didn't want to leave Calvin.

But how could he convince Danna not to go through with the annulment?

* * *

Evening was falling as Danna and Rob settled in to her room above the jail. Katy had pled exhaustion and was already asleep in Danna's bed.

"You did a good job today, Miss Marshal," Rob said, borrowing Chas's nickname. He sipped from his coffee mug.

Danna waved off his compliment.

"I'm serious. I was proud to ride with you."

"I wish you could stay longer," Danna said. Rob was leaving at first light, headed back to his ranch.

Rob leaned back in Fred's old chair, his lean form stretched out, legs turned toward the center of the room. "That's saying something, coming from someone who didn't want to see me for years."

A flush stole up her cheeks. "I wanted to see you. I just...I thought..."

"That I'd gotten so mad I stopped loving my own sister?"

She looked down at her hands clasped on the table. "I heard you and Fred that night. I think you must've thought I was out from the pain or exposure, I don't know. You said..."

"I said that Fred could have you and good luck. I didn't mean it."

“No?”

"No. And the only reason I let you marry him was because I knew how crazy he was about you."

Her face hot once again, Danna scratched at a scar in the tabletop. "I miss him, but..."

"But you've fallen in love with your deputy."

She nodded miserably. "The marriage was only to appease the town council. We'd planned to have it annulled on the grounds that we were coerced into it. He's... still in love with someone else."

"You sure about that? The man was sure fired up to come to your rescue."

She closed her eyes briefly so he wouldn't see the hope that unfurled in her heart. "There's something else I wanted to ask you. Chas said Fred had made notes about Halverson's involvement in his journal. Would you read it to me? I want to know if there are any more clues as to why Parrott and Shipley would pay off the men in town."

* * *

Late into the night, Rob closed the journal and placed it on the table. Danna wiped tears from her eyes, knowing Fred had given his life for this little town she loved so much. Knowing how much he'd loved her.

Rob stood to go and surprised her with an embrace.

"We won't go so long without seeing each other again," he said. "You and that one." He nodded to Katy, asleep in Danna's bed and softly snoring. "Come for Christmas. You've got enough help now to take a few days off." He paused for a moment, his eyes scrutinizing her face. "And bring your husband, too."

Chapter Twenty-Three

The timid knock came soon after Danna had descended from her room to the jail, leaving a sleeping Katy upstairs. Braced to face her husband, Danna was surprised when the door swung open to admit several women.

“Good morning, Mrs. Kendrick. Mrs. Stoll, how are you? And Anna! What are you doing in town so early?”

"It's Martha, dear."

“Marianne.” Several more women crowded into the jail behind the others, although all of them stayed a careful distance away from the cells and the rough-looking outlaws within.

“What—what are you all doing here?”

“We brought you some breakfast.” One of the women held up a cloth-covered basket.

"And jam." Someone else pressed two jars of ruby-red preserves into Danna's hands.

Their smiles surrounded her, warming her. But... “Why?”

Martha Stoll stepped forward. "Young lady, I know I've complained about your dog, but you've done a fine job as marshal, and you should know it."

“We want to thank you, Marshal,” came a voice from the back. “For sticking with the job, even when our men weren't a bit of help to you.”

Danna didn't know what to say. She'd thought the women had never liked her, but this outpouring of goodwill said just the opposite.

A second soft knock came and the door opened to reveal Corrine, who froze in the open portal, a bundle of baby in her arms. The women closest to

her turned their heads away; one even went so far as to sniff and put her nose in the air.

"Oh," Corrine said quietly, her eyes widening and a flush creeping into her cheeks. "I'll go—"

"Corrine!" Danna moved through the throng of women and grasped her friend's forearm, pulling her to the side of the room. "I was going to come see you this morning. I found out that Brent was working with Fred on the rustler case. Actually, Rob found out. It was all in the journal."

A whisper rustled among the women. Maybe it was best they'd all heard. She couldn't bear for her friend to be slighted when her husband had actually done something good for a change.

Corrine's eyes filled with tears. "Was?"

Putting an arm around her friend's shoulders, Danna led her to the desk chair. "I'm so sorry, Corrine. One of the outlaws told us he'd been killed. Helping Fred. Two of my new deputies went out to recover his body early this morning."

Corrine began to sniffle, but these weren't the sobs Danna had expected. A hand pushed a lacy handkerchief at Corrine, and she accepted it without looking up.

"Honey." A buttercup-yellow skirt swished around Danna's desk, and Mrs. Burnett, the preacher's wife, put a comforting arm around Corrine's shoulder. "That man tried his best for you. He really did." Danna wasn't so sure about that, but the other woman was still talking. "You should be proud he died helping Marshal Fred."

Corrine nodded, still pressing the handkerchief to her eyes with one hand while cradling the baby with the other. Suddenly she looked up with her teary eyes. "I forgot I came in here to tell you that I saw your deputy...er...your husband at the stagecoach office, buying a ticket."

Danna's face flamed. "We're not really married. It was all a show for the town council. We're getting an annulment."

"But you love him, don't you?" Marianne asked.

"Yes," she said, because she couldn't deny it anymore.

"Then you should fight for him." Corrine gripped Danna's arm. "Do whatever you have to do to make him want to stay."

Danna looked around at the expectant faces around her. She took a deep breath. "I'm going to need your help."

"All of us?"

"All of you."

* * *

Shaking with nerves, the skirts of her mama's blue dress swirling around her feet, Danna made her way down the boardwalk.

She felt foolish with this dress on and her hair put up as if she were attending a fancy ball. Was it too late to run back to her room?

"Miss Marshal, Miss Marshal!" Young Cody Billings ran up to her on the boardwalk, waving both arms. "Them deputies brought back those dirty council members. They're comin' to th' jail now."

She altered her direction to meet the deputies, grateful for any reprieve from facing Chas. She wanted to convince him to stay in Calvin, and trying to be feminine had seemed like a good idea until she'd seen the stranger in the looking glass. But with a roomful of expectant women behind her, she couldn't back out of the plan.

She was getting lots of stares on the street.

The lead deputy reined in his horse, eyes wide as if he didn't recognize her. He tipped his hat to her, then seemed to change his mind and took it off. "M-Miss Marshal. We got 'em." He waved to Shipley and Parrott, riding with bound hands between two other deputies.

"Good job. I've taken to carrying the jail keys with me, but I'll turn them over to you for a bit." She took a deep breath. "I have to go over to the train station and settle some business."

She'd stepped around his horse and was headed across the street when Shipley dropped to the ground. His hands wrapped around her neck and choked off her air.

She tried to break free, but he was strong and determined. She swung her elbow back and caught Shipley in the midsection. She heard the distinct sound of fabric ripping.

* * *

Chas's heart raced as he left the stagecoach office and headed toward the jail and a much-needed talk with his wife.

He stopped a moment to breathe deeply of the crisp Wyoming air. He did

love it here.

Loved the weathered buildings. The bustling activity on the streets. Even the crooked boardwalk that took him to the jailhouse.

Except, there was something different about Calvin since he'd headed into the mountains yesterday. There was a peace in the air, a sense that the town was safe, wholesome.

He was halfway to the jail when he saw the scuffle, a man choking a woman in a pretty blue gown. He was already moving toward them when he recognized Danna.

Two deputies moved to help her, reaching for Shipley.

He saw it unfolding before his eyes but was helpless to run faster. From horseback, Parrott pulled something from his boot.

A derringer. The man had a gun and was using his rope-bound hands to point it straight at Danna.

Chas drew and fired his pistol before he even blinked.

Parrott screamed in anger as Chas's bullet struck his wrist. His weapon dropped to the ground. Chas approached on shaking legs to find Danna with one pretty knee in Shipley's back.

"Why?" she asked, still panting from exertion. "Why did you do all this? Have Fred killed? Why did you hate us so much?"

The man beneath her remained silent.

"You've ruined it all," Parrott spat, as one of the other deputies took him roughly off his horse. "Your husband was eliminated because he started asking too many nosy questions. You were only appointed because you weren't supposed to figure any of it out."

Danna stood and let her deputy haul Shipley to his feet. The man looked beaten, defeated.

Chas approached, met her eyes, tried to offer a tiny smile.

Danna turned to Shipley. "I don't understand."

"We had a plan," Shipley said, voice nearly a monotone.

"Shipley..." Parrott warned. "Don't say another word."

"Parrott thought he could run the smaller ranchers out of the area if they lost enough cattle. He brought in a gang and had a few unsavory cowhands of his own."

"Shipley." Parrott lunged for his fellow town council member, but the deputy who had hold of his arm yanked him back.

"C'mon," the deputy said. "We'll get Doc to patch up your hands, and

then you're going to jail with the rest of 'em."

Shipley continued as if Parrott hadn't spoken at all. "It was unfortunate that Marshal Fred and Brent Jackson had to die, but they started asking questions of the wrong people. They got too close.

"With Halverson on our side, we planned to start extorting money from the businesses in town. We've heard of other...businessmen making good money that way."

"The only problem was Castlerock. He may be a selfish lout, but he's arrow straight."

"So you set up the robbery," Danna whispered, "thinking his bank would fold if the money was never recovered."

"It would've been best if Castlerock had left town, yes."

Chas couldn't believe the man spoke so calmly of the criminal enterprise they had masterminded.

"And the payoffs?" Chas asked. "So the men wouldn't help Danna?"

"At first no one wanted to work with a woman. They were glad to take the money. After that, we threatened to reveal they'd been bribed. They feared they'd ruin their standing in town, and that's how we kept them quiet."

"Marshal, I'm going to take him in now." The deputy stepped forward.

"Have him write out his confession first," she murmured. "For the judge when he gets to town."

With the mess sorted, Chas took Danna's arm and swung her up onto the boardwalk and out of the dusty street.

She looked up at him, her dark eyes questioning. She was something else, with her dark curls falling out of the coif, dirt smudged across her chin, one sleeve missing and a tear in the hem of her gown. He'd never seen anything so beautiful.

He wanted to sweep her into his arms, but he wasn't sure that gesture would be welcome.

"Hello," he said instead. "I was coming to talk to you."

Danna looked down at herself, and when she looked up again, he could see the distress on her face.

"You all right?" he asked, wondering if she was shaken up. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No, that's not it," she said, shaking her head. With a tiny sigh, she tried to smooth away the wrinkles and dirt from her skirt. Then she seemed to realize her sleeve was torn, and her shoulders slumped. "I guess I'm not

meant to be a lady.”

Her words confused him, as did the sudden tears that sprang to her eyes.

She looked down again, fingered her dusty skirt. "I had this grand plan," she whispered, "to show you I could be a lady as fine as your friends back in Boston. I put on this dress, let them put perfume on me—"

"You do smell nice."

"I let Marianne Kendrick do my hair." She fingered the hair that had fallen down around her ears. "And Merritt Harding promised she'd teach me to read. I thought I could impress you."

"You did all that for me?"

"Yes." She swallowed hard, and for a moment he was afraid she might cry. "Only..."

"Only, you had to do your job," he said, busting with pride.

Tired of looking at the crown of her head, he chucked her on the chin, waited until her luminous eyes met his gaze. "I won't complain if you want to wear a dress, but I like you fine in your trousers and vest."

Murmurs from nearby interrupted everything else he wanted to say. He looked around to find several townspeople on the streets, watching his interaction with Danna and not bothering to hide their curiosity.

"Can we talk someplace private?"

She nodded. "Katy went home with Corrine for the day, to help her take care of Ellie, so the room should be empty for now."

He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm so he could escort her home. Home. He liked the sound of that.

And he was dying to kiss her, but he didn't want to do it in front of the whole town.

She was unusually quiet, until they reached the staircase leading to her room. She hopped up on the first step and whirled to face him, pressing both palms against his chest. "Are you leaving town or not?"

They were out of sight of the main thoroughfare, so he did what he'd wanted to do since he'd caught sight of her on the street.

The extra height of that first stair put her face a few inches above his, but it was easy enough to grab her waist and draw her in for a kiss. A sweet, deep kiss, to tell her everything he wanted to say.

And from the way she kissed him back, it sure seemed like she returned his sentiments.

With a last, lingering touch of his lips, he joined her on that first step and

pressed her close, her cheek against his shoulder. "I'm not leaving," he said, voice husky.

"Hmm," she hummed, seemingly content to stay resting against him. He couldn't get enough of having her close like this.

Then, abruptly, she pushed away from him, eyes a little wild.

She took a step backward, moving up another step. Putting distance between them. His hands felt empty, so he braced them on both sides of the stair railing. "But you were at the stagecoach office. Corrine saw you at the ticket window."

He groaned. "Are there really no secrets in this town?"

Danna crossed her arms. She looked so vulnerable with her mussed hair and dress, her eyes shining like they were filled with tears.

"Darlin'." He purposely lengthened out the endearment, his voice a soft drawl. "I'm here to stay."

She blinked, looking a bit like a sleepy owl. "To stay," she repeated. "But..."

"I was inquiring as to the cost of a *pair* of tickets," Chas said slowly, "So I could take my wife to Boston. I thought we might go on a honeymoon trip."

She blinked. "You're going home?"

He nodded. "If you'll go with me."

"To make peace with your parents?"

"It's past time, wouldn't you say?"

Then she frowned. "But the annulment. We agreed."

He couldn't help the grin that quirked his lips. "Maybe you misunderstood my kiss. I thought it was pretty clear I'd changed my mind, but perhaps it wasn't." He kissed her again. And again, trying to show her everything he'd felt since he'd realized she'd gone after the outlaws alone, everything he wanted to share with her now. When they parted, he spoke into that crown of beautiful hair. "Just so there's no misunderstanding, I love you. I want you to be my wife forever."

"I love you, too," she whispered. "I'm glad I got the chance to tell you."

She squeezed his middle, burrowed her face into his chest. "I almost hate to ask, but...will you mind terribly if I'm still the marshal?"

"I won't mind. I'm going to talk to the town council—what's left of it—and see if they'll let you keep me on as deputy, I think we work pretty well together."

"You won't mind me having a dangerous job? Getting into trouble

sometimes?"

"Not as long as I'm there to help get you out of it." He paused, but this seemed like the right moment. "And in the future, if we want to buy a homestead, you can teach me to ranch."

Epilogue

Christmas Eve

Chas woke in the gray of early morning to the sound of someone getting violently sick.

He touched the space in the bed beside him only to find it empty. "Danna?"

She hummed from across the room—the chamber pot?—and retched again.

He vaulted out of bed, the wooden floor freezing against his bare feet, misjudged the distance, and banged his shin against Katy's cot. He bit off a cry and sensed the teen sit up in the semi-darkness.

"Wha's goin' on?" Katy mumbled.

"Sorry, kid." This apartment had never been meant for three people. He couldn't even imagine how Danna and her first husband had managed in the small space.

He heard rustling sounds, like Danna was moving. "I'm fine. It's nothing."

He wasn't sure he believed her. Those noises hadn't sounded like *nothing*.

"I promised I'd stop by the saloon early to assess the damage from last night's brawl," she said. "I'll catch up with you in a while."

Before he could get one word of protest out, the door opened, sending a shaft of morning light into the room. It closed just as quickly, plunging the room back into shadows.

Why would Danna rush out like that, right after she'd been sick?

Suspensions swirled. He sat on the edge of the bed, trying to make sense of it and still groggy from the split-second waking.

"She sick again?" Katy asked.

"Again?"

There was a beat of silence from the girl. "Uh—"

Chas threw open the curtains over the bed—the same window he and Danna had escaped from those months ago. The first rays of sunlight illuminated Katy's tousled head and guilt-filled expression.

He raised one eyebrow and waited her out.

She groaned and put her head in her hands. "I guess you were having

breakfast with the town council that morning."

The monthly meeting had been one of the first things Danna had delegated to him. Meeting with the three-man council kept the marshal and her deputies apprised of their priorities, and things had run fairly smoothly of late. The banker Castlerock had even come to appreciate Danna and her deputies.

"She asked me not to tell you, said it was probably some kind of bug."

Obviously not, if she was sick again today.

Katy peeked through her fingers. "I don't mean to intrude in y'all's business," she said softly. "It's just..."

"The room is too small for all of us," he finished.

It wasn't a new problem. Both she and Danna were secretive and embarrassed when it came to their womanly time. He'd been hard-pressed to think of a hiding place for Christmas gifts for both females and had called in a favor from the mercantile owner to hold their gifts at the store until later today. The three of them couldn't cook a meal or relax properly in the evenings without bumping elbows or stepping on each other's toes.

In the autumn, he'd pressed Danna about finding a homestead, like she'd mentioned in those crazy first days they'd been married. She'd claimed she wasn't ready.

But he'd wondered—quite a few times—if she meant *he* wasn't ready. His horseback riding skills had improved markedly, but he didn't know anything about farming, raising crops or animals, carving a living out of the land.

Things had been good, if crowded, in their little family. Oh, they'd had bumps along the way. He and Danna occasionally knocked heads, and the independent Katy had a teenage temper tantrum every once in awhile.

Was it possible Danna wasn't as content as she seemed?

Katy pulled a shawl over her nightdress, making no move to get up. School had let out for a week for Christmas, and he supposed she was in no rush to get around.

"If she doesn't want you to know she's in the family way, you should probably pretend you didn't hear anything this morning," Katy suggested.

Suddenly, his ears were full of rushing wind.

"In the family way?" he asked weakly.

Katy's eyes grew big. "I mean—she didn't tell me she was expecting. It's just a guess."

A conclusion he hadn't jumped to.

But the girl could be right.

And if she was, why hadn't Danna told him?

Did she even know?

She'd been raised by her grandfather and a much-older brother. Had the topic of conception ever been broached? Then again, didn't being raised on a ranch mean one saw animals in all stages of childbearing?

"I'm sorry," Katy mumbled. Her expression revealed genuine distress.

"Nothing to be sorry for," he said. "This apartment is just too small."

And now he had one great big reason to find them a new place to live.

* * *

Danna tapped the pencil she held against the school desk. Her eyes watered from the smoky fire Merritt was lighting in the classroom stove.

Or maybe it was more of the overflow of emotions she'd been experiencing over the past week and a half.

For so long, she'd thought something was wrong with her. That she couldn't have children.

Apparently, she'd been wrong. And after a visit with doc earlier in the week had confirmed her suspicions, she'd been constantly near tears with joy. And a little bit of fear.

Would she be a good mother? What would Chas think? Would he expect her to resign her position as marshal?

All the riot of emotions had kept her from telling Chas. She needed to do things right. And dissolving into a blubbing mess wasn't the way she wanted to handle it.

But this morning had proved that she needed to tell him. She hated getting sick, hated even more having others witness it.

"Is everything all right?"

At Merritt's question, Danna glanced up from the primer on the school desk. Her spectacles slipped, and she nudged them up the bridge of her nose with one knuckle. She was wedged into one of the students' desks, the same way she had been every morning this autumn.

The schoolmarm had generously given of her time for an hour each morning before classes started, often setting up the classroom for the day and of late, lighting the stove while Danna worked on reading.

She'd made more progress than she'd thought she would and had already progressed to the third-level book. Merritt was a good teacher.

But right at this moment, she stared at Danna with unabashed curiosity. "You've been distracted all morning."

Danna flushed, sure all the emotional turmoil she was feeling showed in her expression. "It's not—"

The door opened on a gust of wind, and Penny Castlerock blew in. Penny had made a habit of coming to visit the last ten or fifteen minutes of Danna's time. She gave lessons, too, in styling Danna's hair.

"You look terrible," the young woman said upon glancing at Danna. "Are you sick?"

Danna dropped her pencil and put both hands over her cheeks to hide the hot blush that rose. "No." Not really.

Penny's sharp eyes didn't miss a thing. They narrowed on Danna. "Are you—?"

"I can't say." Danna stood from the desk so quickly that she bumped it, sending the pencil flying to the floor. "I have to go."

Penny was grinning as Danna passed her on the way to the door. It blew open in the brisk wind, but she caught it before it banged against the wall.

"What?" asked Merritt.

"She's expecting," Penny murmured as the door snapped closed behind Danna.

She needed to find Chas. And tell him before anyone else figured out her secret.

Her stomach started roiling again as she checked in at the jailhouse. Deputy Cal Newton sat behind the desk. No Chas.

"What do you mean he went to the livery?" Before he could answer, she said, "Never mind." She left the wide-eyed deputy behind and went to the stable to find Will.

He was just as clueless as the deputy had been, but he saddled Danna's horse, and she rode out.

She reined in her horse at the edge of town.

It was pointless, she knew. Chas could've headed in any direction. She didn't even know what his errand was. If a crime had been committed, wouldn't her other deputy know about it? And why hadn't he come to find her? He knew she'd be at the schoolhouse. And it was Christmas Eve. What possible errand could he have, today?

The secrecy bothered her.

Which was ironic, considering she was keeping a secret from him, too.

She tucked her chin into the lapel of her slicker, vacillating between returning to the apartment or finding further distraction in town.

And then she saw Chas, riding in from the east. She turned her mount to meet him.

"What're you doing out in the cold?" he called out before she'd even come near.

What a funny thing to say. She narrowed her eyes, but his expression didn't reveal any clues.

He'd become a much more accomplished horseman and now reined his mount before quickly sliding down. He reached up and helped her from her horse. "Is there something you'd like to come clean about?"

Heat rushed into her face. "You know? About the baby?" This wasn't the way she'd wanted to tell him. She tipped her face up but couldn't read his expression at all. Was he angry she hadn't told him directly?

"I didn't suspect until Katy said something."

"Are you angry?"

His eyes glittered. "Are you?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. I was... surprised when Doc told me. After being married to Fred for so long..." She blushed again, because she didn't know if Chas really liked hearing about her first husband, though he'd always listened when she'd spoken of Fred.

He reached out for her hand. His clasp was cool and dry.

"Surprised, and... happy?" he asked. His eyes searched her face.

Emotion boiled up and tears filled her eyes. "Yes," she whispered. "Happy."

A smile spread across his face. "I wonder if she'll look like her ma." He reached to cup her cheek. "I hope so."

She gave a wet giggle.

"Where've you been, anyway?"

That glitter in his eyes got lighter. "When we talked about it before, you put me off. But with a little one on the way, I don't think we can put it off any longer. I staked out a homestead for us."

Her surprise must've shown in her expression. "You what?"

He gave her a dry smile. "I didn't pick it out all on my own. Last time Rob was in town, we rode out and visited a few places. He gave me some

good advice."

"So you've been thinking about this for a while, hmm?"

He smiled down at her. "I've been thinking I might like to have my morning coffee at a real kitchen table. And sleep in a real bed, a big one. And that I'd like to have room for a cradle and rocking chair for that babe when she gets here. A room for Katy to have all to herself, so she stops feeling like she gets in our way all the time."

She'd thought she was the only one who noticed how careful Katy was not to cause too much trouble. After being on her own for months, the girl seemed incredibly worried about being thrown out. Which Danna would never let happen. Katy was part of their family now. She just had to believe it.

"We'll want to make sure she knows the baby won't be edging her out of our affections," Danna said softly.

"Yes," Chas agreed. "And what about the town's affections? I'd hate for you to get 'a little bit shot' wearing that badge."

She pursed her lips. "Perhaps we can discuss me being behind the desk more until the baby gets here."

"I appreciate that." He looked beyond her toward the wide prairie. "If you're sure you aren't too cold, we could ride out and see the new land. I've got a two-bedroom cabin plotted out."

A home of her own. A teenage daughter and a baby on the way. And a husband to love forever.

"That sounds perfect. Happy Christmas."

Bonus epilogue

Danna was in no rush as she tied off her horse to the hitching post. Somehow the stretch of boardwalk between the post and the marshal's office-slash-jail had grown in size. That patch of wood seemed foreboding.

Or maybe the unease that filled her belly was because she knew her husband would be inside, behind the desk.

These months of being married had been both a joy and a challenge. She wasn't used to sharing herself with someone else. Letting them into the vulnerable places inside.

Nausea rolled in Danna's stomach and she pressed her hand flat against her belly to try and subdue it. It didn't help.

Her friend Corrine had told her that the constant sick feeling would fade as the baby grew inside her. Today, she wasn't sure whether the feeling was from the baby at all, or the anticipation of her husband's expression when she walked through the door.

During her tenure as marshal, she'd faced bank robbers, horse thieves, murderers.

This was worse.

Because the criminals she faced could do her physical harm, but just one look from her husband could flay her open inside. Loving Chas was both the easiest thing she'd ever done. And the most difficult.

There was nothing for it. She crossed the boardwalk, her boots thumping on the planks. She pushed open the door.

Chas looked up from the desk. His hat rested on the surface, on top of a disorganized pile of papers. His hair was ruffled as if he'd run his fingers

through it more than once. Faint lines around his eyes made him look tired.

For a beat, her breath caught in her chest when his eyes softened.

And then his expression seemed to shutter. The smile he gave her was cool and distant before he looked back down at the desk.

"Marilee sent over some lunch from the cafe." He motioned to a cloth-covered dish on the corner of the desk.

Danna's stomach tightened into a knot, the sick feeling threatening to make her breakfast revolt.

"Thank you."

Was this what their marriage had come to? Empty conversation? A husband who couldn't even look at her?

The risks she takes daily frighten me.

She hadn't meant to read Chas's letter, addressed to his sister back in Boston. It was unfinished and had been left out on the small writing desk in their bedroom. She wasn't a snoop. But the reading lessons she'd been taking from Merritt *worked* and now whenever she saw words, her brain tried to process them. Her eyes had followed the written lines of their own accord.

And now that one private thought, straight from her husband's heart, wouldn't leave her.

Chas sighed and rubbed one hand over his mouth. "There's something we should speak about."

Her heart pattered in her chest, and her mouth went dry. "Perhaps we should wait until later."

He glanced around the empty interior. There was no one in either cell and the next deputy wouldn't be on duty for hours. "Wait for what? For Katy to overhear us?"

Their teenage adopted daughter was sensitive to any tension between them. Danna didn't want Katy to be upset.

Nor did she want to have this conversation.

She wanted the whole thing to just go away. Disappear.

She was frozen in place, waiting for him to go on. She swallowed hard.

"We need to plan for when the baby comes."

The risks she takes daily frighten me.

It didn't help that she'd been expecting him to bring up the baby and her job as marshal. She still felt his words like a physical blow.

Even so, she made her words measured and slow. "I don't see why anything has to change."

A look of disbelief crossed his face. “That’s absurd. You can’t really think that.”

She bristled at his statement, but he quickly went on.

“How many times have we both taken a lucky punch breaking up a barroom brawl? You had a gun pointed at you last week before that old farmer could be talked down. Our jobs are dangerous.”

The risks she takes daily frighten me.

Would he really ask her to leave the job she loved? She’d worked so hard—harder than any man—both as Fred’s deputy and now as the marshal. She’d finally won over her town.

She couldn’t walk away from her job now. She didn’t want to.

“It’s too risky for both—”

“Stop!” she interrupted him before he could give the ultimatum that would tear their marriage apart. “I can’t talk about this right now. I can’t believe you’d ask me to—” *Give up my badge.*

Chas looked stricken at her vehement words and she realized she’d raised her voice to him. The first time she’d shouted at him in anger.

Misery trickled over her.

Before she could apologize, a knock sounded at the door.

Maybe it was selfish of her to be relieved, but she whirled to answer it before Chas could say another word.

* * *

Two days after the near-argument, a gunshot echoed down the gully.

The sound registered and Danna dropped to the ground, dust puffing up into her face. She’d moved just in time. Rocks and dirt chipped away from the gully wall, in the place where she’d just been standing.

She rolled to the left so that she was hidden behind an outcropping.

She’d been ignoring the way her belly curdled as she and Chas had left town on horseback, chasing Rudy Clark, a notorious outlaw who’d passed through town and been spotted by a vigilant—nosy—Mrs. Stoll.

But now, her quick, jerky movements were too much. She lost her battle against nausea and vomited, turning her head at the last second.

She wanted to cry at the unfairness of it. She couldn’t control her own bodily function.

But there was no time for that.

There'd been two gunshots before the third that had been aimed in her direction. Two shots turned further down the gully.

It had only been a quarter-hour ago that she and Chas had split up after they'd watched Clark disappear into this gully two miles outside of town.

What if Chas had been exposed when the shots were fired? What if he was hit?

Just the thought of it made her stomach rebel and she lost its contents all over again.

Her limbs were shaky. She didn't even know if she could hold her rifle steady enough to aim it.

Maybe Chas was right. Maybe she should give up being marshal. It *was* dangerous.

And now that she was carrying a baby—a baby she very much wanted—she had more to live for.

After Fred's death, she had given up hope of having her dearest, most secret dream. A family of her own.

But then Chas had burst into her life unexpectedly. And Katy. And this new baby.

Maybe she was in the wrong.

But...

For so long, she'd struggled to prove herself to the town of Calvin. She'd fought and she'd worked late hours into the night.

Maybe what she'd achieved was enough. Taking down the corrupt members of the town council. Protecting Calvin from a gang of murderers and horse thieves.

Were these scant months as marshal enough?

Her swirling thoughts slowed, along with the beat of her heart. Only a few moments had passed, long enough for her to catch her breath. She had to keep fighting.

Clark was out there. So was Chas.

It was time to take control of this situation.

She fished a palm-sized mirror from her inside vest pocket and angled her body so she could extend the mirror past the edge of the outcropping and scan the landscape.

It required patience she didn't feel at the moment to scour the area foot by foot. She thought the barely visible patch of black thirty feet down the gully

must be Clark. He wasn't moving.

Chas's location and status remained unknown.

She trusted her husband. As long as he was able, he was going to execute her plan to surround Clark.

She readied her rifle, and a sense of calm and rightness settled over her. She could hit a chipmunk at thirty yards. Thirty feet was nothing.

She didn't relish the thought of taking another man's life, but Clark had fired first. She wouldn't allow him to fire on Chas again.

She whistled a trill of notes that mimicked a warbler. Just like her grandfather had taught her.

Chas recognized the signal and returned a single, piercing whistle.

Hearing it, she had to blink back relieved tears. She took a deep breath and called out. "Stop shooting and come out with your hands up. You're surrounded. I'm a sharpshooter and so's my deputy."

It was a stretch of the truth. Chas's shooting skills had improved since he'd joined up as her deputy but he couldn't be called a sharpshooter.

There was a long silence. She let it linger, watching with her mirror to make sure Clark wasn't trying to run.

Fred had always said sometimes it was better to let a person stew. Facing the consequences could change a body's mind.

She hadn't thought about that in a long time.

Would Fred have asked her to step down as deputy if she'd gotten pregnant when he'd been alive?

She didn't know.

But she did know she wasn't willing to sacrifice her relationship with her husband over this. Chas hadn't had a chance to lay out his ultimatum, but she'd still let her pride get in the way and acted rashly.

She needed to reconcile with him.

But first, they had to take Clark in.

She was getting ready to fire a warning shot when Clark shouted.

"Don't shoot. I'm out of ammunition."

In the mirror, she watched him stand up with his hands raised.

She let a few seconds go by to make sure he didn't try to reach for a weapon. When she was certain he was telling the truth, she stood from her crouch behind the outcropping.

She kept her rifle trained on him. "Toss your weapon away," she said. "Move real slowly."

Clark used one hand to toss away a revolver. She hasn't got a good look at him as he had ridden away. Certainly not enough of a look to know whether he had a rifle in his possession.

Chas approached slowly from behind Clark. He was being careful, using scrub trees and boulders for cover, just in case.

Once Chas had gotten close enough to ascertain that Clark was unarmed, Danna released a breath and began making her way toward the two men. Chas had Clark's hands bound by the time she reached them.

As she neared, she saw blood on her husband's cheek. It looked like an abrasion, but that didn't mean he wasn't injured anywhere else.

"Are you hurt?" she asked him.

He shook his head, his glance jumping to her and then bouncing away.

"What about you?" he asked in a low voice.

"I'm fine." She tried to hold his eyes, so she could convey that both she and the baby were unharmed, but he didn't look at her again.

His lips were pinched in a thin line. She had really hurt him, with her refusal to listen.

She was going to do everything in her power to make things right.

* * *

Danna dabbed at the scrape on Chas's cheek, just below his eye. He winced slightly at the sting of the antiseptic she'd applied to the damp cloth.

They'd escorted Clark to the jail and left another deputy in charge. It had been a quiet ride home, a tense silence held between them.

They'd seen Katy in town, chatting outside the livery stable with her friend Will. Danna knew the girl would be along shortly. There wouldn't be much time for a private conversation.

It would have to be now.

Chas allowed her to complete her examination of his scrape. When she would've moved away, he caught her waist in his hands. He was still sitting down, so she had to gaze down into his dear face.

"Shouldn't you see the doctor?" he asked.

Danna felt one corner of her mouth kick up in a smile. "I'm fine. I wasn't hit. Clark is a bad shot."

"Still. I'd feel better if he looked you over."

He was genuinely worried about her and the concern in his eyes made it easier for her to lay one hand on his shoulder. "He'll have closed up for the day. If it's important to you, I can stop by his office tomorrow."

"Thank you."

The relief in his expression before he dipped his head warmed the deep place inside her, a place that had gone cold as the distance of the last few weeks had grown between them.

Today, for those terrible moments when she had believed Chas might've been hurt... The agony she'd felt had cleared away her indecision. For the first time, she'd begun to understand how he felt.

She didn't want this distance between them any longer. So she sat down on his knee, letting her hand curve around the back of his neck.

He looked surprised but his arms tugged tighter around her waist

"I don't want to fight," she said in a small voice. "If you want me to give up the badge, I will." The words cut her throat like glass and she had to hide her face on his shoulder to get them out.

He made a noise, a grunt of surprise, but he didn't try to move or force her to lift her face.

His hand closed over hers on her lap. "Why would I want that?"

"I accidentally read part of your letter to Erin. The part where you talked about the risks that I have to take as part of the job."

He squeezed her hand. "It's true that your job frightens me sometimes, but I would never ask you to give it up. You love your job."

"Then...?"

"Yesterday, in your office, I was trying to say that one of us should consider stepping away from the job. Staying home to care for the baby. We shouldn't both put ourselves at risk. But I meant for it to be me."

She raised her head, stunned, to see his face. "You would want to do that?"

The half-laugh he gave was slightly exasperated. "Did you really think I would expect you to quit being marshal?" He tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. "I fell in love with the marshal. I married the marshal. Why should I expect you to give up your job now?"

Emotion welled up and she closed her eyes, afraid tears would pool there.

Chas let his thumb trail over her cheek. "What I wrote to Erin... Of course, it frightens me sometimes. I know you don't put yourself in unnecessary danger. But there are evil people out there."

His vulnerability made her brave enough to open her eyes. She swallowed hard as she met his gaze. “Thank you for trusting me. I’ll be as careful as I can.”

He nodded, a tip of his chin. “I know.”

He’d only barely brushed her lips with a kiss when they heard Katy at the door. Chas broke away with a groan, leaning his forehead against hers.

And when she stepped inside and groused about their embrace, Danna and Chas shared a smile.

* * *

Exclusive Sneak Preview

Be the first to read CHAPTER ONE from Lacy's new release WILD HEART'S HAVEN, coming in early 2024...

"Hollis will be out with the lead wagon."

The woman walking beside Owen Mason barely acknowledged his words and he felt a stirring of irritation.

He worked to quash it.

Rachel Duncan might be the stubbornest, most independent woman he'd ever met. She might bother him like a burr under his saddle. Make his skin itch like it was crawling with ants.

But things couldn't go on as they were.

And Owen had promised to marry her.

That's why he needed Hollis Tremblay, the wagon master of their company. To perform the ceremony.

The sun had been up for almost an hour. The wagon train camp along the Platte River was bustling with activity as every traveler, even the children, helped prepare to pull out for the day.

Owen needed to find Hollis, fast. The bugle—the signal to pull out—was about to blow. He skirted a girl no older than ten who was trying to shoo two chickens into a large wicker basket.

"Sorry."

He glanced over his shoulder at Rachel's murmured apology to see

chickens scattering in opposite directions. The girl's basket was on the ground and she was glaring at Rachel.

Rachel had one hand pressed against the opposite elbow as if she'd bumped it.

Probably bumped it on the little girl. Had she run into her?

It was plausible, given Rachel's condition. The woman was pregnant and due to give birth in the next few weeks. He doubted she could see her feet when she was standing up, and she was clumsy. He'd seen it himself, watched her knock over a pail of fresh water from the creek because she hadn't seen it on the ground, hidden by her skirts.

She caught his eyes and her lips pinched. She always wore a sour expression when she looked at him.

Guilt surged. Maybe he deserved it.

He slowed his stride slightly so she could keep up, but the urgency inside him didn't go away.

He wanted to get this over with.

Owen came across Leo and Evangeline near their wagon. His older half-brother had fallen in love on the earliest days of the trail and married Evangeline.

Their campsite was completely packed up. The fire had been put out completely. Evangeline's young sister, Sarah, played on the wagon seat, away from the dangerous hooves of the oxen that were already in their traces.

Leo must've thought everyone else around was too busy to pay attention, judging by the way he and Evangeline stood so close against the wagon.

Leo had his arms around Evangeline's waist, and as Owen watched, he raised one hand to brush against Evangeline's cheek. The clear affection and love in Leo's expression twisted Owen up inside.

It didn't matter. Owen had no use for a love match. Or any match at all. He was going through with this because it was the right thing to do.

Leo must've caught sight of Owen striding through camp because he glanced over his shoulder and then dropped his hand, though he didn't look embarrassed to be caught snuggling his wife.

"You seen Hollis?" Owen called.

Leo shook his head negatively. "You seen Coop?"

"I haven't," Owen responded. Coop was Leo's younger brother, no relation to Owen.

Owen stopped abruptly and Rachel almost plowed into him. He stopped

her forward momentum with a hand on her elbow, though he quickly dropped it. She gave him a squinty-eyed glare.

Owen turned to Rachel. "Why don't you wait here? I'll go fetch Hollis."

"It will be quicker if I go with you."

He couldn't recall a conversation with Rachel where she hadn't argued with him. He felt irritation, stinging like nettles all over his skin, and rolled his shoulders to try and get rid of the feeling.

"We'll need witnesses anyway." He was aware of Leo's sharp sideways glance, but continued, "Just stay put."

He heard the gurgle of her stomach. His eyebrows raised of their own volition. "Have you eaten anything today?"

Her frown was answer enough.

He looked past Rachel to Evangeline, who was speaking to Sarah. He called out, "Can you help Rachel scrounge up some breakfast?"

Evangeline murmured a quiet, "Of course," but he was already striding away, intent on finding Hollis so he could get this over with.

Leo jogged a few steps to fall into step beside Owen.

"What do you need Hollis for? And witnesses?"

Owen wasn't used to being on the other end of Leo's big brother inquisition. Leo was two years older, which made Owen the same age as Collin and Coop, Leo's younger brothers from another father.

Owen had grown up in California, never knowing he had a brother and sister until his father had been dying of consumption and revealed it on his deathbed. Owen had made a difficult decision to go back east to try and find his siblings.

He'd found them in a spot of trouble.

Leo hadn't wanted anything to do with Owen those first weeks. Owen had thought things had smoothed over, but judging by the frown and that muscle ticking in his brother's jaw, things were still a little tumultuous.

"What do you need Hollis for?" Leo repeated.

Owen might as well tell him. It wasn't easy to keep secrets on the trail. With only a flimsy piece of canvas between you and your next neighbor, it was far too easy to overhear conversations.

"I'm marrying Rachel."

Leo snorted, but then grew serious when he realized Owen wasn't joking. "You can't marry her. You hate each other."

"I don't hate her." He couldn't say the same for her. Not for certain.

At their first meeting, she had been pointing a gun—empty at the time, but he hadn't known that—at Owen's younger brother, August. So Owen had tackled her to the ground. She'd been terrified as she'd hidden from the men that had massacred her wagon train, and it had been dark, and he hadn't realized until everything was over that she was a *she*, and that she was pregnant.

Even if she had forgiven him for that, there was other bad blood between them.

"Maybe you don't hate her, but you sure don't like her."

Leo was right. Owen and Rachel couldn't seem to help arguing at every turn.

He sighed and stopped, turning to face his brother.

"It's my fault Daniel got himself killed." It was the first time he'd said the words out loud. But not the first time he'd thought them.

Leo's frown deepened. "How d'you figure? Daniel was a bully who tried to steal a horse, then tried to steal a wagon."

Rachel's brother had been shot in the middle of a gunfight when Owen and Leo and the others from their company had been defending against an outlaw band who'd tried to murder them and steal their supplies and animals—the same outlaw band that had killed Rachel's other family.

"I should've tied him hand and foot," Owen said.

Or had one of the younger men hold him at gunpoint. Given him a horse and sent him on his way.

Any choice but the one Owen had made could've resulted in a different outcome.

The other men from the wagon train—including the one Daniel had attempted to steal a horse from—had wanted him hanged. Owen had thought he was sparing Daniel's life to bring him to the fort.

Daniel hadn't survived that long.

And Owen might never forget the keening wail Rachel had let out when she'd seen her brother's lifeless body.

Leo's voice shook him out of that terrible memory. "Guilt isn't something to build a marriage on."

Leo was as serious as Owen had ever seen him. His voice held an edge Owen hadn't heard in weeks.

But at Leo's words, Owen felt his shoulders relax. "It's only until we reach Oregon," he told his brother. "Then we'll have it annulled."

Leo scowled.

“What?” Owen was honestly confused at his brother’s response.

“You’d marry her and walk away?” Now Leo sounded offended. And as far as Owen was concerned, this wasn’t his business.

“This isn’t a love match.” Owen couldn’t help it. He was bristling at Leo’s commanding tone. “It’s an agreement between the two of us.”

Leo sneered. “It sounds like something our pa would’ve done. He left one wife behind easily enough.”

Was that what Leo was worried about? “I won’t leave her penniless.”

Leo shook his head. “I thought you were different. But there’s a lot of Pa in you, isn’t there?”

Owen took offense to that. “Our father was an upstanding man. A man of honor—”

“Except when he walked away from his family.”

Leo’s words felt like a slap. He wasn’t done yet. “And you’re gonna do the same.”

Leo whirled on his heel and stomped off, and Owen was left fuming. He strode through a couple of parked wagons, grateful there weren’t any travelers nearby to have heard the words exchanged by the brothers.

Leo had no right to talk to him that way. Leo didn’t understand.

Owen was trying to do right by Rachel. Maybe it wasn’t entirely his fault that her brother was a no-account thief, who didn’t mind bullying his pregnant sister when he got drunk. But he’d been a part of what had happened.

Marrying Rachel meant she’d have the protection of his name until they reached Oregon. That was enough to settle the debt between them.

It didn’t matter whether Leo liked it or not. Owen had lived his entire life until the past nine months believing he was the older brother. Living it out. He took care of his own. He was a man.

And he was man enough to make this decision.

Rachel felt blood boiling in her face as she stood at Owen's side in front of Hollis. Prickles of awareness skittered over her skin as if too many eyes were watching her. Owen had chosen a spot out of the way of foot traffic, blocked from the view of most of the company by a couple of parked wagons.

So maybe the itch between her shoulder blades was her imagination. Or a

result of her misgivings.

Owen's brother August was the only person she considered a friend on the wagon train. He stood slightly behind the two of them with his wife Felicity at his side.

It was telling that Leo hadn't reappeared when Owen had returned with Hollis.

She'd seen the way Leo had looked at her when he'd trotted off with Owen. She recognized the way he'd spoken to his brother. Arguing, that's what he'd done.

He didn't approve of her.

It seemed no one in this company did.

Hollis and Owen exchanged a wordless glance and her stomach dipped for a moment.

"You find me one person who will speak up for him," the wagon master had pointed to Daniel. "One person, and we'll take the two of you to the fort like my captains promised."

She blinked away the memory of the hard light in the man's eyes, but the memory of that threat still burned like icy fire in her bones. Owen was one of the captains. Marrying Owen meant she would be a captain's wife. She couldn't be abandoned out here in the wild if she was a captain's wife.

Hollis moved his intense stare to Rachel. "You sure this is what you want?"

She couldn't forget how precarious her position on the wagon train was. Her voice caught as she replied, "I'm certain."

Owen didn't so much as twitch beside her. She couldn't help an awareness of the man. He was several inches taller than her Evan had been. Evan had preferred a clean shave, while Owen sported several days' worth of dark stubble as if he was too busy for neat grooming.

Hollis didn't ask them to face each other, just started talking.

"We're gathered here in the sight of God and these witnesses..."

She couldn't help thinking of how different this was from her wedding to Evan, only two years ago.

The morning sun was beating down on her head and a breeze tugged strands of her hair into her eyes. The camp was noisy, with oxen bawling and children shouting. A dog barked.

When she'd married Evan, there'd been a reverent hush in the small church that she'd attended faithfully with her parents since she'd been a small

girl. Her father had given her away. Her mother had sniffled back tears from the first pew.

Evan had faced her, his hands trembling slightly when he clasped hers.

Owen didn't so much as look at her.

"...considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained. First, for the procreation of children..."

She ignored the sudden smarting of tears behind her nose.

Evan would never know his child, the one she'd carried for eight months. He'd died violently, suddenly, a mere two weeks ago.

"...a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication..."

Hollis's words barely registered as she stared straight ahead. And when they did, she couldn't help the sniff. Owen could barely stand her. Surely she was the last person he'd want that way.

They both knew this marriage was in name only. He didn't think of her like that and she had no romantic inclinations toward him.

"...for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have for the other, both in prosperity and adversity."

Now Owen did twitch. His head tipped slightly toward her, and she'd registered the movement before she'd thought better of it and found herself caught in his blue-eyed gaze.

She should feel a pang of guilt, shouldn't she? Hollis's words as part of the ceremony—such as it was—were the crux of her dilemma. She needed Owen's company, needed his help.

His eyes narrowed slightly and she dropped her gaze.

She couldn't imagine the man offering her comfort. Not with the way he felt about her.

His name and his help were enough.

She still couldn't understand why he'd made the offer to marry her, but she wasn't fool enough to turn it down.

She had nothing to offer him. No worldly goods. No money. He couldn't want her company.

It mattered not what his motives were. He'd promised to get her to Oregon. Somehow, she'd beg or borrow money to tag along with an eastbound company. Go home.

More tears smarted at the thought of the small cottage she'd shared with Evan—sold now, and most of their furniture with it. Of her mother, back in the small town where Rachel had grown up. Rachel blinked the tears away.

The baby twisted strongly inside her and she couldn't hold back a small gasp. She pressed one hand against the lower part of her belly. This earned a look from both Owen and Hollis.

"Keep going?" Hollis asked.

Face flushed, she nodded.

"If any man can show just cause why these two should not be married, let him speak now or forever hold his peace."

For a moment, her chest was locked tight with a breath that wouldn't draw. Would August speak?

I can't marry you. Not when my heart belongs to someone else. In a fit of desperation, she'd asked August to marry her, to protect her. He'd chosen Felicity instead. The two of them were clearly in love. And he had to know Rachel was marrying his brother for mercenary reasons.

Surely August had concerns. Maybe the same ones Leo had.

But no one spoke until Hollis cleared his throat. "You two gonna face each other?"

It seemed to take an interminably long time for Owen's feet to shift. She hadn't intended to move until he did and there was a faint frown on his lips when they fully faced each other.

"Clasp hands," Hollis said.

"That's all right—"

"No, thank you—"

Owen's refusal, spoken at the same time as Rachel's prim words, made August cough. Or was he covering a laugh?

Hollis wasn't amused. "That wasn't a question. You want me to continue or not?"

There was a long beat before Owen reached out both hands, palms up.

Warily, she slipped her hands into his larger ones. His clasp was warm and dry.

"Wilt thou have this woman as they wedded wife... Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor and keep her... as long as ye both shall live?"

Hollis's words knocked into her with the same force she'd felt that first night when Owen had tackled her to the ground.

It isn't real. But it didn't matter what she told herself.

There was no ignoring that the vows he'd asked Owen to agree to were the same ones that Evan had spoken two years ago. She felt as if she couldn't breathe.

"Owen," Hollis prompted.

His hesitation had grown noticeably long.

There was a fine line between his brows as he stared into her face. "I will."

Relief flowed over her, until Hollis said, "Wilt thou have this man to thy husband..."

It isn't real. It's not a true marriage.

But no matter how much she argued with herself, the panicky feeling twisting inside her was a reminder that she was speaking these vows before God.

I can't do this.

"...obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and..."

She must do it. Say the words. Bind herself to Owen.

"I will," she whispered when Hollis finished speaking.

Owen was completely impassive. No hint of emotion crossed his expression. This was what she'd bound herself to for the duration of this journey?

It didn't matter. Couldn't. She didn't need him to care about her, to like her as a friend. She only needed to ensure her place on the wagon train.

But Hollis wasn't finished yet. They pledged their troth to each other, the memory of speaking the same words to Evan making her tear up unexpectedly.

It was only when Owen said quietly, "With this ring, I thee wed..." and pushed a simple silver ring over her knuckle to rest beside the gold band Evan had given her, that the enormity of what she'd done hit her.

She was married to Owen.

"I don't suppose you want to kiss her," Hollis drawled.

There was a faint flush high on Owen's cheeks.

"That's not necessary," she said fiercely.

Owen dropped her hands like her touch had burned him somehow.

"Pulling out in five," Hollis said. He was tucking away his Bible beneath his arm, already striding away.

And then August was there, slapping his brother's back. "Congratulations."

Owen shook his head. "Not necessary," he echoed her words from moments ago.

August swept her into a hug, his hands at her shoulders in a respectable

way. She'd noticed that about him from the beginning. He was generous with his affection. A pat on the arm here, a hug for his adopted ward Ben, a young girl who'd been orphaned on the trail.

Owen was stingy with his touch. She'd never seen him embrace anyone else.

Not that she wanted his touch. Or any man's.

When August let her go, he held her shoulders for a moment. "Come see me when my brother gets too bossy."

Felicity stepped close, but there was an uncertain moment as if she didn't want to reach for a hug. Rachel had kept her distance since August had made his preference for Felicity clear.

Felicity stuck out her hand. "Congratulations."

Rachel shook it momentarily, finding a smile from somewhere. She wanted a moment alone. Wanted a wide bed in a bedroom that wasn't rolling across the prairie, a room with real walls, to curl up and let her muddled emotions find release.

But the bugle blew from not far away. There was a rush of movement as the stragglers rushed to put away their supplies. At the front of the company, the first wagon rolled into motion.

"Mason!" A male voice called out for Owen. As one of the captains of the company, he was often needed.

Rachel should probably be glad that he hadn't been summoned in the few minutes it had taken them to wed.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, but she purposely tipped her chin in the other direction. He'd done enough for her this morning, hadn't he? Pushed his sister-in-law to get her breakfast, tracked down Hollis, married Rachel.

August had disappeared, but Felicity hovered. What now?

The other woman offered a tentative smile. "I've got to track down Ben... would you want to come with me? Walk together today?"

Rachel guessed that August had put her up to it. He was a gentle soul who never wanted anyone to feel left out.

But the tightness in her lower back was a reminder that it was best not to be alone right now.

"Fine."

[Click to pre-order now.](#)

Read Counterfeit Cowboy next...

"You'd best hurry, miss. The train's leaving now."

A loud whistle drowned out her thanks, so Erin O'Grady simply smiled at the man behind the ticket counter and turned to the companion at her elbow.

"Are you certain this trip is all right with your father?" he asked.

The query from the man beside her was one of the two reasons she wouldn't consider marrying Patrick MacKenna. Her dear friend was far too concerned about her father's opinion. And Erin wanted the freedom her father refused to give her. At nineteen, she'd never been away from home on her own. Until now.

The second reason was that she'd known Patrick since he'd worn short pants and there was no attraction between them. But he was her closest friend, as evidenced by the fact that he'd brought her to the train station this morning. And he'd never lied to her, not like her father had.

"By the way, you look horrible," he continued. "Where did you get that awful dress anyway?"

Sometimes her friend could be a little too honest. "One of the maids let me borrow it."

The housedress in question was drab brown and did nothing for Erin's figure. It was inches too long, and Erin had stepped on the front hem several times in the short time since she'd donned it this morning before leaving her father's house. But the dress served an important purpose. If her father managed to figure out she was leaving Boston by herself and sent someone to fetch her, they'd never recognize Erin in the ugly dress. She hadn't recognized herself when she'd used the looking glass to pin her hair up.

She couldn't wait to get far enough away from Boston to change into the

traveling dress she'd packed.

Erin accepted her valise from Pat and checked over his shoulder. She was gratified to see he'd entrusted her other luggage to one of the porters.

"Are you certain this is what you want to do?" Pat asked.

"I'll be fine." It wasn't quite the answer she knew he wanted, but it was all she could give him. She only hoped it was true, was still raw from the confrontation with her father several days ago. Her anticipation for the trip was muted by the familial discord.

Ignoring the worried crease between Pat's auburn brows, she bent to retrieve the packages she'd bought for her brother and his family on her way to the train station. Christmas gifts that she hadn't had time to stow in the trunk that would make the trip with her. She bobbed the armful as she straightened, and Pat steadied her with a hand to her elbow.

"I'll be sure to tell Da you tried to dissuade me from going."

Patrick blanched, his freckles standing out against his pale cheeks. "But —"

"I'll be fine," she repeated, fervently praying that it was true. She'd never done anything like this before.

The train's whistle blew again and she stood on tiptoe to buss his cheek, then turned to the crowded platform.

She was on her way to Wyoming. On her own.

* * *

Two days out of Boston's Deer Island House of Corrections and all Jesse Baker could hear was the ring of his stepfather's voice.

You'll never amount to anything. Never be more than a petty thief.

He remembered the disgusted look that had accompanied the shouted words as if it had happened yesterday instead of nearly a decade ago when he'd been a boy of fifteen.

He wasn't a thief. People gave him their money, once he persuaded them to his line of thought. A confidence man wasn't a thief, even if he'd been sentenced to five years for swindling.

Although he wasn't exactly a con man any longer. He'd been out of the game for five years, while he'd been in prison. Two days of making his own decisions had muddied the waters he thought were so clear upon his release.

He hadn't had any intention of returning to his life of tricks and schemes. He'd intended to find honest work if he could.

But a visit to the family of Jim Kenner, his former cell mate, had changed everything. He'd promised to bring Jim's brother home to Boston, and he'd hoped that would relieve his guilt.

Now he needed money to get to Chicago. To fulfill his promise made to Jim as he'd died. And he needed to leave now, today. There was no time to get an honest job and save up the funds it would take to buy a train ticket. Even though his mother was still alive, he didn't ask her for help. She wouldn't have forgiven him, not even after all these years.

Jesse blinked away those thoughts. He needed to concentrate, needed to find a lemon—someone who would give him the money he needed.

He scanned the crowd on the platform, some people headed for trains and others disembarking. Men in suits, families with children, porters juggling luggage... There! He spotted the perfect woman, across the platform.

She was tall, wearing a dress with an oversized bustle. White gloves up to her elbows. An ostentatious hat complete with a garish purple feather covered her perfectly coifed hair.

She was obviously made of money. And seemed to be alone. The perfect target.

Jesse began moving through the crowd, already spinning a story in his head. *My sister's eloped with an unscrupulous man. Need to get to Chicago to stop the wedding.* Or maybe, *I've got a sick aunt and need to visit before she dies.* The best stories always evoked sympathy. And the truth was too convoluted—and who would believe a man fresh out of prison?

What he really needed to do was figure out a way to incorporate his borrowed clothing into the story. Jim's sister, the only person who'd shown him any kindness since his release two days ago, was a laundress and had given him the clothing that someone had left behind. The denims, woolen shirt, leather overcoat, boots and Stetson had turned Jesse into a cowboy. Albeit with boots that pinched his toes a little and a hat that felt uncomfortable after going without for such a long period of time.

What would a cowboy be doing in Boston? He kept the ugly plume in sight as he followed her through the thicker part of the crowd. Someone bumped into him and for a second Jesse was back in the prison yard amid crooks with burly shoulders and cold eyes. He shook himself into the present. This wasn't prison. But what were all these people doing here?

Then all the packages and cheerful faces began to make sense. It was only a few days until Christmas.

Jesse hated Christmas. He shoved the emotion down into the blackness inside. Don't get distracted. Just focus on getting to Chicago.

But then he nearly stumbled on top of a young woman in a brown dress crossing his path. For a moment he froze as everything else around him faded and he met her startling blue eyes.

Then she turned to rush toward another departing train and the moment was broken.

He couldn't help glancing over his shoulder and saw that an unsavory-looking character followed the girl a few paces back. He knew the look on the man's face: predatory, focused. As if he were chasing the girl and not merely a fellow passenger who happened to be going in the same direction. Jesse doubted the girl was even aware of the man a few steps behind her.

Don't lose focus. Jesse fought the distraction again and forced his eyes back to that feather as it bobbed above other passengers' heads.

But something about the young woman had called to him and Jesse couldn't just ignore that this girl was in danger. Maybe in danger just of losing her wallet, but his time in prison had taught him there were many evil-minded men who would do much worse to a young woman alone.

Jesse changed direction in time to see the unscrupulous man's shoulder connect with the girl, sending her sprawling. On the crowded platform, it could've been an accident, but Jesse knew it wasn't. He twisted and elbowed his way past several people toward the girl who scrambled to gather several brown-wrapped packages scattered at her feet.

Jesse glared at the man who'd knocked her down, and the fellow hurried away. Jesse knew the other man had hoped no one would stop for the girl, making her more vulnerable.

"You all right, miss?" Jesse asked, squatting and reaching out to help her gather her packages. She was older than he'd first thought, maybe twenty. And prettier, too, with long sweeping lashes against her cheeks and a button nose. But her plain dress and shapeless coat showed Jesse she wasn't anyone that could help him get to Chicago.

She barely glanced up at him, just a flash of those bright blue eyes. "Yes —"

The hiss of a train's brake releasing interrupted her.

"I mean, no. That's my train!" She speared him with a frantic gaze as she

reached for the two small packages he held and darted toward the nearest train—one that had already started to depart.

He could see she was never going to make it. A glance behind him revealed the woman in the feathered hat was long gone.

He still needed a way to get to Chicago. Surely there were other wealthy people in this crowd, someone who could be convinced to turn over their money to Jesse.

But that girl... As he watched, she bumped into someone else and nearly fell again.

Jesse knew she wasn't someone who could help him. But she obviously needed looking after.

He'd come out of prison intending to start a new, honest life. Was this a test to see if he could put someone else's needs above his own motives?

* * *

The maid's ill-fitting dress was going to keep Erin from boarding her train. Carrying all her packages, she didn't have a free hand to hike up the front of the skirt, and she nearly tripped on it again. The train was picking up speed.

She couldn't have come all this way not to make it onto the train.

And then the cowboy was there, propelling her forward with his large hand under her elbow.

"Need a hand, miss?"

"Yes. Thank you," she panted, glancing at him only long enough to get a picture of molasses-brown eyes and hair just a shade too long, curling beneath the brim of his hat.

She had no idea how he was going to get her onto the moving train. They were nearly there, the steps of the train car looming...

Snow blew in from the outside gap between train and station. The sharp wind threatened to tangle Erin's skirt around her legs. She fought forward, feet pounding loudly with the cowboy's boots. They were running out of platform.

The cowboy ran so fast and pulled her with him until Erin felt as if she was almost flying.

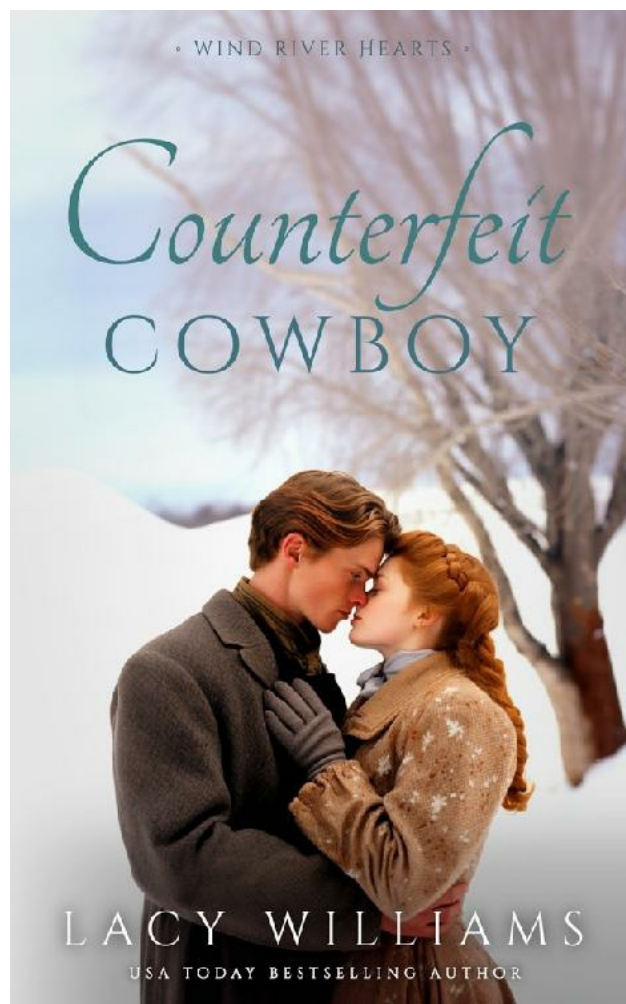
"Ready to jump for it?" the cowboy asked. Wind whipped her hair out of its pins and into her eyes, but she could still see his rakish grin, as if he were

enjoying their flight to board the train.

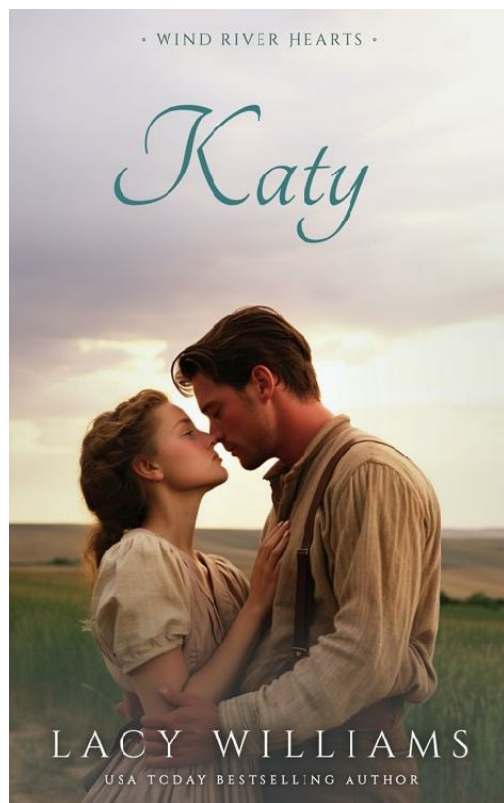
Erin opened her mouth to let him know that an O'Grady would never do something so commonplace as jump—if she could get the words past her burning throat—but her feet tangled in her skirt and she stumbled, coming precariously close to falling onto the tracks. The smell of heated metal filled her nostrils. A strong arm clamped around her waist and hauled her against a muscled chest. Then her feet left the ground entirely, and she was bodily dragged onto the train car's steps. With a jolt and huff as his boots clanged onto the step, the cowboy gripped a handle on the outer wall as they sped out of the station and into the open air.

They'd made it!

[Read Book 2 in this series now](#)



Exclusive invitation



Are you a member of my new releases newsletter? Right now you can receive a special gift, available only to newsletters subscribers. **KATY** is a 30-page short story and will not be released on any retailer platform—only to newsletter subscribers.

Matchmaking seemed simple for the marshal's adopted daughter. Until Katy's heart got involved...

[Click here to subscribe](#) and get your free gift. Unsubscribe at any time.

10th Anniversary - Special Author's Note

Hello, dear reader.

I can't believe it. Ten years. It's been ten years since *MARRYING MISS MARSHAL* was published. A decade. 3,650 days (or so).

In ten years, the **Wind River Hearts series** has grown to include sixteen books! But out of all my books, *MISS MARSHAL* will always have a special place in my heart.

This was the first book that an editor saw. She believed in it enough to offer me a publishing contract—my dream! I can still remember getting the phone call from a New York area code and how shaky I was while I spoke to her on the phone.

MISS MARSHAL was the first book I ever held in my hands. I stalked the UPS man for weeks. Then when the box finally arrived, it was magical opening it and touching the paperback with my name on the cover.

I signed so many copies of *MISS MARSHAL* for friends and family. And I got to see it in my local library.

There's nothing quite like a first book.

And I am so thankful for all of you, my readers. I wouldn't be able to write more books without you. Your faithful support has been inspiring!

Here's hoping for another ten (or thirty) years writing for you.

Thanks for reading.

-Lacy

*This book is dedicated to Luke and Laney for their endless patience. Love you
two.*

Acknowledgments

To the God who gave me everything needed to make this book a reality—all praise.

To those who have pushed me: my beloved Luke, Denice Stewart, Margaret Daley, Vickie McDonough. Thanks for not giving up on me.

To those who have encouraged me: Mom and Dad, Haley, Sean & Megan (and all my family), Janet Barton, Linda Goodnight, Darlene Franklin & the rest of OCFW and WIN—thanks for believing in me.

To those who have made this book better through critique, brainstorming and more: Megan Yager, Mary Brookman, Haley Yager, Denice Stewart, Mischelle Creager—thank you for pushing me to make this a better story.

Copyright © 2011, 2017, 2021 by Lacy Williams

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.