

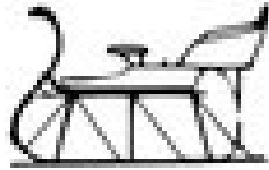
*A SLEIGH RIDE* FOR

*Rowena*

KAITLYNN CLARKSON

A SLEIGH RIDE FOR  
ROWENA

SLEIGH RIDE BOOK 2



KAITLYNN CLARKSON

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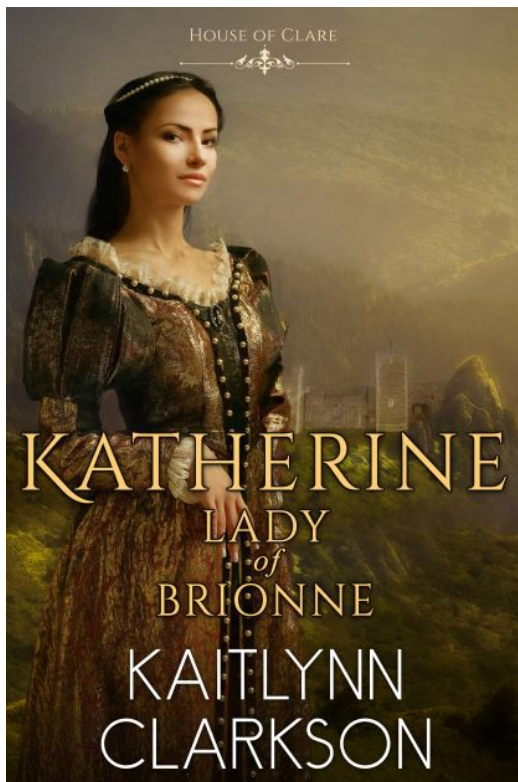
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# CHAPTER 1



*January 1900*

*Rowena*

Rowena peered out the window at the swirling mass of white outside. The wind had picked up overnight, whirling the snow into blinding white drifts. She wondered how she would make it to school today. And would her students get there? She frowned as she thought of trying to walk through the fresh snow for an entire mile. She'd never had to deal with snow of this magnitude in Salt Lake City, partly because it was a milder climate and partly because it was a well-serviced city with snow plows that kept the roads open. She felt a pang of homesickness as she thought of her hometown with its wide streets and magnificent buildings. Jackson was a primitive outpost by comparison, and although she'd grown to love the frontier town over the past six months, she would always hold a special place in her heart for the city she'd called home for almost all of her twenty years.

She sighed. She'd left her hometown for a reason, and this was the life she'd chosen instead. There was no sense in pining over what could never be. Perhaps she would return someday once she was ready to confront the past, but for now, Jackson was home.

Pushing aside the troublesome thoughts, she pulled out her small looking glass to check her appearance. She'd arranged her auburn hair into a low bun at the nape of her neck, and she patted it to make sure it was neat. Her blue-gray eyes looked back at her, serious as she considered the difficulty of getting to school after the snowstorm. Perhaps she should leave earlier than usual. She smoothed her dark blue skirt with one hand and

flicked at a loose thread on her striped plum and dark blue blouse. She would have to tend to that in the evening. Satisfied that she looked respectable for another day of teaching, she turned to leave the small lean-to room with its colorful knotted rug on the floor and the warm, comfortable bed with the bright quilt made by her hostess. Rebecca and Zach had generously opened their home to her despite already having two girls, Lucy and Mary, with another baby on the way. The house was cheerful and noisy, but Rowena was grateful for their kindness.

“The wind was noisy last night,” Rebecca said as Rowena entered the kitchen. She turned to tend to the frying pan on the wood stove, cracking eggs with a brisk, practiced motion. The bacon sizzled in the pan and the kitchen was filled with the warm, savory aroma.

“It is,” Rowena agreed as she took a plate of bacon and eggs to the table.

Rebecca went on. “Don’t worry about how you’ll get to school today. Zach has it all figured out.”

Rowena looked at her in surprise. “You mean I don’t have to walk?”

Rebecca shook her head. “There are deep drifts after the snowstorm. No, Zach asked our neighbor over the hill if he would give you a ride on his sleigh as he goes past. He goes by around the same time you leave each day.”

Rowena thought of the large man who’d waved on his way past a few times. She hadn’t ventured over the wooded hill to the north of the house and barn. The road disappeared into the trees, and she’d never had any reason to go there, so she had no idea where their neighbor lived. She frowned as she wondered what the community would make of it. Teachers had certain expectations placed upon them, and she knew that unwed women had to be careful to maintain propriety.

“I am grateful,” she said, trying not to sound uncertain. “Walking would be difficult.”

“It would be more than difficult,” Rebecca replied. “I know it might be awkward riding with a stranger, but Zach won’t finish the barn chores until after you leave. He’ll bring the girls along later.”

Rowena fidgeted, unsure how to ask about the propriety of the matter. “Isn’t it ... rather unseemly to ride with a man in his sleigh?” she blurted out at last.

Rebecca paused at the stove and turned to face her. “In other communities, perhaps there would be concerns. Some school districts have strict rules for their teachers. But remember, we don’t have a teaching superintendent out here. The community has banded together to build the school and pay the teacher’s wages. You only answer to the school board. Have they given you a list of rules that you must follow?”

Rowena shook her head. “They just told me they expect me to set a good example and do my best to teach the children. I was told that it’s been difficult to get or keep a teacher here so they aren’t making lots of rules for teachers to follow. I did receive a list of chores I’m responsible for aside from teaching.”

“Out here, it’s sometimes necessary for practical matters to come ahead of social expectations,” Rebecca explained. “Everyone understands that and they know the teacher can’t walk through deep snow to get to school. You don’t have any way of getting there unless you ride on a sleigh. The only person who can take you at the time you need to go is Jake. It’s not about being unseemly. It’s simply about the practical consideration of travel during winter.”

“Well, I will appreciate it,” Rowena said, trying not to sound ungrateful, but nervous expectation made her feel jittery in the stomach. What would it be like riding in a sleigh with a stranger?

Rowena’s duties included arriving at school at least an hour earlier than the students so she could light the fire and warm the room before they arrived. Zach’s solution was practical, so she would just have to swallow her discomfort and hope the ride to school went quickly.



“What’s the neighbor’s name?” Rowena asked as she took a sip of coffee with her breakfast. The bitter aroma filled her nostrils, a warm and comforting scent that reminded her of sitting around the kitchen table with her family.

“Jake Brooks,” Rebecca said in answer to her question. “He’s working as a lumberjack up the mountain during winter when he can’t do any farm work. Lots of the men do other things during the winter.” She rinsed a plate in the bowl on the bench, her hands flying with practised efficiency.

“Like Zach makes boots,” Rowena said, placing her mug on the table in front of her.

“It’s a good way to earn a little extra money,” Rebecca agreed. “Around here, boots are hard to come by, so Zach always has customers who need repairs or new ones. During the summer he’s too busy, of course, so everyone just has to wait for winter to get their boots from Zach.”

“Every town needs a bootmaker,” Rowena agreed. She paused. “Thank you for breakfast. If you’ll excuse me, I need to get ready.”

“Of course.” Rebecca took a bite of bacon and eggs as she hurried around the kitchen preparing lunch for the girls to take to school. “Have a good day, Rowena.”

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Rowena opened it to find the neighbor standing on the porch. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and bundled up in his thick winter overcoat, he reminded her of a bear. Dark hair peeked out from beneath his fur cap, and his bushy dark beard wore a sprinkling of ice crystals. Cheerful blue eyes regarded her appreciatively. She closed the door behind her, mindful of the precious heat escaping. It was cold enough to almost take her breath away.

“I’m Jake Brooks, the neighbor to the north.” He held out a large, gloved hand, his voice a deep rumble.

Rowena shook his gloved hand. “I have seen you in passing,” she murmured. “As you probably know by now,

I'm Rowena Williams, the schoolteacher."

"Pleased to meet you at last, Miss Williams," Jake replied. "I'm sure Zach has told you of the arrangement to get you to school today."

"He has, and I am grateful." Rowena glanced at the sky; an occasional snowflake still drifted earthward, although the wind had dropped. "It would not be an easy walk today."

"It would be an unwise walk," Jake said seriously. "The drifts are deep and you could fall into one and be unable to escape, or lose your way. And that's without the physical exhaustion you would encounter from plowing through deep snow for a mile." He gestured behind him, where two large white horses waited patiently with the sleigh. "My team can handle it."

"Thank you," Rowena replied.

Jake descended the porch steps and held out his hand to help her down, but as she reached for his hand, her foot slipped on the snowy step. Before she could blink, she felt herself flying through the air as Jake tried to catch her, but she slipped through his grasp and landed with a thump in a snowdrift piled up against the porch. Snow went down her neck and her skirts were in disarray as she gasped with shock and cold. Winded and horrified after her snowy tumble, she struggled to sit up, trying to maintain some semblance of modesty, but the snow was soft and she only succeeded in digging a deeper hole.

Within moments, strong arms lifted her to her feet as shame brought a flood of heat to her cheeks. She risked a glance at the big man in front of her only to realize that his concerned blue eyes were studying her intently. She wished the snow would open up and swallow her whole.

"Are you all right, Miss Williams?" Jake asked, finding his voice at last.

She nodded, unwilling to trust her own voice. Her school supplies had fallen from the sack she'd packed them in and were scattered across the snow. The sight of

the snow ruining her books galvanized her to action, and she tottered unsteadily towards the nearest one.

“Wait!” Jake sprang into action. “Allow me.”

“Thank you,” she mumbled, the icy fingers of humiliation still choking her heart.

Jake gathered her things and put them back into the sack. She noted that he handled the books with care, something she appreciated. When he was done, he handed it to her again.

“Thank you.” Her voice was clearer this time. “It seems that deep snow does not agree with me.”

Jake chuckled, a pleasant rumbling sound. “You’re not alone, Miss Williams. Every person here has taken a tumble or two during the winter months. Snow and preserving one’s dignity do not usually go together.”

Rowena laughed then, still feeling shaky. “That’s good to know. I felt as if the weather had personally singled me out for a little mistreatment.”

Jake’s blue eyes were merry with amusement. “We all feel that way when it happens to us.” He offered her his arm. “Although we risk further calamity, are you ready to proceed?”

She laughed again and took his arm. “Doesn’t the Bible say something about two walking together and falling into the ditch?”

“Only if you’re blind. I’m keeping my eyes wide open.”

“We should be safe, then,” Rowena answered, feeling strangely at ease with the large man beside her. Despite the awful tumble, she was unhurt, and Jake had managed to banish the humiliation that had threatened to overwhelm her.

Jake helped her into the sleigh and settled the blankets around her. Then he climbed up beside her and pulled a thick blanket over his own lap. He turned to her. “Have you been in a sleigh before?”

She shook her head. “I came from Salt Lake City. It doesn’t snow as much there, and the city officials keep the roads clear when it does.”

“There’s something special about a sleigh ride,” he said, surprising her. “It’s quiet, and sometimes you can almost hear nature breathing.”

His insight and sensitivity quickened her curiosity. “Have you always lived here?” she asked. “You seem to get along well with nature.”

He shook his head. “I’ve been here for three years. But I’m not one to abuse nature the way some do. I believe we should respect all living things. We need each other to survive.”

“How true,” Rowena mused. “Yet humans act as if we are the only creatures that matter.”

“I think we should all take only what we need from the land, but others see a way to make a profit from it, and then the natural world is out of balance.”

“Aren’t you a lumberjack?” Rowena asked, wondering if his stance conflicted with his occupation.

“During the winter months, yes,” he replied, steering the horses away from a large snowdrift. “I know it seems odd given what I’ve just said.”

“So, how do you reconcile your beliefs and your actions?” Rowena questioned.

He thought for a moment. “It’s not about refusing to use nature’s resources at all,” he said. “For me, it’s about using them responsibly. For example, I would never cut down every tree on my property or the land I’m working on. I prefer to harvest each one after I’ve considered its place in the forest compared with my use for it. That’s what I’m talking about. Sometimes I will leave a tree because it’s holding the soil on the hillside or providing shelter for younger trees.”

“Ah, now I understand,” Rowena said as they approached the silent schoolhouse on the edge of town.

“I have never heard anyone speak of such matters before. It is most interesting. Thank you.”

“You are welcome.” Jake smiled at her as he drew the horses to a halt, then jumped down and walked around to her side of the sleigh. He extended a hand and helped her to alight, then offered her his arm.

“I’ll see you to the schoolhouse,” he told her. “Will the boys shovel the path later?”

“I hope so,” Rowena replied. “Some of them might not make it to school today.”

“If it doesn’t get done, I’ll do it when I return this afternoon,” Jake promised. “I’ll be back later to pick you up.”

Rowena looked at him in surprise. She had assumed she would have to leave early when Zach came to collect the girls. It would give her more time to do her after-school work if Jake came by a little later.

“That would be lovely,” she replied. “I appreciate your help. Thank you for calling for me later. I was wondering how I would get home.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Jake replied. “Zach told me you like to leave a little later so you have time to finish the day’s work after the students go home.”

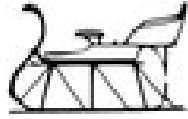
“Yes, I do. It will be most helpful if I can leave a little later.” She smiled at Jake, who gave her a parting wave and headed for the sleigh.

“I hope you have a good day, Miss Williams,” he called over his shoulder.

Rowena stood on the porch watching as he climbed into the sleigh and flicked the reins. A moment later, the horses trotted briskly through the snow, fading into the whiteness that finally swallowed them up.

Rowena turned her attention to her duties, but her mind kept returning to the surprising encounter with a bear of a man with a deep, rumbling voice and an appreciation for nature. She found herself looking forward to the return trip that afternoon.

## CHAPTER 2



*Jake*

Footsteps sounded on the porch as Jake finished his breakfast. He opened the door to find Charlie shaking the snow off his coat. He stepped aside to allow his neighbor and friend to enter the warmth of the cabin.

“Mornin’, Charlie,” Jake greeted him. “I thought we were meeting in the woods.”

The older man shook his head and his long gray beard swayed, dislodging a scatter of ice crystals. “Sorry, Jake,” he said with regret in his tone. “I was all set to help you today, but a huge raccoon broke into my cabin last night and made a mess. It almost scared the life right out of me. I couldn’t reach my gun without disturbing it, so I had to let it have its way for a bit until I could figure out how to scare it off. Now I need to secure the door and clean up.”

Jake sighed. “They sure know how to spoil a man’s day.”

Charlie’s gray eyes lit up with a smile beneath his fur cap. “It’s not what I’d planned to do, but it will give me a chance to fix that door. I’ve been meanin’ to do it for a long time. It’s my own fault that the beast got in. Are you still goin’ to the forest to work?”

Jake nodded. “I’m giving Miss Williams a ride to school in the sleigh. I need to leave soon so she gets there in time.”

Charlie regarded him with curiosity. The older man had been like a father to Jake. “You look as if you might enjoy that,” he observed.

Jake felt his face grow warm beneath his beard. “It’s an arrangement that has worked well so far,” he said,

trying to keep his tone neutral. “Of course, after things that happened before, I was a bit wary, you know.” His voice trailed off.

Charlie nodded. “I know. But the past is over now, Jake.”

“I was just hesitant to say yes,” Jake said. “I’ve worked hard to build the life I have here now.”

“You’re doing a neighborly deed,” Charlie replied. “Out here, you just do what you must to get by in the winter. No one is going to raise questions.” He gave Jake a sly look. “Anyway, besides that, what’s this new teacher like? There’s nothing like a pretty lady to motivate a man to go out in the cold.” He chuckled at his own joke. “I have heard that she’s pleasant on the eyes.”

“Perhaps,” Jake conceded. “But it’s difficult to tell when I only see her wrapped up in enough layers to outfit a small army. She is quite determined to ward off the cold.”

“It’s a blessing to have a teacher,” Charlie said. “Now we just need a preacher.”

“Maybe one will come in the spring,” Jake replied. “It would be a shame if the new church just sat idle and no one used it.”

The small wooden church with its modest belltower had been completed during the summer by volunteers from Jackson and surrounding areas, but so far, they had been unable to secure the services of a preacher, even a traveling one.

“Someone will come eventually,” Charlie said, sounding confident. He glanced at Jake. “Don’t you have to leave soon?”

“Now, actually,” Jake replied, taking out his pocket watch to check the time. “I’d love to stay and talk, but I don’t want Miss Williams to be late for school.”

“You know where to find me,” Charlie stated, turning to head out the door. “I’ll work with you tomorrow if that is suitable.”

“It is.” Jake pulled on his coat and secured his cap firmly over his ears. “I want to cut up the tree we felled yesterday.”

Charlie left, and a short time later, Jake was sitting in the sleigh behind Chance and Minnie, taking deep breaths of the fresh air. He’d enjoyed taking Miss Williams to school the day before, despite their awkward start. He could see that she had the ability to laugh at herself and try again when something went wrong, and she intrigued him. Single women weren’t common in small frontier towns, and he knew they were fortunate to have a teacher. Many places were not as blessed as Jackson had been.

Rowena was waiting on the porch when he arrived, her blue-gray eyes smiling at him above the layers she’d wrapped herself in. Small puffs of steam rose from her breath in the frosty air, and she reminded him of a poem about a traveler braving the hazards of winter that his mother read him when he was small.

“Good morning, Miss Williams,” he greeted her, jumping down from the sleigh to assist her.

“Good morning, Mr. Brooks,” she answered, wisely waiting until he stood by the steps to help her descend safely.

He held out his hand, ready to catch her if she fell, but this time, she stepped down lightly, barely touching his gloved hand. He offered her his arm, and she accepted his help over the snowy ground to the sleigh.

“It’s a beautiful morning,” he observed. “I love winter sunshine.”

“So do I,” she agreed. “It’s like a promise that the sun hasn’t gone away forever despite the winter storms.”

He helped her into the sleigh, then handed over her belongings. “Even the horses like the sunshine,” he added. “I like that thought, by the way. Sometimes winter feels as if it’s never going to end.”

“The horses are beautiful,” she observed. “I like white horses. What are their names?”



“Chance and Minnie. They are half-brother and sister. They share the same sire and grew up together. They’re inseparable. Chance is a gelding, of course, and he’s the most placid of the two.”

“Do you use them in your work?” Rowena asked.

“Yes. When we get to the forest, they’ll be helping me to haul logs. Chance is better at it than Minnie, so he gets the most work.”

“You’re blessed to have them,” she declared. “We walked everywhere we needed to go in Salt Lake City or took the public omnibus, so I have never owned a horse before. But I admire them greatly.”

“You can get to know Chance and Minnie,” Jake offered. “They love it when you rub their necks or give them a treat.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “I think I will enjoy that.”

His heart warmed at her words. Did that mean she wanted to see more of him? The thought was appealing.

They reached the schoolhouse and Jake helped Rowena down from the sleigh, then offered his arm. The boys had shovelled the schoolyard path the day before and no new snow had fallen, but there was always the possibility of an icy patch.

They made it to the schoolhouse porch and Rowena put her key in the lock to open the door.

But nothing happened. She tried again, and this time, the key jammed. She looked up at Jake, worry in her eyes.

“The key is stuck,” she said. “I can’t open the door.” There was a note of fear in her voice. “The children will be here soon and I need to light the fire.”

“Don’t worry,” Jake soothed. “Let me try.”

Rowena stepped aside and Jake jiggled the key in the lock, but it remained stuck fast.

“It’s not going to budge,” he said after a moment. “Does the school have any tools?”

Rowena nodded. “The woodshed has a few. I don’t know if they would be the right ones, though.”

“I’ll look.” Jake strode off the porch and headed for the woodshed behind the school building. While he didn’t hold great hopes of finding anything useful, he couldn’t leave Rowena and the children stuck out in the cold. He had to try.

To his surprise, he found an assortment of tools and selected several that might be helpful. Many were old and worn and had most likely been donated when the school building was erected, but he hoped he could make do with what he found.

“You found tools!” Rowena exclaimed in surprise when he got back to the porch. “I wasn’t sure you would find any.”

“Nor was I,” Jake replied. “These are not exactly the right ones for dismantling a door lock, but I’m hoping I can still do it with what I have.”

Rowena stood watching as he took the door off its hinges and began to pull the lock apart. Her hopeful expression made him determined that he wouldn’t give up until he’d fixed the problem.

“I’m sure Charlie wishes he had a lock on his door,” he said with a chuckle.

“Charlie?” Rowena queried. “Is he one of your neighbors?”

“Yes. He came to see me early this morning. A raccoon got into his cabin and made a mess, so he couldn’t haul logs with me today like we’d planned.”

“A raccoon?” Rowena’s eyes were wide. “Can they open doors?”

Jake resisted the urge to chuckle. “They can be quite determined,” he said, trying to sound serious. “Unfortunately for Charlie, the ‘coon found his door before he got around to repairing it.”

Rowena gave a little shudder. “I’m glad our cabin door is sturdy,” she said. “I don’t want to share my house with

a hungry raccoon.”

“Charlie wasn’t impressed either,” Jake said, finally freeing the lock and testing it to make sure it moved. “They can be quite feisty, especially when they’re cornered.”

“How did he scare it away?” Rowena asked.

“He couldn’t reach his gun, but he had an old gold pan under the bed from his days as a prospector. He got it out without attracting attention, then banged it loudly on the wall, hollerin’ for all he was worth. The raccoon got the message and ran off, but not before it made a mess.”

Rowena’s eyes were wide. “That sounds scary,” she breathed. “A raccoon wouldn’t be my choice of companion.”

“Nor mine,” Jake agreed, certain now that the lock was free and would work. “I’ve freed the lock,” he told her. “It had a bit of dirt inside; maybe one of the children tried to poke something into it yesterday. But it should work now.”

“Thank you,” Rowena said fervently. “You have no idea how grateful I am for your help. The children will start to arrive soon, and now I can get the fire going.”

“That’s my pleasure.” Jake smiled up at her from where he knelt on the porch, the door propped against his knees. “I’ll just get this door back on and then I’ll light the fire for you.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t delay your working day any longer than I already have,” Rowena said. “I can ask one of the boys to light it if they arrive before I get it going.”

“It’s no problem,” Jake assured her. “It won’t take long.”

She took a deep breath. “Thank you, Mr. Brooks,” she said softly. “I don’t know what I’d have done without your help today.”

He looked up at her. “If you ever need anything, just ask,” he told her. “I’ll be happy to help.” He paused. “And

we don't get too formal around here. You may call me Jake if you wish."

Her face lit up in the prettiest smile Jake had seen in a long time. "I'd like that. Please, call me Rowena. Miss Williams sounds like my maiden aunt."

Jake chuckled and rose to his feet, holding the door. His bare hands were clumsy from the cold, but he wouldn't change a moment of their time together. "Rowena it is," he agreed.

They heard voices approaching and could see several children making their way toward the schoolhouse.

"I must go," Rowena said. She hesitated, and then reached out and put her hand on Jake's arm. "Have a good day," she said softly, her luminous eyes meeting his before she turned and made her way inside with lithe grace.

Her touch seemed to burn through his coat to his bare skin, and his heart skipped a beat as he felt the heat rise to his face.

"I'll light the fire for you in a moment," he called belatedly through the doorway.

There was no answer, but Jake didn't need one. He had plenty to think about already, and he knew that the alluring Miss Rowena Williams would occupy his thoughts often during the day. He was already looking forward to their return journey in the afternoon. He paused to wait for several children to climb the porch steps.

"What are you doin'?" asked a freckle-faced youngster as he bounded up the steps a moment later in a scatter of snow.

"I just fixed the door for Miss Williams," Jake replied, waving a hand in the direction of the woodshed. "And then I'm going to light the fire for her."

The boy regarded him with a knowing look. "Are you sweet on the teacher?" he asked. "Pa says men do things for ladies they're sweet on."

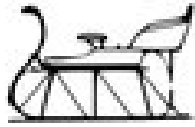
*The young rascal.*

Jake gave the boy his most mysterious look. “Well, now, that would be tellin’ secrets, wouldn’t it?” he asked.

The lad shrugged beneath his heavy winter coat. “I’d do it for her,” he said, then darted inside as several other children clambered onto the porch.

Jake chuckled. Perhaps he had some competition for Rowena’s heart.

## CHAPTER 3



*Rowena*

“Miss, Jerry and Eliza can’t come to school today.” The little gap-toothed girl with blonde braids looked up at Rowena with a frown.

“Why not, Jessica?” Rowena knew it was common for children to stay home when their families needed help.

The little girl suddenly looked shy. “They have no food or firewood,” she said reluctantly, then scampered off to play in the snow with the other children.

Rowena had noted the absence of the two children, but it hadn’t occurred to her that something might be wrong. Their father had been ill; perhaps the family needed help. She would make inquiries.

That afternoon, she was waiting when Jake drew to a stop outside the schoolyard, the sleigh whispering over the mud-spattered snow.

“Good afternoon,” he greeted, jumping down to help her get settled as he always did. “How was your day?”

“It went smoothly enough, thank you,” she answered. “How was yours?”

He grimaced. “I had a broken saw that caused quite a delay, but apart from that, it went well enough.”

She bit her lip. “Could we ... could we go somewhere else before we go home?” she asked. “Would that be inappropriate?”

He looked at her in surprise. “Where do you need to go?”

“To the Jasper farm. Little Jessica told me that the children didn’t come to school today because they have no food and no wood. She lives next door. I’d like to

check on them; their father has been ill, and perhaps the family needs help.”

Jake’s forehead creased in concern. “Of course. I didn’t know about it or I’d have already gone out to check on them. We can’t take winter lightly in these parts. Folks have been known to starve or freeze to death because they’ve been alone. Under the circumstances, I believe it would be appropriate. But to be sure, let’s ask Mrs. Hill if she would go with us. She’ll know what to do if they’re sick.”

“All right,” Rowena agreed.

A few minutes later, Jake stopped the sleigh outside the modest wooden cottage on the town’s main street. “I’ll ask her,” he said, jumping down from the sleigh.

Rowena waited as he went to the front door. She couldn’t quite see what was happening, but she heard voices and then a moment later, Jake was back.

“Mrs. Hill is checking on a man who fell ill yesterday,” he said. He frowned, looking up at the sky. “She won’t be long, but as much as I’d like to wait for her to return, I’d like to get out there before darkness falls. Would that be acceptable?”

Rowena thought for a moment. “And as much as I’d like to have her with us, it’s more important to reach this family if they need help,” she decided.

“All right. We don’t know what we’ll need or how long it might take,” Jake agreed. “It’s best if we go sooner rather than later.” He glanced sideways at her. “And you need to be the one to go since it was one of your students who raised the alarm.”

“I just hope we can help them,” Rowena said as Jake flicked the reins and the horses moved smoothly down the road. Their harness bells jingled in the frosty air, and the sleigh runners whispered and creaked across the snow as the horses’ hooves made muffled thuds on the soft surface.

Rowena took a deep breath, glad to clear her head after a day of children’s chatter and making decisions

over a thousand minor matters. The air was so clean and crisp, and despite the low cloud hanging overhead, it was good to be outdoors. Jake's warm bulk was nestled beside her; his solid shoulder pressed against hers, and she resisted the urge to lay her head against it and rest.

They left the town and headed down the road towards the Jasper farm. It wasn't long before they passed through the belt of forest on the lower reaches of the mountain and they soon reached a clearing with a cabin, a barn, and outbuildings. There was no smoke rising from the chimney and Rowena knew Jessica was right. This family was certainly in need.

"Harold! Are you there?" Jake called, stomping onto the front porch, his boots covered in snow.

There was no answer for a long moment, and sudden fear struck Rowena's heart. Were they too late?

But after what seemed like an eternity, the door opened a crack, and Rowena heard a child's voice. She scrambled down from the sleigh and made her way to Jake's side.

"It's me, Miss Williams," she said gently, hoping her voice would make the child on the other side feel more at ease.

The door opened then, and young Jerry stood there, his fair hair ruffled and a smear of dirt on one cheek. Eliza peeked from behind him, tear stains on her little face, and in the background, Rowena could hear a toddler crying. Jerry was visibly cold, shivering as the frigid air from outside hit him.

"What's wrong, Jerry?" she asked gently. "We came to see if you need anything."

Tears pooled in Eliza's big blue eyes as she moved to stand beside her brother. "Momma and Pa are both sick. And we're cold," she whimpered, her slight shoulders shaking.

"Oh, my dear." Rowena knelt and gathered the little girl in her arms. "We're here to help. May we come inside?"



Jerry stepped aside to let them in and they closed the door. Jake looked at Rowena. "We don't have much time," he said, worry creasing his brow. "I'll try to get them some wood before dark."

"I'll see what I can do here," Rowena answered, already heading for the bedroom. The toddler's wail ended abruptly when she saw a stranger, and the man on the bed raised his head feebly. The child burrowed into her mother's side, but the woman lay still on the bed. Rowena could see that it was a struggle for her to breathe.

"Mr. and Mrs. Jasper," she said, gently placing a hand on the man's shoulder. "It's Miss Williams. I'm here to help."

The man opened his eyes and tried to speak, but all that came out was a croak. He tried again.

"Cold," he managed.

Rowena knelt so that she was at eye level with him. "We'll get wood," she said. "Do you have food?"

"No food," Mr. Jasper managed. "We have supplies but no one to prepare ..."

"All right. I'm going to tell Mr. Brooks that we need to get you some food." She rose to her feet. "Don't worry," she said gently. "We'll take care of everything."

She hurried to the porch, where Jake had found some wood and was loading the wood box.

"It isn't much," he said. "We'll have to find them some more to even get them through the night."

"They have no food, Jake. The children are cold and hungry."

Jake thought for a moment. "All right. Let's light the fire with the wood we have here, and then head back into town. I'll call up some of the men to help with wood, and perhaps you can find Mrs. Hill. She's the nearest thing we have to a nurse, but she's good. She'll know what to do. She'll get some of the other women to help with food."

Rowena felt a surge of relief in her heart. "I wouldn't have known where to start," she said. "Thank you. Now we have a plan."

Jake took the wood inside and set the fire in the stove, patiently coaxing the feeble flame to life. When it was going, he turned to Jerry.

"Can you look after the fire while I'm gone?" he asked.

The young boy nodded.

"Good. There's enough wood to last until I return, and when we come back, we'll bring more wood and some food. So don't worry."

The boy's pinched face looked relieved. "Thank you, sir," he responded.

"You're welcome, Jerry," Jake said kindly. "How did your little friend know that you needed help?"

"Because she asked her father to stop to see if we were coming to school."

Jake was puzzled. "Why didn't she tell him you needed help?"

Jerry shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe she didn't think of it."

"Well, thankfully, she did tell Miss Williams. "Being cold is not pleasant, is it?"

Jerry shook his head. "No, sir. We were so very cold last night. Ma and Pa tried to keep the baby warm between them, but me and Eliza couldn't get warm. And this morning, Ma was even sicker."

Jake put his hand on the lad's shoulder. "We're going to see if we can get Mrs. Hill to come out," he said kindly. "She'll know how to care for your folks."

"Thank you, sir." Jerry scrubbed a dirty hand across his small face. "We'll be waitin' for ya."

Jake and Rowena made their way back into town. Jake dropped Rowena at Mrs. Hill's house while he went to find some men who could help with the wood and barn

chores. Rowena explained the situation, and it wasn't long before the motherly Mrs. Hill took charge. She donned a coat and they hurried down the street, stopping briefly at several houses with their request.

Before long, women appeared carrying food, and two offered their assistance with tending to the sick. Rowena was amazed at the spirit of neighborly concern that sprang to life when they asked for help.

The gloom of a winter night had descended when Jake reappeared, followed by two other men carting wood on large sleds.

"Would you like to go home?" he asked Rowena as he stood just inside Mrs. Hill's front door.

Rowena looked at Mrs. Hill.

"You go on home, dear," Mrs. Hill said. "There's not much you'll be able to do. Mrs. Wallis is coming out with me, and between us, we'll take care of the children and prepare a meal for the family. And the men will stack the firewood and do the barn chores."

"Thank you," Rowena said fervently. "I had no idea how we would go about helping this family, but it's all under control."

Mrs. Hill smiled. "You haven't lived here long, have you?"

Rowena shook her head. "This is my first winter."

"We take care of each other out here," Mrs. Wallis added, a cloth sack full of beans in her hand. "Especially in winter."

"It takes a community to survive around these parts." Mrs. Hill picked up her medical bag from the table. "We must get going; delays could be disastrous."

"Of course. Thank you so much, Mrs. Hill," Rowena said as they headed for the door.

The older woman turned briefly and grasped Rowena's gloved hands for a moment. "Thank you for caring," she said. "You'll do all right here."

Jake offered his arm to Rowena as they descended the porch steps. He helped her into the sleigh while Mr. Hill helped the other ladies into his sleigh. Lanterns cast strange shadows across the snow, and in the distance, Rowena heard a wolf howl. She shuddered, glad they were returning home and hoping the assistance party arrived safely.

“Please stay safe,” she called to Mrs. Hill. “I would hate to hear that a mishap had befallen you.”

“We will,” the other woman promised. “Mr. Hill has lived here for years and knows the roads well. We’ll be fine. Please don’t worry.”

Before Rowena could answer, a horse and rider loomed in front of them.

“Evenin’” she heard Charlie drawl as he addressed Mr. Hill. “May I be of assistance? I was about to head home when I heard we had a neighbor in trouble.”

“Thank you,” Mr. Hill replied. “But I think we have enough men now. Mr. Wallis is coming along with me on his horse.”

“Thank you for offering. Much appreciated,” Mrs. Hill added.

Charlie noticed Jake’s sleigh then. “Jake! You’re still here,” he said in surprise. “I thought you took Miss Williams home long ago.”

“One of Miss Williams’ students raised the alarm,” Jake explained. “We went to get help and now the help no longer needs us,” he finished with a chuckle.

“So does that mean you’re going home now?” Charlie asked.

“Sure does,” Jake replied. “I’m sure Miss Williams must be weary, and Rebecca and Zach are probably starting to worry about her.”

“Mind if I ride along?” Charlie asked. “If we meet somethin’ mean and hungry, we’ll meet it together.”

“Of course not,” Jake replied. “I don’t have lanterns on my sleigh so I’ll just let the horses find their own way home. Their night eyes are better than mine.”

“Well, we’d better go now,” Mrs. Hill said. “Take care, everyone, and thanks for caring for the Jasper family.”

Mr. Hill flicked the reins, and the horses moved steadily over the snow, leaving Rowena and Jake in silence. The darkness was almost unnerving; Jake’s sleigh was not fitted with lanterns, and they would have to find their way home without any form of lighting.

Jake turned to Rowena. “I hope Zach and Rebecca are not worried about you. I was not expecting to get you home this late.”

“I’m sure they’ll understand,” Rowena said, trying not to yawn. Now that the excitement of the afternoon was over, she suddenly felt tired.

“Ready?” Charlie asked from his horse.

“I sure am,” Jake said. “Why don’t you follow behind us so your horse doesn’t have to break the snow first?”

Charlie fell in behind them as Jake loosened the reins and the horses began the journey home. “The horses know the way home,” he told Rowena. “And Charlie is here to act as a chaperone, so no one can start any rumors.”

Rowena suddenly had another, far more alarming thought than community rumors springing to life. “Are you sure ...” she couldn’t bring herself to say the words aloud.

“Sure of what?” Jake let the reins go slack as the horses found the trail.

“Sure we’re safe from wild animals,” she whispered as she looked around, as if speaking the words would bring one into existence.

Jake patted the seat beside him. “I have a gun,” he assured her.

“I feel so silly,” she admitted. “I seem to be jumping at every shadow, and everyone else is probably laughing at me.”

His voice was serious as he answered. “It’s no laughing matter. People die out here from the dangers of weather and wild animals. It’s just that people who’ve lived here for longer have learned to put on a brave face. We can’t live our lives in constant fear; that just saps our strength and our will to live. But it doesn’t mean we aren’t vigilant.”

“Oh, I thought everyone was just braver than I am,” she explained.

“Not really. No one wants to meet a mountain lion, a bear or an enraged moose. Sometimes people pay with their lives when that happens, and everyone is more vigilant then.” Jake took a deep breath. “It pays to be alert.”

Satisfied with his answer, Rowena leaned back against the seat, weariness settling in her bones like lead weights. Her head drooped, and before she knew it, she was leaning against Jake’s solid shoulder as she struggled to keep her eyes open. Jake slipped his arm around her shoulders, holding her steady as the horses plodded through the night. In her sleepy state, everything felt just right.



## CHAPTER 4

*Rowena*

“Did you hear anything about the Jasper family today?” Rebecca asked a few days later as Rowena helped her prepare supper for the family.

Rowena paused as she washed potatoes in a bowl. “Yes, Jerry and Eliza were at school today for the first time since their parents fell ill. Mrs. Hill believes they had diphtheria, and the children stayed home in case they also fell ill. They didn’t, so Mrs. Hill said they could come to school.”

“That’s good news. Are their parents recovering?” Rebecca added water to the stew she was about to set on the stove, her movements graceful.

“Mrs. Jasper is still very sick, but Mr. Jasper got up for a couple of hours yesterday. Mrs. Hill was worried there would be an outbreak, but the family has remained isolated at home, so perhaps there won’t be one.” Rowena left the potatoes and stirred the stew while Rebecca added more wood to the stove and put cornbread in the oven. “Ja ... Mr. Brooks says the men have worked out a roster to chop wood and do the barn chores until Mr. Jasper is back on his feet. Turns out they did have a woodpile, but it was buried beneath a snowdrift and needed to be split.”

Rebecca gave her a knowing look as she closed the oven door. “Mr. Brooks is a good man,” she said evenly. “Keep that in mind, Rowena.”

Rowena felt her cheeks heat. “What do you mean?”

“He’d make a good husband,” Rebecca said candidly, returning to the stew. “But perhaps he is not yet ready after ...”

“After what?” Rowena tipped the potatoes she’d cut up into the stew. The pot was steaming hot now and a savory aroma wafted up, making her stomach rumble. But she hardly noticed; she wanted to hear Rebecca’s answer.

“That’s not my story to tell,” Rebecca replied quickly. “I’m sure Jake will tell you when he’s ready. Just keep in mind what I said.”

Rowena mumbled a reply, her mind whirling around Rebecca’s words. What had she meant? She’d realized that many people out here had a past and it seemed Jake was no exception. Rowena had also arrived in Jackson because she wanted to make a fresh start, so she was no different from anyone else. She wondered what could have hurt Jake so badly. Would he ever tell her?

Before she got a chance to question Rebecca further, Zach came inside, and Rebecca’s attention switched to the needs of her family.

The following morning, Jake was late to pick Rowena up.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said when he finally arrived, pulling up in a swirl of snow.

The horses tossed their heads, unaccustomed to the faster pace Jake had clearly set. He usually liked to conserve their strength for the day’s work, so they tended to amble rather than rush.

“We still have time.” Rowena didn’t wait for his help but made her way to the sleigh by herself. Jake hurried around to the other side and assisted her into the sleigh, waiting until she was settled before climbing into the driver’s seat.

“I had to mend a broken chain,” he told her. “It’s a temporary fix until I can get it to the blacksmith’s.”

“Will it still work?” Rowena asked, pulling the blankets closely around her. She wasn’t sure she’d ever become accustomed to the cold finding its way into every part of her that wasn’t thoroughly bundled up.



“I hope so.” Jake slapped the reins on the horses’ rumps, and a moment later, they were trotting down the road, small clumps of snow and dirt flicking up from the horses’ hooves. “I have to finish this job by the end of the week because I borrowed a saw that has to go back then. So I’ll be working hard to get it finished in time. And delays don’t help.” His brow creased in concentration. “But that’s not your concern.” He turned to her then, and the focused look in his eyes softened as they met hers. “I’d rather be in your classroom today,” he told her with a smile. “It would be warm and there would be a pretty teacher to talk to.”

Rowena felt a blush stealing over her cheeks. “I don’t think you’d fit in one of the desks,” she teased, trying to keep the mood light.

He pretended to think for a moment. “Sadly, I think you’re right,” he agreed. “But it would still be fun.”

“I’m not sure my pupils would agree with you, especially the boys. Some of them can’t wait until they can spend winters in the woods with their fathers.”

“Ah, the things we do when we’re young,” Jake rumbled. “I thought I had my life all sorted out at that age. I was going to become a blacksmith and wed a pretty girl and raise some big strapping sons who’d help me.” He laughed, but there was no mirth in it. “None of those things came to pass. It was not because I didn’t try.”

“What happened?” Rowena asked.

Jake gave her a long look. “Things that were out of my control,” he said after a moment. “Everything fell apart, and all the plans I had for my life came to nothing.”

“Even the pretty girl?” Rowena questioned, hoping she wasn’t overstepping a boundary.

Jake gave her a sharp look. “Who told you about that?”

“No one,” Rowena said hastily. “You just mentioned that part of your life and that it didn’t work out, so I was curious, that’s all. Forgive me if I shouldn’t have asked.”

Jake relaxed. "You're right, that didn't work out, either. But I have a new life now, so I don't spend too much time in the past."

"Jake!"

At the shout from behind, Rowena and Jake both turned around to see a man on a tall bay horse catching up to them.

"Charlie's here," Jake told Rowena. "He'll be working with me today."

"Charlie, you remember Miss Williams, don't you?" Jake asked as the older man drew alongside them on his horse.

Friendly blue eyes greeted Rowena from above the scarf wrapped around the lower half of the man's face, and she could see gray hair peeking from beneath his fur cap.

"Sure, you're the schoolteacher everyone is praisin'," Charlie drawled. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Williams." He tipped his cap to her.

"I am pleased to meet you again too, Mr.?"

"Wright," Charlie replied. "But around here, everyone just calls me Charlie. No need to get all formal."

"All right, Charlie." Rowena smiled at him. "I've heard lots about you from Jake, and I'm glad he has such a kindly neighbor."

"I might be a little later today," Jake told Rowena as he drew the horses to a stop in the schoolyard. "I need to get as much done as possible this week. I'm hoping it goes smoothly and nothing goes wrong."

"I hope so too," Rowena replied as she prepared to alight from the sleigh. "I don't mind if you come a little later. I have plenty to keep me occupied."

Jake helped her down and escorted her to the schoolhouse door while Charlie sat waiting on his horse.

"I'll see you this afternoon," he said, barely waiting for her to open the door. Then he was gone, and Rowena

turned her attention to the day's work.

It was late afternoon when she realized that Jake still hadn't come, and a prickle of unease started down her spine. She was alone in the empty classroom, and darkness came early during the winter months. She hoped Jake would come soon.

At last, she caught a glimpse of the sleigh approaching, but she could tell immediately that it was not Jake driving. Fear clutched at her heart. Had something happened to Jake?

"Good afternoon, Miss Williams," Charlie called as he jumped down from the sleigh to assist her.

"Where's Jake?" she asked as dread filled her stomach.

"He stayed behind to repair some equipment that broke during the day. I wasn't able to be of much help, so he asked me to come down and pick you up. He shouldn't be far behind me. He has my horse, so he can travel faster than he would in the sleigh."

Relief warred with worry in Rowena's mind. "Are you sure he'll be all right?" she asked tentatively as Charlie helped her get settled in the sleigh.

"Don't worry about Jake," Charlie assured her. "He is resourceful and knows how to survive in the woods. He'll be fine. Besides, as I said, he should be right behind me. He was almost done with the repair when I left."

Charlie dropped Rowena off at home and she did her best to entertain the children so Rebecca could do some chores without them getting under her feet. But as darkness fell, Rowena couldn't help but hope that Jake had made it to safety. She had been half-watching the trail from the cabin windows, but it was unlikely she'd have seen a lone horse and rider go past in the darkness.

At last, it was bedtime, and as she said her evening prayers, Rowena added an extra one for Jake, desperately hoping he'd gone past the house without her noticing. Then she burrowed under the covers, eyes wide open, unable to feel the slightest bit sleepy.

Then it began. Somewhere on the wooded hillside between their home and Jake's, a pack of wolves began to howl. It sounded fearfully close to Rowena, and she shuddered as the wild song seemed to surround the cabin. She pictured the large animals prowling around, hungry and ready to devour anything that crossed their path. She tried to convince herself that Jake was safely home, sound asleep with his livestock and horses securely shut up in the barn.

Yes. That was how it was. Everyone was safe and she could quit worrying and go to sleep.

After a fitful night, Rowena awoke to discover that fresh snow had fallen, obscuring any tracks that might have been left from Jake's return journey after dark. She dressed and headed for the kitchen to help Rebecca with the breakfast chores before it was time for her to leave for school.

She'd just sat down to eat breakfast when loud footsteps clumped on the porch and someone banged on the door. Zach was still at the barn and Rebecca was feeding the baby, so Rowena threw on a coat and opened the door, stepping out onto the porch.

Charlie's worried blue eyes met hers over the scarf wrapped around his face. "Jake didn't come home last night," he told her.

Fear ripped through her heart and she caught her breath. "Oh no!" she exclaimed. "I was worried that something had happened to him."

"Somethin's wrong, for sure." Charlie's tone was grim. "I would offer to give you a ride to school, but under the circumstances, I think it's best if I raise the alarm and go look for Jake."

"Of course. I can get a ride to school when Zach takes the girls. I won't be there in time to light the fire or do the other chores, but I'm sure the parents will understand, under the circumstances."

Charlie nodded and turned to leave, worry creasing his brow.

“Charlie?” Rowena said as he headed to his horse.

He turned.

“I’ll be praying,” Rowena said softly.

“We need all the prayers we can get,” Charlie replied.

No one needed to say the obvious. It had been a cold night, and without shelter, Jake’s chances of survival plummeted. And that was without a potential injury that had left him unable to get home. Rowena wasn’t sure she’d be able to concentrate for a second while she was teaching. She would have to exert all her willpower to keep her mind on the job.

“What was that all about?” Rebecca asked as Rowena returned inside and removed the overcoat she’d donned in haste.

“It was Charlie,” Rowena explained as her heart hammered with fear. She couldn’t keep the worry out of her voice. “He came to tell me that Jake didn’t return home last night, so I need to get a ride with Zach when he takes the girls to school.”

Rebecca sucked in a sharp breath. “That’s awful news!” she exclaimed. “Are they looking for him?”

“Yes. Charlie is gathering some men from the town to look where he was working.”

“Zach will want to go too,” Rebecca said. “Can you drive the sleigh yourself?”

“I ... I don’t know,” Rowena confessed. “I’ve never driven one before. Only a buggy once or twice.”

Rebecca thought for a moment. “I’ll do it.” She looked at Rowena. “We ladies have to be ready for anything around here. I’ll show you how to hitch up the horses and what to do, so if you need to drive yourself in the future, you know how.”

“Thank you.” Rowena was relieved that Rebecca would help. “I guess that means we’d better hurry since it will take longer to get ready than usual.”

Sure enough, the moment Zach came inside and heard the news, he headed for the barn to saddle up his horse. Rebecca assured him that she would help Rowena and the girls get to school, and he kissed them all goodbye and left, a worried frown on his face.

As soon as breakfast was finished, they all made their way to the barn and Rebecca showed Rowena how to hitch the horses to the sleigh. The girls climbed into the rear seats while Rowena sat in the front, and Rebecca made sure everyone was bundled up. She got settled herself and then took the reins, and Rowena admired her confidence. She wished she felt as confident and resourceful.

Rebecca seemed to read her thoughts. “You’re never too old to learn,” she said gently. “You might not have grown up in these parts, but if you stick around long enough, you’ll soon be able to handle these situations as if you’d always lived here.”

Rowena was grateful for Rebecca’s kindness and encouragement, and when they were on the trail, Rebecca handed the reins to Rowena.

The horses tossed their heads as they sensed someone new driving, but continued their steady plod along the trail. Rowena felt tentative at first; the reins in her hands seemed to be alive.

But she soon realized that they were still on the trail, the sleigh was still pointed in the right direction, and nothing bad had happened.

“I worried for nothing,” she told Rebecca with a wry smile. “I do that sometimes.”

Rebecca laughed. “I do too,” she confessed. “But look at you. You’re driving a sleigh!”

It was a good feeling.

## CHAPTER 5



### *Jake*

Jake opened his eyes and groaned as he tried to move his leg. It throbbed with a fury that he'd never thought possible, but he knew if he tried to examine the gash again, it would be unbearable.

His thoughts returned to the previous day. He'd been so sure that he would quickly finish the repairs to the chain puller that he'd sent Charlie home, fully expecting to be only a few minutes behind him. He'd been worried about Rowena waiting for a ride home and had sent Charlie with the sleigh.

He hadn't been expecting to slip on ice right next to the log rack. Before he could stop himself, he'd collided with the log he'd last worked on, gashing his leg on a jagged, protruding branch that hadn't been taken off at the base yet. He'd been trying to maneuver the log into position to finish dressing it when the chain puller had broken.

It was an easy fix, and he'd been sure he could get it done fast so that the log was ready to work on when he returned the following day.

Instead, he'd been instantly plunged into a nightmare of pain, forced to fight for his survival as the daylight faded to blackness and the temperature plummeted.

He knew there was no way to reach Charlie's horse, who was still in the temporary pen they used during the day to spell the horses or when they only needed one and the others were set free. It was made of poles they'd cut from the forest and attached to several trees to form a rough square. The pen was also on the other side of the clearing; it might as well have been a mile away. And

even if Jake could reach the horse, he would be unable to mount or ride.

So, he'd hoped Charlie would notice that he hadn't come home and would come looking for him, but now it was morning and no one had come.

He was grateful that he'd fallen beside the log rack. He'd been able to crawl to several of the branches he'd stripped off earlier and make himself a rudimentary lean-to on the end that at least kept most of the snow off as it began to fall overnight.

But it had been brutally cold, and unable to move around much, he'd soon feared that he would simply freeze to death or suffer from severe frostbite if he did manage to survive. He'd done his best to wrap the gash in rags he'd had in his pocket for cleaning the chain puller, and although it had continued to seep blood, staining the snow around him, it was the best he could do. He fought to stay awake all night, moving positions as often as he could and hoping that Charlie would arrive to rescue him.

As the cold reached right into the center of his bones and the freezing hours stretched endlessly into the night, Jake felt his hold on life slipping. He thought of all the plans he'd had that had fallen apart and the new life he'd made for himself here in Jackson. Rowena's face flashed into his thoughts, her gray eyes laughing at him as they shared a companionable sleigh ride to school. Regret seared his heart as he wondered what the future might have held; he wasn't ready to die but wasn't sure he could stop death's icy fingers from claiming him as the wind pulled at his feeble shelter and the wolves howled in the distance. He hoped Rowena was safe at home with the family and not worried about him. It had been a foolish mistake to send Charlie ahead of him.

He'd dozed off sometime during the everlasting blackness, the sweet sleep of death beckoning him to a warm and cozy place, only to awaken with a start as the pain in his leg jerked him awake. He'd been surprised to discover that it was morning, and he'd somehow survived the night.



But despair shook him as he realized that no one had come searching for him, and he knew that he was too cold and weak to even attempt to leave his pathetic little shelter to seek help. He would perish sooner rather than later, and wisdom prevailed upon him to stay put. There was still a chance that Charlie would find him, and he clung to the hope with the last of his strength.

Closing his eyes, he leaned back against the log end that supported his shelter and tried to ignore the pain in his leg, taking deep breaths to ease the throbbing. It seemed to be the only thing that took his mind off it.

“Jake? Jake!”

The voice shook him from his half-conscious state.

“Over here,” he croaked, shocked at how weak his voice sounded.

“Did you hear something?” a male voice asked.

“No. Call again,” said someone else.

“Jake? Are you here?” came the call.

“I’m here,” he tried again, wishing it would come out as more than a whisper.

He heard boots tramping through the snow.

“No one’s been here this morning,” one of the men said. “There aren’t any tracks.”

“I’m here,” Jake yelled with all his strength.

“Over there,” one of the men exclaimed. “I’m sure I heard something!”

The footsteps came closer, and a moment later, Charlie’s head bent through a gap in the shelter.

“Jake! You’re still with us!” he exclaimed, jubilation in his tone even as his face took on a shocked expression. “You’re hurt,” he said unnecessarily. He disappeared and Jake heard him talking to the others. “His leg looks a bit mashed up,” he told them. “But he’s awake.”

The men gently removed the branches of Jake’s shelter. He could see a group of friends and neighbors

watching him with shock and concern in their expressions.

“You came,” he croaked out.

Charlie was beside him instantly. “Of course we came. I’m just sorry I didn’t check last night to make sure you got home safely. That was a grave error on my part. I truly believed you’d be right behind me.”

“I was sure of that too,” Jake managed.

Charlie stood. “It’s not going to be easy to move him with that leg of his, but let’s get it strapped so it can’t move and then load him onto the sled.” He turned to Jake again. “This is going to hurt, I’m sorry.”

As Jake screamed in pain, the men strapped his injured leg to the other one and slid him onto a makeshift stretcher. Then they carried him to a waiting sled. Charlie retrieved his horse while the other men secured Jake’s stretcher to the sled and piled blankets and heated rocks around him. Finally, they bound a cloth around Jake’s chest and down to his waist to secure him to the sled so he wouldn’t slide off as they descended the hill.

Each bump brought a fresh wave of agony as the sled set off, and Jake screamed several times before they’d even taken fifty steps.

Then brown specks started to dance in front of his eyes, and a moment later, everything went mercifully black.



*Rowena*

“May I have a word with you, Miss Williams?”

Rowena looked up to see Charlie standing in the doorway of her classroom, still wearing his overcoat. She rose to her feet, trying to maintain the expected dignity of a teacher as she made her way toward him. She turned to the class.

“Carry on with your work, boys and girls. I will be back in a moment.”

She donned her coat and followed Charlie to the porch, her emotions churning in her stomach. She almost couldn't wait to ask about Jake.

Charlie seemed to sense her urgency. “We found him,” he said. “He's injured and very cold, but there's a good chance he will survive.” He paused. “It was a close call.”

“What happened?” Rowena begged.

“He slipped and gashed his leg. And because I was so certain he would be right behind me, I just followed through on our plan to meet again in the morning. I took his team home and he was going to bring my horse home. I will never forgive myself for not checking on him.”

“Don't be hard on yourself,” Rowena consoled. “It's a mistake anyone could make.”

Charlie shook his head. “You should never become complacent out here,” he said. “That was the mistake I made. I know how easy it is for things to go wrong, especially in winter. But we've gone through the exact same routine so many times, and it's easy to get complacent because of all the times that everything has been fine. I should've known this. I've lived a long time on this earth.”

“Don't blame yourself,” Rowena pleaded. “Even Jake thought he'd be right behind you, or he wouldn't have sent you ahead of him.”

Charlie looked at her with haggard eyes. “My carelessness and arrogance almost cost a friend his life,” he said. He shuddered. “What if I hadn't turned up when I did? Jake was almost at the end of his strength.” He paused. “I couldn't bear to lose him, Miss Williams. He's

been more like a son to me than my own sons ever were. They disowned me and I've never seen or heard anything of them since then. Jake is all the family I have in this world." His voice shook and he swiped a gloved hand over his eyes.

Rowena hadn't realized that the relationship between the two men went so deep. "You're fortunate to have found one another," she said quietly. "Many people never find a family of the heart."

"I'm going to do a better job of watching out for him now," Charlie vowed.

"Where is he?" Rowena asked.

"He's with Mrs. Hill," Charlie replied. "He's still in a bad way, but that's the best place for him to be. She thinks he will recover in time, although things can still go wrong. She'll keep him with her until he's well enough to go home. Even then, he might need extra help for a while."

Rowena felt weak with relief. "I'm glad she's caring for him," she said. "I know she'll do everything she can to help him recover. Does he have frostbite?"

"A little on the foot of the injured leg, but Mrs. Hill thinks he'll recover from that, too. She says it was only because of his size and stubborn refusal to go to sleep that he survived at all. Because he was injured, he wasn't able to move much, but he still kept his hands and his other foot moving as much as he could. He says he did doze off, but he was in a lot of pain, so that helped him to stay awake."

Rowena shuddered again, horrified at how close they had come to losing Jake. "I had a bad feeling about it all night," she admitted. "I heard the wolves howling, and I just kept praying that Jake had made it home safely and was in his warm home with all his animals secure in the barn."

"I just assumed that's how it was," Charlie replied. "And that was a huge mistake. I don't know if I can ever forgive myself."

“Maybe not yet, but you need to in the future,” Rowena said. “Otherwise, you’ll feel miserable and guilty for the rest of your life. I’m sure Jake will forgive you if he hasn’t already.”

“I’ll call in to see how he’s doing this afternoon.” Charlie glanced at the sky. “I still have chores to finish at home. I’ll return later and see Charlie, and then I can pick you up in the sleigh and take you home. Would that be acceptable for you?”

“Yes, please,” Rowena said. She’d been so worried about Jake that she hadn’t considered getting home. She couldn’t expect Rebecca to drop everything and come to get her, and Zach would pick the children up before she was ready to go home. She always marked their work and set the lessons for the next day before she left. There was no quiet space at Zach and Rebecca’s home for that.

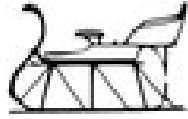
Charlie’s blue eyes smiled for the first time since he’d arrived. “I’ll see you later, then.” He paused. “Your students are probably wonderin’ what happened to you.”

“Hopefully, they haven’t started a war or set the classroom on fire,” Rowena said with a smile. “Thank you for dropping by with the news, Charlie. I was worried.”

“I know you were.” Charlie’s eyes held a hint of mischief. “Jake’s a good man, Miss Williams. And he thinks highly of you. Just remember that.”

Rowena gaped at him in surprise. But before she could respond, Charlie stepped lightly off the porch and strode to the hitching rail to mount his horse. Rowena watched him trot down the road, still surprised by his words. He was the second person to say the same thing in a matter of days. Was a matchmaking conspiracy afoot? And more importantly, was she ready to open her heart again to the possibility of love?

## CHAPTER 6



*Rowena*

“Would you like to come with me to see Jake?”

Charlie stood in the empty classroom as Rowena gathered her things that afternoon. She looked at him in surprise.

“I thought you’d already been,” she said. “I wasn’t ready for you because I thought you’d be later.”

“Am I too early?” Charlie asked in concern. “I can come back later.”

“No, it’s all right,” Rowena said hastily. “I’ve done everything important that needs doing before tomorrow.”

“Well, I’m headin’ to see Jake if you’d like to come,” Charlie offered again.

“Yes, I’d like that,” Rowena replied, feeling shy. Had Charlie noticed her concern with Jake?

It seemed that he had. “I know you’ve been worried about him,” Charlie said, offering his arm as they made their way to the sleigh.

“He’s my friend,” Rowena replied, hoping that would be enough to satisfy the man who’d called Jake a son.

Charlie gave her a keen look that told her he didn’t quite believe her, and she felt a blush rising to her cheeks.

“Well, is that so?” Charlie drawled, helping her into the sleigh. “You make a mighty fine *friend*, Miss Williams.”

Rowena had a feeling the older man was laughing at her behind his long, gray beard, and she had no idea

what to do about it. How was she supposed to convince him that Jake really was just her friend?

And was there more to their friendship? Rowena wasn't sure. It was true that she looked forward to their sleigh rides as the highlight of her day, and he often filled her thoughts. Did that mean she had feelings for him? She thought back to the events that had led to her arrival in Jackson. Had she had real feelings for Christian, who'd wed her best friend, Maria? Perhaps. It sure had hurt when Christian chose Maria over her. It had plunged her into a dark well of misery for months, which led to the decision to leave Salt Lake City and try a new adventure. She held no animosity towards her friend; after all, only one of them could have the man they both loved. She just wasn't sure the friendship would ever be the same again, and feeling lost and adrift, she'd decided to strike out in a new direction.

Charlie glanced sideways at her as he shook the reins and the horses started moving forward. "Jake is a fortunate man," he said quietly. "I just hope he realizes that."

"I'm sure he does," Rowena replied. "He's just escaped death."

"That wasn't what I meant," Charlie said, then fell abruptly silent.

Rowena decided to let the matter drop. "Will Mrs. Hill allow us to see him?" she asked instead.

"I don't know," Charlie answered. "But if you don't ask, the answer is always no, isn't it?"

Rowena smiled. "I hadn't thought of it that way, but you're right. You only get a yes if you ask."

They drew to a stop outside Mrs. Hill's house on the main street. Charlie helped Rowena alight from the sleigh, and soon they were inside the warm, cozy home.

"You've come to see Jake?" Mrs. Hill asked, looking from one to the other.

Charlie nodded. “Yes, please, if that’s not too much trouble.”

Her brow creased for a moment in thought. “He’s still not out of danger,” she said. “I’m keeping a careful watch on that leg in case it gets infected. And almost freezing to death hasn’t helped his general health, either.” She paused. “All right. You may go in one at a time, but you can’t stay for long. And please wash your hands first, and don’t touch him. I’m very strict about hygiene when a patient has a wound.”

She led the way to a small washroom at the end of the porch, and Charlie went first, washing his hands thoroughly with the cake of soap she’d left on the side of the wash basin. Then it was Rowena’s turn, and once they were done, Mrs. Hill let Charlie into the small infirmary she had set up on one side of the house.

“Please, have a seat while you wait, my dear,” Mrs. Hill invited.

Rowena took a seat on the red velvet couch in the parlor, sitting with her back straight and her hands folded in her lap as was expected of polite company. Mrs. Hill sat opposite in her work apron, which struck Rowena as incongruous.

But nothing in this place was like life anywhere else; here, life was so imbued with the struggle to survive that people paid less attention to niceties and proper manners simply because they had no time or energy to devote to non-essential matters.

“Your young man went through a near-death experience today,” Mrs. Hill said.

Rowena gaped at her. “My young man? Jake is just my friend.”

“My mistake,” Mrs. Hill smiled at her. “He asked for you, so I just assumed ...”

“He’s a neighbor,” Rowena explained. “He’s been driving me to school each day in his sleigh because that’s the only way for me to get to school on time.”



“Well, that’s neighborly of him,” Mrs. Hill agreed. “He’s a good man, Miss Williams. If I were you, I’d consider that.”

Rowena stared at her in surprise. Yet another person had just told her to think about Jake as a good man. Suspicion bloomed into certainty. There was definitely a matchmaking conspiracy afoot.

But before she could consider the matter further, a noise at the door caught her attention, and a moment later, Charlie emerged, his face somber.

“Was he pleased to see you?” Mrs. Hill asked.

“He’s not the Jake I know,” Charlie admitted, his face stricken. “He looks very weak.”

“That’s normal,” Mrs. Hill replied. “He’s been through an awful ordeal that almost took his life. Give him a few days or so, and if nothing else goes wrong, you should start to see improvements.” She turned to Rowena. “Are you sure you want to see him, my dear? He doesn’t look the same as he usually does.”

Rowena nodded. “I’m sure.”

“Then you may go in for a short time. Just remember what I said. I’ll be just outside the door.”

“Only stay for a short time and don’t touch anything.” Rowena rose to her feet, grateful that Mrs. Hill was willing to act as a chaperone. “I will see you in a few minutes,” she said as she headed for the sick room.

As she entered the dimly lit room, she could see Jake’s huddled form beneath the blankets. A fire blazed in the fireplace on the other side of the room and it felt warm and cozy, but Jake still looked cold. His eyes fluttered open as she approached, and she was shocked at how frail and feeble he looked, despite his size.

“Rowena,” he rasped, reaching for her hand. “You came. I was hoping you would.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “Mrs. Hill has forbidden me from touching you. She wants to avoid infection in your leg.”

“Oh, I forgot,” Jake mumbled, withdrawing his hand. “I was just glad to see you.”

Rowena pulled a chair close to his bedside and sat down where he could see her. “I was so scared when I heard you hadn’t come home,” she confessed.

“Not nearly as scared as I was,” he said with a grim smile. “I thought I would never see you or anyone else again.” He winced in pain as he tried to move.

“Did that matter?” she asked, curious.

“More than anything,” he murmured. “The thought of the people I care about kept me going through the night when I should’ve frozen to death.”

Rowena shuddered. “I’m so glad you hung on,” she said. “I heard the wolves howling and I was worried because I didn’t know if you’d arrived home safely.”

He gave her a curious look. “How did you know that I might not have?”

“It was just a feeling I had. There was no real explanation for it. Just a feeling that something wasn’t right. When I heard the wolves, I kept telling myself that you were home, all your animals were safe in the barn, and everything was fine. I had to pray about it for a long time before I finally felt at peace.” She took a deep breath as the anxiety of the moment filled her memories. “As it turns out, I was right.”

“I think your prayers were what saved me.” Jake shifted in the bed, again wincing with pain. “They tell me I was almost at death’s door when the men arrived.”

“Charlie is just about beside himself for not checking that you’d arrived home safely,” Rowena said. She felt bad for the man who considered Jake his son by choice.

“I know. He kept apologizing, but it’s partly my fault. We’d both become a little complacent because we’ve been working in the woods all winter and haven’t had any mishaps. We forgot that even tiny things become a matter of life and death out here.” He paused for a moment. “I was so sure that I would be right behind

Charlie because I'd almost finished the last job and then I was headed home. I thought I'd only be another fifteen minutes at the most. It was foolish of me to send him ahead."

"Well, the mountains are always ready to teach us a lesson," Rowena replied. "I just hope you never have another one like it."

Jake grimaced. "It taught me a good one."

"How long until you're healed?" Rowena asked, wanting to hear it from Jake himself.

He closed his eyes. "I don't know. Mrs. Hill says the next few days are crucial to avoid infection. If I get past those, I might be able to go home within a week or two. But I will need help with chores around the farm and in the house."

"I'm sure the neighbors will take care of the animals for you," Rowena said. "I know Zach would be happy to help. And there must be others."

Jake licked dry lips. "They are good people around here." He reached for a glass of water, almost knocking it over, and growled in frustration. "I'm not going to make a good patient," he muttered.

"Not patient enough?" Rowena teased.

Jake gave her a mock glare as he collapsed back onto the pillows, exhausted by the effort. Rowena reached for a cloth and wrapped it around the glass, then handed it to him.

"Now I can say that I haven't touched anything of yours," she told him as Jake took the glass and she turned to place the cloth on the dressing table.

"More's the pity," Jake mumbled.

Rowena felt heat flooding to her cheeks. "What did you say?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing. But if I had something of yours to comfort me in my great distress..."

He allowed the words to trail off, and Rowena felt flustered. She didn't know what to say. Was Jake *flirting* with her? What was she supposed to do with that thought? She didn't know whether to welcome the idea or be embarrassed.

"You're a good distraction," Jake smiled as if sensing her confusion. "I can lie here and think about all the things I want to tell you while you're gone. You will come back, won't you?"

Rowena cocked her head to one side, thinking. "I'll make you a deal," she said at last. "You stay alive overnight and I'll see if I can persuade Charlie to bring me for a visit tomorrow after school ends. Does that sound good?"

"It sounds wonderful," he smiled, and Rowena was glad to see that some color had returned to his cheeks since she'd first set eyes on him.

She rose to her feet. "I must go now," she told him. "Mrs. Hill will come in with great wrath and chase me out otherwise. I must not tire the patient."

His face fell. "Already?"

She nodded. "Beware the fearsome nurse," she said in a dramatic whisper. "It will prolong your life."

Jake chuckled, and it was the most wonderful sound she'd heard in a long time.

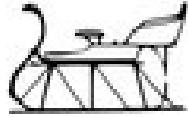
"Dear Rowena," he murmured. "You've made me feel better already. Thank you for coming to see me." He leaned back on the pillows, looking tired, and Rowena knew it was time to leave.

"Goodbye, Jake," she said softly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

As she rode home with Charlie a few minutes later, she mulled over Jake's words in her mind. Perhaps it was the pain relief that Nurse Hill had administered, or perhaps Jake was simply grateful to still be alive, but he'd certainly allowed his feelings to show. Rowena hugged

the memory to her heart, already looking forward to seeing him again.

## CHAPTER 7



*Rowena*

“That sure was a lot of snow last night,” Rebecca commented, a worried frown on her face as she stared at the window. “And with Zach ill in bed ...” Her voice trailed off.

“We’ll just have to manage the best we can,” Rowena replied. “I can do the barn chores if that would help. Perhaps Lucy can show me what to do. She’s been to the barn with Zach a few times, hasn’t she?”

Rebecca’s eyes were full of relief. “If you don’t mind,” she said cautiously. “Lucy knows what to do. And thank you, Rowena. That would be a great help.”

It was several weeks since the accident that had almost claimed Jake’s life, and Rowena knew she would never be unconcerned about the weather again. This snowstorm was the first large one they’d had since then, but she knew better than to assume it was over. She would take extra care anytime she had to go outside.

It was still early, but she and Lucy headed for the barn so they could milk the cow and feed the animals before Charlie came to pick her up. Jake had returned home and was doing well, but he had still not recovered enough to go back to work. Charlie had been faithfully driving her to and from school each day, and she was grateful. Now that Zach was ill, she had to start her day even earlier so she could help Rebecca get through all the chores. Everyone was hoping that Zach would recover quickly.

She and Lucy floundered through deep snow drifts as they made their way to the barn. The snow had stopped, but the heavy clouds overhead threatened more. Rowena never ceased to be amazed that so much snow could fall

on a single town, but the long-term residents assured her that this was an especially snowy winter and it wasn't always like this.

“Look!” Lucy stopped short beside her and pointed. “Whose footprints are those?”

Rowena stopped too, staring at the set of large footprints in surprise. No one from the house had been to the barn this morning, and a prickle of fear made its way down her spine. Who had visited the barn?

But the animals needed care, and it wasn't fair to expect Rebecca to do the job just because Rowena was worried. She took a deep breath and told Lucy to stay behind her and keep quiet. Then they approached the barn almost silently.

Fortunately, they didn't have to dig the door out, and it slid open easily. But a moment later, the window at the other end of the barn banged, and Rowena gasped in shock as she saw the fleeting movement of a person outside. Rooted to the spot in fear, she and Lucy stood staring at the window for a long moment, but everything was silent.

At last, they moved inside and Rowena closed the door to preserve the warmth inside. She cautiously made her way to the window, climbed onto the barrel that had been placed below, and looked out, hoping she didn't disturb whoever had just fled.

But apart from a hole in the snow where someone had jumped from the window and a set of footprints leading into the woods on the hill behind the barn, there was nothing to indicate that anyone was still around. Rowena shuddered; had they just disturbed a criminal who had used the barn as shelter? Fear swirled around in her heart and she could only hope that whoever it was didn't return.

“Is anyone out there?” Lucy whispered fearfully from behind her.

Rowena climbed down. “No, honey. He's gone.”

Lucy's blue eyes were huge in her little face. "Will he come back?"

"I don't know," Rowena answered. "I hope not. It seems that he is afraid of us, so let's hope he just stays away."

"I hope he doesn't freeze to death outside." Despite her fear, Lucy's natural kindness asserted itself.

"I'm sure he knows how to survive," Rowena assured her. "The barn wasn't exactly warm last night. Just not as cold as outside. He probably made himself a cozy bed in the hayloft to stay warm."

"I hope he found something to eat." Lucy's worried frown creased her pretty face. "Even if he is a bad man, he doesn't deserve to freeze to death."

Rowena marveled at the little girl's heart for humanity, doubtless learned from her mother, who was the epitome of kindness.

"You have a kind heart, Lucy," she said. "We don't know. So let's do our chores instead so we're not late for school. How about that?"

"All right," Lucy agreed.

"Now, you'd better show me what to do, or I might get lost in the barn." Rowena peered around, pretending to be lost.

Lucy giggled. "Then we'd have no school if you were lost in the barn."

"Maybe I could teach the cows instead," Rowena suggested.

Laughing, Lucy led the way to the hay loft. "We start here," she said.

Later, after the chores were finished and she was ready for school, Rowena waited by the door for Charlie to arrive in his sleigh. The sleigh bells on his harness made a distinctive sound, and she'd grown accustomed to hearing him before he arrived.



But a shout outside startled her, and she opened the door to find Jake there instead. She gaped at him in surprise.

“Jake! What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be resting still?”

Jake’s smile was the biggest she’d ever seen. “No more of that invalid business for me,” he declared, climbing down carefully from the sleigh.

“Wait! Stay there,” Rowena exclaimed, fearful that he would fall and injure himself again. She made her way down the steps as quickly as she could. She would have to clear the snow from around the steps and the front door later if Rebecca didn’t get time. It was usually Zach’s job to shovel snow, and she hadn’t realized how much the family relied on him to keep things running smoothly in the background.

“It’s all right.” Jake was determined. “My leg is still a little stiff, but as long as I’m careful, I can do most things again.”

Rowena beamed at him. “Well, in that case, welcome back. It’s good to see you on your feet again.”

“It’s good to be walking instead of hobbling around on crutches, I can assure you,” Jake stated as he helped her into the sleigh.

“Are you ready to go back to work in the forest again?” Rowena asked.

“Not yet.” Jake carefully settled himself in the sleigh and picked up the reins. “It’s almost spring, so the winter work will soon be over anyway.”

“Spring?” Rowena looked around her at the snowy forest as the chilly wind brushed her cheeks. The clouds parted overhead to reveal a glimpse of blue sky, but it disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Jake smiled at her. “Spring comes gradually here,” he said. “It will happen, don’t worry. Sometimes it feels as if winter will last forever, but before you know it, the sun is shining and the birds are singing and everything feels

wonderful. You just have to watch for the signs. I'm seeing them already."

"What are they?" Rowena asked.

"Have you noticed that the days are longer now?"

"Yes, of course. But what else is there?"

"The birds come back, often before the snow has fully melted. I saw a mountain bluebird a few days ago, and it cheered my heart no end. There is nothing like the sight of a bright blue streak flying across a snowy landscape."

"It sounds beautiful," Rowena agreed.

"And we always listen for the cowbird's song," Jake continued. "It sounds like water dripping into a pot."

Rowena laughed. "Well, I never! Whoever heard of a bird that sounds like dripping water?"

"I think you'll enjoy spring in these parts," Jake said. "The contrasts between the seasons are huge. Spring is wonderful after the cold winter."

"When does it stop snowing?" Rowena asked. "I thought it might be over because we went for a couple of weeks with not a lot of snow, but last night, down it came again."

Jake chuckled. "It can snow at any time," he said. "But mostly, we can expect less snow or no snow later in March."

"I can't wait for spring," Rowena said. Then a sudden thought struck her as she remembered the intruder in the barn. She turned to Jake. "Snow is good for something. There was an intruder in our barn last night and he left footprints in the snow."

"An intruder?" Jake looked at her in astonishment. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "I'm sure. I caught a glimpse of him as he fled through the window at the end of the barn."

Jake frowned, concern all over his face. "Why didn't Zach go to the barn?"

“He’s ill and can’t get out of bed right now. I went with Lucy so Rebecca didn’t have to worry about that as well as caring for him and all her other chores.”

“Well, I admire your willingness to step in where you’re needed,” Jake said. “But this afternoon, don’t go alone. I’ll stop by and do the chores with you. We don’t know who it is or if they’re dangerous.”

“It seemed that the man was afraid of us,” Rowena said. “He made great haste to flee.”

“That may be so, but if he realizes women are doing the work, he might get bold. I’ll be there.”

“Thank you.” Rowena smiled at him, feeling grateful.

Jake’s eyes softened as he looked at her. “It’s good to be here, driving you to school again,” he said quietly.

“I appreciate it more than you know,” Rowena replied. She felt a blush rising to her cheeks. “And you’re better company than Charlie. Not that I wish to be unkind to him.”

Jake burst out laughing. “We’d better not tell him that. He might get offended.”

“Please don’t,” Rowena begged. “It will only hurt his feelings.”

“Why am I better company than Charlie?” Jake asked, his expression curious as he looked at her.

“Charlie is a wonderful man,” Rowena said. “But he hardly says a word once we’re going down the road. I enjoy a bit of grownup company after being with the children all day.” She paused. “Besides, he smokes a smelly pipe.”

Jake laughed again. “I never could take to a pipe myself. I prefer the fresh air God gave us to breathe.” He looked at Rowena, his glance tender. “You have no idea how much I wanted to be back in the sleigh driving you to school,” he said. “It motivated me to push through the pain to get moving again.”

“I thought of you every single day,” Rowena confessed. “I was almost beside myself with worry when you had your accident. All I could think of was that you would get an infection or go downhill. Even after you were safe, I was still worried.”

“Nurse Hill’s strict rules paid off,” Jake said. “As you know, there was only a little infection that soon went away, and I’ve been getting stronger every day since then. I hope that when spring planting comes, I’ll be as good as new.”

“I hope so, too,” Rowena said softly. “It’s so good to have you back, Jake.”

He reached out and put his gloved hand over hers. “I wouldn’t choose to be anywhere else,” he told her.

They reached the schoolhouse, and Rowena was surprised to see several boys already waiting for her to open the door. Their eyes went wide as they spotted Jake.

“Mr. Brooks is well again!” one shouted to the others. “He just drove Miss Williams to school!”

Peter scrunched up his freckled face as Jake offered Rowena his arm and escorted her to the schoolhouse porch.

“My pa says you ought to wed her,” he said bluntly.

Jake looked taken aback for a moment but recovered swiftly. “Does he, now?”

The boy nodded. “He says unwed pretty ladies in these parts are like feathers on a moose. Have you seen a moose with feathers, Mr. Brooks?”

Rowena watched as Jake swallowed back a gulp of laughter.

“No, I haven’t,” he said in a suspiciously strangled voice. “I imagine it would be quite a sight.”

“My pa means it’s rare,” Peter explained. “Just like unwed pretty ladies. Are you gonna wed Miss Williams?”

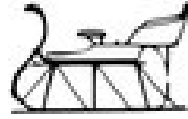
“He can’t do that!” Daniel protested, his blue eyes outraged. “If he does, we won’t have Miss Williams for a teacher any more. She’ll be at home havin’ babies and cookin’ dinner for him. Then who will teach us?”

The boys fell silent, and Rowena felt her cheeks blazing with heat. She stole a glance at Jake and discovered that he was silently choking on something, his face red as he stared at his boots. She wasn’t sure whether to laugh or wither up with embarrassment, either.

“Well, I reckon we ought to just say no more about it,” Peter announced firmly after the boys had considered the problem for a moment. “We need a teacher more than Mr. Brooks needs a wife.”

And that was the end of the matter. The boys scampered up to the woodshed to collect wood for the fire, and Rowena bade Jake farewell and went inside. She had never felt so grateful to escape from a situation in all her life.

## CHAPTER 8



### *Jake*

Jake chuckled aloud as he thought of the conversation with the schoolboys earlier in the day. It had been intensely embarrassing as they'd questioned him over his intentions toward their beloved Miss Williams, but it had also been highly amusing. It was interesting to hear what gossip the town rumor mill had been concocting.

And it wasn't a bad idea. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he became aware of the feelings that had grown toward Rowena. She was in his thoughts constantly and he found himself looking forward to seeing her each day at the beginning and end of school. He was secretly grateful for the recent snowstorm; it meant that he was able to continue driving her in the sleigh for a little longer. Once the snow melted, she would return to walking to school and he would be so busy with spring planting that he would have little time to spend with her for a few months. The thought made him feel melancholy.

A noise on the porch caught his attention and he glanced toward the window over the kitchen bench, expecting to see nothing but the reflection of the lantern on the table.

But to his shock, he caught a glimpse of a face peering in the window. For a moment, he thought it was Charlie; he thought he saw a long gray beard and Charlie's gray fur cap. He blinked, and when he looked again, it was gone.

Leaping to his feet, he ran to the front door and opened it.

"Charlie! What are you doing out there?" he called into the night. "Just knock on the door like a civilized person

would!”

But there was no answer, and Jake began to wonder if he was seeing things. There was no way to tell if the footprints in the snow were fresh; he'd been tramping up and down the steps all afternoon and the snow was churned up. He stood for a moment peering into the darkness as the lamplight spilled through the window onto the snow, but there was no indication that anyone else had ever been there. The wind sighed softly through the trees on the hill, but otherwise, it was silent. Puzzled, he frowned, then returned to the warmth of the cabin.

The following morning, Jake rose early. It was still dark as he dressed and headed for the barn. He wanted the chores done earlier than usual so he could help with Zach's barn chores before he had to take Rowena to school.

He made his way to the barn without thinking, his mind going over the day's activities. He wasn't expecting to find the barn door ajar slightly, and it took him a moment to register that someone else must have opened it. He was particular about closing doors in the winter because an open door could mean death to smaller animals such as chickens and sheep if the temperature inside dropped too low.

Cautiously, he entered without touching the door, his eyes peering beyond the circle of light cast by his lantern for anything amiss. He wished he'd brought his gun with him, belatedly recalling Rowena's experience from the previous day. Had the same intruder found his barn?

A sudden noise just above him in the hayloft caught his attention, and a moment later, a dishevelled man with hay in his hair tumbled down the ladder, landing right at Jake's feet. He scrambled off the floor and attempted to flee, but Jake grabbed hold of his coat and spun him around. They stood staring at one another face-to-face as Jake gasped in shock.

“Charlie! Why are you in my barn?” he demanded. “What kind of crazy prank is this?”

The familiar face looked blank.

“Well, answer me!” Jake said, giving his friend a little shake. “What’s wrong? Why aren’t you at home?”

“I’m not Charlie,” the man said at last.

It was true that he didn’t sound the same as Charlie. And why did he look thinner and older than Charlie?”

“Well, if you’re not Charlie, then who are you?” Jake demanded. “And why are you sneakin’ around in my barn?”

The man held up his hands. “I’ll tell you.” He coughed. “But could I warm up a little? It’s been such a cold night.”

Jake noticed that he was shivering. “All right,” he said reluctantly. “But no funny business.”

They returned to the cabin and Jake poured the man a cup of hot coffee. He held it gratefully in age-gnarled hands as he sat at Jake’s table.

“So, what’s going on here?” Jake asked once the man had taken a sip.

The stranger sighed and placed the mug on the table. “I’m Robert,” he said. “Charlie’s twin brother.”

Jake gaped at him in astonishment. “Twin brother? I had no idea Charlie was a twin!”

“We parted ways a long time ago,” Robert said sadly. “We both said unkind things, and I’ve regretted it every day since then.”

“Then why don’t you just go to Charlie’s place and make up?” Jake asked.

Robert sighed again. “I don’t know if he would agree to see me,” he admitted. “And I don’t even know exactly where he lives. I just know it’s somewhere around here.”

“He’s my neighbor,” Jake replied. “So why are you sneaking around instead of going to see him?”

“Because I’m not quite ready.” Robert’s face looked haggard in the flickering lamplight. “I led a bad life, Mr. ?”



Jake realized he hadn't introduced himself in the confusion. "I'm Jake Brooks," he said. "Just call me Jake."

"Right. Jake." Robert seemed to be distracted for a moment. "As I was saying, I did bad things and let everyone down. Everyone who was important to me. Do you know how that makes you feel, Jake?"

Jake nodded. "I do. I have a past too, you know. Many people out here do."

"Well, I have to gather up every last bit of courage to face Charlie," Robert said. "I don't know what he'll do. He might even get his gun and run me out of town."

Jake couldn't imagine Charlie doing any such thing. "I don't think so," he said.

"You weren't there when we parted." Robert gave an involuntary shiver. "It was bad."

"I know Charlie very well," Jake said. "I've never seen even the faintest hint of violence in his nature. The story you're telling me is most surprising."

Robert looked at him in surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Charlie has been so good to me over the years. I know what I'm talking about."

Robert's expression became hopeful for a fleeting moment. "I hope you're right," he murmured. "But even if you're not, I'm not going to live much longer anyway." He coughed again. "I want to make things right before I leave this earth."

Jake suddenly felt sympathy for the man. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said quietly. "But the only way you can see Charlie again is to face your fears and just do it."

"I know," Robert replied. "But surviving out here has taken so much effort that I haven't been able to gather up the courage yet."

"How did you get here?" Jake asked.

"I got a ride on one of the supply wagons that came in after the snow melted," Robert said. "But then it snowed

again, and I had no idea it would be so cold.”

“You’re lucky you survived,” Jake said, his voice grim. “It’s a foolish thing you did at this time of year. Never tempt the weather because it will kill you before you can blink.”

“I thought it would be safe enough now,” Robert said. “The wagons got in, didn’t they?”

“Yes, but the drivers and teams had proper lodgings and food to go to,” Jake reminded him. “What was your plan, by the way?”

“I didn’t really have one.” Robert hung his head. “I just know I need to see Charlie, and so I asked where his farm was and started walking. Only it snowed before I arrived, and then I had to find shelter. By then, I didn’t know which farm was his.”

“Was that you looking through my window last night?” Jake asked.

Robert nodded. “I wanted to see if I’d found Charlie’s place. When I saw you, I hightailed it out of there.”

Jake felt sympathy for a man who should be spending the final years of his life in comfort instead of hiding in barns like a fugitive.

“Are you in trouble with the law?” he asked.

Robert shook his head. “I did my time. My debt to society is paid.”

Jake thought for a moment. “Well, you certainly can’t go on sleeping in barns,” he said. “You can sleep in the lean-to until you figure out how you’re going to approach Charlie.”

Robert’s tired blue-gray eyes lit up. “Thank you, Jake. I appreciate your offer. I won’t impose on your hospitality for long. You have my word.”

“Just turn your attention to the reasons you came here,” Jake replied. “Trying to survive shouldn’t be your first thought.”

Robert's shoulders sagged in relief. "You're a good man, Jake." He coughed. "You've given me the courage to face my past."

Jake clapped him on the shoulder and rose from the table. "I wish you well, my friend. I think you'll find Charlie to be fair and reasonable." He glanced out the window. "I must go now. I have barn chores to do and then I have to help my neighbor do his. He's feeling poorly."

A short time later, Jake was feeding the animals while Rowena milked the cow. She'd recently learned how to do it thanks to Lucy's diligent instruction. She was so proud of herself that she had insisted on doing it every morning since. Zach was on the mend and would soon be ready to do the barn chores again himself, although since Lucy had proven her usefulness, it was likely that she would continue to help.

Jake turned to Rowena before he headed into the hay loft. He wanted her advice. "So, now that we know who our intruder is, how do we help him?" he asked.

She looked up at him, her gray eyes a bright spot in the shadows of the barn. Jake thought about kissing her, then instantly scolded himself for the thought. He didn't want to alarm her or take advantage of her, but each time he saw her, his feelings for her seemed to grow. He was on the path of no return and he didn't even care. He just wanted to see her and hear her voice, and nothing could distract him from that desire.

"You've already helped him," she pointed out. "Sometimes, the best thing we can do is stand aside and allow a person to make up their own mind about how they'll do things."

He tugged on his cap, a frustrated expression on his face. "But I want to actually *do* something. You know?" He paused. "Charlie is a special man in my life. I had no idea he had a twin; I guess there are some things he's never shared with me. But now that I know, I want this story to end the way it should."

“I know,” Rowena agreed. “But providing Robert with food and shelter while he addresses the huge rift in his life is doing something. You’re enabling him to concentrate on his purpose for being here rather than trying to survive.”

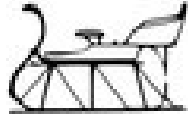
Jake looked at her as tenderness flooded his heart. “How did you get to be so wise?” he asked with a smile.

She returned his smile as he thought how pretty she looked this morning with wisps of auburn hair trailing around her face. “Wise? Not really. Just observant.”

“Well, you can share your observations more often,” Jake replied. “I like them.”

He noticed that she ducked her head and blushed. He felt his own cheeks grow warm as he scampered up the ladder before she realized the effect she had on him. Some things were better kept to himself.

## CHAPTER 9



### *Rowena*

Rowena breathed deeply of the cold, fresh spring air, excitement filling her senses as she walked through the meadow on the way to school. Most of the snow had melted and spring flowers were poking their heads up from the damp ground. The air was filled with birdsong as the migratory birds returned from their winter homelands, and the sun shone brightly overhead. It was a good day to be alive.

She heard a horse approaching from behind and despite a prickle of unease at being alone on the trail, she turned to discover Jake riding up behind her. His face split into a wide grin as he saw her. It had been a week since they'd seen one another; he'd been working from daylight until dark with the plowing and planting and she knew she wouldn't see much of him for a while yet.

Jake dismounted and stopped in front of her, holding the horse's reins loosely in one hand.

"I was hoping I might see you," he said.

Her heart skipped a beat as she looked at his familiar face. Each night, she went to bed dreaming of him, picturing his bright eyes and large hands as he told a story or drove his team. She couldn't stop thinking about him, and now that he was here in the flesh, her heart hammered. She'd been almost sorry when the snow melted and she was able to walk to school again because it meant that she saw a lot less of Jake.

"I didn't expect you to come along but it is a most pleasant surprise," she told him.

He fell into step beside her. "I'll be glad when the spring planting is over. I'll have more time then," he said,

looking at her as if he wanted to memorize every inch of her face. “You have such beautiful hair, Rowena,” he said softly. He reached out to touch it, his fingertips feather-light as they brushed a stray curl off her cheek. “I’ve hardly seen you without all your winter coverings.”

“I haven’t seen you much without them, either,” she told him. She’d guessed from his bushy dark beard that his hair was thick and dark, too, but her attention was drawn to his lips. So rosy and full for a man. She wondered what it would be like to kiss them and blushed at the thought.

“I’ve missed you,” Jake went on. “I did enjoy our sleigh rides to school so much.”

“So did I,” Rowena confessed.

Jake stopped walking and dropped the horse’s reins on the ground. He turned to face her and reached for her hands. “Rowena, I can’t stop thinking about you,” he said, his eyes meeting hers with an intensity that took her breath away. “Do you feel the same way about me?”

She dropped her eyes, unable to bear the intensity of his gaze. “I do,” she whispered.

“Would you ... would you mind if I came a-courtin’?” he asked.

“That ... that would be fine,” she managed, kicking herself at the same time. Of course it was more than *fine*. It was something she wanted to shout from the rooftops.

His face broke into a smile. “My dear Rowena,” he said softly, leaning closer.

His lips hovered just above hers; those rosy, luscious lips. As fire shot through her veins and her legs threatened to give way, Rowena found herself standing on tiptoe as her arms stole around Jake’s neck. He lowered his lips to hers and the exquisite sensation filled all her senses and sizzled down to her toes. Jake’s lips were firm and smooth and his beard tickled her cheek as he held her close. His kiss was gentle at first, then more urgent until at last he pulled away, breathless. His cheeks were flushed, and Rowena was sure there must be some

evidence of his kiss on her own lips. Her heart hammered and her legs felt weak as she clung to Jake, her cheek against his shoulder.

“My dear,” his deep voice rumbled somewhere above her head. “I hope I did not offend you by being too forward.”

She shook her head, unable to trust herself to speak. “That was wonderful, Jake.”

He drew back and looked at her, disbelief and pleasure mingling in his expression. “Do you really mean that? I was afraid I had gone too far without your permission.”

“We must still be circumspect,” Rowena said. “You know what the gossip is like in a small town. And I am a teacher. Even though I don’t have a superintendent or school committee imposing rules upon my conduct, I still must be careful.”

He nodded. “I do understand. I will behave myself in the future, I promise.”

“But not *too* much,” Rowena teased, gratified to see the blush that stole across his cheeks.

“We probably won’t have a choice,” he returned. “The worthy ladies of Jackson will be watching every move we make once we announce that we are courting.”

“They have sharp eyes,” Rowena agreed. “Nothing escapes their notice.”

Jake smiled. “I’ve heard some of the less scrupulous men around town making bets on how long it would be before we announce our courtship.”

Rowena was shocked. “Courtship? You must jest.”

Jake shook his head. “There’s no dancin’ around the truth out here, my love. We say it as it is. Everyone has been watching us for a long time now. Even you must surely see that.”

“Why can’t people mind their own business?” Rowena sputtered.

Jake chuckled. “Because exciting things don’t happen here all that often. And everyone loves a story that makes them feel good. Besides, it’s part of the cycle of life. Falling in love is as natural as breathing. Nothing to hide or be ashamed of.”

“Well, if you look at all the rules we’ve created around courtship, you might think otherwise,” Rowena replied. “Oh, Jake, I don’t care what they think. I’m just happy to be with you.” She waved her arm around at the wildflowers strewn across the meadow. “Isn’t the springtime so beautiful? Look at the blue sky and the flowers! It’s such a wonderful time to be alive.”

Jake laughed at her exuberance and caught her hand as they continued walking. His felt large and secure around hers, and another flood of happiness washed through her heart. He smiled down at her, his muscular shoulder brushing against hers. Rowena wondered how much happiness one heart could hold.

“I do have one confession to make,” Jake said, becoming serious.

“What’s that?” Rowena asked, sure that whatever he said couldn’t possibly disturb the beauty of the moment.

“I was betrothed once,” Jake said with a sigh. “Back in Montana. I just wanted you to know.”

“What happened?” Rowena asked, wrinkling her nose.

“We had plans to wed, but then one day, my intended just left with no warning or explanation. I heard a rumor that someone had seen her in another town, but I never heard a word about where she’d gone or why. And there was trouble, too. It shook me up, so when Charlie invited me to come here and make a new start, I took the opportunity.” He paused. “But time has passed and I’m ready to try again.” He smiled at Rowena. “I’m looking forward to getting to know you better, my sweet Rowena.”

Rowena took his large hand and held it to her cheek. “I don’t care about what happened in the past,” she said. “I



just want to enjoy being here with you now. Why spoil a wonderful moment with something that happened long ago?"

"That's what I want, too," Jake told her. "But I just wanted to be honest with you. I don't want any secrets between us."

"Nor do I," Rowena agreed. "So to be fair, I suppose I should tell you why I came to Jackson. It was almost the same reason. My best friend loved the same man that I did. Only he chose her, not me. I was brokenhearted at first, but eventually, I decided I needed a fresh start, and just as I did, this teaching opportunity came up. It seemed to be an answer to my prayers." She stopped walking and looked up at Jake. "I hope we'll get the chance to continue this conversation," she said. "But it would not look proper if we were seen walking into town together." She glanced down the trail to the last bend before they would come into view of the town.

"That's right," Jake agreed, looking serious. "A man can be in a lot of trouble from mere appearances. But that doesn't mean we're done. There are many things I still want to tell you."

His eyes met hers, full of secrets and promises. She felt a blush rise to her cheeks.

"Goodbye, Jake," she said softly. "I will look forward to seeing you again soon."

Jake raised her hand to his lips, his eyes on hers. "As will I, my dear Rowena," he said quietly. "I will wait here for a few minutes."

"Thank you." She smiled at him, grateful for his thoughtfulness. "I hope you have a wonderful day."

"Oh, I will," he assured her. "Seeing you has been the best thing that could've happened."

As Rowena came into sight of the schoolhouse, she did her best to appear orderly and proper, but she could still feel the burn of Jake's lips on hers and the sensation of his arms firmly around her. Would anyone notice?

The day flew by, filled with lessons and preparations for the upcoming school picnic, to be held after church. Rowena was glad church had resumed after the long break during the winter months. Now, some of the men were taking turns to deliver a sermon, but soon they would have a new preacher and everyone was getting excited. It would be good to have regular services again. Life was rosy with happiness, and she couldn't imagine ever feeling melancholy again.



An excited buzz filled the small wooden church after the service. Children squirmed, eager to run and play after sitting still, and the parents hurried to set out the picnic cloths and hampers they'd brought, filled to the brim with hearty food to satisfy their hungry broods.

Rowena smiled as she made her way down the path to walk to the schoolyard nearby. People stopped to greet her and there were several new faces, a sure sign that their small town was growing.

She helped Rebecca gather the food from the wagon and then watched the baby while Rebecca set it out. Little Thomas was restless, so Rowena took him for a walk. She intended to talk to friends while keeping Thomas out of Rebecca's way.

She spotted Jake sitting on a picnic rug among friends and headed in his direction. She was surprised to see a red-haired woman she hadn't met sitting with them; perhaps the woman was a friend of Lily, Matthew's wife. The woman was around Rowena's age or a little older, with an abundance of red curls piled high on her head, dainty features, and a loud laugh that grated on Rowena's nerves. She was wearing a lilac dress that drew attention to her bosom, and she appeared to be the center of attention. Rowena decided she would meet the stranger before forming opinions about her; after all, the

world was full of nice people who were a little different from everyone else, and Rowena wouldn't judge anyone before getting to know them.

But as she approached, the red-haired woman looked up and took Jake's arm possessively. Silence fell as the friends sitting around on the picnic rug watched Rowena or averted their eyes.

"Good afternoon, Miss Williams," Jake greeted her at last. "Have you met Poppy Hartman?"

"I'm afraid I haven't." Rowena stooped to offer her hand to the newcomer, the baby cradled in the crook of her arm.

Poppy gave her hand a cursory shake, then tossed her magnificent curls. "I'm Jake's betrothed," she purred. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Williams. That's a fine baby boy you have there."

"He's not mine," Rowena said, shocked. "He ... he belongs to Rebecca over there." She pointed vaguely in Rebecca's direction. How could she manage inane small talk when her world had just gone into a spin? Her heart pounded and her breath felt shaky, and she had no idea what to do.

Jake looked stricken and couldn't meet her eyes, but he did nothing to correct Poppy. He allowed her to hang onto his arm as if she *owned* him. How dare he kiss Rowena and whisper sweet words to her when this brazen *creature* claimed ownership of his heart? And if things were truly over between them, why didn't he stop her? Why didn't he tell her that they were no longer betrothed?

Stricken with shock, anger, and the beginnings of grief, Rowena turned. "I'll see you all later," she managed, trying not to burst into tears. "Enjoy your meal."

An awkward silence followed her departure, but she didn't care. She could feel the heat burning in her cheeks, and Rebecca instantly noticed when she returned to their picnic rug and placed Thomas next to Lucy.

“I’m not hungry,” she told Rebecca. “This looks wonderful.” She indicated the chicken pie, the corn and beans, and the cornbread with fresh butter. “But I’m not feeling so well. I’m sorry. Don’t wait for me. I’ll walk home.”

She turned on her heel and fled to the safety of the schoolhouse, grateful that she had the key on a chain around her neck. She locked the door behind her, hoping no one had noticed her departure, then fled to the storeroom, shut that door, and cried her eyes out.

## CHAPTER 10



### *Jake*

Jake couldn't stand still. He kept replaying the awful moment Poppy had shown up at church this morning and reclaimed him as her betrothed as if nothing had happened. She'd offered no explanation about why she'd left him, and when he'd tried to ask her, she'd simply said that she had other things to do.

He'd been unable to escape her clutches at the picnic. When he'd tried to tell the friends they were eating with that he and Poppy were no longer betrothed, she'd sweetly shut him down and then privately whispered that he wouldn't want his secrets getting around town.

He'd recognized the threat for what it was and had stayed silent, but inside, he was churning with anger. He wanted to shout at her and tell her to go back to where she came from, but he knew that would only make things much worse. And he still didn't know how to handle the situation without the life he'd worked so hard for cascading down around his ears.

Everyone had secrets out here. But he was sure that few people had left behind the trouble that he had. And it would be the most scandalous gossip anyone had heard in years. Poppy wielded a lot of power with the information she held and she knew it. How had the infernal woman even found him?

His thoughts flew to Rowena. Dear, sweet Rowena whose world had crumbled to bitter ashes as he watched. His heart smote him as he thought of seeing the confusion on her face, followed by devastation as she realized that he belonged to someone else. She'd been so happy; they both had. He was looking forward to sharing his future with her when the time was right, and now

that had been stolen from him. Rage surged through his heart at the thought. How *dare* that conniving little minx reappear and upset his world after breaking his heart when she disappeared? She had no right to steal his future or his happiness, and Rowena had done nothing to deserve the grief Poppy had inflicted. She was nothing but trouble and he bitterly regretted the day he'd ever laid eyes on her.

He thought he loved her once. She was pretty and vivacious and good company. But that was before he'd known she was also treacherous, willing to betray a heart on a whim. It had taken him a long time to be ready to open his heart again to love, and just when he'd found it, the past had arrived to snatch it away. He couldn't think of anything more unfair.

Unable to settle, he made his way over to Charlie's in the dying light of evening. Charlie appeared at his knock and motioned to the chair on the porch. The evening was cool, but Robert was inside, and neither of them wanted to disturb the sick man.

"How's Robert?" Jake asked.

Charlie shook his head. "Not so good. He's sick and weak. I can't see him lasting for long."

Jake sighed. "I'm sorry it's worked out this way."

Charlie's shoulders slumped. "So many wasted years," he murmured. "I wish he'd come sooner."

"He was so afraid of you," Jake said quietly. "Things didn't end well between you, he said."

"That's true." Charlie stared off into the distance. "We were both young and had hot tempers. We fought over a girl and neither of us ended up wed to her. We just ended up losing one another. It's my deepest regret."

"At least you've reconciled now before it's too late." Jake pulled out his whittling knife and a stick of wood from his pocket. He needed something to keep his hands busy.

“You didn’t come here to talk about Robert, did you?” Charlie’s voice was quiet. Somewhere in the distance a bird called as the pink and mauve sunset painted the sky. The mountains in the distance turned pink too, and it struck Jake again how beautiful this land was. He would be sorry to leave it and move on, but did he have a choice?

“No,” he said at last, flicking a sliver of wood off the porch.

“I heard.” Charlie didn’t need to explain. “She’s back and wants to take up where she left off.”

“Why, Charlie?” Jake burst out, giving the knife a vicious twist in his frustration. “Why does she have to come back and destroy everything I’ve worked for here?”

Charlie shook his head, his long gray beard swaying with the motion. “Some people are selfish, Jake. They only think about how other people and situations can benefit themselves.”

“She has no right.” Jake’s tone was bitter. “And she threatened me. *Threatened* me. Can you believe it?”

“I’m afraid I can.” Charlie was silent for a moment. “What did she threaten you with?”

“The reasons I left town.” Jake knew Charlie would understand what he was talking about. “She holds an incredible amount of power and she knows it. She can destroy my life here with a few words and she’s using that as a weapon.” He gave a bitter laugh. “She’s already destroyed what I had with Rowena.”

Charlie looked at him sharply. “How do you know?”

“Because I watched Rowena die inside right before my eyes. She was so happy, Charlie. And then Poppy arrived and Rowena went through this instant change from joy to grief. I could see it in her eyes. And there was nothing I could do about it.” He fell silent. “I still don’t know what to do. If I tell Poppy to stay out of my life, she’s going to utterly destroy me around town. And that will reflect badly on Rowena, too. I want to spare her from that pain.”

“You’re stuck in a hard place,” Charlie agreed. “Either way, you lose.”

“At least if I stay quiet, Rowena might not get hurt any worse than she already has been.”

“Have you thought about telling her?” Charlie asked.

“I have, but I was waiting for the right time. If I say anything now, it’s going to look mighty suspicious if Poppy starts rumors around town. I have always intended to be honest with her.” Jake stared at the stick in his hand. “It’s important to lay a foundation of honesty if you want a good future.”

“Telling her sooner rather than later might have been better,” Charlie observed.

“How was I to know that a nightmare from the past would show up on my doorstep?” Jake kicked at a wood shaving and watched it fly off the porch.

“We always make the best decisions with hindsight,” Charlie said. “If only we could know these things at the time.”

“I wanted Rowena to get to know me a little before I told her,” Jake replied. “She matters to me, Charlie. I didn’t want to get this wrong.”

“I know. I can see that. And if it’s any comfort to you, I think she’d make a fine wife. She’s still learning how to live out here, but she has determination and spirit, and those are important qualities for living successfully in this place.”

Jake sighed. “I can’t imagine a future without Rowena in it,” he said, feeling broken. “But perhaps it’s not meant to be. I don’t want to leave the life I’ve built here, but do I have a choice?”

Charlie opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, their attention was arrested by a lone horseback rider approaching along the trail.

Charlie squinted in the fading daylight. “It’s a woman!” he exclaimed. “Why would a woman be riding out here alone?”



“Oh, no.” Jake groaned as the rider came close enough to recognize her. “It’s Poppy. Why is she coming here?”

Charlie stared at her in silence, a perplexed frown settling on his brow. “I guess we’re about to find out,” he said.

Poppy rode up and dismounted. “Good evening, gentlemen,” she greeted, tying her horse to the post beside the porch. “I’ve come to stay.”

Charlie gaped at her in shock. “Stay? What are you doing here?”

Poppy’s features took on a hard look. “Don’t you recognize me, *Uncle Charlie*? I’m Poppy, all grown up.”

Charlie gasped. “I had no idea. How did you find me?” He sucked in a deep breath. “And look at you. You’re nothing like the little girl I remember.”

Poppy’s posture said she would not take no for an answer. “I went looking for my dear old father,” she drawled. “I tracked him down to Butte, Montana. But I got there a few days too late. Someone who knew him said he was headed here. So I followed.”

“On your own?” Charlie was horrified.

Poppy waved the question away. “Oh, no. I had help along the way. I traveled with different people going to different places. I’m used to it.”

Jake wondered why she would be accustomed to travelling all over the countryside with strangers.

“Well, are you going to invite me in to see my father?” she demanded.

“Certainly,” Charlie stuttered. “He’s in the bedroom but he’s not doing well.”

“I heard,” Poppy returned. She swept past them and pushed the door open, closing it with a bang behind her.

Jake and Charlie looked at one another in shock.

“I had no idea that Poppy was your niece,” Jake said. “Did you know her while she was growing up?”

Charlie shook his head. "I met her once when her mother stopped by to ask for money. She was traveling with a group of entertainers that visited the frontier towns. They were a bawdy lot. I can imagine Poppy saw some sights growing up. She was quite young then. Apparently, Robert abandoned them and Poppy's mother hoped I could tell her where he was. And she wanted money."

Jake still couldn't believe the wild tale that was unfolding before his eyes. "Why did you never say you had a niece named Poppy?" he asked.

"To be honest, I didn't think of her," Charlie replied. "As I said, I only met them once when Poppy was young. I never made the connection that the one you were betrothed to was the same girl. My niece just didn't enter my mind at all."

Jake felt as if his mind was in a spin. "How does this even happen?" he murmured, almost lost for words.

"How did you meet Poppy?" Charlie asked.

"She was living in Butte and working in the hardware store. She was charming and good company, and I believed her when she said she had no family and was making her own way in the world. She seemed to have good morals and manners, and well, there aren't too many single women around these parts. So I was happy when she agreed to wed me. All of us have a past, and I was satisfied with the way she explained hers. I had no reason to disbelieve her."

Charlie sighed. "What a tangled mess." He tugged at his beard. "One thing is certain. This young lady won't accept anyone telling her no. I pity anyone who gets in her way."

"Now do you understand what I was saying before?" Jake asked.

Charlie nodded. "I can. And I have no doubt that she would do whatever it takes to get her own way, without any regrets for whomever she hurts in the process. You're in a pickle, Jake."

“Thanks for the encouragement,” Jake said grimly. “I don’t know what to do right now, but I will do whatever it takes to protect Rowena. She doesn’t deserve to have this mess destroy her life.”

A noise from inside the cabin caught their attention and they fell silent. A moment later, Poppy swept onto the porch.

“Was Robert awake?” Charlie asked. “He’s been sleeping a lot lately.”

Poppy gave an impatient gesture. “Yes, my *father* spoke to me. He said he’s glad he came so he could make things right before he leaves this world.” She gave a bitter laugh. “But nothing can make up for the way he abandoned me as a child. He wasn’t around to protect me or provide for me. I had to learn to do those things for myself.”

“Why did you tell me you were an orphan?” Jake demanded.

Poppy gave a mocking laugh. “Oh, do you really think you’d have been interested in a person of ill-breeding like me? I’m the illegitimate daughter of a showgirl and a drifter. Who would ever want me and give me a respectable life knowing that?”

“I was prepared to give you a respectable life,” Jake said hotly. “But you left without even saying goodbye and you took my heart with you. Why?”

Poppy shook her head. “It’s in the past now. It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me.” Jake heard the stubbornness in his voice but he didn’t care. “You owe me an explanation.”

Poppy fixed him with a piercing, green-eyed stare. “No, I don’t. But you’re going to give me that respectable life you promised me. Finding you here was a stroke of luck that I never dreamed of. It’s time Poppy Hartman had a new start.” She continued to stare at him. “Or you know what will happen ...” The threat was soft and menacing. “No one in this town will want you to stay

here after I'm done with you. They'll run you out of town ... just like they did before."

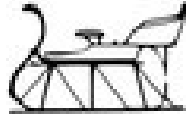
Jake's heart smote him and he gave an inward shudder as the memories flooded back, as sharp and horrifying as they had been in the beginning. He couldn't imagine facing the same thing a second time.

"Let's not be hasty," Charlie spoke up. "Let's just take our time and see what happens."

Poppy turned on him. "No one can tell me what to do, Uncle Charlie. I *will* get the fresh start in life that I deserve and no one is going to stop me. Stay out of my business." She stood straight and tall, her back ramrod-stiff. "Now, I'll be staying here, so I'd like some help getting my bag down." She gestured to the carpet bag that was tied to the back of her saddle. "And someone can care for my horse." She paused for a moment. "Do you know if my father has any assets?" she asked casually. "I heard that he struck it rich on the gold fields."

Charlie just shook his head as he and Jake stared at one another in shocked dismay. In the space of half an hour, Poppy Hartman had turned both of their lives upside down and neither of them knew what to do about it.

## CHAPTER 11



### *Rowena*

Rowena dressed for church with care. Her best deep-blue dress was clean and neatly pressed. The fitted bodice was decorated with an insert of white and flared out over her hips, accentuating her trim waist. The dress fell almost to the floor, just allowing the toes of her shoes to peek out from beneath. Her white hat was modest and trimmed with a simple blue ribbon as a hatband. She stared at the small looking glass in her room for a long moment, wishing she could do something about the shadows that had appeared beneath her eyes during the last week. She hadn't been able to sleep much, unable to shake off the thoughts of the heartbreak that had befallen her without warning.

She thought about not attending the church, but as the teacher, she was expected to set an example of morality and piety.

But she had a more personal reason for wanting to attend. She wanted to show Poppy and Jake that she wasn't about to fall apart because of what they had done to her. She had no doubt that Poppy either didn't care or was glad to be rid of her, but Jake should know that she would carry on regardless of his actions.

Besides, the new preacher was arriving soon, and every churchgoer in the district wanted to make a good impression. The church had been closed during the winter, but everyone wanted to make up for it now. Everyone would notice if Rowena didn't go, and tongues were already wagging about Poppy's arrival in town.

A short time later, she entered the church with Zach and Rebecca. Keeping her back straight and her head held high, she made her way to the front, looking neither

to the right nor the left. The floorboard near the middle gave its usual soft creak as she stepped on it, and the scent of furniture polish and old books filled her nostrils. The pump organ hit an especially shrill note as the organist started on another hymn, almost making her flinch. She saw Poppy sitting in a pew near the middle of the church; Poppy clutched Jake's arm and glared in Rowena's direction as she sat down.

So be it. If Jake was going to allow that mean-spirited woman to sweep into his life and control him, then he deserved her. Pain flooded her heart again as she thought of what might have been, and she wondered if Jake had ever really gotten Poppy out of his heart even as he was declaring his feelings for her. It seemed that he hadn't.

She regretted attending church already; it promised to be the longest day she'd ever endured. She just wanted to go home, throw herself on her bed, and cry her eyes out. She couldn't wait until school ended and then she would leave Jackson and return to Salt Lake City, where she at least had friends and family for comfort.

No one had said anything to her directly about Poppy's arrival in town. Everyone seemed to tiptoe around her, careful not to say or do anything that might upset her, but there was plenty of gossip flying around. She'd heard it from the schoolchildren, some of whom were too young and innocent to know any better.

The sermon seemed to go on forever, and the plain little wooden building felt stifling to Rowena despite the pleasant spring day outside. The wooden pews were even more uncomfortable than usual, and the man chosen to read the sermon that day droned on in a monotone that made Rowena want to cover her ears and flee the building.

At last, the ordeal ended and Rowena rose to make her escape. But the narrow aisle was crowded with people waiting to greet the speaker, and as they waited, the chatter grew louder and louder.

One voice rose above them all.

“The preacher will be here soon,” someone in front of Rowena said.

“Yes.” Poppy’s reply was loud. She glanced over her shoulder and her eyes flickered briefly over Rowena as she stood in line. “We’re plannin’ to wed when he arrives.”

“Oh, that’s exciting news.” The woman moved closer to Poppy, clearly eager to hear more.

Poppy cast a triumphant half-glance back at Rowena. “Yes, Jake can’t wait,” she said. “It will be soon, so we’ve started telling everyone our plans.”

Rowena felt sick to the stomach and she felt as if she might suffocate in the stuffy church. Jake was going to *wed* Poppy? How could she have been so blind that she couldn’t see he still had feelings for the woman who’d left his life so abruptly?

Leaving the past behind didn’t work, it seemed. Rowena thought bitterly of the kiss she’d shared with Jake and how she’d believed his pretty words.

But that was all they were. Lovely, meaningless words. Not enough to build a future on. Anger surged through her heart as she thought of his callous disregard for her feelings. All it took was a pretty face from the past and Rowena might as well have been a cow grazing in the pasture for all Jake cared.

The woman in front of Rowena seemed to sense the awkwardness of the situation. Her eyes were kind as they met Rowena’s.

“Some women have no thought for others,” she murmured so only Rowena could hear.

Rowena felt tears building and wished she could escape before they fell. The woman’s kindness only made it worse. Rowena just nodded, and the woman put her hand on Rowena’s arm and gave it a little squeeze.

“Thank you, Eliza,” Rowena murmured in return, grateful that someone had acknowledged her situation.

At last, the churchgoers departed from the small building, and Rowena was able to make her escape.

“I’ll walk home,” she told Zach and Rebecca. “I need to check on something in the schoolhouse. I’ll be home in a while.”

Rebecca gave her a searching look, and Rowena realized that she understood exactly what had happened.

“Will you be all right?” she asked quietly.

Rowena nodded, not trusting herself to speak. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Rebecca squeezed her hand without speaking and hurried to the wagon where Zach was waiting. Rowena turned and headed for the school building adjacent to the church. Her steps were measured, and she walked with her head held high. No one was going to watch her disintegrate on the outside. It was already bad enough that she was so broken on the inside.

She entered the schoolhouse and closed the door, sinking gratefully into her desk chair as the cheerful sounds of people chatting, children playing, and teams leaving continued outside. She would wait until it was quiet before she would venture out again.

Safe in the privacy of the schoolhouse, she allowed the tears to fall, muffling her sobs in her hands lest anyone was outside. She was so lost in her grief that she didn’t notice footsteps on the porch until it was too late to hide in the storeroom. She jumped to her feet as the door opened, horrified to see Jake standing there. He looked uncertain.

“May I come in?” he asked.

She swallowed back her tears and gave him the best icy look she could muster. “If you must,” she replied. “Isn’t everyone still outside?”

He shook his head. “No. I waited until they were all gone.”



He entered and left the door open, and Rowena felt panicky as she saw that someone could come to the door and see them together, but she wasn't going to allow Jake to see how she felt.

He crossed the room to stand before her, his face haggard and his eyes tormented.

"Rowena, it isn't what you think," he began.

Anger flared. "Then what is it?" she retorted. "I was forced to endure that ... that *woman* you call your betrothed announce that you will wed as soon as the preacher arrives. How can it be anything else?"

He held up his hands. "Rowena ..." he begged. "Listen to me. I didn't want this to happen."

Anger turned to fury. "Then why didn't you stop it? You're a grown man, aren't you? You could've just said no."

"It's not that easy." His blue eyes were tormented. "Please believe me. I'm trying to do what's best here."

"So that includes trifling with hearts, does it?" Rowena's tone could've cut glass. "I believed you, Jake. Fool that I was. I thought you felt the same way about me that I felt about you."

He raised his hands again. "I did. I still do."

She rounded on him. "Then why are you planning to wed another woman? Nothing you say is making sense and you're absolutely cruel. This discussion is going nowhere. Please leave."

Jake's shoulders slumped and Rowena thought she caught a glimpse of tears in his eyes as he turned away. He paused at the door and then turned to Rowena.

"I can't tell you the whole story," he said. "But please believe me. This was not what I wanted."

Rowena couldn't speak past the lump in her throat. For the second time, she watched as the man she loved walked away to choose someone else. It was almost more than she could bear, and she waited until Jake had left

before collapsing across the desk in a torrent of weeping. How could she have been so foolish twice?

It was late afternoon before she finally made her way home. She trudged through the wildflower meadow, hardly noticing the colors and scents of the wildflowers that normally delighted her, or the distant mountain peaks reaching for the sky. Her heart felt like lead in her chest and she wished she could leave town right away instead of waiting for the school year to end.

But she'd been hired to teach, and the local children deserved an education. She would stay, but she had no idea how she would endure watching Poppy claim the life that could have been hers.

Rebecca looked up as Rowena entered the cabin. The children were helping Zach feed the animals, and the baby was playing on the floor. Without a word, Rebecca motioned to the kitchen table.

"Let's sit," she said quietly. "I have time."

Rowena lowered herself woodenly into the chair in silence. Rebecca waited for her to speak.

"Heartbreak is horrible," Rebecca said when she realized Rowena wasn't going to say anything. "I know what it feels like."

Rowena looked at her in surprise. "I thought you had only ever loved Zach," she said.

Rebecca shook her head. "No. I was betrothed once before I met Zach. I thought it was love. I was looking forward to a future with this man. But one day, he left without warning, and I later found out that he'd met another woman in another town when he drove cattle down that way to market. I guess the attraction was too strong."

"That's terrible," Rowena said. "Did you ever see him again?"

Rebecca nodded. "It didn't work out with the other woman. Turns out she already had a husband and had run away from him. She got tired of life on the move and

returned to him. So my intended came back asking for another chance.” She smiled. “It was the best day of my life when I was able to tell him that I’d met a far more worthy man and he had no chance. I wed Zach soon after that, and I am thankful every day that I did. He’s been a wonderful husband and father, far better than the other man would’ve been. What was my worst heartbreak turned into my biggest blessing.” She paused. “I think your situation with Jake is similar to my story,” she said. “But I believe Jake when he says it was not what he wanted. I think he has been manipulated into moving in a certain direction, but he’s the only one who can change directions.”

“He’s a man, isn’t he?” Bitterness crept into Rowena’s tone. “He’s old enough to say no and take charge of his own life. So why does he allow some nasty, conniving woman to decide his future?”

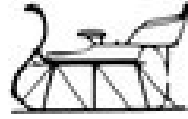
Rebecca sighed. “I don’t know the answers to those questions. But I do know that Jake is a good man, Rowena. Despite appearances, I think you’ll find there’s more to the story. This is so out of character for Jake that there must be something else happening in the background.”

“Jake said as much,” Rowena conceded grudgingly. “But he’s still planning to wed this awful creature, so having high and noble morals and ideals hasn’t got him far, has it? The end result is still the same.”

Rebecca fell silent. “All I’m saying is keep the door open,” she said at last. “Sometimes things are not what they seem.”

“And sometimes what you see is what you get,” Rowena returned. “Thank you for listening, Rebecca. I don’t want any supper tonight. I’m going to bed early.”

## CHAPTER 12



### *Jake*

Jake sank into the bathtub with a groan, the warm water slipping around his body like a blanket. He leaned his head back on the edge of the tub and stared at the ceiling boards, relaxing for the first time that day.

He'd known it would be a difficult day, of course. He just hadn't imagined *how* difficult it would be. Poppy had come over the day before and insisted that they go to church, and Jake had spent a sleepless night dreading it.

It had almost broken his heart to see how devastated Rowena looked despite her display of bravery. He'd watched her from afar, earning him a rebuke from Poppy for not paying her enough attention, but he didn't care. The woman he loved was falling apart from the inside out, and even though he didn't want to be in this situation, he felt responsible.

He'd had no qualms about sending Poppy home with Zach and Rebecca, telling her he had to see someone in town before he went home. She wasn't happy, of course, but Zach had volunteered to drive her all the way home so there was no reason for her not to go. No one commented on Rowena's absence, but Jake knew that everyone would notice. He'd avoided being in town as much as possible since this whole sorry fiasco had begun, but he was certain there was talk of nothing else. The townspeople had never seen such a juicy story play out in full view and everyone was wondering what would happen next.

He'd watched Rowena slip over to the schoolhouse as he talked to the other men, something she often did after church. It was not in itself unusual. But everyone would notice that Poppy was with Zach and Rebecca instead of

Rowena. The gossip around town was rife with speculation, and Jake hated that he'd inadvertently dragged Rowena into the midst of it.

Anger filled his heart at the thought of Poppy's announcement that they were to be wed. He was sure Rowena had heard it, and he was certain that Poppy had intended her to. He hadn't said anything to Poppy about his relationship with Rowena, but he was sure someone would've filled her in. Poppy had a knack for seeking out the biggest gossips in town and learning all the secrets they were prepared to divulge, which she would then use to her advantage. She'd done it while they were betrothed, but because it didn't directly affect him, he'd dismissed it as women's business and thought nothing of it. Now, he could see that it was a serious character flaw that could be dangerous.

He closed his eyes, savoring the warm bath after the effort it had taken to fill it up. He always put the tub in the middle of the floor of his cabin, close to the stove so he could easily carry the hot water over. Bathing was an arduous task without adequate plumbing, something he intended to solve when he could, but it was worth the trouble. He always felt relaxed after a warm bath.

But footsteps on the porch brought his relaxation to an abrupt end. Before he could climb out and get decent, the door flew open and Poppy burst in, her face like a thundercloud.

"Is it true that you were courting that horrid little schoolteacher?" she demanded, two bright spots of color appearing on her cheeks. She didn't seem to notice that Jake was naked in the bath.

Jake gasped in shock and scrambled to reach his shirt, flinging it across his lap to provide at least the illusion of modesty. He slid lower in the water, his mouth opening and closing like a flapping fish as he tried to form words.

"Well, is it?" Poppy demanded again, ignoring his obvious discomfort.

"Yes." Jake found his voice at last. "We were courting."

“I knew it!” Poppy’s tone was triumphant. “I could tell by the way she looked at you. Someone else confirmed it today, and now I’ve heard it from your own mouth.” She marched over and leaned close, her words hitting him in the face. “Well, not any more, Jakey boy. You belong to me and we’ll be gettin’ wed as soon as the preacher arrives.”

“Now, wait a minute.” Jake was getting angry. “You don’t own me. Not now and not ever. So just go away, back where you came from. I don’t want to wed you.”

Poppy’s eyes glittered dangerously. “Oh, but you will.” Her tone was sweet and deadly. “You see, I’m with child. And the whole town will soon believe the child is yours. All I have to do is whisper the word into a few of the right ears and it will spread like wildfire.”

Jake shot up in the bath, almost forgetting that he was naked. “How dare you blackmail me, you evil woman?” he shouted. “Besides, who’s going to believe that’s even possible since you only just arrived in town?”

Poppy smiled sweetly. “All I have to do is tell the right people that I’ve actually been here for a few months, nursing my ill father. No one knows when he arrived, or that I didn’t come with him. All they will see is a dedicated nurse, caring for her dying father. No one will question that.”

“Well, I will,” Jake declared. “I’m not going to be blackmailed into this. Why don’t you just go away and leave us all alone?”

“If you oppose me, you’ll be more sorry than you’ve ever been in your whole life,” Poppy threatened. “The whole town will know you forced me and the child is the result.” She glared at him with icy eyes. “Just like the last town that ran you off.”

“That wasn’t true and you know it,” Jake said hotly. “I was set up by a rival who wanted the land I was buying. You know that.”

“Yes, but no one else does,” Poppy purred. She reached into the sack she carried and produced a worn

envelope. “They’ll believe it, especially when they see the letter I have from the sheriff. It tells the story in great detail.” She gave him a triumphant smirk. “So it would be much better for you if you cooperated. Besides, I have another surprise for that sorry little excuse for a teacher. She’s been involved with Zach, so she has. I found them together when I went for a visit and tied my horse up at the barn.”

Jake was filled with rage. “You did not!” he hissed. “You’re lying. Leave Rowena out of this.”

“Ah, but everyone else will believe me,” Poppy said sweetly. “Everyone loves a good rumor. All I have to do is start it off and then it gets a life of its own. It’s a most useful way of getting what one wants.”

“You’re pure evil,” Jake spat out, shaking with rage.

Poppy eyed him coldly. “I deserve a better life, Jake. No one will give it to me, so I’m going to take what I can. Finding you here was the best luck I could’ve hoped for. No one will stop me now.”

“What about your father?” Jake demanded. “And Charlie? They know the truth.”

Poppy gave a derisive snort. “They won’t say anything. Charlie is afraid of me and my *father* is on his deathbed, the worthless old scoundrel. He won’t tell me if he has a gold stash hidden somewhere.”

“That makes two scoundrels in the family,” Jake muttered.

“I don’t care what you think.” Poppy’s tone was icy. “I’m going to become a respectable woman, thanks to you. My child will have a better future than I did.”

“Who’s the father?” Jake demanded.

“You, of course,” Poppy returned in a sugary sweet tone of voice. “No one will ever believe otherwise.”

And with that, she marched out the door, slamming it shut on the way. Jake scrambled out of the now-cold bath and wrapped a bath towel around his midriff. He darted to the door in time to see Poppy clamber onto her

horse and gallop off along the trail toward Charlie's place, her loose red hair streaming behind her.

Jake sank down on a chair at the kitchen table, shaking with the aftermath of the encounter as well as the cold. He stared unseeingly at the log wall opposite, his mind unable to comprehend the enormity of what Poppy wanted to do to him. And if he refused to go along with her plans, not only would she destroy him, but she would destroy Rowena, too. Jake couldn't allow that to happen. There *must* be something he could do to stop her. His life loomed before him, monstrous and miserable as he thought of being shackled to Poppy until one of them died. Not to mention being forced to raise another man's child as his own. It was unthinkable.



“Can you spare a moment?”

Charlie stood on Jake's doorstep the following morning, his face haggard and his eyes bloodshot. Jake wondered if he'd been drinking, then remembered that Charlie had given up drinking thirty years ago.

“Of course. Come on in.” Jake stepped aside to allow the older man to enter the cabin.

Silence fell as the two men seated themselves at the kitchen table, something they had done so often in the past that it had simply become part of the ritual of a visit.

“What's wrong?” Jake asked at last.

Charlie winced. “Is it that obvious?”

Jake nodded. “Sure is.”

Charlie sighed. “I'm sure you can guess. Poppy.”

“Say no more. Has she caused you a big pile of grief, too?”



Charlie stared at his hands. “Now, I’ve got no doubt that my brother let a lot of people down in his life, but no one deserves to be harassed and berated until they take their last breath.”

Jake scowled. “Won’t she leave her father alone?”

Charlie shook his head. “She’s convinced that he struck it rich in the mines up in Montana and he’s got a stash of gold somewhere. He’s tried to tell her that it’s all gone, but she won’t let it go. And when she’s not pestering him about the gold, she’s berating him for being a bad father. I had to ban her from his room last night so he could get some peace.” He frowned. “The problem is, Robert believes he deserves it, so he does nothing to stop her. It’s some kind of strange penance in his mind. I honestly believe her mind is unwell.”

Jake growled in frustration. “She’s nothing but a selfish, nasty, conniving female scoundrel. She showed up here last night with her demands and threats. While I was in the bath, no less. She didn’t care. And who knows how bad it will get when the child arrives ...”

Charlie turned to him in horror. “*Child?* Is there a child?”

Jake felt instant regret for mentioning something he’d assumed Charlie already knew. “I’m afraid so,” he said reluctantly.

Charlie’s eyes were wild with shock. “You mean this witch of a woman is about to multiply herself in *my* home?”

“I’m sorry, Charlie,” Jake said. “I thought you knew.”

Charlie clapped a large hand across his face and groaned. “Every second with her around makes things worse.”

“Don’t worry, Charlie. She’s currently blackmailing me into marrying her and giving her a respectable life. She has it all planned out how to make it happen, and so far, I can’t think of any way of stopping her without massive destruction to my life and Rowena’s. She’s got it all worked out to benefit herself.”

Charlie stared at him in dismay. “You jest, surely?”

“I do not. As I said, she visited last night with her plan all worked out and there was nothing I could think of to dissuade her. She’s an expert at lies, manipulation and gossip.”

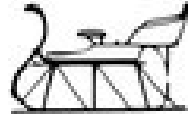
“Everyone will realize she’s no good, won’t they?”

Jake shook his head. “Not soon enough. She’s very careful with her stories and the way she presents herself. She either has everyone convinced she deserves their sympathy or has won them over with her charm, preparing them for the evil seeds she will plant if she needs to. My life will no longer be worth living, Charlie. I’ll be miserable for the rest of my days if I wed her, or if I don’t, she will utterly destroy me in this town. And just to ensure that I got the message, she also has plans for Rowena if I don’t do as she says.” He raked a hand through his hair in frustration. “What am I going to do? I can’t see any way out of this.”

Charlie took deep breaths, closing his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, he was calm, the shock and dismay replaced by a steely resolve.

“Let’s not get all shook up,” he drawled. “I have a plan.”

## CHAPTER 13



### *Jake*

Jake took one last look in the small looking glass in the bedroom. His tie was straight and his hair and beard were clean and combed. His Sunday best suit was clean and pressed, and his shoes were polished to perfection. He was ready.

So why then did he still have a huge lump of dread in the pit of his stomach? He had no idea what the day would bring and he had to be prepared for anything. He could only hope that Charlie's plan was watertight.

With a sigh, he headed for the team, patiently waiting outside with the wagon while he dressed. He glanced at the living room of the cabin one last time, seeing that everything was in order, the way he liked it. He could only hope he would return here this evening in one piece.

He arrived at the church early, nerves building in the pit of his stomach. What if this didn't work?

No, he couldn't think of that. He wanted to be there early to greet the guests personally, so he focused on that instead as he waited for everyone to arrive.

Poppy hadn't questioned his sudden change of heart over her wedding plans. She'd sneered that he'd seen the wisdom of remaining silent at last and had been happy to throw herself into planning the day. Jake had cooperated when requested, but other than that, remained as distant as possible. Poppy didn't seem to notice or care.

Now, as the townsfolk began to gather, he greeted each one with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. Finally, everyone was seated and Jake waited at the front

of the church, wanting to fidget but doing his best to remain calm and composed.

At last, there was a flurry at the rear of the church and Poppy stood in the doorway on Charlie's arm. She paused, allowing her triumphant gaze to sweep over the congregation from behind her lacy veil, finally settling on Jake with a victorious light in her green eyes.

There was no doubt that she was beautiful. Somehow, she'd procured a stunning cream-colored gown overlaid with lace and trimmed with satin. Its train trailed behind her, and she carried a magnificent bouquet of wildflowers.

After pausing to soak up the admiration of those present, she began her stately walk down the aisle, her back straight and her eyes fixed on Jake. She could have been royalty.

The unsuspecting preacher began the ceremony. After greeting those present and delivering a few remarks about the sacredness of the event, he turned to Poppy and Jake.

"Who gives this woman in marriage to this man?" he asked.

"I do," Charlie replied. He took Poppy's hand and placed it on Jake's arm, then sat down on the front row.

The preacher began his speech about the meaning of marriage and how each party should prepare for married life.

*Lies!* Jake wanted to shout. There was nothing sacred or meaningful about being blackmailed into marriage. But he held his peace, trusting that everything would work out in the end. He stole half a glance at Poppy. The satisfied smirk on her face made him feel sick to his stomach.

The preacher finished his talk and addressed the congregation. "Before we proceed any further, is there any reason why these two should not wed?" he asked. "Speak now or forever hold your peace."

“Yes.” A voice rang clearly from the rear of the church.

Everyone turned around in shock to stare. Robert stood there, breathing heavily and propping himself up with a cane. He was obviously ill and in pain, but he’d made it.

“Speak up,” the preacher said, a note of surprise in his voice.

“Father!” Poppy screeched. “What are you doing here?”

Robert ignored her. “I have not lived a good life,” he began. “And while I would like to be able to say that I support my daughter in this matter, I cannot allow her to destroy the lives of people I care about.”

“Father!” Poppy shrieked. “You have lost your mind!” She turned wild eyes on the congregation. “Pay him no attention! He’s ill and has lost his powers of reason.”

The preacher held up his hand. “Allow him to speak. It is a legal requirement.”

The room hushed as Robert went on. “My daughter will tell you that she came here with me months ago to nurse me back to health, but it isn’t true. She came here three weeks ago.”

“That is the truth,” Charlie affirmed. “She arrived at my cabin to stay three weeks ago.”

Poppy looked as if she was ready to lash out physically and hurt Charlie, but Jake held her arm firmly in his grasp. She tried to wrench free, giving him a furious glare through her veil.

“She will also tell you that Jake has put her in a compromising position,” Robert went on. “I can assure you, the child is not his. It’s not even remotely possible.”

Everyone gasped and stared at Jake. He felt his face redden even though he’d done nothing wrong.

“Yet, she has coerced Jake into being here today to wed her under the threat of exposing secrets that could ruin his life.” He paused for breath. “Jake does not

deserve this. He is a man of integrity and honesty who was falsely accused by someone else in a situation such as Poppy's."

"It's true," Jake spoke up. "I was accused of a crime against a woman in another town that resulted in a child. The accusation was motivated by someone who wanted land that I owned, and they were successful in running me out of town." He took a deep breath. "Miss Hartman thought to do the same thing to me. Either I would comply with her wishes or she would see to it that I was ruined in this town." His gaze swept the room. "Have any of you heard rumors?"

A murmur rippled through the congregation.

"Nothing certain," someone ventured.

"But enough for people to question my motives and integrity," Jake stated.

Heads nodded in agreement. He continued.

"There have also been whispers of misconduct against Miss Williams."

People dropped their heads and no one was willing to look him in the eye. He felt a perverse satisfaction in knowing that his intuition had been correct. People *had* been talking about Rowena.

"The rumors about her are also incorrect," Jake went on. "She has done nothing wrong, and I promise there will be trouble if I catch anyone saying anything untoward about her. If you want to check for yourselves, you may ask either Zach or Rebecca. They know of these allegations and it has hurt their reputation too. They will defend Miss Williams' honor without hesitation."

Poppy was weeping now as she tried to break away from Jake's grasp. "It's lies!" she shouted.

Jake shook his head. "It's over, Poppy. No one is going to believe you now. You're not going to force me to wed you and your days of spreading lies about innocent people are over. Accept it."

She turned to him with such rage on her face that he took a step back. “I hate you, Jake Brooks,” she spat, her tone low and menacing. “I have never hated anyone as much as I hate you. You should be dead.”

She reached inside her dress and pulled something out of the shoulder. Horrified, Jake saw that it was a handgun. In a split second, she’d cocked it and was pointing it right at him.

“Get down!” Robert roared from the rear of the church, where he still stood leaning on his walking stick.

It was enough to distract Poppy. “I’ve changed my mind,” she snarled. “You die first, *Father*.” And she raised the gun and pulled the trigger.

Robert fell to the floor and lay still, but the bullet continued its journey, shattering the window in the foyer instead. Everyone froze in shock and there was a stunned silence before screams of terror rent the air and the congregation stampeded for the door.

Poppy started to raise the gun again, but before she could aim it at Jake, Charlie launched himself at her, tackling her around the legs and knocking her to the ground. The gun went off again, splintering a hole in the ceiling, and there were more screams as the people fled. Jake pounced on Poppy and wrested the gun from her hands. She lay on the floor looking up at him with fury in her eyes.

“Don’t think this is the end of this,” she snarled. “I’ll hunt you down and finish the job.”

“No, you won’t,” said a firm voice somewhere above their heads.

Jake looked up to see the sheriff’s deputy standing there glaring at Poppy.

“You’re off to jail, Miss Hartman. You attempted to murder your own father and the man you were supposed to wed. Your father called me to be here in case of trouble. I was waiting in the foyer.”

“My father is a dead man too,” Poppy raged.

“Not yet,” Robert said from behind the deputy. “In fact, I feel better than I have for a long time. All this excitement must have been good for me.”

Jake stared at him in surprise. The last time he’d seen Robert, he’d been sure the man didn’t have long to live.

“I believe you have been showing signs of insanity,” the deputy went on.

Poppy paled. “I am perfectly sane,” she retorted.

“Then you’d better cooperate with me, or I will recommend that a doctor assess you for a stay in an asylum,” the deputy responded. “On your feet, Miss Hartman.”

Poppy burst into tears. “I just wanted a wedding,” she wailed. “I’m not insane!”

“Well, you went about getting one the wrong way,” the deputy said firmly. “Blackmail and attempted murder are crimes, and sane people don’t behave the way you have. No one should be treated the way you’ve treated these three men, no matter what your grievances are. At the very least, you’ll be spending some time in jail.”

As the deputy led Poppy away, her sobs faded into silence. Charlie sank onto the front pew and held his head with his hands. Robert sat beside him, holding his cane. Jake was still sitting on the floor where he’d wrestled the gun from Poppy, the feeling of relief making him feel weak.

“Thank you, Robert,” he said quietly. “I know it took a lot of effort and a big dose of courage to come here and do what you did today.”

Robert looked sad. “I wanted things to work out with Poppy,” he said, regret in his eyes. “But she was only interested in how I could benefit her in some way. It was not possible.” He took a deep breath. “I think I’m feeling better now because that situation has been resolved. It was weighing on me heavily while I was so ill.” He paused. “I wouldn’t say I have recovered, but I feel much better than I did.”



“Charlie has been caring for you well,” Jake replied. “With good food and rest, you might yet make a full recovery.”

“You know, I hope I do,” Robert replied. “I feel that I have something to live for now.”

Charlie spoke. “I still feel sorry for Poppy and the child, if there is one,” he said. “She’s messed up her own life; let’s hope she doesn’t destroy the baby’s.”

Jake sighed. “She’s an adult. No one can force her to make good choices.”

“We’re all fortunate that she was a terrible shot with that gun,” Charlie said with a grim smile. “I never expected her to be armed on her wedding day. She was getting what she wanted.”

Robert looked sad. “She’s been forced to look out for herself from a very young age,” he said. “I blame myself for not being around when she was a child. She had no one she could rely on. Not that it was entirely my fault. Her mother didn’t want me around. But I should’ve stayed and fought for her. Things might be different now if I had.”

Charlie placed his hand on his twin’s shoulder. “We all wish we’d done things differently. But if you can’t let it go, you’ll be eaten up with guilt and will never find peace.”

“I’ve been talking to the Lord lately,” Robert confessed. “That seems to help.”

“It does,” Jake agreed. “And I need to do a lot more of it because there will be ongoing consequences from today. Things might be rough for a while, and I have no idea if I will ever be able to persuade Rowena to give me another chance. This whole sorry mess broke her heart.”

“Don’t worry, she’ll hear all about it sooner rather than later,” Charlie said. “Someone will tell the tale, and it’s likely to grow more outlandish with each retelling.”

“I just hope she can see the truth.” Jake stared at his hands for a long moment. “She was very angry with me,

and I can't say I blame her.”

“Whatever happens, just know you've done your best to make it right,” Charlie advised. “She's got good sense and a kind heart. It might take time, but I think you'll find she will see your situation for what it was.”

“I hope you're right,” Jake muttered fervently. “I hope you're right.”

## CHAPTER 14



### *Rowena*

Rowena started in surprise as she heard someone at the rear door of the schoolhouse. The children had gone home for the day, and she was almost ready to gather up her things and walk home herself. It was a beautiful afternoon; the sun was shining and soft spring breezes were blowing, and Rowena knew a walk in the fresh air would do her good. She was thankful once again that the schoolhouse was on the edge of town and she wouldn't have to walk past anyone to go home. She didn't feel like engaging in polite conversation. Not today.

The beautiful day failed to ease the ache in her heart, of course. She'd heard that Jake was going to wed Poppy today, and no matter how hard she tried, the tears wouldn't stop falling as she thought of the future that might have been hers.

Not that it mattered now. She'd written a letter with her resignation to the school board, and all she had to do was hand it to one of the board members. She would miss the children, and she'd grown to love Jackson and its quirky residents and unpredictable weather.

But there was nothing here for her now, and she had no desire to spend her days trying to avoid Poppy and Jake in the small town. It was best to treasure it as a learning experience and move on. If only her heart could also move on ...

Now, as she rose to answer the door, she wondered who would be coming to see her. Perhaps it was one of the men coming to fix the door to the woodshed.

But when she opened the door, she was shocked to see Jake standing there in his best clothing. Lost for words, she could only stare at him in surprise.

“Good afternoon, Rowena,” he said. His voice sounded rough.

“Where’s your wife?” Rowena asked, looking around. The church next door was deserted, and apart from Jake’s horse grazing in the large vacant lot next to the church, the street was empty. “Why aren’t you with her?”

“There is no wife, Rowena.” Jake’s blue eyes sought out hers with a desperation that surprised her.

“Why not?” Rowena propped one hand on her hip, wondering if she should just send him away. “What are you even doing here? I’ve got to get home.”

Jake took a step back at her frosty tone, then his face fell and he sighed.

“Rowena, could we please talk for a little while?” he begged. “I want to explain.”

Rowena frowned. “I think there’s nothing more to be said, Jake.” Tears pricked at her eyes and she felt angry with herself for the effect he still had on her. “Even if there is no wife, you still made your choice.”

Jake took a step closer. “Please?” he asked again quietly. His eyes were haunted with fear and regret. “Let me explain. You’re going to hear it from someone else anyway. I’d appreciate the chance to tell you the truth before you hear the embellished version.”

Rowena sighed, allowing the anger inside to push away the tears. “All right. I can give you five minutes before I must leave for home.”

She stood back and allowed Jake to enter the room. His presence seemed to fill it up, and she was reminded again of how large he was. If only he’d been large enough to send Poppy away when she’d arrived. He’d seemed helpless to resist her, and Rowena felt disgusted by the way he’d simply allowed Poppy to take up the life she’d thrown away years before.

“Well, I’m waiting,” she said after a moment when she realized Jake had fallen silent.

He took a deep breath. "Rowena, I never wanted Poppy back in my life," he said.

"Then why didn't you tell her to leave?" Rowena challenged.

He looked at her with a mixture of regret and longing. "I deserve your anger," he told her. "But at the time, Poppy had information about my past that I didn't want to become public. She used that information to blackmail me into doing what she wanted. And I wasn't the only one she tried to harm. Her actions affected others, too. Her mind isn't well, Rowena. She does things no sane person would do."

Rowena stared at him, saying nothing.

"I had to decide what I was going to do about it," Jake went on. "No matter what I did, it would hurt someone, including me. It was the most difficult position I've ever been in."

"But you thought it was acceptable to hurt me." Rowena's voice was quiet, the fire in her heart dying down at his words. She hung her head, and to her shame, a tear slid down her cheek.

Jake crossed the room in two strides and took her gently by the shoulders.

"No, Rowena, never! I didn't want to hurt you. That's why I had to allow this situation to develop to the point where the truth would come out. I was trying to protect you." He took a deep breath and lifted her chin gently so he could look into her eyes. "Please believe me."

She looked at him through a blur of tears. His face was so familiar, so dear, and she wanted to believe him with all her heart. But she also knew that she had to be careful. He had hurt her once and she didn't want to give him the chance to do it again.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Poppy brought herself undone," he said grimly. "All I had to do was allow her enough rope to hang herself, in a manner of speaking. Not that it was easy, and I had help

from two brave men. She almost took her father's life today."

Rowena gasped. "How?"

Jake sighed. "As I said, her mind isn't well. She's had a difficult life and it's made worse by her choices and character. I would love to think that she might have a change of heart in the future, but for now, she is a danger to herself and anyone who gets in her way. She's likely to spend some time in jail, so perhaps she'll do some thinking there."

"So how did you get out of the wedding?" Rowena asked, curious now.

"I told the truth," Jake said simply. "And before you hear it from someone else, I'll tell you myself." He paused. "A few years ago, I was accused of a crime that led to a woman being with child. The leading men of the town got together and decided that I should be run out of town."

Rowena gasped. "That's terrible!"

"It would've been if it had been true," Jake agreed. "But as sure as I'm standing here, it was a lie. My conscience was clear. But no one else would believe it, and the rumors flew around the town until everyone had decided that I was the guilty party. I was fortunate to escape unharmed; they were very angry."

"But why would anyone want to accuse you of a crime you didn't commit?" Rowena could hardly believe his story.

"Because one of the businessmen of the town wanted a block of land that I owned. I wouldn't sell it to him as I had plans for it myself. So he took matters into his own hands."

"Oh, Jake! That's horrid."

Jake shrugged. "It was hard at the time. But I've made a new life here and I'm happy now. The only problem was that when Poppy arrived, she decided to accuse me of the same thing. She even had a letter from the sheriff

in the other town to uphold her claims, or so she said. I suspect the letter was a very recent forgery once she realized she could benefit from this situation. She wanted me to offer her a respectable life, and she didn't care how she got it. Regardless, she had a plan to convince the people of the town that I had committed this crime and that I had done the same thing to her. If I wanted to avoid her accusations, I had to agree to her plans."

Rowena gasped. "What an awful predicament! How did she dare to think she could get away with such blatant lies?"

"I don't know. She's a skilled manipulator who's used to getting her own way by force or by fraud. I just wish I'd seen that in the beginning. She was charming and attentive back then and I thought we could have a good future together. She deceived me just as she was working on deceiving the people of this town. She had plans to slander others, too."

"Is that why she was hostile to me?" Rowena asked.

Jake nodded. "Someone must have told her that you are part of my life now, and she didn't like it. But the wedding was a good chance to bring the truth out while everyone was together. I just didn't expect her to have a gun."

"A gun?" Rowena's eyes went wide. "Who takes a *gun* to their wedding?"

"Someone like Poppy." Jake's smile was grim. "She was going to get her own way no matter what. Fortunately, she's a terrible shot."

"Did you say she tried to shoot her father?" Rowena was confused. "Isn't he the man who was hiding in our barn and was so sick he was about to die?"

Jake nodded. "He is, but he somehow managed to get himself to the wedding and played a part in putting a stop to Poppy's plans." He shook his head. "What a day. Almost married, almost shot, and having to tell half the town about my past."

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Rowena asked, dropping her eyes. She was disappointed that Jake had hidden the truth from her.

Jake fell silent. “I know you might find this hard to believe, but I intended to,” he said. “I just hadn’t found the right time. And I didn’t want to spoil your happiness, Rowena. When we walked through the meadow that day, you were so happy. We both were, and I didn’t want to ruin that. I know it’s not an excuse, but I had no idea that Poppy was about to descend on us and wreak havoc. I’d have done a lot of things differently if I’d known that.”

“You did tell me about her,” Rowena admitted. “But I still would’ve appreciated knowing the other things about your past.”

“Would it have changed the way you saw me?” Jake asked.

Rowena fell silent. “No,” she said at last. “I trusted you to tell me the truth.” She looked up at him. “Is that the only thing you should’ve told me? Is there anything else?”

“No.” Jake reached out to take her hand. “I promise.” He took a deep breath. “Rowena, I know we got off to a bad start, and I wouldn’t blame you if you don’t want to see me again, but I have to know. Is there any chance we could try again?”

Rowena’s heart melted at the look in his blue eyes. Hope mingled with longing, and she wanted to throw her arms around his neck and tell him it would be all right.

But caution prevailed. “I think we could try it,” she said after a moment. “And if there are no more madwomen, forced weddings, shootings, or scandals, we might be safe.” She gave him a small smile. “Do you think that might be possible?”

His face broke into a broad smile of relief. “More than possible.” He drew her closer. “I think we’ll find that the excitement will die down after a while and things will go back to normal. Will that be too dull for you?”



She laughed for the first time in what felt like weeks. “I think dull would suit me very much.” She turned to the desk behind her and picked up an envelope. “I guess I won’t need this now,” she said.

“What is it?” Jake asked.

“My resignation. I was about to hand it to a member of the board.”

Jake’s face paled. “You were planning to leave?”

“Why would I stay here in the same town as a woman who hates me and the man who chose her over me?” Rowena countered. “I’d go home where I was welcome.” She paused and glanced at Jake. “Besides, there will still be gossip. Telling the town about your past will only add fuel to the fire, not calm it down.”

Jake looked fierce for a moment. “Let them talk,” he muttered. “I know the truth and so does God. And I have as much right to be here as anyone else. I’m just going to hold my head high and ignore it.”

Rowena looked at him with admiration. “That’s brave of you, Jake. I’m not sure I’m that robust. Women’s gossip can be nasty.”

Jake’s eyes softened as he looked at her. “I’m sorry you were dragged into this, Rowena. But the only way forward is either to leave or ignore it. Some people already see you as an unfortunate victim of the villainous Jake Brooks.”

“I wish people wouldn’t so readily assume the worst about a person,” Rowena said. “Surely there were people who knew you would never do anything to hurt someone, especially a woman.”

“I do have loyal friends,” Jake agreed. “And I’m grateful for them.” He took a deep breath. “But this is not about other people. I came to see you, Rowena. I wanted to know if ...”

“If what?” she asked, almost holding her breath.

“If you would be willing to give me another chance,” he said quietly.

The unspoken plea in his eyes almost broke her heart, but she paused for a long moment. “I think I could consider it,” she replied at last.

“Have I been able to change your mind about leaving?” Jake moved closer, his eyes full of tenderness and longing.

Rowena felt her cheeks warming up. “I might be able to put it off for a little while.”

“Must I work harder to convince you to stay?” Jake asked as he held out his arms in invitation.

Rowena felt her heart pounding in her chest and she could hardly look at him. His arms crept around her, drawing her close, and he held her for a long moment. Then he bent his lips to meet hers, and as the fire ignited by his touch swept through her veins, she knew she was where she belonged. Everything was just as it should be.

## EPILOGUE



*1 year later*

*Rowena*

Rowena gathered up her things for the last time and turned to look around the schoolroom that had been the reason for her arrival in Jackson. She paused for a moment to say a quiet goodbye in her heart. The walls of this small room held a lot of memories from the past two years, and she would always be grateful for the events that had led her to this place. She would miss the students, each one with their unique way of looking at the world, and she would miss the familiar routine of arriving each morning in the quiet time before school began and finishing the day in peace after another day of shaping young minds.

But the time had come for a new phase of life, and as bittersweet as it was to close this chapter, she was eager to begin the next. In just over a week, she would become Jake's wife, and she still could hardly believe it. After the disappointments and heartaches that love had cast at her door, she was almost afraid to embrace it lest it be snatched away from her again.

But Jake had no such qualms, and she smiled as she heard his footsteps on the porch. A moment later, the door opened and he entered, his eyes lighting up as they met hers. He strode forward and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"How is my beautiful bride-to-be?" he rumbled.

Rowena looked up at the large man who would soon join his life with hers. "I had a good day. Did you?"

He smiled. "I did. I finished planting the biggest field, so I thought I'd celebrate by meeting my favorite

schoolteacher and giving her a ride home on her last day.”

“Thank you,” Rowena replied, touched by his thoughtfulness. “I’m a bit sad to leave but I’m looking forward to the future.” She slipped her hand into his. “Our future,” she said shyly.

Jake squeezed her hand and picked up the box with her things in it. “I can imagine,” he replied. “Sometimes it feels sad to leave something behind but at the same time be excited about what comes next.”

They went to the porch and Rowena locked the schoolhouse door for the last time. She would have to return the key to a member of the school board, but it could wait. Right now, she was going to enjoy a ride home with Jake. Even though she enjoyed the walk, he’d made the effort to meet her, and she appreciated that.

“How are Charlie and Robert today?” she asked as Jake helped her into the wagon.

He chuckled. “Tired and grumpy. The baby kept everyone awake last night.”

Rowena laughed too. “Two old grandpas, a nurse and a baby. What a strange mix of humanity in one cabin.”

“It’s just as well Charlie made it bigger. Now he can escape to his own room at least.”

“I guess he spends a lot of time at the barn now,” Rowena smiled. “I never imagined him taking in his brother *and* Poppy’s child.”

“Charlie has a heart of gold,” Jake said.

“It’s just as well Robert had some actual gold so he could hire the nurse. I’m surprised Poppy didn’t manage to get hold of it while she was here. She was quite persistent.”

“Robert is no fool,” Jake replied. “He might have been at death’s door, but there was nothing wrong with his mind. He knew what she wanted.”

“He must have been convincing,” Rowena said. “She went away thinking he was penniless.”

“It’s worked out in the end,” Jake agreed. “Robert had the means to hire the nurse so Poppy’s baby would have a family. It’s his way of trying to make up for his failure as her father.”

“Did he tell you that?” Rowena asked.

“In a roundabout way, yes. He wanted his granddaughter to have the stable life that his daughter never did. Not that living with the nurse is easy. She’s always bossing them around, but Robert takes it with good grace. I think he considers it the penance he deserves.”

Rowena laughed again. “It’s a story with a good ending,” she agreed. “Little Constance will grow up with two doting grandfathers and a good community where she belongs.”

“She’s unlikely to ever see much of her mother,” Jake replied.

Rowena felt sad at the thought. “I wish things had turned out differently for Poppy.”

News had filtered through that Poppy had gone to jail for more than just taking a shot at her father. She was wanted in several counties for various offences and it would be a long time before she was free again.

Jake sighed. “So do I.” He fell silent for a moment. “She could’ve had the respectable life she wanted if only she had put aside her selfishness and gone about it the right way. That was her mistake.”

“Being respectable is hard for some people,” Rowena said. “Especially when they face the disadvantages that Poppy faced. I feel sad for her.”

“I do too, but no one can make her choices for her. She’s an adult and chooses for herself.” Jake guided the team around the big rock on the edge of the trail before speaking again. “There’s not much we can do for Poppy

but pray that the Lord will work with her. I'm more interested in us, my dear."

Rowena leaned her head against his shoulder, contentment flooding her heart. "I'm looking forward to our wedding," she said.

Jake smiled down at her. "So am I. I can't wait until we don't have to say goodbye at your doorstep each time I see you. Soon, we can see one another whenever we want, and I can tell you, that will be wonderful." His blue eyes sparkled with happiness. "Would you like to come over before I take you home and see what I've done with the cabin since you were there last? I planned to surprise you with it later, but why not now?"

"I'd like that," Rowena replied. She still couldn't believe she was about to have a home and husband of her own.

A short time later, they were inside Jake's cabin. He had enlarged it and added a bedroom and a private bathroom, saying he couldn't expect a lady to bathe in the middle of the cabin floor. Rowena was grateful for his thoughtfulness and she couldn't wait to move in and start adding some feminine touches to the manly space.

But Jake had something else he wanted to show her. He pointed proudly to the kitchen windows as Rowena gasped in delight.

"You made rods so I can hang drapes!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Jake, we'll have such a pretty cabin!"

Jake smiled at her enthusiasm. "I figured that with the new mercantile that has opened in town, you can find some cloth to make them."

Rowena clasped her hands together in delight. "Real drapes! Not just sacks to cover the windows when it's cold. I feel as if we're gettin' real fancy out here."

Jake laughed and snaked out a long arm to pull her against his side. "I've never seen a woman so excited over drapes."

Rowena looked up at him. “It’s not just the drapes,” she said quietly. “It’s what they represent. To me, they mean home and somewhere to belong. A place of my own. That’s what’s so exciting. Hanging my very own drapes will make this feel like my home.”

“You know, I understand that,” Jake mused. “This cabin feels more complete already. It was always mine, but something was missing, and it’s only just occurred to me what it was.” He leaned down and dropped a kiss on her hair. “It’s you, my love. I can’t wait to share my humble abode with you.” His voice rumbled close to her ear. “And our babies, of course. They’ll be welcome too.”

Rowena felt a blush rising to her cheeks. “I want you to myself for a little while first,” she managed, even as a smile played on her lips. “But whenever the Lord sees fit to send them, they’ll be loved.”

Jake was in a reflective mood. “You know, when Poppy caused all that trouble, I couldn’t imagine ever being happy again. I knew I had to somehow escape her clutches, but I didn’t know how to go about it. But it sure taught me to value the people I love. I thought I was about to lose every one of them. I didn’t value them the way I should have before Poppy came along. Before that, if something didn’t work out, I’d just move on. But this taught me to fight for those I love.”

“I was sure heartbreak was going to follow me everywhere I went,” Rowena confessed. “I had to allow you to prove to me that you weren’t going anywhere after that. It took time, so thank you for being patient with me.”

“Thank you for giving me the chance to show you,” Jake said softly. “I was so afraid that I’d lost you forever.”

Rowena leaned her head against his shoulder as they stood in the middle of the cabin, her future home. “I’m so glad we got a happy ending,” she whispered, happiness filling her heart.

“So am I, Mrs. Almost-Brooks.”

Rowena laughed. “Mrs. Almost-Brooks. I like the sound of that.”

“So do I,” Jake rumbled above her head. “I’m looking forward to taking the Almost out of it.”

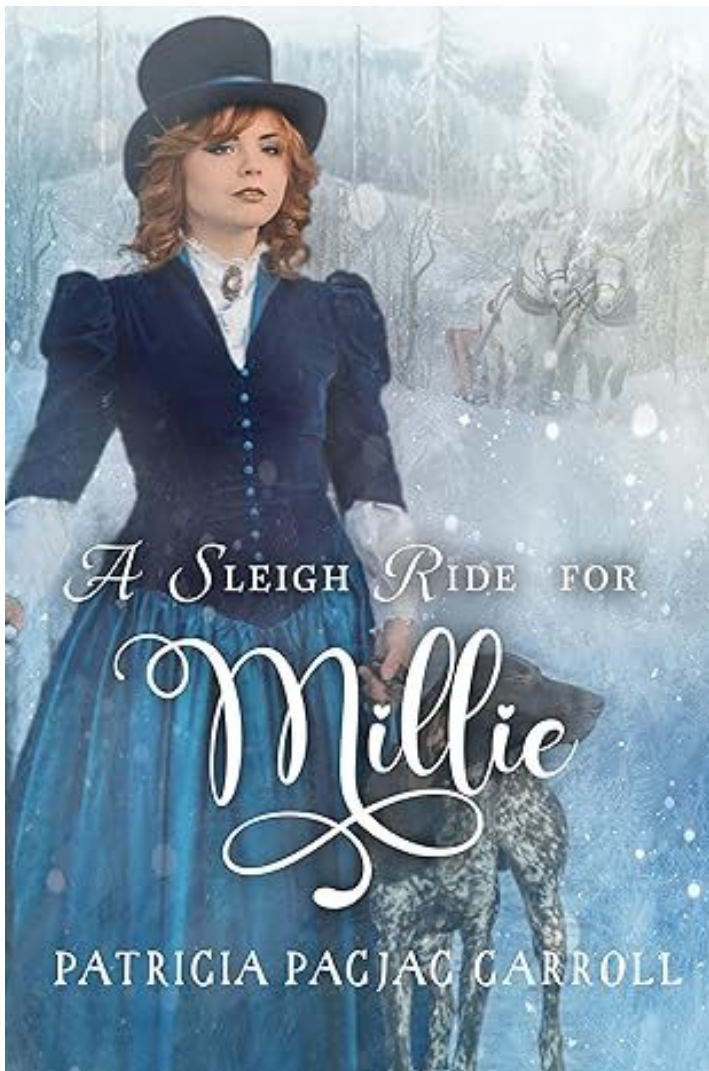
Rowena giggled. “You make me laugh, Jake Brooks. And next week, I’ll no longer have an Almost in my name.”

“I can’t wait,” Jake said, holding her close.

THE END



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## Courting Chaos Multi-Author Series:

[Priscilla's Choice](#)

## Double Trouble Multi-Author Series:

[Ezra's Brides](#)

[Isaac's Brides](#)

## Sleigh Ride Multi-Author Series

[A Sleigh Ride For Rowena](#)

# CONTEMPORARY TITLES BY KAITLYNN CLARKSON

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Hear the waves crash on the shore and feel the wind in your hair at Spindrift Cottage. Join the amazing Miranda Harwood and her many family and friends as they fall in love, make friends, and have adventures. You'll never want to leave!

## [CRESCENT HEAD SERIES](#)

Fall in love with the pretty seaside village of Crescent Head. Get to know the characters who call it home and join them as they face tragedies, fall in love, and find happiness. Bask in the warm sunshine and enjoy the views of the endless surf. You'll feel as if you've been on a vacation to the beach!

## [MEDICALLY YOURS SERIES](#)

Their hearts are in the right place, but these characters seem to suffer more than their fair share of scrapes, mishaps and funny situations. But they are a resourceful lot, especially when it comes to falling for someone special. They might work in a medical setting, but they often find themselves in amusing conversations and sticky predicaments on the path to love. Funny and quirky, this series is not for those who prefer serious stories!

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From runaway goats to a sheep in a custody battle, these farmers find themselves in some surprising situations. Join them for amusing banter, funny mishaps, and outrageous circumstances as they find unconventional ways to make love work. This romantic comedy series is not for the serious at heart!

## ABOUT KAITLYNN CLARKSON



Kaitlynn Clarkson loves writing sweet and clean romance that makes people smile. She's wanted to write stories ever since she was a little girl when she would get into trouble for reading instead of doing her chores. Kaitlynn writes from the Mid North Coast of NSW, Australia, where she lives with her husband and children and a herd of cows. She's sure there will never be enough time to read all the books she wants to! You can follow Kaitlynn on [Amazon](#), [Facebook](#), [Goodreads](#) and [Bookbub](#). You can also find her on her website, <https://kaitlynnclarkson.com>