

Love Inspired HISTORICAL

The Nanny's Little Matchmakers



DANICA FAVORITE

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Аннотация

A Wife for their PapaPolly MacDonald intends to tame Mitch Taylor's five mischievous children, even though every other nanny has fled. She needs this job—and Mitch's brood sorely needs affection. Perhaps their widowed papa does too. But when the children begin scheming to make her their new mother, Polly must resist. She's seen too many bad marriages to want one of her own. Mitch has come to Leadville, Colorado, to escape a scandal, not find a wife. After the disaster of his first marriage, he's sure he isn't husband material. Though Polly's tender care is working wonders with his children, Mitch knows he should keep his feelings to himself. But can two wary hearts deny the dearest wish of five eager matchmakers?

A Wife for Their Papa

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"I don't think Isabella has ever known such tenderness and love before."

Polly's heartbeat returned to its original state. At least Mitch hadn't noticed her foolishness over him. And instead, he'd brought her focus back to where it should have been in the first place—his children. "I imagine it's been hard, having so many nannies, and with her mother now gone, love is all the little dear needs. And I'm happy to provide it."

But Mitch didn't return the expression. Instead, his eyes looked haunted, his brow furrowed. "I don't think she even had that before." He rubbed his forehead, then shook his head slowly. "How could I have missed it, all this time?"

"Missed what?" Polly reached forward and touched his arm

tenderly.

Oh, if he were only a little boy like Rory or Thomas, she could take him in her arms and hold him. But Mitch wasn't a boy, and the longing in her heart felt different from how she felt toward his sons. But it didn't change her wish to somehow make whatever was going on in his mind better.

DANICA FAVORITE loves the adventure of living a creative life. She loves to explore the depths of human nature and follow people on the journey to happily-ever-after. Though the journey is often bumpy, those bumps refine imperfect characters as they live the life God created them for. Oops, that just spoiled the ending of Danica's stories. Then again, getting there is all the fun. Find her at danicafavorite.com.

The Nanny's Little Matchmakers

Danica Favorite



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As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.

—Proverbs 27:17

To Shana, thanks for helping my books shine, and for making me a better writer.

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Dear Reader

Extract

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Chapter One

Leadville, Colorado, 1882

The door to the Mercantile jangled and Mitch Taylor looked up from the books. Before he could greet the customers, his sister-in-law, Iris, had already stepped into action. A good thing, since the customers appeared to be a pretty young lady and her father. The lady seemed to be a proper miss, in a pale blue gown edged with lace, ribbons and all the fripperies that went with the latest style. Her strawberry blond hair arranged in a similar fashion to those he'd seen back in Denver, the young woman could have graced any parlor with ease. She laughed at something Iris said, a soft musical tone escaping her pink lips and a pretty smile lighting her face.

Mitch turned away. Not only was the young lady young—too young—but he had no business admiring ladies of any sort at this point in his life. He'd never imagined that he'd end up crawling back here. Here not being precisely the correct term, as the Leadville store hadn't opened yet when he'd made the decision to remain in Denver and run his own store while his brother worked to expand the family mercantile empire. Besides, he hadn't crawled. He'd run.

Hattie was dead.

The words rolled in his mind as he considered them. Hattie

was dead. Some days those words still didn't seem real.

But the ensuing scandal was real enough. He could only hope that it would be a while longer before talk reached Leadville and he would have enough time to—

A crash and a screech from the back of the store made him set his pen down. Mitch took a deep breath, then casually turned in the direction of the noise.

As seemed to constantly be the case, before he could even get to the other side of the counter, one of his children, this time it was Clara, ran toward him. Mrs. Abernathy, their nanny, followed behind.

“You get back here!”

Clara darted behind him and clung to the back of his shirt. “I won't!”

Even the glowering look on Mrs. Abernathy's face would not be enough to convince Clara. Experience had taught him that while all of his children were stubborn, when this particular daughter refused to do something, walking to China would be easier than getting her to change her mind.

“What seems to be the problem?” Mitch asked, offering Mrs. Abernathy a smile.

“Everything is the problem.” Mrs. Abernathy's face had turned an unmistakable shade of red. He'd seen it on a number of nannies, all shortly before they'd quit.

Mitch pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. Could he find a way to convince her to stay?

The young lady he'd been admiring came into view, covered in flour.

No. Even before Mrs. Abernathy opened her mouth to utter the fateful words, Mitch knew nothing would keep her. He supposed he should make the effort, but with this being the second nanny in the space of a month, he'd need all of his energy to convince another woman to come work for him.

"I see," he said instead.

"Those children are out of control." Mrs. Abernathy gave him a sharp look as the flour-coated woman approached.

"I know," he said quietly. He could feel Clara relax behind him. She, too, knew that their nanny was a few words from giving notice. For Clara, as well as the other children, this would be another victory.

The flour-coated woman smiled at him. "You must be the father of the little darling who welcomed me to the store."

Iris rushed over. "Polly, I am so sorry. You see—"

Polly held up a hand. "It's not your fault, Mrs. Taylor. But I think there's a young lady who owes me an apology."

She looked at Mitch firmly, but not unkindly. Not like the many people who'd been terrorized by his children. He'd liked to have said that such occurrences were rare, but in truth, they'd left Denver not just to escape the scandal of his wife's death. He also needed respite from talk of the antics of the Taylor Terrors, as his children had been dubbed by society.

Most people, when they saw his children coming, ran the other

way. Perhaps people running away was a small exaggeration, but not by much.

Polly squatted down in front of him. “Come on out now, young lady. I realize that you’re new in town, but in Leadville, we don’t go throwing flour at strangers. That might be what you did where you used to live, but here, that’s not our custom.”

She spoke gently, sweetly. Without the rage of so many of the others who’d insisted that Mitch do something about his out-of-control children. Even her eyes. A bright blue that matched her dress, they looked almost...nice.

Clara didn’t budge.

Polly rose and looked him in the eye, then stuck out a hand, which he shook. “Polly MacDonald. I can see why your daughter might be a bit shy, but she does owe me an apology.”

Then her blue eyes twinkled as she pointed to a figure peering around a barrel. “Although we could say that our little mishap with the flour was my own fault, since I was so inconsiderate as to be paying too much attention to the dried fruit and not realizing I was stepping into a battle between these two.”

Rory. Mitch sighed again. Of course it was Rory and Clara. The two of them hadn’t stopped bickering since Rory had the misfortune of being born seven minutes after his sister. A fact she wielded like a weapon in establishing superiority to her younger brother.

“You see! They are positively out of control,” Mrs. Abernathy said with the kind of self-righteousness Mitch had resigned

himself to hearing from everyone who met his children. "I'm sorry, Mr. Taylor, I really am. But your children are too wild for the likes of me. I never thought I'd say that about any child, but there is clearly something wrong with them. They belong in an institution."

Had he not heard it dozens of times before, he might have been insulted. Instead, he smiled politely and nodded. "Thank you for your service, Mrs. Abernathy."

"I beg your pardon!"

Mitch turned toward Polly, the woman his children had just doused in flour. The kindness had melted from her face, replaced with a level of fury he'd expected from the flour incident.

"There is nothing wrong with those children. I cannot fathom why you would make such a horrible suggestion as to put them in an institution. I hope Mr. Taylor docks whatever wages you have coming to you. Whatever is wrong with these children, it's not a deficiency in them, but in the kind of care they are receiving. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Then Polly squatted down again. "Please come talk to me, little one," she said in a much gentler tone. "I won't hurt you, I promise."

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Abernathy stomped away. Mitch wasn't sure if he was glad to see her go or not. He'd have liked to have thought there was truth in Polly's words, that had he had a better nanny, his children wouldn't behave so terribly.

But he had been through an awful lot of nannies.

Clara came forward. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't mean to hit you. I was trying to get Rory back."

"Rory," Mitch said, indicating his son should join them. "I believe you also owe Miss MacDonald an apology."

Which is when it occurred to him. Clara had actually apologized. Never in all of his life had he heard his children apologize. At least not without threats of bodily harm, missing supper and the like.

Mitch looked over at the young lady. "It is Miss, isn't it?"

She gave him the kind of dazzling smile that would have struck him in the heart were it not firmly encased in stone. It had been a long time since he'd allowed himself to be swayed by a pretty face.

"Indeed it is."

"I'm Mitch Taylor. I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. I was caught up in the situation."

He placed his hand on Clara's shoulder. "This is my daughter Clara, who is ten, and that's her twin, Rory." Then he looked around. "Where are the others?"

Dutifully, his other children stepped out from behind the shelves. "This is Louisa, my eldest, who is twelve, and there's Thomas, who is seven." Mitch looked around. "Where is Isabella?"

The children all looked at each other like they'd assumed the other had been in charge of the child.

"I'm sorry," he told Polly. "Would you excuse me for a

moment?”

She smiled at him. “Let me help. How old of a child am I looking for?”

“Right.” Mitch tried to smile back, but he found he lacked the energy. “Isabella is three, and she has dark curls and is wearing a...”

He looked at the other children. He’d gone out early this morning, before any of them were up. “What is she wearing?”

“A pink dress,” Louisa volunteered.

Everyone stood there, staring at him. “Well, let’s find her!”

Suddenly, there was a flurry of activity in the store as everyone went off in search of Isabella. Mitch paused at the counter for a moment.

“It’s all right,” Polly said kindly, her hand resting on his arm. “I’m sure we’ll find her.”

Mitch nodded. Like all of the other difficult emotions he had to suppress in life, this one should be no different. After all, Isabella disappeared all the time. She liked to hide in small spaces, where she’d curl up and take a nap. The rational part of his brain told him that Isabella was most likely somewhere doing just that. But the ache in his heart...the one that had already borne too much for any man to bear...

“Thank you,” he said simply. Then he turned to look for his daughter.

* * *

Mitch Taylor was not a cold man, Polly had decided upon

meeting him. The simple way he spoke, seemingly unattached, gave an air of coldness that would have driven most people off. But there'd been a catch in his voice whenever he spoke of his children that gave him away. He might want people to think him detached, but Polly could tell by the love in his eyes that he cared deeply for his children.

She paused at a pile of blankets tossed casually on the floor. Mrs. Taylor would never tolerate such disarray in the store. Though she only spoke to the other woman briefly on her visits, Polly knew the pride Mrs. Taylor took in keeping everything in order.

Polly knelt down and moved the blankets. She spied a mass of curly black hair.

She gently touched the child. "Isabella?"

The little girl sighed and pulled the blankets back closer to her.

"I've found her!" Polly stood and waved Mitch over.

The relief spreading across the man's face reaffirmed her belief that there was more to Mitch than he let on. He ran to them and immediately scooped up the little girl into his arms.

"Isabella!" He cradled her against him. Then she lifted her head, yawned and looked around.

Which is when Polly noticed that Isabella was completely unlike any of Mitch's other children in appearance. Her mass of curls was much darker than the straight brown hair of her other four siblings. But it was the deep rich brown of Isabella's skin that struck her the most. Especially as it contrasted with Mitch's

fair skin, blond hair and blue eyes.

Her friend Emma Jane had adopted a child, and Polly had always admired her for the ferocity with which she and her husband, Jasper, loved little Moses. But to see this strange man, who wore such a veneer of ice, loving a child so clearly not his own, it made Polly's heart tumble in a funny manner she hadn't expected.

"Yes, she's mine," Mitch said curtly, still cradling the little girl as he moved past her.

"Of course she is," Polly said, knowing how Emma Jane and Jasper often had to correct others who made unkind remarks about Moses not being theirs. "I can see you love her very much."

Mitch relaxed slightly, then peered down at his daughter. "You gave us quite a scare, Isabella. You mustn't hide like that."

"I was sweepy," the little girl mumbled, then rested her head back on her father's shoulder.

"Mrs. Abernathy's lessons were too long today," the eldest girl, Louisa, said as she joined them. "She wasn't paying the slightest attention to Isabella and was more worried about Clara's spelling. Rory told her that Clara cheated on her lessons, so Mrs. Abernathy rapped her knuckles. If I hadn't been forced to work on penmanship, I might have been able to look after Isabella myself."

Louisa gave him a haughty glare. "I'm twelve years old. I don't see why I need lessons anymore. I can watch the younger children, and then you won't need to hire any more dreadful

nannies like Mrs. Abernathy. I'm practically a grown woman. I can do it."

Polly fought the urge to laugh. At twelve, she'd thought herself quite the grown woman. And, in truth, she'd taken on much of those responsibilities. Her mother had been busy taking in the washing from other miners and their families, her father had been busy working in the mines. That is, when her father hadn't been too drunk to work. It had fallen on Polly's shoulders to keep an eye on both her younger siblings and any of the other young children in the various mining camps they'd bounced between.

But it was not a life she'd wish on any twelve-year-old child. If a girl had a choice, anything was better than the drudgery of running a household that wasn't hers to run.

"We won't be having this argument again," Mitch said, shifting Isabella in his arms. "You need an education so you can have a good life for yourself."

"I do have a good life," Louisa declared hotly, "at least when I don't have a horrible nanny forcing me to do useless things."

"Your education is not useless." Mitch's voice held the same calmness she'd observed when she first met him. "You have no idea the doors it will open up for you."

Louisa looked like she was going to speak, but then closed her mouth as she nodded grudgingly. Her expression was anything but accepting, but at least she appeared to be listening to her father.

Polly would have given anything to have her only

responsibility be her lessons at that age. Instead, she changed diaper after diaper, wishing things could be different. It was only the Lassiters' influence that had allowed her to have an education in the first place.

Pastor Lassiter, or Uncle Frank, as he'd lately insisted he be called by the MacDonald family, and his late wife, Catherine, had come to the mining camps as part of their ministry to spread the gospel to the miners. But more than that, they'd helped Polly's family better their circumstances, and Polly had been able to take lessons with their daughter, Annabelle.

Uncle Frank! Polly looked around, realizing for the first time that while she'd come with the pastor, in all of the excitement, she'd forgotten him.

She spied him at the counter, talking with Mr. Taylor and his wife. Polly started toward the Taylors, noting that Mitch followed close behind.

"Ah! Polly!" Uncle Frank stepped aside to let Polly join the conversation.

"I'm sorry, I got caught up in all the excitement." Three little heads peered from around the corner of the counter.

"Yes, I saw." Uncle Frank smiled. "I think we stopped by in the nick of time."

He turned his attention to Mitch. "Frank Lassiter. I'm the pastor at Leadville Community Church. Andrew wanted me to welcome you to town, let you know that we're here for you if you need anything."

Mitch frowned, then gave his brother a funny look. "You know I'm not much of a church-going man. The church—"

"This church is different. Trust me. Pastor Lassiter can help with your situation," Andrew Taylor said.

Uncle Frank made a face. "Please. I've told you to call me Frank. We're all the same in the Lord's eyes, so don't make me any more than I am."

"I'm sure the church can't do anything for my situation. I need a new nanny, that's all."

The hard set to Mitch's jaw made Polly's heart ache. They'd encountered a lot of pride over the years, both when Polly's family helped take care of other miners' children, and now with helping Uncle Frank with his ministry to the miners and the outcasts of Leadville society. Mitch wanted help. But like so many who'd been wounded in the past, accepting help from the church was almost too difficult to bear.

Uncle Frank looked over at Polly. "That is something we can help with. Polly is wonderful with children, and I know she'd be delighted to help with yours until you can find a replacement."

The familiar resentment rose up in Polly. It wasn't that she didn't like children, or that she didn't like being with children. But her entire life, she'd heard the same thing: "Polly won't mind." "Polly would be delighted." Only no one ever bothered to ask if, in fact, Polly had any opinion on the matter at all.

Surely there had to be more to Polly's life than the same drudgery that seemed to be a woman's lot. Until she married,

she was under the direction of her family in doing whatever they wanted. And then, when she finally settled on a husband, it would be more of living whatever life he chose for her. When did Polly get to choose for herself? To live beyond dirty diapers, washing that needed done and cleaning up after everyone else.

And it wasn't that Uncle Frank, her mother and everyone else asked things of her that were intolerable. It was just that...no one ever gave her a choice. All she wanted was to find her own way in the world and choose to live a life she wanted, not having to constantly do what everyone asked her to do.

As for finding a husband, well, Polly had fooled around with the notion of romance. Only a lot of people were not who they seemed, and she'd been taken in by the wrong sort of fellow. There were a lot of wrong sorts of fellows in Leadville, and as much as a girl wanted to believe in the happy endings a few of her friends had, finding an honorable man was just as difficult as finding a good vein of silver. It might happen to some folks, but too many people lost everything in their hunt for the elusive treasure.

So what was left for Polly? Continuing to be "delighted" to perform every menial task her family gave her since she was without the benefit of a husband? Settle for marriage to a man who was nice enough but spent his spare time in the many saloons and brothels in town? No, she had to find a way to make her own way in the world.

A respectable way in the world. She'd met enough working

girls to know she didn't want a life outside of the respectable bounds of society. Which left her few options outside of marriage or remaining the dutiful daughter.

But perhaps, with this situation, there was a way for everyone to get what they wanted.

Polly smiled and turned to the gentlemen.

“Actually, Uncle Frank, I would like to apply for the position myself. I think it would be good to earn my own money and start to live my own life.”

Uncle Frank stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. “Is there something you need? I thought I paid Gertie plenty to provide everything you could want, and your father is earning a nice wage running the mine. I'm sorry if we haven't been generous enough.”

The genuine despair at having thought he'd cheated her family in some way tore at Polly's heart. Uncle Frank had been too generous, to a fault, for many years.

“That's not it at all.” Polly sighed. “Everyone my age is married. Annabelle, Mary, Emma Jane. Every time I begin to form a new friendship, the woman finds a husband. I'm sure I'll have to marry eventually, but I don't want that right now. I—”

“I know your heart was broken by that fellow, but you'll find another. In time.”

All of the other adults murmured in agreement. All except Mitch, who stared at her intently. His seemingly expressionless face gave almost nothing away. But his eyes...they seemed very

interested in what Polly had to say.

“This isn’t about what Tom did. I’ve been over him for a long time. This is about me, and finding what’s important to me in life. Surely there is more to life than the drudgery of marriage and children. If I can take a job, earn some money, then I can go off in the world and find what else is out there for me.”

“If taking care of children is drudgery, then why would you want to take care of my children?” Mitch asked quietly.

Polly’s hand flew to her mouth. She often got into trouble for speaking her mind without thinking. It had almost ruined her friendship with Annabelle, but fortunately, the two of them had been able to mend the rift. Since then, Polly worked very hard to temper her tongue.

“Because they aren’t my children, and I’m being compensated for my time. I enjoy working with children, but I also want time for myself. I can have that if I’m taking care of your children.”

Polly took a deep breath, then drew the courage to share her plans with Uncle Frank. “I’ve been thinking of obtaining my teaching certification. If Mr. Taylor does not hire me, then I will find a job elsewhere to earn the money needed to take the course.”

Then she turned back to Mitch. “Surely we can work something out. You need a nanny, and I need employment. I’m good with children, you heard it yourself.”

“All right,” Mitch said, looking at her. “I’m willing to discuss the job with you. Once you’ve heard what it entails, you can

decide for yourself if it's drudgery or not."

Polly almost felt the weight of her life lift off her shoulders. But as she noticed the calculated way Mitch still observed her, she knew that her challenges had just begun. In fact, as she heard one of the boys, Thomas, let out a yelp, she had to wonder if she'd just put herself into an even more challenging situation than the one she was desperate to leave.

Chapter Two

He was crazy to even consider it, Mitch told himself firmly as he followed Polly and Frank back to the parsonage, where Frank insisted they would be more comfortable discussing the issue. The children skipped on ahead, gleeful at having gotten rid of yet another nanny. And, he was certain, already plotting ways of getting rid of Polly.

Mitch kept stealing glances at the girl, who suddenly seemed so young. Too young, but probably the same age Hattie had been when they'd married. Perhaps even older.

Hattie's dreams had not included marriage or family either. But Mitch hadn't understood that when she'd accepted his proposal. Nor had he realized it when the baby, Louisa, had come too soon. He'd been forced to accept that reality when he'd been left alone too many nights with the squalling baby as Hattie pursued her career on stage.

At least Polly had the maturity to realize that she wasn't meant to be a wife and mother. She wouldn't leave behind a brokenhearted husband and children who didn't understand why

their darling mummy didn't want to be with them. That had been years ago, of course. Mitch's heart had healed, and the children understood that Mummy had to travel a lot for work and they lived for the moments when she could be with them.

Well, that's how it had worked while Hattie was alive. With her gone, Mitch didn't know what hope the children clung to, or how he was supposed to make up for a lack of a mother. Even one as inattentive as Hattie.

They arrived at the parsonage, a cheerful yellow house that looked like it had been tacked on to several times over the years. Frank escorted them to the parlor, then excused himself briefly to get the rest of the family to make introductions.

Polly sat on the sofa, smiling at Mitch's children, who now regarded her with a great deal of suspicion.

A short robust woman entered the room, wiping her hands on her apron. "What is this nonsense I hear about Polly becoming a nanny? And going off to be a teacher?"

"Maddie, stop." Another woman, an older, stouter version of Polly, entered the room and looked at her. "But you should have told us."

"Ma, I..." Polly looked up helplessly, as though she hadn't quite thought through her plan.

Before Polly could finish, Frank reentered the room, several children following him.

"I realize this isn't a standard part of employment negotiations, but since our families will be connected in the coming months,

I wanted you to meet everyone. Besides, I'm sure your children could use some friends."

Frank introduced the children, and Mitch's head spun from all the names. From what he gathered, Frank's son-in-law, Joseph, had recently built a house next door. Joseph was raising his orphaned siblings, and while the eldest, Mary, had recently married, the Stone children rivaled Mitch's own in number. Additionally, when Polly and her mother, Gertie, came to stay with Frank to help with the Stone children, they'd brought along Gertie's youngest daughter, Caitlin. Polly's older brothers and father remained in the mining camp, running the Stone mine. And, apparently, the folks at the parsonage also cared for several other children as well.

All told, Mitch counted a dozen children, in the age ranges of his own. A little girl about the same age as Thomas stepped forward and said, "Hi, my name's Nugget. Want to go play bandits with us?"

His own children looked at him expectantly.

No one had ever asked them to play before. Usually, they would approach other children, ask them to play, and the children's mothers would take them by the hand and usher them away with warnings about "those people."

Polly smiled at him. "It's all right. They'll stay in the backyard." Then she looked over at a little girl standing next to Nugget. "Right, Caitlin?"

"Yes, Polly." The little girl sighed and looked like she was

about to whisper something to Nugget.

“And no ropes!”

The two girls sighed like Polly had accurately predicted what they had up their sleeves.

“Or water,” Maddie said. “Or you’ll all be doing the washing, then sent to bed with only bread and milk for supper.”

“And do leave the rocks on the ground,” Gertie said, looking pointedly at a boy who appeared to be of similar age to Rory.

Gertie smiled at him as the children went outside. “And now that we’ve probably frightened you with all the warnings we’ve given the children about their behavior, let me assure you that—”

“Don’t bother,” Polly said, pointing at her soiled dress. “His children can take it. I have this courtesy of a flour fight over rapped knuckles and tattle tales.”

“More laundry,” Maddie sighed. “I do so hate laundry.”

“Maddie is our housekeeper,” Frank said, patting the other woman on the arm. “And she does a fine job. However, I was thinking that Alan Forester’s widow is in need of extra money, and she’s been taking in washing. I’m sure she’d be happy for the work.”

“What use would I be, then?” Maddie glared at him. “I’ll be thanking you to not be giving my work to someone else to do. You just tell those rascals to stop getting so dirty, and we’ll be fine. I’ll get tea for everyone.”

Maddie stomped off, and the other adults laughed.

“Please, sit.” Gertie gestured to an empty chair. “I apologize

for the craziness, but you should know right off that chaos is something Polly does very well with. The children truly aren't bad, but they are lively. If yours are as lively as ours, you'll need all the help you can get."

Her words were meant in solidarity, that he could tell by her smile. And for the first time in a long time, Mitch didn't feel quite so alone.

"Which is why I offered my services," Polly said, looking at him with a ferocity that surprised him. "Your children are quite a handful, but I know how to handle them."

Mitch let out a long sigh. Polly's offer was probably the best he was going to get, considering he'd gone through every nanny agency in Denver. He'd have to send to New York, or perhaps even London, to find someone willing to take on his children. No one wanted to take care of the Taylor Terrors.

But that wasn't the only reason people didn't want to work for him.

He cleared his throat. "Perhaps. But I feel compelled to share some of our family's circumstances with you before you make a decision."

Then he looked around the room. Could he trust them with his secrets? Some of them perhaps. "I hope we can all keep this information confidential."

"Of course," they all said at once, looking aghast that he'd even suggest it.

Mitch debated about what information to share—most of

it could be confirmed by reading the papers, and there were certainly even more rumors and innuendos. But the whole truth? No one knew the whole truth. He wasn't even sure he did.

“The reason we came to Leadville is I needed to leave Denver. Our family owns a successful chain of mercantile stores, but the rumors and gossip surrounding my wife's death were hurting business, and my family was receiving threats. I'm staying with my brother until talk dies down.”

Mitch's throat ached as he tried to form the words to explain Hattie's death. “You may have read the story in the papers. My wife was Hattie Winston, the famous actress who was found murdered in her bed at the Orrington Grand Hotel.”

Silence rang through the room so loud, it was almost like thunder. But then Mitch realized it was his heart. He'd only admitted the truth out loud to his brother, Andrew, and Iris. To tell strangers seemed almost...irresponsible of him. Not that he'd given any information that hadn't been in the papers.

“Hattie's scandalous affairs have always tainted our family. The good families have long stopped receiving us, and now, with her death, people are outright hostile. Hattie ruined a lot of lives.”

His chest tightened at the thought. He'd liked to have said that Hattie had ruined his life, because in many ways, she had. But without Hattie, he wouldn't have his children, and without them, what would he have then?

Mitch looked up at the others. “My children know few details about what happened. I have deliberately kept the information

about their mother's indiscretions from them. They loved their mother, and I won't have their memories tainted. It's all they have left of her."

For all of Hattie's faults, when she was with the children, she did appear to love them. And they had adored her. Everyone adored Hattie Winston. A reviewer once wrote about her that "to be in the presence of Hattie Winston was to be in the sun, and to be without was to be in the midst of the cloudiest of days."

Mitch had spent his time in Hattie's sun. Unfortunately, when a person spends too much time in the sun, he gets burned.

Polly gave him a sympathetic smile. "I think I speak for everyone here when I say that none of us have a problem with that, and we don't judge you, the children or even Hattie."

She glanced over at Frank, who nodded. "One of the many components of the ministry here is that we care for the least of God's children, and that includes those tainted with scandal."

Maddie entered the room, bearing a tea tray. "I have refreshments."

Polly turned away from him and looked at Maddie. "Were the children still out back?"

"Screaming like wild animals. I'm surprised you don't hear them."

"Nugget?" Polly's eyes darted to the door.

"Leading them all as always."

Polly turned back to him. "Nugget is Joseph Stone's half sister. She is the product of a liaison between his father and a woman

of the night. I'm not telling you this to gossip, or to single her out from the others. In fact, I would suggest you never say anything to indicate Nugget being any different from the rest of her family or that she is not equally loved and valuable, because every single person in this household will hurt you for it. But I want you to understand. Whatever scandal their mother was involved in, it has no bearing on the worthiness and love your children deserve."

Though Polly's speech was meant in defense of someone else's child, her fierce love for Nugget made Mitch want to weep. He never wept when Hattie died, even though he probably should have. But here, knowing that what he'd always hoped for his own children might actually be possible...

Frank came over and put his hand on Mitch's shoulder. "I know you bear a heavy burden, even more than what you've shared with us. But we are here, as servants of the Lord, to help you bear those burdens."

Mitch's eyes filled with tears. He couldn't help it. For twelve years, he'd carried the shame of the truth about Hattie, listened to the judgment of others over Hattie's behavior and here, in this place, these people were telling him that he didn't have to anymore.

Polly MacDonald wasn't just offering to take care of his children. She was offering him a lifeline he hadn't known he needed.

* * *

Polly hadn't expected the rush of emotion from Mitch. She

could tell he still fought to maintain control, but his eyes were watery, like he wanted to cry, but couldn't. How many times had she seen that in the people they'd ministered to? People who needed help, and didn't believe it possible.

Even though she'd seen this job as a way out, and a chance to carve her own path, now it was something more. They hadn't even talked terms of her employment, but she knew whatever they were, she'd accept.

The trouble with wanting her own life was that, if Polly were to be honest with herself, there were pieces of her current life that she loved. They'd been given a nearby barn to use for their mission purposes and were slowly converting it to a real place where they could minister to the down-and-out people of Leadville society. Polly loved every minute she spent there.

But the coming home...living with everyone else's expectations...that's where her life had become drudgery.

Thinking about Mitch and his children, Polly felt a renewed sense of purpose, more energy than she'd felt even when considering pursuing her teaching certificate.

Mitch looked up at her. "Aren't you needed here?"

Everyone in the room laughed. Polly groaned. "Trust me, they have plenty of help. The others are just over at the mission today."

Gertie nodded. "We have Mary and Annabelle, and Emma Jane comes over often to help as well. Plus, Rose has been extremely helpful lately."

Polly was grateful that she neglected to mention that all four women were expecting. Somehow she didn't think Mitch would see four expectant mothers as being much help with such a rowdy brood of children. In truth, each woman had a unique bond with a different child. Annabelle could always get Nugget to behave the best, Mary handled the rest of the Stone children with ease and somehow Daniel, the unruliest of them all, had become besotted with Emma Jane's son, Moses, and would do anything Emma Jane asked.

No, Polly wasn't needed to help care for the children these days. She hardly felt needed at all, other than being an extra hand. Even then, sometimes she wondered what place she had in all of this chaos.

The latest announcement, Mary's pregnancy, a scant two months after her wedding to Will Lawson, made Polly wonder where she fit amongst her friends.

One more reason she should carve out a life of her own.

She turned to Mitch and smiled. "Truly. I've been looking for an opportunity like this for a long time. You could accept me for a trial period, and if things don't work out, then you can hire another nanny. But in the meantime, you'll have someone to care for your children."

The front door opened, and Polly heard the laughter of her friends long before she could see them.

"Oh, my feet!" Rose pulled off her hat as she entered the room, rubbing her swollen belly. "Oh! I'm sorry, didn't realize

you had guests.”

“It’s all right,” Frank said, patting the couch beside him. “Come sit. Rest your feet, and meet Mitch Taylor. He’s considering hiring Polly to be his nanny.”

Annabelle and Mary followed.

“What’s this about Polly becoming a nanny?” Though Mary had barely discovered her pregnancy, she rubbed her own belly as she sat in one of the empty chairs.

“She’d like a life of her own, it seems,” Frank said, smiling at Polly. She imagined he was trying to be encouraging, but as she looked at her three expectant friends, she felt guilty knowing that she probably should stay here to help them.

Rose made a noise and patted her stomach again. “I had visions of that myself, and look where that got me. I suppose you’re taking a more respectable path, but don’t be fooled into thinking that the world is any better out there. At least here, you have a family who loves and supports you.”

“It’s not as though she’s running away with an outlaw, Rose, dear.” Annabelle gave her sister-in-law a pat on the shoulder as she moved to sit in another chair. Then Annabelle turned her attention to Mitch.

“I am assuming you’re not an outlaw, and that you’re a man of good character? Mary’s husband, Will, is a lawman, and I can assure you that if you engage in any funny business, he will bring you to justice.”

Poor Mitch looked overwhelmed, and she didn’t blame him.

“I’m sure Will would be happy to make some inquiries,” Mary said, smiling at Mitch in the same way she smiled at the children when giving them a subtle threat.

Except with so many people staring him down, Mitch could hardly think that any of them were being subtle.

Polly stood. “I’m sure Mr. Taylor is perfectly respectable. His brother runs Taylor’s Mercantile, and we all know how well he speaks of his other family members. Uncle Frank would have never brought him into our home had it been otherwise.”

Then she turned to Mitch. “Why don’t we go out back so we can check on the children and discuss terms of my employment?”

The creases in his forehead softened as he stood. “I think that’s a good idea. My children...”

He looked as though he wanted to say something about his children’s capabilities but then thought better of it. Polly bit back a giggle. Oh, if only he knew the sort of antics she’d put up with over the years. He was afraid of terrifying her, but after having endured questioning by her family, he should have realized that there wasn’t much that scared Polly.

Polly led him out the back door, not waiting for any of the others to catch up or comment. That was the other problem with being tied to her family. As much as she truly loved them, it seemed like none of them gave her the space to think for herself. To make her own choices.

Granted, some of the overprotectiveness was her own fault. Her failed romance was with a man who’d turned out to be an

outlaw, and her blind trust in him had nearly cost Annabelle her life. Polly had failed to see the man's interest in Annabelle, and when he'd kidnapped her, hoping to use her as leverage to gain access to a silver mine, Polly had looked the other way. No, not looked the other way. That implied a level of complacency Polly had lacked. Rather, Polly had been blinded by jealousy and thought Annabelle had stolen her beau.

Love, or at least the thought of being in love, had stolen Polly's good sense. A common occurrence in these parts, since she'd seen too many love-struck women have their hearts broken by men interested in gambling, boozing and brothels. When she'd fallen for Tom, she'd been convinced he wasn't like those men. She'd been only partially right. He might not have spent time in any of those places, but he'd been wicked all the same.

So it was no wonder none of her family and friends trusted her judgment. She questioned it herself. But this was not a romantic entanglement. Rather, it was legitimate, respectable employment.

No hearts to be broken here.

After all, Mitch was mourning the untimely death of his wife. The hint of gray at his temples suggested he was not the sort of man to be interested in her anyway. Although...if she'd been in a room with her friends, before their weddings, she might have indulged in a giggle or two over the fact that despite his age, Mitch Taylor was a handsome man indeed.

But he would not be interested in her. And while she was sure

he was a perfectly respectable man, she was also certain that he was not free of secrets. Secrets that Polly would just as soon not involve herself with.

Mitch put his hand at her waist to steady her as she walked down the stairs. Though she'd walked down the stairs to the backyard plenty of times on her own before, there was something almost comforting about the warmth of his hand at her waist. Polly looked up at him, and he smiled.

Flecks of ice sparked in his deep blue eyes, and once again, she was struck by the hidden warmth within. It would be easy enough to believe in the fantasy that Mitch's secrets were all about his hidden depth and warmth, but Polly knew better.

"Children!" Polly stepped out of Mitch's reach and held her arms out. Her youngest sister, Caitlin, came running.

"We were good," she said in a singsong voice. "Can we have some of the cookies Maddie was baking?"

The other children quickly followed, the chorus of voices joining Caitlin's. But Polly noticed that the Taylor children hung back.

Polly stepped toward her charges and gave them a smile. "Did you have fun?"

The eldest, Louisa, glared at her, but the others hesitated. Nugget tugged at the back of her skirt. "They didn't know any of our games."

Polly turned toward Nugget. "Did you teach them?"

"No." Nugget kicked at a rock. "They didn't want to play."

Polly put her arm around Nugget and turned her toward the Taylor children. “Do you remember when you first came here, and you didn’t know anyone?”

“People were mean to me, on account of my mama,” Nugget said quietly.

One of the twins, Clara, came forward. “People are mean to us, on account of our mama, too.”

Polly watched the expressions flash across the rest of the Taylor children’s faces. Her heart ached as she remembered the taunts poor little Nugget used to face. And, to a lesser extent, she used to face. Polly’s ma was a woman of the most honorable sort, but her pa... Polly sighed. She did her best to honor her pa, but his gambling, drinking and suspected philandering was the biggest reason she could never see herself settling down.

“Well, I’m not going to be mean to you on account of your mama.” Polly held out her hand. “And I am fairly certain that none of the children here will do so either. But if they do, they will answer to me.”

Clara came and took Polly’s hand. “Everyone says Mummy was wicked. And we’re wicked just like her.”

Those big brown eyes looked up at her, full of hope, yet fearful.

“You’re not wicked,” Polly said, squeezing the little girl’s hand, then looking over at the rest of the Taylor children. “You might need to learn a few manners, but that doesn’t mean you’re wicked.”

Mitch stepped alongside her. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “I don’t think anyone’s told them that before.”

She turned her attention to him. “Why haven’t you?”

“I didn’t know.” The sadness in his voice tugged at her heart more strongly than the wounded expressions on his children’s faces.

She’d already been convinced that she needed to help this family. But now, more than ever, nothing would stop her from giving them the support they needed.

Chapter Three

Slipping his hand into Polly’s free hand felt more natural than anything he’d done in a long time. Actually, everything about being with Polly felt natural. How had Mitch not seen the misery his children had been living in for so long? How had he not known how the nannies themselves disparaged the children?

Polly squeezed his hand, sending an intense current of warmth through him.

“I’m sorry, children, I didn’t know.” Mitch looked at his children, wishing he could undo the damage that had been done to them.

Clara let go of Polly’s other hand and rushed at him, wrapping her arms around his legs. Before he knew it, the rest of the children were gathered round him, hugging him. Isabella probably had no idea why, but she was still of an age where all she needed was a few snuggles and she was perfectly happy. She hadn’t yet realized that people treated her differently because of

her dark skin.

Louisa, however, stood apart from them. Watching him. Shooting glares at Polly.

“Just because you say the right things doesn’t mean we’re going to accept you as our nanny.” Then she looked pointedly at the hand Mitch still held. “Or our new mummy.”

Polly immediately jerked her hand away. “Well, I suppose it’s just as well that I never have any intention of marrying.” She gave Louisa a smile that seemed to be more menacing than sweet. “Or having children. As for being your nanny, if you can prove to me that you are as capable as you say of taking care of your siblings, I will gladly leave my post, become trained as a teacher, then make my own way in the world.”

Mitch watched as Polly locked gazes with his daughter. “But I promise you that whatever you try to do to drive me away, it won’t work. The only way I will leave is if I am completely assured of your ability to take care of yourselves.”

Then she turned her gaze to Mitch. “We haven’t discussed terms of my employment yet. Perhaps we can leave Louisa in charge while we take a short stroll to settle things. This could be the perfect opportunity for her to prove her worth.”

Polly didn’t wait for Mitch’s response as she tucked her arm into his elbow and extricated him from his children’s embraces. She didn’t speak until they were well outside of the children’s earshot.

“I think they’ll be just fine while we walk. Even though I left

Louisa in charge, everyone in Uncle Frank's household is within earshot."

She smiled at him, and again, he was struck by the warmth in her expression. Warm, but tough.

"I'm not comfortable with Louisa raising her siblings. It's no life for a young girl."

"I quite agree," Polly said, a twinkle filling her eyes. "Having lived that life myself, I can tell you that eventually, she'll come to resent it, and be willing to do just about anything to escape."

"Such as become a nanny to five unruly children."

Polly grinned. "Indeed. It's a good thing you only had five, because I'm not sure I have the stamina for six."

Mitch had already been certain in his decision to hire Polly, but her quick wit and sense of humor cemented it. The dour women who'd looked after his children in the past always intimidated him, and sometimes he wondered if that intimidation only frightened the children.

He'd never considered that what the children might need was something completely different. Someone completely different.

"You're sure your family won't mind?"

Polly sighed. "Honestly, other than not having someone to do their bidding, I'm not sure they'd notice. I feel more in the way these days, and I never know what my place is. Other than following orders."

Then she stopped, put a hand over her mouth and turned to him. A few moments later, she dropped her hand, then gave

him a dejected look. "I'm sorry. I sound like such an ungrateful daughter. Ma has worked hard her whole life. Even when Pa wasn't up to the task of providing for our family, Ma took over. I know Ma says that Pa means well, but the truth is, she's nearly worked herself to death to do right by us, and I am truly grateful for her sacrifices. Maybe it is selfish of me to want my own life, but I've spent most of it helping Ma. Now that Pa has a good job in Joseph's mine, Ma doesn't have to work so hard."

Another long sigh escaped Polly's lips as she looked at the house, then back at him. "Since I'm not needed so much, I have to take the chance to live the life of my choosing, not what's forced upon me."

She gave him a soft smile, and once again, he was struck by how pretty she was. He pushed the thought away and concentrated on her words instead.

"I didn't mean to unburden myself on you like that, but I don't want you to think I'm a bad person or Ma is a bad person. We've done the best we could do with what we have, and I promise I'll be good to your children."

"I know," Mitch said, trying to ignore the tug on his heart. Her words made him want to hire her not just for his children, not just for him, but to give Polly the life she craved.

But he refused to let himself get attached to her on a personal level. Polly had already indicated her desire to eventually leave, so he had to think of her position as temporary. As for any deeper feelings, those were completely unacceptable.

A man only remarried for love or to get a family for himself. He already had more family than he could handle. Love, well, that was a folly he'd not repeat.

Hattie had bled him dry of any sort of romantic notions he might have had. Polly MacDonald was pretty enough, and he'd admit that she stirred feelings in him he'd thought dead, but Mitch knew better than to act on any of them. The only thing worse than falling in love was falling for a woman he knew wouldn't stay. He should have seen the signs with Hattie, but now that he knew Polly's plans for her own life, he knew how completely off-limits he had to keep his heart.

He had to keep things strictly professional, which was why the question forming on his lips had to be asked. Not for his sake, of course, but for the five children who might become attached to Polly.

"How long do you plan on working for me before seeking your teaching certificate?"

Polly shrugged. "I have no timetable. I'll stay as long as I'm needed and we're both satisfied with my work. I don't necessarily need to become a teacher, but it is one of the few respectable forms of employment for a young unmarried lady. Particularly one who has no intention of ever marrying."

Once again, Mitch found his interest piqued by her strong declaration against marriage. "Was your heart broken that badly, then?"

Polly shook her head. "I know everyone thinks it's because

Tom broke my heart. But the truth is, I've seen what falling in love and marriage does to a person. Did Ma know what kind of man Pa would turn out to be when she married him? Of course not. She had stars in her eyes, and even now, if you catch her at just the right time, she'll tell you of the roguish way he stole her heart. But what good did that do her? Backbreaking work, more mouths to feed than she could afford and having to put up with his antics?"

A gust of wind scooted between them, and Polly pulled her shawl tighter against her body. "I know that not every man is bad, and I'm sure you want to defend your gender to me. But honestly, I've had enough of a taste for when things go wrong to not want to venture there myself. In my experience, things go wrong more than they go right."

Mitch couldn't help the sigh that escaped. Part of him wanted to argue with her logic and tell her that exactly not all men were bad, and not all marriages were terrible. But his own experience...

"I understand. As much as I tried to protect the children from knowing the truth about my marriage to Hattie..."

Mitch sighed again. He'd never confessed the truth of his marriage to anyone, not his family, not the few friends who stood by him, not the police who questioned him over Hattie's death.

"I'm sorry that it wasn't good," Polly said softly. "But you did your best to make your children feel safe and secure. Which is what Ma did for us. I respect that. And you won't hear a word against her from me."

Then Polly glanced back at the house. “I shouldn’t have told you those things about my pa. Ma would be terribly hurt if she knew I held him in such low regard. She’s never spoken ill of him, even on the nights he’s come home smelling of drink and cheap perfume.”

Her loyalty felt like a warm cloak around his heart. His children were safe with this woman. She wouldn’t make them feel small or out of place, and she’d do her best to keep them from the talk that followed their family. And, as he watched her nibble on her lower lip, he knew that he was safe with her as well.

“I won’t say anything,” Mitch said softly. “Thank you for trusting me. I imagine this has been weighing on you for some time.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Polly said quietly, once again glancing in the direction of the house. “My friends have all married wonderful men. They all think I’ll eventually find someone just as wonderful and live the same wonderful lives they lead. But how can I tell them that marriage isn’t always so wonderful when they are clearly so happy?”

“You don’t,” Mitch said, taking her by the arm and leading her down the road. “I never wanted anyone to know what a fool I’d been, so I simply pretended everything was fine.”

Then he stopped. “I’m sorry, I don’t know where we’re going. And I don’t know why I’m telling you all of this. I suppose that both of us needed someone to talk to, and both of us understand what’s at stake for the other.”

Polly smiled, then pointed at a nearby barn. “Why don’t I show you Uncle Frank’s mission, and the work he’s doing? As for talking, I understand completely. Your secrets are safe with me.”

They turned a corner, and Mitch realized that not all of his secrets were going to remain safe. Gerald Barnes, deputy and chief investigator into Hattie’s death, was coming toward them.

He should have known that Gerald would show up in Leadville sometime. But what he hadn’t expected was the two large men standing with him.

Gerald and his men closed in. “Mitchell Taylor, you’re under arrest for the murder of Hattie Winston.”

* * *

Murder? Polly looked at Mitch. There had to be some mistake.

But Mitch didn’t look at her. Instead, he stared at the deputy. “You know I didn’t do it.”

“I got a witness who says otherwise.” The deputy put his hand on the gun at his waist. “I suggest you come peacefully.”

The two men with the deputy came toward them, looking like they expected a fight. Once again, Polly stole a glance at Mitch, who wore the same icy calm expression he had in the Mercantile when his children were misbehaving.

“Of course.” Mitch held out his hands, almost as though he’d been expecting this. Then he turned and looked at Polly.

“I’m sorry we weren’t able to settle terms of your employment fully, but I can assure you that once we sort out this misunderstanding, I’ll pay whatever wages you think fair.”

He nodded in the direction of the deputy and his men. "They're witnesses to my agreement to pay you, so you needn't worry that I'll not give you your due."

"I wasn't worried," Polly told him. "I'm happy to care for your children, but—"

"You should be worried, miss," the deputy said, his brow furrowed. "The way poor Miss Hattie died, it was a gruesome scene, and I'm sure she must've suffered in the end. You shouldn't trust the likes of Mitch Taylor. He has a pretty tale to tell, but it's all lies."

Secrets. Everyone had them. Could Mitch have killed his wife? Polly's gut told her no. But with as forthcoming as he'd seemed to be in their discussions, why hadn't he mentioned that he was a suspect in his wife's death?

"I believe, in this country, a man is innocent until proven guilty," Polly said quietly, looking at Mitch. What would he say in his defense?

"There's proof enough," the deputy said. "A fine citizen like Mitch Taylor, you'd have never believed it. But I suppose there's only so much a man can take, and one night, he just lost it."

Then he looked at Mitch. "I suppose you thought she had it coming. But no one, no one, deserves to die the way Hattie did."

Still, Mitch remained silent, and Polly's stomach turned inside out. Why wasn't he defending himself? Why did he seem so calm?

"Can we go now?" Mitch stared back at the deputy. "I'd

rather not cause a scene. My children have already been through enough.”

Once again, Mitch brought his icy gaze to Polly. “If you wouldn’t mind bringing the children back to my brother’s, let him know what’s happening. He can notify my lawyer. I trust you’ll care for the children as we discussed?”

Polly nodded slowly. “Of course. I could ask Uncle Frank or Will—”

“Please don’t.” Mitch’s shoulders rose and fell. “I know you want to help, but right now, the only help I need is making sure my children are safe and well cared for. That’s all that matters to me.”

Other than his initial protestation of guilt, not one word about his innocence. Not one word about the heinous crime he’d been accused of. In fact, he stood there calmly as though he’d been expecting this to happen all along.

What kind of man was Mitch Taylor? Had she been wrong in her instincts about him?

As she watched the deputy put handcuffs on him and lead him down the street, Polly couldn’t imagine that she’d been wrong. But why was he so meekly accepting this injustice?

Or was it as the deputy had suggested, and Mitch had just snapped?

Mitch stopped, then turned to look at her. “Go. I’m counting on you.”

The deputy and his men led Mitch away, and while Polly

wanted to run after them, she did the only thing she could do—she ran back to the parsonage and back to the Taylor children.

When she arrived at the house, Uncle Frank was waiting for her on the porch.

“Where’s Mitch?”

Polly started spilling the details of Mitch’s arrest, hoping that somewhere in her words, something would come out that made sense. Before she got very far in her story, Will Lawson, Mary’s husband and a deputy in Leadville, arrived at the house. Both men were silent until Polly finished, but from the expressions on their faces, she knew the situation wasn’t good.

Finally, Will spoke. “I’ve heard of the case. Grisly murder. Everyone figured the husband did it. He got tired of being cuckolded and finally did something about it. The biggest surprise in the whole thing is why he didn’t do it when their youngest daughter was born. You don’t get much more proof of infidelity than that.”

Little Isabella’s face popped into Polly’s head. “He wouldn’t have killed her over that. He loves Isabella. He loves all of his children.”

Will shrugged. “His children, maybe. But I don’t know a man alive who would put up with that kind of behavior from his wife.”

“So you’re proclaiming him guilty without having all the facts? What kind of lawman are you?”

A grin spread across Will’s face. “The kind who knows better than to mess with Polly MacDonald. You’re right, though. I don’t

have all the facts. But since he's now closely tied to the family, I aim to find them."

Polly's shoulders relaxed. Despite her lack of trust in most men, she had to admit that one of the few men she trusted explicitly was Will Lawson. He'd proven his honor time and again, and his thirst for justice was unequaled. If anyone could help Mitch, Will could.

Her conscience nagged her as she remembered Mitch's instruction not to have anyone help him. But she'd seen his pride in accepting help with the children and knew that getting Will on the case was the right thing to do.

Until Will looked at her with such intensity, she thought it would melt her on the spot. No wonder criminals feared him.

"But if he's guilty, Polly, I will see him brought to justice."

She wouldn't consider that possibility. Mitch had to be innocent. She couldn't be wrong about a man and his criminal involvement twice. Mitch seemed too...

Memories of how Tom had fooled her rattled in her brain. He'd seemed incapable of a crime as well, and look where that had gotten her.

"What will happen to the children if he is?" Polly couldn't help the question that escaped her.

Will shrugged. "Either family will take them, or they'll go to an orphanage. But don't worry, we'll make sure you're not stuck with them."

A blur of dark braids flew at her.

“We will not go to an orphanage!” Clara’s fists pummeled Polly in the stomach. “I trusted you! You are not sending us away!”

Polly wrapped her arms around the little girl. “No, I’m not sending you away. I promise. Even if it means staying with you for the rest of my life, you will not be sent away.”

As Clara sobbed, Polly could only pray that she wouldn’t have to make good on the promise. Yes, these children had already burrowed into her heart. But there was still a part of Polly that desperately yearned to be free. Had she just trapped herself?

Chapter Four

“It’s time for bed,” Polly called as she picked up a discarded sock from the floor. Mitch had been gone for over a week, but his brother, Andrew, said he’d heard from him and that everything was fine.

Fine. How could anything be fine when a man was in jail? Even Will had little to report on the case, a fact which only made the wait even more maddening.

Four scowling faces looked up from the game of marbles they’d been playing. Isabella, sweet Isabella, toddled over to her.

Louisa glared at her. “We aren’t finished with our game.”

“I believe I warned you when you began the game that you would not have enough time to complete it. If you like, you can leave everything out and finish in the morning.”

“That’s not fair!” Rory swiped his arm across the elaborate setup, ruining any hope that the children could continue in the

morning.

Polly sighed. The longer Mitch was gone, the angrier the children became. Andrew's explanation for their father's absence wasn't sitting well with any of the children because after so many days, "your father will be home soon" sounds an awful lot like a lie.

"It's a shame you ruined such a lovely game." Polly ruffled the boy's head, and he shied away. "Off to bed now, and in the morning, you can help with the others' chores, since you spoiled their fun."

Clara smirked and flounced out of her seat. "I don't mind going to bed. Because in the morning, we'll wake up, and Papa will be home."

"He will?" Thomas looked up with such innocent brown eyes that Polly wanted nothing more than to agree with Clara. "Papa's never left us before. What if Papa never comes back, like Mummy?"

"Papa is nothing like her," Louisa said, picking up the marbles. "He'll be back, you'll see."

"Hey! Those are mine!" Rory snatched at Louisa's hand.

"I won them, fair and square."

"I was going to win them back if she hadn't told us to go to bed."

"Well, you didn't, and now that you've ruined the game, they're mine," Louisa said triumphantly, holding up a marble with deep blue flecks. "And this one sure is a beauty. I've been admiring it

ever since Uncle Andrew gave it to you.”

“Not all of those marbles are yours, Louisa.” Clara pointed at some of the marbles in her pile. “You’re just taking advantage of Rory’s foul temper to gain more for yourself.”

“You’re just a sore loser.”

As the four children’s squabbling grew louder, Isabella began to wail. As she often did when the others fought. Polly pressed her fingers to her temple and rubbed gently before speaking.

“Give me the marbles.”

Immediately, the voices went from accusing each other to what a horrid nanny Polly was. She smiled and held out her hand.

“All of them. We’ll sort out what belongs to who in the morning. Now go get ready for bed, and I’ll be in to hear your prayers in a moment.”

Thomas was the first to comply. He hadn’t yet found the will toward the level of defiance the older children had. After depositing his marbles in Polly’s outstretched hand, he made his way to the bedroom he shared with the other children.

The Taylor family lived in a small apartment above the Mercantile. Andrew and Iris had recently vacated the rooms to live in a home they’d built nearby, and were hoping to rent them out as soon as Mitch’s troubles were resolved. For now, though, the Taylor children crammed into the tiny space, complaining often about how their home in Denver had much more room. The cozy place featured two bedrooms, a large sitting room that had space enough for a dining area and a small kitchen. Off the

kitchen was a tiny room the previous nanny had occupied, but with Mitch gone, she'd taken over his room as her own to be closer to the children. To Polly, room enough. At least when the children weren't all squabbling.

"Don't let Louisa keep my special marble," Rory said as he deposited the few marbles he'd been able to collect into her hand.

"We'll discuss it in the morning."

Clara sighed as she handed over her marbles as well.

Louisa, however, remained where she stood, holding the marbles, chin raised high, her eyes daring Polly to act.

"You, too, Louisa."

"I'm the eldest. I shouldn't have to go to bed so early."

"Your attitude says otherwise. I'm sure if I had more cooperation from you, then you would be rewarded by being allowed to stay up later and read in the sitting room. But clearly, from how you're fighting with your siblings, you're just as tired and cranky as they are."

Louisa's face reddened, and she opened her mouth to speak, but Polly had learned that a single look, the same she'd successfully employed dealing with the children in the Lassiter household, was enough to silence her. Even Louisa knew that the look meant her punishment would be worse if she spoke.

"Fine. But as soon as Papa returns, I will speak to him about this, and he'll tell you how unreasonable you're being."

With that, Louisa set the marbles on the table and flounced off.

Polly couldn't help the smile that curled at the edges of her lips. Every day was a battle with the Taylor children, but it seemed like each one became easier. Mostly because the children were starting to learn that while she was firm, ultimately, she was fair, and in the morning, when the marbles were divvied out again, each child would be satisfied with the results. Not completely happy, of course, but satisfied enough that they'd received their due.

In the meantime, though...she looked over at the sofa, where Isabella had curled up and fallen asleep. The girl had a knack for being able to do so whenever she felt tired and could be found sleeping in the oddest of places, as evidenced by their first meeting.

"Come along with you, then." Polly scooped the sleeping girl up and carried her to Mitch's bed. Their first night together, Polly learned that Isabella was prone to nightmares, and the easiest solution was to keep the small girl in bed with her. Otherwise, her cries woke the entire household, and it made everyone miserable. Polly had spent enough years with a child in her bed that she was able to quickly comfort Isabella and lull her back to sleep without much fuss.

After Polly tucked Isabella in, she went into the children's room, where they were all in their beds, the girls in one bed, the boys in another, quilts tucked up to their chins. Thomas had already fallen asleep, and Rory seemed to be quickly on his way.

"Good night, boys," Polly said softly, brushing their heads

gently and pressing quick kisses to their hair.

Then she went to the girls' bed. As she reached for Louisa, she was met with the usual icy glare. "Don't you dare."

"All right, then. Good night, Louisa."

Polly smiled and looked down at Clara. "Good night, my sweet." She smoothed the little girl's hair and bent to kiss her, but Clara stopped her.

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Tuck us in, and kiss us and then say a prayer for us?"

Polly hadn't gotten to the prayers yet. Since the children refused to pray with her, she prayed aloud anyway and hoped that somehow her words, combined with God's love, would reach their hearts.

"Because I care for you, and I want you to know that you're loved."

"You're not our mother," Louisa said, then rolled onto her side, putting her back to Polly.

"No, I'm not," Polly said softly. "But it doesn't mean I can't love you. It doesn't mean that God doesn't love you."

Clara reached up and hugged her. "None of our other nannies loved us."

"Well, I'm not like them," Polly said, hugging her back and kissing her on top of the head. "Now off to sleep with you, and we'll talk more in the morning."

Then, as she always did, she tucked the quilts firmly around

the children, saying the familiar prayer her mother had always said when she tucked her in.

“May the Lord be with you, and in your dreams, show you the love He has for you, so that in the morning you wake, full of His love and everything you need for a glorious day. Amen.”

She thought she heard Louisa snort, but Clara whispered something softly, something that, if Polly had to guess, sounded an awful lot like “amen.”

The wounds these children carried were not something Polly could fix, but if they allowed Him into their hearts, the healing they needed could follow.

Polly exited the room, closing the door softly behind her. She tiptoed through the rest of their home, blowing out the lamps, then banking the fire so it would keep them warm the rest of the night. Though the spring weather was warm during the day, evenings and early mornings still held a chill that needed to be kept at bay.

Satisfied that everything was in order, Polly returned to the bedroom where Isabella slept. She quickly changed into nightclothes and snuggled in with the tiny girl. Another benefit of sharing a bed was that it was already warm when she got in.

She'd just begun to enter the hazy almost dreamlike state when a crash startled her. Polly's heart leapt into her throat as she sat up in bed.

A scraping sound, then another crash.

Muttered words of anger.

At home, Polly would have lain in bed and prayed that Pastor Lassiter, or Will, or someone, would have dealt with it. Or that it was one of the boys, having fun. But here, alone in this place with these children, she knew it was up to her.

Hands shaking, Polly pulled her wrapper around her nightgown, then grabbed the pitcher from the dresser. It wasn't much, but at least if the intruder got close enough, she could use it as a weapon.

"Please, Lord," she prayed, "don't let the intruder be armed."

Her prayer did little to quiet the rushing sound in her ears or calm her unsteady hands.

Polly eased open the door, then peered out. A large mass lay on the ground, muttering in pain.

She held the pitcher above her head. "Who are you, and what are you doing in our home?"

For a moment, she thought about sending it crashing over the intruder's head, which would incapacitate him long enough for her to get help, but her hesitation gave the intruder time to speak.

"Polly, it's me, Mitch."

Her heart continued to thunder in her chest as she lowered the pitcher, then clutched it tight against her.

"You nearly frightened me to death."

"Why didn't you leave a lamp lit?"

"I had no way of knowing you were coming home tonight. One would think you would have kept me apprised of your circumstances so that I had something to tell the children. Had I

known you were coming, I would have been better prepared.”

“Point taken,” Mitch said, his voice sounding like he was smiling as he spoke. “Could you light a lamp? It seems the furniture has been rearranged in my absence and I tripped over a chair. I think my shin might be bleeding.”

Polly took a deep breath, trying to steady her still-frantic nerves. “Of course. I’m sorry. I should have done that sooner.”

She lit a lamp, then looked down at Mitch, who was rubbing his leg. The damp spot on his pants indicated he’d probably cut it open. “I’ll get some bandages.”

Polly quickly gathered the supplies she needed, lighting a few more lamps along the way, then returned to the sitting room, where Mitch had made himself comfortable on the sofa.

“You’ve done a nice job rearranging things. It’s much more open, yet cozy in here.”

As she knelt in front of him, Polly gave him a smile. “Thank you. I found that it’s easier to give the children their lessons if I can see the older ones working at the table, and I can help the younger ones here. It’s so hard for Isabella and Thomas to sit still, so having some open space for them to move around in makes it easier.”

As she spoke, she’d rolled up his pant leg to find a deep gash. “You’ve got quite the injury here.”

He smiled down at her, warming her in a way she hadn’t expected. Like a sudden burst of sunlight through the clouds.

“Like my children, I suppose I don’t do anything halfway.”

She couldn't help but smile back. "I don't suppose any of us do."

Polly dabbed at the wound, trying to ascertain its depth.

"You're good at this."

"I've had a lot of practice. In the mining camps, there aren't many doctors, if any, so you have to learn a lot on your own. I can tend most injuries, deliver a baby and, if things get truly desperate, I've taken a bullet out of a man."

She could feel his gaze on her. "A refined young lady like you? But how?"

Meeting his gaze without taking pressure off his leg, she shrugged. "What you see is the product of a lot of hard living, a few refinements here and there, and a good dose of God's grace. I mentioned how Pastor Lassiter's involvement in our lives changed everything for us. Before that, we spent our days in mining camps, doing whatever it took to survive. You couldn't wait for someone more qualified to come do a job if you were the only body around to do it. I've been helping deliver babies since I was ten years old. There aren't too many womenfolk in the camps, and you learn pretty quickly to stick together."

Which is how Polly knew that marriage wasn't always a picnic. She hadn't just experienced her mother's pain, but watched as the other women in the camps struggled as well. She neglected to mention to Mitch that she'd learned to treat a gunshot wound after a woman in camp was shot in the arm by her drunken husband. He hadn't meant to shoot her, of course, but he'd been

drunk and... Polly shook her head. It didn't matter.

"You're amazing, you know that?" The warm look Mitch gave her made her squirm. Amazing? Her stomach flipped, not in an unpleasant way, but in a way she couldn't explain. Didn't want to explain, because it meant...

Polly shook her head. "Thank you, but in all honesty, I just did what I had to do. You and anyone else would do the same in a similar situation."

* * *

Mitch wanted to argue with her, to let Polly know that there was something more to how wonderful she was, but he couldn't find the strength to put it to words. Besides, how could he start thinking of a nanny as being wonderful?

"How are the children?" he said instead, as she finished bandaging his wound.

Her smile filled her face, lighting her eyes. When had anyone smiled giving a report on his children?

"They're doing quite well, all things considered. They miss you terribly, but we're getting along. It would have been easier had you at least sent word."

He'd forgotten about how readily she spoke her mind. This was the second time in a matter of minutes she'd taken him to task as if he were one of the children instead of her employer. As much as he should remind her of propriety, he knew her chastisement of him came from a place of caring for his children.

Yet the gleam in those blue eyes told him she wasn't finished

with him yet.

“My lawyer was in contact with my brother. I believe he kept you apprised of the situation.”

“Apprised?” Polly’s voice rose slightly, but then she lowered it again, looking over her shoulder at the bedrooms. “If by apprised, you mean he let us know you were alive, then yes. We were apprised of the situation. However, when one engages a nanny and tells her of the scandal of his wife’s death, he should also apprise the nanny of the fact that he is considered a suspect.”

Polly was right, of course. He should have told her. But he hadn’t realized his arrest was so imminent. He’d already known that getting anyone to care for his difficult children was challenging enough, but then to have his extenuating circumstances on top of that...it seemed like madness.

“My lawyer has advised me not to speak to anyone about the case. It didn’t occur to me that they would arrest me like that.”

She frowned at him. “The press perhaps, but the person entrusted with your children should know what to expect. You should have at least informed me of the potential issues and how you’d like me to address them with the children.”

Mitch let out a long sigh. Right again. But Polly didn’t understand what was at stake here. He’d sheltered the children from the truth about their mother for years.

“I haven’t known what to say,” he said quietly, looking down at his hands. He’d always tried to be strong for his children, and yet now, when they faced the biggest challenge they’d ever faced,

he had no idea what to do.

“They just lost their mother, and now their father has gone off without word and I’ve had no explanation for them. You have to say something.”

Mitch’s heart clanged to the bottom of his stomach, threatening to pull him under. How did a man tell his children that their beloved Mummy was dead, and everyone thought their father did it?

He didn’t look up at her. Couldn’t really, considering that he already felt the weight of her eyes on him, and to have to face them would be too much. Why was Polly affecting him this way? She was practically a child, and yet the wisdom and experience coming from those eyes...

“I don’t know what to say,” he said, repeating his earlier words, looking forlorn, still not meeting her gaze.

“How about letting them know you didn’t do it and that you’re working to find the real culprit?”

Her words hung in the air between them, and it should have been easy enough to agree with her.

But then Polly spoke again, so quietly, it was almost indecipherable. “Unless, of course, you killed her.”

Had she tossed a red-hot coal and hit him squarely in the chest, it would not have burned as hard as her words. Mitch jumped up from his chair and stood, towering over her, where she knelt.

“Get out!”

Polly calmly picked up the supplies she’d used to bandage his

leg, then rose. “And who will watch your children the next time the deputies come for you?”

Even the accusations from the investigators hadn't stung so much. They'd spewed horrible, disgusting details about Hattie's death, and never had he felt so violently toward them.

“How dare you?”

“How dare you?” Polly stepped into his space, mere inches from him, bringing her face as close to his as possible, given that she stood nearly a head shorter than he. “You hire a woman to care for your children, get arrested for a grisly murder and don't have the courtesy to tell her the truth about what happened. At least be so good as to declare your innocence.”

The sparks flying from her eyes only served to stoke the fire in him. “I told them when they arrested me that I didn't do it. What more do you want?”

“No,” Polly said, taking a step back. “You told them that they knew you didn't do it. It's not the same as telling me what's happening, and to reassure me that you did not, in fact, kill your wife. It's not the same as telling your children that you didn't kill their darling Mummy.”

Everything in Mitch's body burned. But as he thought of the only answer he had, he suddenly went cold. “I shouldn't have to.”

He walked toward the fireplace, putting his hands out for the dying embers to give him some warmth. Something to chase away the ice that had seized his heart. “I've never been anything but honorable in all of my dealings. In how I treated Hattie and

the children. How could anyone think...”

Memories washed over him. All the times he and Hattie fought, with Hattie storming out and him not hearing from her for months. The scandals Hattie always found herself in, and him, stoically standing by, saying nothing, because he didn't want the children to think ill of their mother.

No, he had never said anything. The papers had always said enough, and regardless of whether or not their stories were true, they said it anyway. What was there for him to say?

Mitch turned back toward Polly. “I didn't kill Hattie,” he said quietly. “I hope that satisfies you. But that is all I will say on the matter, and should you require any more information, I suggest you find other employment. For I will not speak of it.”

His threat, as much as he'd like it to have more power, floated on the air. Losing someone who cared for his children as much as Polly would be a blow. But already the rumors and innuendos swirling about were too much for Mitch to handle. All were complete lies, of course, but he'd seen how good friends had already closed their doors to him, not wanting to be involved with something so scandalous. And with the way the investigators had already twisted his words and actions, his lawyer had told him that the less he said to anyone, the better. One of the “witnesses” was Mitch's former housekeeper, who'd told the investigators about the violent last argument he'd had with Hattie.

The argument had been violent. But it had been Hattie who'd thrown the lamp at him. Hattie who'd screamed obscenities.

Hattie who'd slapped him so soundly it had made his cheek bleed from where her nails had scratched him. She'd stormed out, slamming the door behind her, and he hadn't heard from her since.

Absently, he rubbed the spot on his cheek. The scratches had faded, leaving only invisible scars that left him wondering how he'd gotten caught up in the madness in the first place.

Polly remained standing where she'd been, the shadows too dark for him to see her eyes, and he was glad. He'd just begun to get to know her, just gotten to like her, and now he was driving her away.

Mitch cleared his throat. "I'd also like to make it clear that I won't have you gossiping about my family. If anyone asks, a reporter shows up or anything of the like, you will say nothing. I was arrested based on rumor, and I will not have anyone in my employ who is prone to idle talk."

"I would never gossip about anyone," Polly said quietly.

"Perhaps," Mitch said slowly. "But just as you needed to hear that I didn't kill my wife, I need to hear that you won't be talking to anyone about my family."

Polly nodded. "You have my word." Then she hesitated. "But...my family..."

"I would rather you not share with them." Who knew what, even in innocence, might be shared. And, with all the comings and goings in the parsonage, what would be overheard and misconstrued.

She didn't say anything, but instead, walked over to him and placed her hand on his arm. Then, with those eyes that seemed to probe deeper into his soul than he was comfortable with, she spoke softly.

"It must be incredibly lonely keeping yourself so closed off. As much as they make me crazy sometimes, I don't know what I would do without my family to talk to. I understand that it must be difficult to talk to someone you barely know, but I hope you know that you don't have to go through this alone."

Mitch's throat clogged with anything he might have said in response. What did Polly know of his life? Of the difficulties he could not, would not, share?

Then she squeezed his arm, sending a current through him that seized his heart. "Even if you reject my friendship, please at least consider opening up to your brother. He cares for you deeply, and I know he wants to help even more than he has."

He closed his eyes, willing himself to breathe. Andrew was the last person he'd confide in. Yes, he loved his brother, but how could he let his brother know just how bad things were? How could he disappoint him so?

Polly's soft lilac scent filled his nostrils. She was the one he wanted to confide in. Wanted to wrap his arms around her, and have her tell him it was going to be all right. But then he would have to admit to feelings that he didn't have the right to have.

Mitch took another deep breath. "I have everything under control," he said, pulling away. "We should both turn in for the

night. Morning will be here before you know it, and I'm sure I don't need to tell you that the children are early risers."

"Of course," Polly said, bowing her head. She seemed to understand without him having to tell her that theirs needed to be a more formal relationship. There would be no confidences shared, no...none of the things that sometimes crossed his mind. He couldn't afford to have his heart so ensnared again.

He started for his bedroom, but Polly stopped him. "If you'll just give me a moment, I've been sleeping in there with Isabella. It seemed easier to be closer to the children."

"It's all right. I'll take the other bedroom. After the nights I've spent in a cell, any bed has to be more comfortable."

Another dip of the head. "As you wish."

No, nothing was as he wished. But as he watched Polly retreat back into the bedroom, he knew it was the only way to keep his heart safe.

Chapter Five

The children were already eating breakfast when Mitch entered the kitchen, hair tousled and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. Polly had hoped he'd be able to sleep in, but with the room just off the kitchen, and the ruckus that always came with mealtime, she should have known his peace wouldn't last long.

"Papa!" five voices chorused as they all jumped from the table and wrapped their arms around him.

As much as she wanted to hold Mitch's inability to be forthcoming against him, and wanted to stay angry with him, she

found that as she watched the loving interaction between father and children, she couldn't bring herself to do so. For the first time since he'd gone away, Louisa was actually smiling.

"I see Polly still has all her hair," Mitch said, looking up at her and smiling. "I hope that means you were all well behaved."

The cross expression returned to Louisa's face as she made a noise. "Well, she wasn't as horrid as Mrs. Abernathy, but we would have done just fine without her."

As the younger girl wound herself up for what Polly imagined was yet another argument for why she should be allowed to take care of her siblings, Mitch seemed to sense the direction Louisa was taking as well.

"I don't want to hear it," he said, shaking his head. "I need an adult taking care of you, and Polly is doing a wonderful job."

"How would you know? You've been gone." Louisa's dark eyes flashed, and she stepped away from her father, crossing her arms over her chest.

Polly turned to help Isabella get back in her chair, but not before she caught the reciprocal flash in Mitch's eyes.

"It couldn't be helped," he said, his voice quiet, yet with an undercurrent of tension that made Polly's heart ache.

She supposed he couldn't be forthcoming with the children; after all, having their father be accused of killing their mother was a tragedy no child should have to experience. Losing their mother was bad enough, but to have to face the potential involvement of their father...

Polly took a deep breath. She'd been judging Mitch harshly, when he'd simply been doing the best he could do.

"Would you like some breakfast?" she said, straightening as she smiled at him. "Your brother thoughtfully provided a housekeeper to help with the cooking and such since apparently you hadn't had time to engage one. Lucy has just gone down to get some more milk, but I think you'll be pleased with her."

Mitch nodded slowly, then sat at the head of the table. "Thank you. I guess I hadn't realized what a mess I'd left behind."

He spoke slowly, as though the remorse for the difficult position he'd left everyone in had finally dawned on him.

"We made it through just fine," Polly said, handing him a plate. "Now we need to move forward as best as we can."

She'd have liked to have told him that she was sorry for her accusations the previous night. The five accusing glances, even from little Isabella, must have weighed incredibly heavily on him. He didn't need the additional pressure from her.

The back door opened, and Lucy bustled in. "There's a crowd gathered out front, and they were asking me all sorts of questions."

Mitch had just raised a forkful of eggs to his lips but hadn't taken a bite yet. The fork clattered to the table as he jumped up and went to the front window.

He muttered something indistinguishable as he turned back toward the kitchen area. "Reporters."

"Like when Mummy has a show?" Clara asked, her eyes

lighting up momentarily, then dimming. “They don’t know she is gone?”

“No, you dolt. It’s because Mummy is dead. They all want to know how we feel about losing her.” Louisa’s face darkened, but fire filled her eyes. “Why won’t they leave us alone?”

Mitch looked over at Polly, his eyes locking with hers. A silent reminder that the children didn’t know the circumstances that hung over him.

How were they supposed to carry on with their lives with the reporters hanging about? One ill-placed question, and Mitch would have a great deal of explaining to do.

“Let’s forget about them and enjoy our breakfasts, shall we?” Polly tried to sound cheerful, but as the sullen children stared at their congealing eggs, she found she didn’t have much of an appetite either.

Isabella, however, was too innocent to understand the darkness surrounding her family, and she devoured her meal. At least one of her charges was eating.

Mitch made a show of finishing his breakfast. “It was delicious. Thank you, Lucy.”

He acknowledged their housekeeper with a smile, but his eyes weren’t in it.

How had Polly come to take such an interest in him? To notice his moods and his features? She shook her head. Just part of the job. Of course she had to be sensitive to Mitch’s moods—for the children’s sakes.

“I suppose we could start our lessons.” Once again, Polly tried to sound cheerful, but she was met with dull expressions. Typically, the suggestion of lessons would have elicited a few groans, or some argument. But with the mention of their beloved mummy, their grief came back up again, swallowing them into a pit of mourning that left them incapable of feeling anything else.

“Or, I was thinking, we could go to the parsonage and take our lessons with the children there today.”

“Wif Nugget?” Isabella’s big dark eyes brightened as she hopped off her chair and bounded toward Polly.

In the days Mitch had been gone, the children had spent a good deal of time with the parsonage children. Partially because it was easier than keeping them cooped up in the tiny apartment when they were clearly used to living in a larger home. But also because Polly had seen how much the children needed to be around others their own age. Nugget had taken a shine to Isabella and relished finally having a child younger than herself to mother.

Oddly enough, Isabella seemed to relish the attention just as much.

“Yes, my sweet. With Nugget.” She ruffled the little girl’s hair, then looked over at Mitch. “With your father’s approval, of course. It might provide a nice distraction.”

Mitch gave her a warm smile. “Yes, that would be nice. Thank you.” Then he looked over at Lucy. “Had anyone followed you to the back?”

“No, sir. It’s not a well-used entrance, and the only reason I

knew of it was because the other Mr. Taylor suggested it to avoid the reporters.”

Then he turned his attention to Polly. “Let’s go now, before anyone discovers it.”

* * *

Madness. That’s what the whole situation was. He would take the children out of the apartment now, so they wouldn’t see the people standing in front of the building holding signs that said Murderer, but what then? Eventually, they’d have to come home, and those people, as well as the reporters, would still be there.

Everyone thought he’d killed Hattie. The newspapers in Denver already blasted the headline that he’d killed her in a fit of passion. Passion. Ha! He hadn’t experienced passion toward Hattie in so long, he couldn’t even remember what it felt like. But the sensational headlines sold papers, and convicting him of Hattie’s murder would get the sheriff reelected. No one cared about the truth.

Had it not been for his lawyer calling in a favor with the governor, who’d called in a favor with the judge to allow Mitch to be released on bail until his trial, Mitch would still be sitting in a jail cell.

He appreciated the way Polly bundled up the children and hurried them out the back door.

“Let’s be as quiet as we can,” she said softly, putting a finger to her lips. “We’re hiding from those people, and we don’t want them upsetting you further.”

Five heads nodded at her.

“Lucy, you take the older two and meet us at the parsonage. If they see a woman and two children walking down the street, they won’t realize it’s us. I’ll go with the younger three, and Mitch, you may follow in a few minutes.”

Efficient. Strong. And yet, there was a tenderness to her voice that made him think she really did care for the children and sparing their feelings.

Then she looked at him, piercing him with those blue eyes. “I’m assuming you know your way around town enough not to take a direct route? No sense in leading them there, though I know Uncle Frank will do his best to shield everyone.”

Mitch nodded slowly. “You’ve thought of everything.”

Polly shrugged. “We’ve had to deal with our share of reporters over the years. Don’t worry, your children are safe.”

The tension seemed to evaporate from his chest, and suddenly, he felt like he could breathe again. Polly had very easily managed everything in his absence, and for the first time in a long time, he could almost believe that everything would be all right.

“Thank you, Polly. I’ll see you all there soon.” He kissed each of his children as they passed and almost bent to kiss Polly as well. Then he shook his head. Where was he coming up with all this ridiculousness?

Habit, of course. He just kissed every head that passed, especially now, knowing how very precious each moment with them was.

Polly seemed to sense his hesitation because she ducked her head away, but not before he caught the pink tingeing her cheeks.

As he exited, Mitch was pleased to note that none of the reporters or people carrying the horrible signs had discovered the service entrance. Perhaps it was because the rear stairs led to the storeroom of the Mercantile, then out the back door of the Mercantile. People probably didn't even realize the two were connected. He could only hope that the commotion didn't hurt his brother's business too much. Iris was expecting another child, and they'd just built a nice house down the road.

Though no one had seemed to notice Mitch's departure, he still carefully wound his way through town, taking alleys, backtracking and going the most unlikely routes possible. When he finally arrived at the parsonage, he could hear laughter coming from the backyard.

Polly opened the front door before he could knock. "Good. You made it. Everyone is waiting for you in the parlor."

Everyone? "I thought I told you to keep my family business private."

"And I have," she said, looking him so firmly in the eye that if he were one of the children, he'd obey her immediately. "However, if you think that you're going to be able to continue to shelter your children from the reporters and those people with the awful signs, then you can't keep them at the apartment. Uncle Frank has said that we can all stay here until the furor dies down."

He should be angry with her. Had every right to be angry with

her. Polly MacDonald was so efficient at managing everything around her that she'd forgotten that he was an adult, perfectly capable of managing himself.

Except in this instance, she was right.

If they went back to the apartment, the children were bound to see the signs. Were bound to ask questions like, "Did you kill our mummy?" just as Polly had.

"Thank you," he finally said. "But I don't see why everyone needs to be gathered in the parlor over all of this."

"Because you're in a serious situation," a deep voice behind him said.

Mitch turned to see a tall man younger than he sporting a badge prominently on his vest.

"Will Lawson," he said, holding out his hand as he examined Mitch.

Mitch shook, wondering what this lawman was going to do in the situation. Polly had mentioned a close family friend being a lawman, but that didn't mean the man was going to be on his side. None of the lawmen in Denver seemed to care about the truth. Why would this guy be any different?

"Mitch Taylor, but I suppose you already know that."

"Seems to me you're in a bit of a pickle."

"My lawyer is handling things."

"Fair enough. But I'm happy to do some investigating of my own."

What would Will find that the deputies in Denver hadn't

already found? Supposedly, they'd exhausted every lead, and everything seemed to point right back to Mitch. The last thing he needed was more evidence suggesting he was guilty.

Back in Denver, Mitch had hired an investigator of his own, a man who promised he'd find something on the real killer. That man now worked for the deputies, claiming there was nothing that said Mitch didn't do it.

Mitch swallowed the lump in his throat. "Thank you, but I believe my lawyer has everything in hand. I'd hate to take you from your important work here in Leadville."

"It's no trouble," Will said, obviously not accepting the easy way out that Mitch had given him.

What was the other man's agenda?

"All the same, I think we'll be just fine."

Actually, they weren't. That was the trouble. So much evidence was stacked against him, or at least that's the way it seemed. It didn't appear to matter that they couldn't prove that Mitch had been at the murder scene, or that Mitch had any connection to whatever had been used to bludgeon Hattie to death. But that's what happened when all they really wanted was someone to take the fall so the sheriff looked like a hero.

Mitch turned to Polly. "I believe you said people were waiting on me."

Her brows furrowed as she pursed her lips, but she didn't argue with him. She meant well, he knew, but Polly didn't understand what he was up against. What he'd always been up against. People

were constantly trying to be his friend, hoping to gain access to the amazing Hattie Winston. And now that she was gone, every charlatan in town was offering “help” with the case, only their motives weren’t so pure. Whether it was to prove his guilt, or get the inside scoop for the latest newspaper, all the supposed offers of help never had Mitch’s best interests in mind.

Did Will have Mitch’s best interests in mind? He had no idea. He’d barely met the man, and while Polly’s recommendation might mean something to some people, Mitch had too much at stake to trust just anyone.

Polly led him into the parlor, where Pastor Lassiter, Gertie and Maddie sat waiting. Before Mitch could speak, Pastor Lassiter stood.

“Now I know you object to receiving help, but I have to say that in this instance, you are going to accept what we offer. Those children of yours need protection, and if they’re staying with us, no one is going to know who they are. Folks around here are used to us having all sorts of children running around, and not one will question who these children are. Pride isn’t going to keep your children safe.”

Mitch nodded slowly. “Thank you. I am grateful for the offer. In fact, I was afraid of what would happen if I had to take them back home. They don’t need to be subjected to the scandal.”

The older man looked at him solemnly. “Now, Polly assures me that you’re innocent, but I need to hear it from you. I won’t harbor a murderer in my home.”

The ever-present lump in Mitch's throat threatened to cut off his airway. It seemed like all he ever did was proclaim his innocence, but no one ever listened.

"I didn't kill Hattie."

There. The words were his own, but he hardly recognized his voice. He had children who were grieving a lost mother, and rather than focusing on them, he had to continually defend himself.

"Where are my children?"

Polly smiled at him. "They're playing in the yard. We're letting them get their wiggles out before we start lessons."

Once again, Mitch nodded slowly, trying to process the information. Laughter drifted toward him, and somewhere in there, he thought he recognized the sound of his own children. Pastor Lassiter walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I believe you, son. But from what I've seen in the papers, you're going to need to do a lot more than what you've been doing to get the rest of society to believe it."

Mitch's body went cold as he looked around the room. "You've seen the papers? Are they here? I don't want the children—"

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