

Love Inspired HISTORICAL

*The Cowboy's
City Girl*

LINDA
FORD

Montana
Cowboys

Linda Ford

The Cowboy's City Girl

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Bride on the Ranch Beatrice Doyle came to Montana to escape her father's marriage plans for her—not to lasso herself a cowboy. Yet she can't ignore the sparks that fly between her and Levi Harding while she's at his family's ranch, caring for his injured stepmother. But opening her heart would mean sacrificing her quest for independence... After being rejected by the girl he hoped to marry, Levi vows never to love again. Nevertheless, he's drawn to big city girl Beatrice. In her, the half-Native American rancher sees himself: someone a little bruised, a lot lonely. And when the two join forces to care for an orphaned girl, he yearns to heal their fractured hearts—and form the family they all long for. Montana Cowboys: These brothers live and love by the code of the West

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Bride on the Ranch

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Montana Cowboys: These brothers live and love by the code of the West

"Seems Dolly feels safe with us," Beatrice murmured.

Levi grinned at her. "I kind of like knowing that."

"Me, too."

He held her gaze, searching for and finding a sense of belonging even if it was only because they shared a concern for this orphaned child.

He broke the eye contact first, knowing his thoughts had gone to dangerous territory. Beatrice was a city girl with secrets. She was here only to do a job, then she would leave. And he did not intend to open his heart to more pain.

But his eyes wanted to return to hers, to explore further, perhaps even to let her glimpse something in his own heart. Instead of listening to the demands of his heart, he focused his attention on her hand, resting on little Dolly's knee.

Without giving himself time to change his mind, he placed his hand on Dolly's other knee. So much for not listening to his heart.

The three of them sat together. No one speaking. No one moving.

He could get used to this feeling of contentment.

LINDA FORD lives on a ranch in Alberta, Canada, near enough to the Rocky Mountains that she can enjoy them on a daily basis. She and her husband raised fourteen children—four homemade, ten adopted. She currently shares her home and life with her husband, a grown son, a live-in paraplegic client and a continual (and welcome) stream of kids, kids-in-law, grandkids, and assorted friends and relatives.

The Cowboy's City Girl

Linda Ford



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I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

—Psalms 139:14

To my grandson, Christopher, on your graduation. I am proud of the young man you have become. This Irish blessing is my hope and prayer for you: May the dreams you hold the dearest be those which come true and the kindness you spread keep returning to you.

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Summer 1899

Near Granite Creek, Montana

Beatrice Doyle squealed as the buggy lurched to one side and ground to a halt. What had happened? She pulled her hat forward to protect her face from the slashing rain, looked down on both sides of the buggy and groaned. One wheel had fallen off the narrow track that would allow her to cross the tossing water of the river and get safely to her destination.

Clouds darkened the afternoon. Flashes of lightning crisscrossed the sky. Thunder followed in a constant roll and crash. She sat, staring straight ahead, the reins slack in her hand with no notion of how to get out of this predicament. Until two weeks ago she had lived a sheltered, protected life and had certainly never driven a buggy. She'd lived in the city, the only child of her parents, and she'd thought her life would continue on the same pleasant note. How could she have been so wrong?

Now here she was in Montana, a far cry from Chicago. Thankfully Uncle Elwood and Aunt Opal had welcomed her into their home. Beatrice had come west with the intention of learning skills that would enable her to become independent, and she was learning them at an incredibly brisk pace.

When the influenza epidemic hit the town, Uncle Elwood's responsibilities as the preacher had included ministering to the sick. Aunt Opal had helped and taken Beatrice with her.

"Though I've a long ways to go before I can hope to run a house or take care of children," she muttered to the raging sky. Learning to do anything else of practical use seemed even more impossible.

When Uncle Elwood received news that Mrs. Harding was injured and needed help, Beatrice had begged to be allowed to take on the challenge.

"But I don't have time to take you there and you don't know how to drive the buggy," he'd protested.

"You can show me. Besides, how many times have you said Old Sissy, your mare, knows what to do?"

Her uncle began to relent at that point and had finally given in to her arguments as to why this was a good idea.

"Well, Old Sissy," Beatrice yelled. "What are you going to do?"

The horse stood with her head down. Seems she found the rain every bit as miserable as did Beatrice, whose clothes were clinging to her. With no help from that direction, Beatrice gathered her wet skirts about her and climbed down to look at the wheel. She determinedly ignored the ankle-deep water soaking through her impractical shoes and further wetting her skirts as she studied her problem.

If she pushed while Old Sissy pulled, they just might get the buggy back to level ground. Beatrice leaned her weight into the wheel and yelled at the horse to go.

Beatrice's foot slipped and she barely managed to catch herself before she fell downward in the water. As it was she stepped off the rocky road bed and into cold, dark water that licked at her knees and left her no closer to achieving her goal.

Lightning streaked across the sky, momentarily blinding her. A bone-shaking crash of thunder followed almost directly on its heels and the air filled with a sulfur smell.

She had no desire to spend the rest of the afternoon in the middle of a river with rain pouring down on her head. "I have to get out of here." She grunted and again leaned into the wheel.

A hand caught her shoulder and jerked her back. "Lady, leave it be."

She struggled against the grasp of the water and the weight of her sodden clothing to turn and face the owner of the voice. She grabbed at the wheel to keep her balance and blinked at the man before her. She recognized the tall, dark and handsome cowboy, whom she'd seen previously in town. Her first thought on that occasion was that he seemed so sure of himself and where he belonged in the world.

Not that she didn't know exactly what her role in life was. Her father had made it abundantly clear, making her glad to leave home and head west. "With no son, it's your duty to help the family by marrying well," he'd said.

"You're Levi Harding." His father, Big Sam, ran the biggest ranch in this part of Montana. "I'm on my way to your place. I understand your mother needs help."

He blinked, another flash of lightning bringing his features into sharp detail. The thunder followed almost immediately.

"Lady, did no one tell you about the dangers of lightning and water?" Rain dripped from the brim of his sodden cowboy hat, providing a damp curtain in front of his face, but not so much she couldn't see the frown on his lips.

"Of course they did." But she couldn't think what she'd been told.

"You're a perfect lightning rod."

"You mean...?" Her voice trailed off. She couldn't take in the danger to herself.

He swept her off her feet and plowed his way through the water to solid ground. She should protest his boldness, but instead she clung to his shoulders and wished the rain would quit.

He set her on her feet. "Stay here." Levi turned back to the river, reached the horse and grabbed its reins, pulling and calling. A bright flash of lightning made Old Sissy rear in fear and revealed the sharp features of the man, his arms upraised like some kind of modern-day Moses.

Beatrice's heart lurched. How bold and strong he was. How many times had she wished for such a man to save her from her father's plans? Reality squelched her eagerness. Yes, it might be looked upon as a romantic rescue except for a few small details. Like the pouring rain, her soaked clothes and the cold that had reached the marrow of her bones. And the hard, unyielding lump in her heart that warned her to never again trust a man to be what she wanted and needed.

Shiver after shiver raced through her and her teeth rattled.

Within a few moments, the buggy stood on solid ground again.

He held out his hand to assist her to the seat. When she was as comfortable as her dampened state allowed, he tied his horse to the back and climbed up beside her. "I'll get you safely to the ranch."

"Thank you." This was not quite what she had in mind when she'd fled Chicago with Father's words echoing in her ears and her mind set on making her own way in life.

"You'll not receive another nickel until you obey me," he'd said without an ounce of sympathy, and Mother had stood resolutely at his side.

She had no doubt he meant every word. All her life she'd known she was a disappointment to her parents for being born a girl instead of a boy. But not until recently did she realize the depth of their disappointment.

It had begun when she fell in love with Henry St. James, a handsome, blond man who worked as a clerk in her father's office. Because of his lowly station in her father's business, Henry had insisted on meeting her in secret, but she fully expected he would eventually confront her father with a declaration of his love for her.

How wrong she'd been. When her father discovered Henry's interest in her, he had paid him to vanish. Henry hadn't even cared enough to object or offer her an explanation. She began to suspect his interest all along had only been the hopes of financial improvement.

After that Father had presented three suitable young men to her. "Any of these men can become my son and heir."

She'd wept in secret to think her father was selling her like something in the stockyards.

She refused to marry any of them. "I will marry for love," she had declared. Though she had no intention of ever marrying. How could she ever trust another man? Henry had vowed to defend her. Look how that had gone.

Father had said she was simply being immature and selfish. But she had refused to be coerced, which caused her father to buy her a one-way ticket to Granite Creek, Montana, with the warning that she could return home when she came to her senses.

The misery of being cold and wet matched the misery of her spirit.

She lifted her head, ignoring the water dripping from her hat brim to her nose. She was not going back home to be married off by her father. She would use every opportunity to learn the necessary skills she would need in order to get a job so she could take care of herself. Mrs. Harding's need was an answer to Beatrice's prayer for a chance to prove herself.

Never mind that Levi had rescued her and she'd felt safe in his arms. She would never again allow herself to trust in a man's good intentions. No. She'd learned her lesson on what value she held.

Levi had said nothing since they began the journey together. What sort of man was he? One who sat straight and focused on the trail ahead. Out of the corner of her eye she studied his profile. Strong, bold, angular. She'd seen him once before in town. Tall and dark. Aunt Opal said his mother had been a full-blooded Lakota Indian. The woman she was going to help was his stepmother.

A half-breed. She didn't know what to think. She'd seen the way her father treated the natives they'd encountered in Chicago with ruthless disdain. Yet the way Levi sat so straight and almost regal, she couldn't imagine her father doing the same to him.

Besides, he'd been willing to rescue a silly maiden standing in the river even at risk to his own safety.

She turned to him. "Thank you for rescuing me."

His smile was fleeting but had lasted long enough for her to appreciate the way his features softened.

"No problem. I could hardly stand by and hope you wouldn't get hurt."

"I suppose not." Though she'd met men who cared little about her personal needs and lots about lining their own pockets.

The buggy hit a rough spot and she jostled, tipping toward the side.

She was off balance and might have fallen off except Levi grabbed her arm and pulled her back upright. That was twice he'd saved her life. She didn't know what to make of it.

Just happenstance. As he said, he could hardly stand by and watch her get hurt.

It was no cause for her to think it meant anything. She knew better.

* * *

Levi had wanted to get one of his new sisters-in-law to help his stepmother. Or even his brother Johnny's new sister-in-law, Celia, but Maisie had refused, saying since she'd been helping care for the sick, she might be contagious and didn't want the rest of the family exposed to the illness that had ravaged the town of Granite Creek and the surrounding area.

Preacher Gage had said he would send someone to help her.

Levi had been tracking the latest trail of the men creating havoc at the ranch when the rain erased any signs he might have followed. Near as he could tell, there were three riders, but who they were or why they seemed to take delight in making mischief around the ranch, he could not say. So far nothing had been seriously damaged nor was anything missing, but everything they did had the potential to be more serious. Gates had been left open, but he discovered it in time so the horses did not escape. A pile of oats had been left where the milk cow could get into it and founder, and again, only his vigilance had prevented it. The woodpile had been upset so he'd stacked it again before the rain came. The list went on and on. It frustrated him to no end that he hadn't been able to catch the culprits and put a stop to it. Especially with Pa and the hired hands away.

Levi had been left in charge and he meant to fulfill the responsibility.

But losing the trail just as he reached the river had proven to be fortuitous. He saw in the water a young woman he didn't recognize attempting to get her buggy unstuck while lightning flashed about her. His thoughts had turned to Helen. His heart had slammed into his ribs so hard he had grunted.

Thankfully, he had not witnessed Helen drowning, but he'd imagined it many times. It was not something he wished to see repeated with this woman, though she was more likely to be struck with lightning than to drown.

Before he could even give the thought consideration, he'd gone into the water and carried her to safety. As soon as he lifted her into his arms, he recognized her as the city girl, Miss Doyle, visiting her aunt Opal and uncle Elwood Gage. What was the preacher thinking to send her to help Maisie? From what he'd heard, she was more used to having servants than being one.

No doubt, the preacher had his reasons. For instance, the fact that so many were ill with the influenza and more were falling sick all the time. Levi would just have to make the best of it and be grateful for whatever help she offered.

A suspicion edged into his thoughts. Perhaps no one else was willing to work in a house where a half-breed lived. Did Miss Doyle know about his heritage? Or had Preacher Gage neglected to mention it? Maisie often reassured him that he was just as white as native, yet he knew many didn't see it that way.

Like Helen. He and she had been friends for a couple of years. He'd fancied himself in love with her. At sixteen he had begun to pressure her to promise to marry him when they both turned seventeen. Her reply had shocked him clear through.

"We can be friends," she'd said. "But Levi, I could never marry you. Do you know what people would say? Why, there would be homes where I wouldn't be invited because I'd married a half-breed."

"How is that different than being my friend?"

"People don't have to know we're friends. We can enjoy each other's company out here far from town."

He had stalked away. He did not want a secret friendship any more than he wanted to be looked upon with shame and regret.

Helen had drowned two weeks later, swimming alone. He couldn't help thinking if he'd been there he might have been able to pull her to safety when she banged her head on a rock. Her loss had been devastating, but little did anyone know he'd felt the loss well before she drowned.

A year ago, at eighteen, he'd met Fern Dafoe and had been attracted to her. He reasoned she would accept him because she was a half-breed like himself. But his interest in her had been short-lived. She had wanted him to join her father and her brothers in their nomadic way of life, a life that brought them perilously close to getting arrested on more than one occasion. After he'd told her that he didn't want to leave the ranch and he didn't want to join up with her wild family, she'd been angry and accused him of being too white.

Too white for Fern. Too native for Helen.

At that point, he'd made up his mind. He would never again open himself up to loss and rejection. Some might say he had grown too guarded, but he knew his heart could not withstand more. Perhaps losing his ma when he was only five had made him extra cautious.

Miss Doyle's voice brought him back to the present. "Mr. Harding, how far do we have to travel to get to your ranch?"

"We're almost there. I prefer you call me Levi. Mr. Harding is my pa, though mostly he's known as Big Sam."

"So he's a big man?"

"In every way imaginable."

She tipped her head as if trying to fathom what he meant. "Big in size and big in heart?"

"Yup. And big in personality."

"Oh." She considered his reply for a moment. Her voice was soft as she asked her next question. "Will he frighten me?"

Levi laughed. "Only if you let him. But he's not home right now. He and a bunch of cowhands have gone up the mountains where some cows are trapped by a landslide. They have to dig them out."

"You did not go with them?"

“Someone had to remain at home to take care of things. Good thing I stayed behind. I can’t imagine what would have become of Ma if she’d been alone.” His voice hardened. If something happened to Ma he would have himself to blame.

“I thought she was your stepmother.”

He smiled. “I barely remember my own ma. Maisie is the only ma I’ve known. I should tell you why she needs help. I don’t know why she thought it was necessary to carry a sharp hoe into the loft of the barn just because she wanted to clean up the mouse droppings.” Couldn’t she have asked Levi to help? But she hadn’t. “She said she could smell mice every time she entered the barn. She fell from the ladder, landed on the hoe and laid open a deep cut on the back of her thigh.” He closed his eyes but that did nothing to erase the picture of blood soaking her skirts. “If she doesn’t rest her leg, she’ll end up crippled, or maybe worse.”

Miss Doyle made a sympathetic sound and then sat up straighter, though he would have thought she was already poker straight. “I’m here to help.” She peered into the rain. “I see no houses. Do you have neighbors, Mr. Harding?”

“Levi, remember?”

“Yes, Levi. And please call me Beatrice.”

“Thank you, Beatrice.” Her name suited her. Regal and distant.

Though how distant had they been a few minutes ago as he carried her from the river? Should he explain it meant nothing? He was being neither bold nor inappropriate, only intent on saving her life. He decided the less he said about it, the sooner they would both forget it. “To answer your question. We don’t have many neighbors. My brother Tanner married this spring. He and his wife, Susanne, and the four children they adopted live a few miles to the west. My other brother, Johnny, married more recently and he and his wife, Willow, live three miles north. She brought a baby boy and two sisters to the marriage. Other than that our neighbors are no closer than town.”

“Willow? What an unusual name.”

“An unusual gal. She wasn’t at all bothered that my brother is part native. Nor was Susanne, the girl who married my oldest brother.” Levi looked at her with silent challenge. “My mother, Seena, was a full-blooded Lakota Indian. She was injured fleeing the Battle of the Little Bighorn. My pa found her, saved her life and then they fell in love and married.”

She met his eyes. The rain softened sufficiently for him to see that her eyes were golden-brown, as warm as freshly baked bread. Then she ducked her head enough to hide behind the brim of her hat.

“You say that like you expect me to get off the seat and walk the rest of the way.”

He couldn’t decide if he should laugh at her suggestion or stop the buggy and let her off. “I’ll take you back to town if you wish.”

“I knew the situation before I came this way. I have no intention of turning back.”

She knew he was a half-breed and still she came? Her response both surprised him and pleased him. “You’re sure?”

She nodded. “I intend to do the job I came to do.”

He pulled up before the house. “We’re here.”

She squinted into the curtain of rain. “Where’s here?”

She wouldn’t be able to see much of the place in this downpour. “The Sundown Ranch.” Pride filled his voice. They reached the house. He swung down and went around the horse to reach up and help her. “Come on in. It’s simple but I think you’ll find we’re very comfortable.”

“Indeed.” Not another word, leaving him to wonder if she’d find the place to her liking or not. Hadn’t he heard that her father was one of the richest men in Chicago? She’d surely think the ranch house small. But she had agreed to come here of her own free will. That must mean something.

“Come and meet my ma.” He drew her inside, but his heart slammed against his ribs as a result of what he saw. “Ma—” Maisie balanced a steaming cup of tea as she tried to make her way to the table while hobbling on one leg. “What are you doing?” He sprang forward, took the cup, set it aside

then half carried her to the nearest chair. “You are supposed to be resting with your leg up. Have you started the wound bleeding again?”

“Levi, stop fussing and introduce me to this young lady who looks ready to turn tail and flee.”

He looked back at Beatrice. She looked miserable and cold. Leaving Maisie safely settled on her chair, he beckoned her forward.

But she didn't move, glancing at the puddle forming at her feet. “I'm dripping wet.”

“It's only water. It will dry. Come to the stove and get warm.”

He caught a look of uncertainty in her eyes. She shook from head to toe and started to wobble.

He sprang forward just in time to catch her before she fell to the floor in a faint. Snagging a chair with his foot, he dragged it close to the stove, lowered her to the seat and considered his predicament. He should be out chasing the scoundrels responsible for causing problems around the place. The pouring rain provided perfect cover for them, but the woman who had come to help Maisie was of no use. He couldn't leave her alone—or expect her to take care of Maisie's needs.

He was stuck inside with two incapacitated women.

What was he going to do?

Chapter Two

Beatrice closed her eyes against the darkness clouding her mind. Her wet clothes were too tight. The cold had seeped into her brain.

The warmth from the stove and the firmness of the hard chair eased her faintness but she dare not open her eyes yet, afraid the room would spin and make it impossible to stay upright.

Levi hovered nearby. He'd saved her from disaster yet again. How long before he decided she was a bad risk and sent her back to town? How could she prove she could do the job if he had to continually rescue her?

Sucking in the deepest breath her constricting clothing allowed, she willed away the dizziness and opened her eyes. She would do what she'd come to do. “I'm fine.”

“Perhaps if you changed into dry clothes.” Mrs. Harding's voice revealed no criticism, a fact that gave Beatrice a bit of courage.

“Yes, of course. My bags...” She could hardly expect Levi to go out in the rain that still pounded down.

“I'll get them.”

“Oh, no. I couldn't ask you to do that. It's still raining.”

“You didn't ask me. Besides, I could hardly get any wetter.”

Indeed, puddles followed his every step. He was as wet as she, and surely as miserable, yet he was willing to venture back out into the inclement weather. It wasn't like he had to. He wasn't one of Father's servants, who were expected to run and fetch no matter the conditions.

Before she could answer or object he was out the door. She stared after him. If she wasn't so miserable she might wonder if he was always so accommodating or was he anxious to be done with her?

She'd faced so many strange and frightening things since she'd left home. Only one thing had sustained her—her trust in God. She'd clung to His promises on the trip west and as Aunt Opal showed her how frontier life was lived. God is my strength and power: He maketh my way perfect. A fragile calm filled her. God would provide everything she needed.

Her gaze went to Mrs. Harding.

“Are you sure you're okay?” the woman asked.

Beatrice nodded. She should get to her feet and introduce herself but she feared having another weak spell. “I'm Beatrice Doyle. The preacher's wife is my aunt. They've sent me out to help you.”

“Pleased to meet you, my dear. And you shall call me Maisie. May I call you Beatrice?”

“Of course.” Beatrice's insides steadied at Maisie's kindness.

“I am blessed you have come.”

Levi returned at that moment.

“Put her things in Tanner’s old room,” Maisie said. She turned to Beatrice. “Go with him and please make yourself at home. Change into something dry then come back and tell me about yourself.”

Levi waited at the doorway to the next room for her to rise and follow him. He watched her as if expecting he would have to drop her bags and catch her again.

She held herself very upright and, doing her best to ignore her very uncomfortable clothes, she followed him into a sitting room, where there was a cluster of comfortable chairs, bookshelves full of books and a round stove for cold winter days. “What a warm, inviting room,” she murmured. She could imagine the family gathered round the stove on winter evenings.

“It’s nothing special. Tends to get a little crowded when the whole family is here and as you can see, there’s no place to go but here or the kitchen.”

She couldn’t tell if he meant to complain or if he was happy about having such a large family to crowd the house. “I would think sharing the room with family would be joyous.”

He paused before a door, a smile curving his mouth. “It is.”

She could not get over the way his features softened when he smiled. Like a happy feeling from inside him rushed to get out.

And then he opened one of the four doors along the wall, carried her things inside, then stepped out and indicated she should enter. He fled across the sitting room before she could even thank him.

The room was bright and pleasant, which made her realize the rain had softened to a mist. She parted the curtains and looked out the window. Trees stood shrouded in moisture with a trail through them. She was rather disappointed she couldn’t see the barn and whatever other buildings there would be. In fact, it was the first time in her life she’d been unable to see any sign of human habitation from her dwelling place and it both frightened her and filled her with a sense of awe.

Closing the curtains, she inspected the rest of the room. A little table stood beside the bed and upon it were a lamp and a Bible. Her courage grew by leaps and bounds. At least she’d come to a place where the Bible was important enough to be put by the bedside in their guest room, giving her hope they loved and honored God as much as she did. Another thing her parents and she had disagreed on.

“I do hope you are not going to be fanatical like my sister,” her mother had said with enough disdain to fill volumes. “She chose to marry a penniless preacher when she could have married a wealthy man.”

Since spending time with Aunt Opal, Beatrice decided being like her was a compliment. Aunt Opal was kind and gentle and loving.

She changed into a dry frock—one less fashionable but infinitely more comfortable—and hurried out to the kitchen. She drew to a halt when she saw Levi, in dry clothes, sitting at the table with his mother. She’d heard the outer door open and close and assumed he’d left.

Maisie reached out a hand. “We’re having tea. Come and join us. Tell me about yourself. Levi, pour our guest a cup of tea. My dear, sit down so we can talk.”

“But I’m not a guest. I’ve come to help you.”

“First things first,” Maisie said. “Levi, get her a cup.”

Beatrice crossed to the table feeling Levi’s gaze on her every move. Did he think he might have to spring up and catch her again? No more weakness, she told herself. She had to prove she could do this job. If she did it well enough, Maisie would be able to recommend her for another job. But her legs quivered at Levi’s attention. Why did she allow him to make her nervous?

Beatrice sat in the chair indicated and reluctantly allowed Levi to pour her tea. “Thank you.” She dare not look at him for fear she would see doubt in his eyes as to her suitability to do her job. So far she had done nothing but make more work for him.

“Now tell us about yourself. Where are you from?” Maisie asked.

“Chicago,” Beatrice answered.

“What does your father do?”

“He’s a businessman with many interests. Perhaps you’ve heard of Bernard and Wardell Doyle?” Bernard was her father, Wardell her uncle. “They own a railway, a manufacturing plant and several other businesses, though Father says his greatest asset is his name.” All the more reason Beatrice being a girl had been a disappointment.

“No, I’m sorry,” Maisie said. “I was raised in Philadelphia but haven’t been back east in a number of years. Do you have siblings?”

“I’m an only child.”

“Me, too.” Maisie laughed softly and gave Levi an adoring look. “Some might see that as a blessing, isn’t that right, Levi?”

“I’ve never thought of it much.” His grin was so mischievous that Beatrice almost stared. The man had a beautiful smile that left her breathless. “Except when Tanner and Johnny tied me to a stake and said they were going to torture me.”

“Tanner and Johnny are Levi’s older brothers,” Maisie said. “Tanner is twenty-one, Johnny twenty. My, how time flies.”

Beatrice waited for Maisie to supply Levi’s age. But she seemed to have forgotten the subject.

“How old are you, my dear?”

“Eighteen. How old is Levi—?” She blurted out the question then stammered to a halt. “I’m sorry. That was very rude of me.”

“Not at all.” Maisie smiled at Levi. “He’s nineteen.”

Beatrice concentrated on her tea while she gathered her manners.

Maisie continued. “Did Levi tell you about my injury?”

“He said you cut your leg.”

“I fear it’s rather a bad cut on the back of my leg.” Maisie told of her accident. “My wound needs dressing, but I can’t reach it so I will need you to do it for me.”

Beatrice had seen more illness in the past two weeks than she would have seen in four lifetimes back in Chicago. But she hadn’t tended a wound. “I’ll do my best.” She meant to sound strong and confident, but knew her voice revealed too much uncertainty.

Levi’s expression hardened into sharp lines. No doubt he wondered what sort of help her uncle had sent.

She could and would do the job. He’d see. So would his stepmother.

“Ma is to rest with her leg up, so you’ll be in charge of the kitchen, the meals, the laundry—everything she’d normally do.”

“I understand. My aunt explained my duties.” And had done her best to teach her in a few short hours how to do them. Beatrice had been shocked at how much a person had to know in order to run a house.

“I can’t emphasize too strongly that she is not to be moving about,” Levi continued. “Her leg must be allowed to heal.” His dark gaze held hers in an invisible iron grip. She couldn’t free herself from his look. Did he think she was incapable of doing the job? He must never learn how close to the truth such doubts were. She’d prove to him and to her father, and even to herself, that she could handle the things her choice of life required.

“I believe you’ve made yourself clear,” she said with far more assurance than she felt.

Levi looked ready to say more, perhaps warn her further of the cost of failure on her part. He didn’t know the half of what failure would mean, not only to Maisie, but also to Beatrice.

Maisie interrupted their conversation.

“Levi, would you bring in one of the easy chairs from the other room and a footstool? I believe I’ll rest better if I can sit in the kitchen and talk to Beatrice as she works.”

Levi hustled to do so, arranging a chair and stool by the table and getting Maisie comfortable in it.

“Thank you, my boy.” Maisie patted Levi’s cheek. “Now you run along and leave us to take care of things.”

“Do you have everything you need?” He directed his question to Beatrice.

“I’m sure I can manage.” Not for all the grass in Montana would she admit she might have ventured in out of her depth.

“Then I will take care of the horses and the buggy.” He hurried from the house.

Beatrice gave a nervous glance about the room. No doubt there were things she needed to do, but she had no idea where to even start. Aunt Opal had always given her instructions about what to do next.

“My dear, don’t look so nervous.”

Beatrice took in one deep breath and then another. “I hope I can do what’s expected of me. I confess I’m not very experienced. I might make a mistake.” The word stuck in her mind. According to her parents she was a mistake.

“You can learn whatever you set your mind to and I don’t believe it’s a mistake you are here.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m an old lady. I’ve learned a few things. And I will tell you this. I don’t think God makes mistakes. I prayed for a nice young woman to come help me. I had no idea how God would answer my prayer, yet here you are. An answer to my prayer.”

Beatrice released a shaky breath. “I also prayed.” She could not say she asked God to help her find a way of being independent. How would she explain that after telling them her father was a wealthy businessman?

“Then we’ll let God do what He has planned. I’m willing to teach you if you’re willing to learn.”

Encouraged by those words, Beatrice looked around the kitchen. “What do you need me to do at the moment?”

“It’s time to prepare supper.”

She swallowed back her rising panic. If only Aunt Opal was here to tell her what to do. I can do this. I must do it. I have to be able to support myself if I’m to avoid my father’s plans. Hoping she portrayed more confidence than she felt, she got to her feet and hurried to the cupboard.

“Levi brought in potatoes and chops before the rain started.”

A few simple words and Beatrice felt like she’d stepped off the deep end of a wharf. I can do this, she repeated.

A few minutes later she was ready to change her mind. She knew to scrub the potatoes and put them to boil, but when she looked at the basin holding the chops she had to push back a desire to gag. What was one to do with them? Fry them? She could do that. Aunt Opal had taught her that much.

Hoping Maisie might make a suggestion, Beatrice turned toward the table.

Maisie’s head was against the back of the chair, her eyes closed, her mouth open. She’d fallen asleep.

That left Beatrice to manage on her own.

She would not give either Levi or his stepmother reason to suggest she return to town.

* * *

Levi took the horses to the barn, where he groomed and fed them, all the while wondering if everything was all right in the house. Beatrice hadn’t looked any sturdier after she’d changed her clothes. If he was to describe her to his brothers, he’d say she was beautiful but fragile, and something about the way her eyes flashed gold and the way she tilted her head gave him cause to wonder if she was as strong as she obviously wanted him to believe. So far, he’d seen no evidence of strength. She’d already fainted once. Was it something she did often?

He paused in his task and glanced in the direction of the house, his nerves twitching with apprehension. If she fainted again, he could see Maisie ignoring the need to rest her leg and rushing to look after Beatrice.

He better go to the house and make sure that didn't happen.

He hurriedly finished taking care of the horses and left the barn.

A horse and swaying rider crossed the yard in the general direction of the barn.

He groaned. His cousin Charlie often hit the bottle too hard and the way he tipped half off his horse informed Levi that this was one of those days. He made it to Charlie's side in time to prevent him from crashing to the ground. He staggered under the weight of his cousin but thankfully stayed upright.

"Hi," Charlie slurred.

"Charlie, it's men like you who give us half-breeds a bad reputation. Stay away from the liquor and get a job." He took the bottle from Charlie and poured its contents out on the ground.

His cousin tried to grab the bottle before the alcohol watered the grass but he could barely stand. "It's mine. Give it back."

Levi tossed the empty bottle into the bushes. "You've had enough." Way too many times, he and his family had tried to help Charlie. Pa had even hired him on several occasions. But Charlie ended up wandering away, leaving a job undone and searching instead for something he thought he'd find in a bottle.

Charlie lurched to one side, then caught Levi's arm to steady himself.

Levi glanced toward the house. The rain had stopped, allowing anyone who happened to glance out the kitchen window a full view. If Beatrice saw them would she not think the same as so many people did? Drunk half-breed.

His jaw muscles tightened. He couldn't help what she saw or what she thought. He wasn't like Charlie but not many would choose to believe that.

Charlie was kin, but even if he hadn't been, Levi would not have left him in his present state. He led him and the horse to the barn and turned the horse loose to tend to later. He took Charlie to the water trough and ducked his head underwater twice. It wasn't like he could get much wetter. He must have ridden throughout the storm that had now passed over. "Maybe that will sober you up."

Charlie sputtered his protests.

"Let's go to the bunkhouse." None of the cowboys was around to protest Charlie's presence. They made it to the meager quarters and Levi found a change of clothes for his cousin, who was beginning to sober up. Maybe Levi could persuade the man to sign on again. Pa wouldn't object and Levi could keep him busy with odd jobs.

Levi took a good hard look at Charlie. "I guess you'll do."

Charlie grinned somewhat crookedly. "For what?"

"For coming to the house for supper."

Charlie's grin widened. "Aunt Maisie is always happy to see me."

Levi grunted. "She doesn't care for you showing up drunk."

"It's okay now." Charlie held out his arms and walked across the bunkhouse.

Levi had to admit he did an admirable job of walking a straight line considering he couldn't stay upright less than an hour ago. "Let's go, then." He judged that Beatrice had had plenty of time to prepare a meal and his growling stomach informed him it was time to eat.

They strode toward the house, avoiding the puddles in the yard. Hot water filled the basin on the outside stand, so they washed up then stepped inside.

Charlie ground to a halt as he saw Maisie resting in her chair. Seeing her there relieved a degree of Levi's worry.

"What happened to you?" Charlie asked.

Maisie reached out welcoming hands to Charlie as she explained her accident. Levi followed and they both kissed her on the cheek.

"This lovely young lady has come to help me so I can rest my leg. Beatrice, this is Levi's cousin, Charlie."

Charlie turned to meet Beatrice. His mouth dropped open.

Levi thought it must take a great deal of effort but Charlie managed to close his mouth and swallow loudly. “Pleased to meet you.” He didn’t offer a hand, perhaps wondering if she would object to him touching her.

Levi allowed himself a little self-satisfaction. Not only had he touched her, but he’d also held her in his arms. He could have told Charlie she was as light as a newborn colt but smelled like a whole field of wild roses. Of course, both times she’d not been in a position to object to being held by him. Something he must bear in mind before he got too cocky about it.

“You’re the prettiest girl Levi ever brought here,” Charlie blurted out.

Levi pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. “Charlie, you’re going to make her think I have a habit of bringing girls to the ranch.”

Charlie struggled to find something to say.

Levi held his breath as he wondered what his cousin would drop into the conversation to further embarrass Levi.

Finally, Charlie got his words out. “Only Helen. No one else.”

Helen. The only reminder of how others viewed him that he needed. “Sit down, Charlie.”

Beatrice scurried past him to set another place at the table.

“Yes, please sit down,” Maisie said.

Beatrice placed the serving dishes on the table and sat across from Levi and Charlie. Maisie sat at one end of the table. The other end remained empty. No one ever sat in Big Sam’s place when he was absent.

“Levi, would you ask the blessing?” Maisie said. She reached for Levi’s hand on one side and Beatrice’s on her other.

With his head tipped, Levi watched Beatrice. Would she take Charlie’s hand?

Beatrice stared at Charlie. Neither she nor Charlie reached for the other. He wasn’t sure who to be annoyed with.

Maisie squeezed his hand, bringing his attention back to the need to fill his empty stomach. He closed his eyes and prayed. “Lord, we thank You for Your provision of the food upon this table. Amen.” For no one else’s ears, he added, Help this woman take care of Maisie so her leg can heal. He did not add, Help me remember she’s white and a rich city girl—and I’m a half-breed and a rancher.

“And thank you to Beatrice for preparing the food,” Maisie added as she passed the meat to Levi.

He forked off a chop. Looked at both sides of it and gingerly put it on his plate. It was almost black but he was hungry enough to eat almost anything.

Charlie poked at three chops before he selected one.

Beatrice murmured, “No thanks,” and passed the platter to Maisie.

Maisie took a piece of meat without comment.

The rest of the food was passed around.

Charlie grunted as he spooned out some peas. “Still got water on them.” He edged the vegetables from the bowl.

Conversation died as everyone tackled the food. Levi tried to cut through his potato. It was as hard as a marble in the center. The lumpy, gluey gravy did not make it go down easier.

Maisie bravely ate the food on her plate, though he wondered how she could get it down.

Charlie rearranged his.

Levi put a piece of burnt meat in his mouth, choked a little and washed the food down with a glass of water. His eyes watered.

“I’m sorry.” Beatrice pushed her chair back and bolted outside.

[Chapter Three](#)

Shock burned through Levi's veins as he stared at the door through which Beatrice had disappeared. He'd said nothing about the ruined meal. "She mustn't have followed your directions," he said by way of apology to Maisie.

"She did the best she could. The poor girl has never been faced with this kind of work before."

Charlie grabbed the two remaining pieces of burnt meat. "Better'n starving," he said and downed them with the aid of several glasses of water.

Maisie chased the remaining food around on her plate. "Try and picture yourself fitting into her world. I expect you'd feel clumsy and ill-at-ease."

Levi jerked to his feet and scraped his plate into the slop bucket. "At least the pigs will enjoy the food." He faced Maisie. "I'm sorry to foist this woman on you. Charlie, where's your sister? I'll get her to help Maisie."

Before Charlie could answer, Maisie pushed herself upright, then lowered her foot to the floor. He sprang forward. "What are you doing?"

"I can't say what I need to say while looking and feeling like an invalid." She grimaced.

When he started to protest, she held up her hand. "Levi, I want you to give Beatrice a chance. She needs to be here."

"What? Why?"

Maisie gave him a look that he'd years ago learned to respect. "God has brought her here for a reason and I, for one, am grateful for her company. Don't let knowing she's from high society prejudice you."

"Me? Prejudiced? Haven't you got that backward?"

"I don't think so. I know you are a fine young man, worthy of any young woman. Do you know it?"

"Of course I do. But what difference does it make in this situation? The only thing I want from Beatrice is for her to help you."

Maisie nodded, her look gently reprimanding. "I wouldn't want to see you denying the call of your heart."

What on earth was she talking about? "The call of my heart? What's that?" He half mocked, but his affection and respect for Maisie kept him from voicing his true feeling on the subject. It would be his head that he followed, not his heart.

"I hope and pray that someday you will hear it and be brave enough to listen to it." Before he could protest, she hurried on. "Now go apologize to that young lady and persuade her to join us again." She lifted her leg back to the stool and leaned back, sure her orders would be obeyed.

"You better do it," Charlie said. "You know Aunt Maisie always gets her way."

"Thank you, Charlie," Maisie said, seemingly happy to be described that way.

Levi strode to the door, jerked it open and stepped outside. He closed his eyes and tried to gather his thoughts and calm his mind. He'd said nothing about the meal. Why should he apologize? He opened his eyes, expecting to see her in a weeping heap nearby. Instead, she stood before the rose bush Maisie cherished and lovingly wrapped every fall to protect it through the winter. When he was done here, he would cut some of the fresh flowers and take them inside for Maisie to enjoy.

Beatrice touched the dusky pink petals of one of the blossoms then bent over to inhale the sweet scent. Hearing him approach, she slowly lifted her head, her eyes wary.

He forgot everything that had been said inside. He forgot his annoyance over being ordered to apologize. He even forgot about being a half-breed, though there lingered a warning note that he would regret his lapse. But all those things disappeared in the way his heart reached out to her in a desire to erase the uncertainty in her eyes. His mouth was suddenly dry and he had to admit it wasn't from the taste of burned chops. He'd admitted she was beautiful but seeing her shyly at the rose bush emphasized her beauty in a way that left him tongue-tied.

She smiled but no light came to her eyes. "I haven't gotten off to a very good start, have I?"

Still speechless, he could only wait for her to continue.

"I'm not used to running a house on my own but I hope you'll give me another chance. This job is important to me."

He found his voice. "Why? From what you said I understand you came from a rich family. Can't you simply go back home if this fails?"

Darkness clouded her eyes.

He glanced overhead but the clouds were not dark enough to bring those shadows to her eyes. They came from inside and again he had an urge to pull her close and protect her. It was only because he'd already rescued her twice and now it felt like his job.

She answered his question. "My reasons would be of no interest to you."

He could argue the point, but she likely wouldn't believe him and he had no desire to invite a snub. "Come on in and finish supper."

She laughed, a sound of derision. "I think it is quite inedible."

"There's always bread and jam."

"Very well." She took two steps toward him and stopped, the scent of roses wafting toward him. "Does that mean you're going to give me another chance?"

His head told him to say no. She wasn't qualified for the job. Even worse, he felt his resolve to never again look with any interest at a woman faltering. Especially a white woman. Even more dangerous to the security of his heart, a rich city woman. But the word no would not leave his mouth. Instead he replied, "I surely am." Besides, if there had been a better person to send out to help Maisie, wouldn't Preacher Gage have sent her?

They reached the house. He grabbed the doorknob and opened the door for her, again breathing in the scent of roses as she passed him.

"I'm sorry for rushing away like that. Please forgive me." She addressed the words to Maisie.

"You're forgiven. Now let's finish our meal."

Maisie's plate was empty, as was Charlie's. Not wanting Beatrice to eat alone, Levi bravely took the smallest potato he could find, drowned it in butter and ate it in two mouthfuls.

"We have a little custom," Maisie said. "We go around the table and tell about our day."

Levi wanted to beg off for this once, but he thought it might be interesting to see how Beatrice would describe her day.

"Levi, with your pa and older brothers away, that leaves you as the oldest. Tell us about your day."

"I found Beatrice crossing the river, on her way to help you, then found Charlie needing someone to shake him up and that's about it." He left out all the details that mattered, such as the jolt of fear when he saw Beatrice in the water with lightning flashing about her and the painful reminder of Helen's death, which brought with it the memory of her rejection. The way his arms tightened around Beatrice as he carried her to dry land and then catching her as she fainted and feeling it was good and right to be there to protect her. Nope. He wasn't going to admit any of those things. Not even to himself.

Maisie chuckled. "Short and sweet and to the point. Charlie, tell us about your day."

Charlie sat up straighter. "I wasn't drunk. I don't care what Levi says. I still had half a bottle to go."

Silence greeted his words. No doubt anyone with two eyes could see that Charlie had had more than enough to drink, despite his half-full bottle. Levi could hardly blame Beatrice for refusing to hold Charlie's hand as he asked the blessing. But was it because of his drinking or because of his mixed blood? Was she of the belief that half-breeds weren't fit company for a white woman? Especially a high-society woman. A Doyle, which seemed to mean something to her, but meant nothing in Levi's world. Not that he cared what her opinion might be except to object to it on general principles.

Except it mattered far more than he wanted it to.

“Charlie, where have you been and what have you been doing since we last saw you?” Maisie asked.

“Been around.” He hung his head. “Tried to find work but no one wants to hire a half-breed.”

Levi refrained from pointing out the bottle was as much a hindrance for Charlie as his heritage.

“Not everyone feels that way,” Maisie soothed. She turned to Beatrice. “Tell us about your day, my dear.”

Beatrice chuckled, drawing Levi’s gaze to her, filling his mind with surprise and his heart with relief. He’d expected her to compete with Charlie for the worst day. “My day has been full of so many surprises I cannot begin to name them all. Being allowed the chance to do this job is an answer to prayer. Then I was rescued from the river by Levi. I am blessed beyond measure.” Her smile faded. “I apologize for the ruined meal. I found preparing it more difficult than I imagined.” She reached for Maisie’s hand. “And I thank you for being patient with me.”

Maisie looked pleased. “You’re welcome.”

When Maisie didn’t continue, Levi reminded her, “It’s your turn to tell about your day.”

“My blessings are self-evident. I was afraid I’d be lonely with Big Sam away, but here I sit with three young people at the table. How blessed I am.”

“You’re glad to see me?” Charlie asked, his tone indicating both doubt and longing.

“I’m always glad to see you. I hope you plan to stay a while.”

He grinned and pushed his longish hair off his face. “Maybe I will.”

If his cousin stayed it would keep him out of trouble. For some reason—perhaps their shared heritage—Levi always felt protective of Charlie. He looked at Beatrice to see if he could guess her feelings about Charlie being invited to stay. Their gazes collided. Her look went on and on. Challenging him. He wanted to say, Look after Maisie, make meals as best you can and leave my heart alone.

His heart? His heart had nothing to do with Beatrice. That thought was Maisie’s fault. It was she who had said he should listen to the call of his heart.

There would be no such call and even if there was, he would not hearken to it.

* * *

Beatrice didn’t realize how tense Levi made her until he and Charlie left the house again and a long sigh emptied her lungs.

“I’m a city girl, too.” Maisie’s voice brought Beatrice back to the here and now. “A teacher. I planned to teach in a girls’ school but when I saw an ad Big Sam had placed seeking someone to instruct his three boys, I changed my mind. The idea intrigued me. And I applied for the job. Big Sam demanded character references. He must have liked what my teacher and pastor said, as he said I got the job. My father wasn’t happy. He said it was a whim and I’d regret it.”

“Did you... Do you?” It amazed Beatrice to think of Maisie as a city girl.

“Not once. I fell in love with the boys immediately. They were wild and untamed. Big Sam had taken them with him everywhere after Seena died. I had my hands full teaching them manners and how to read and write. By Christmas, Big Sam and I were in love. How I love that man still.” She looked into the distance. “I hope he comes home soon. I miss him.” She gave a regretful chuckle. “He is not going to be happy to see what I’ve done to myself.”

“I’ll make sure you rest so you can heal as quickly as possible.” Beatrice prepared the water to wash the dishes.

“If you help me move closer I can dry,” Maisie said.

Beatrice would have refused but she heard the lonely tone of Maisie’s words. She pushed the chair and stool closer, then handed Maisie each dish as she washed it.

“Levi is very protective of me,” Maisie said. “So don’t mind him if he’s...” She waved her hands to indicate she wasn’t sure how to describe him.

Beatrice nodded as if she understood, but kept her attention on washing dishes, certain her cheeks were pinker than leaning over the hot water would make them. And she supplied her own words. Darkly handsome. Protective—even of a young woman he'd barely met. Has strong arms that make a girl feel safe.

Enough. She'd learned her lesson about trusting men. She had only one goal in mind—a life of independence that allowed her to follow her own plans and be freed of her father's.

Thankfully, Maisie didn't pursue the subject and they were soon done with the dishes.

Beatrice took the dry plates and returned them to the proper shelf. She stood back to admire the clean dishes. "Why did no one tell me how satisfying it is to see dishes washed and stacked in the cupboard?"

Maisie laughed. "Most people don't find it quite so satisfying after doing it three or four times a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year."

Beatrice faced the older woman. "Do you find it satisfying?"

"Immensely so, but then I'm doing it for those I love and that makes all the difference."

Love made all the difference. What a wonderful idea. Beatrice sighed almost inaudibly.

With the last of the dishes done and the kitchen clean so far as Beatrice could tell, she could think of no reason to stand about continuing this conversation, though she wished she could. It was nice to hear Maisie talk about love and marriage in such positive tones. Marriage, according to her parents, was more of a business deal than romance.

As if reading Beatrice's mind, Maisie caught her hand. "I wish you and everyone could know the kind of love I've found. Don't settle for anything less."

She wasn't interested in marriage of any sort but wouldn't tell Maisie that. "What do I do with the scraps and wash water?"

"Dump the water on my flowers by the house. They thrive on it." She chuckled. "Though they've had plenty of water today. The scraps..." Maisie looked doubtful, as if uncertain Beatrice could deal with the task.

"Tell me and I'll do it."

"Very well. Take the bucket of scraps out to the pigpen and dump them over the fence into the trough. Watch for puddles on the path. "

"Where will I find the pigpen?"

Maisie gave her instruction.

Beatrice emptied out the basin of water then carried the heavy, slimy bucket from the house, being careful not to let it brush against her skirts as she passed the barn. She smelled the pigs before she reached the pen and gasped. Nothing had prepared her for so many strange and, sometimes, unpleasant odors. She reached the fence and counted two big pigs and half a dozen small ones that rushed toward her squealing and grunting and running into each other, pushing one another out of the way and climbing over each other.

She laughed.

"Amusing, aren't they? Now you can see why bad-mannered people are often called pigs."

She jerked about to stare at Levi. "I didn't see you."

He shrugged, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "I was over there." He pointed. "If you'd taken two steps to the right you would have tromped on me but you were too intent on your task." His gaze shifted to the bucket on the ground beside her.

The pigs squealed loudly.

"They're getting impatient." Levi picked up the bucket and dumped the contents over the fence into a wooden trough.

Beatrice stared, fascinated as the pigs buried their snouts in the trough, not caring if they stepped on each other. She shook her head. "Pigs are...well, pigs."

Laughter rumbled from Levi, drawing her gaze to him. How his eyes danced, and his face crinkled in a friendly sort of way. Just because she called a pig a pig?

She turned back to the animals. “They’re noisy, rude and loud. And they stink.”

More rumbling laughter. “Johnny says he thanks God he wasn’t born a pig.”

That brought a burst of laughter from Beatrice. Her eyes connected with his and something sweet filled the air. She couldn’t remember a time she had shared real, honest amusement with a man. It caused her insides to bounce up and down...not an unpleasant sensation. She reminded herself not to stare, but despite her admonition she could not break the look between them.

He shifted his gaze first, letting it go toward the house. “Have you done Maisie’s dressing yet?”

Her thoughts jarred back to the reason she was here. Changing the dressing was not a task she looked forward to. She had not a clue how to tackle the job. “No, I just finished cleaning the kitchen.” She turned to retrace her steps.

Levi fell into step with her. They reached the barn. She welcomed the chance to shift her thoughts to something else. “I thought there would be horses and cows in the pens.”

“The horses are out with the men at the moment except for those we need for getting around and Pa’s breeding stock.” He pointed toward the animals in the pasture. “He has big plans for expanding our bloodlines into something that will make the Sundown Ranch horses more desirable than the average horse. We seldom keep cows in the pens. They are out grazing. Except for the milk cow. Do you want to see her?”

“Is she friendly?”

He grinned. “She won’t say hello if that’s what you mean, but she also won’t be rude like the pigs who act like pigs.”

He was teasing her and she didn’t mind. “It’s good to know she has her species figured out.”

They were at the barn door. He edged it wider open and she stepped inside.

“I hope you don’t find the smell obnoxious,” Levi said.

She sniffed as she turned her head from side to side. “There’s a warm, earthy scent, a musty odor and a kind of mushroomlike smell. None of it overwhelming or unpleasant. It’s rather a reassuring odor.”

He stared at her. “Reassuring? You make the smell seem vital.”

“Vital? Yes. That’s exactly how it feels.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know what to make of you.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant, nor was she sure she wanted to know. If it was good she would be flustered, if bad, she’d be wounded. No, better not to know. “So where is this milk cow?”

He swept his arm toward the alleyway and she preceded him the direction indicated. Old Sissy munched on her feed. There were wooden pens on either side, some with boards that looked as if they had been chewed. She glanced upward at the sound of something scurrying overhead.

“Mice,” he explained. “The cause of Maisie’s accident.” His expression hardened like black rock.

“Wouldn’t cats take care of that problem?”

“Cats are hard to find and harder to keep. We had a mama cat but she was half-wild and packed up her kittens and moved on.”

An amusing mental picture flashed through her mind of a cat carrying a valise out of which three little kittens peeked and she laughed softly, wishing immediately that she had kept her amusement hidden.

“What makes you laugh?” Levi asked.

She glanced at him to see if he was annoyed but he appeared more curious than anything and she explained. “After all, you did say she’d packed up.”

He grinned. “She carried them one by one to a new place.”

“Carried them. How?”

“By the scruff of the neck.”

“I remember a time the groom was angry with the boy who helped with the horses and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shook him. It didn’t look pleasant.” She shuddered to think of baby kittens being carried that way.

“It’s the way cats do it, and the kittens don’t seem to mind. Now, do you want to see the milk cow?”

“Yes, of course.” Though she’d momentarily forgotten their reason for coming to the barn.

He moved along the alley and stopped where a gate had been pushed open. A tawny-colored cow stood patiently with Charlie squatting at her side squirting milk into the bucket at his knees.

Beatrice knew where milk came from...in a picture-book sort of way. But she’d never seen it foaming up in a pail. For some strange reason it brought a sting of tears.

Charlie gave Levi a pained look. “I ain’t no chore boy.”

Levi leaned back on the side of the pen and gave his cousin a steady look. “Nothing wrong with good honest work.”

“This is squaw work.”

Levi’s laugh lacked mirth. “Not here. Big Sam says it’s man’s work.”

“Don’t see him doing it, though.” Charlie stood. “I’m done here.”

Levi straightened. “Not until you’ve stripped her. I don’t want her going dry. We need the milk. Finish the job.”

Beatrice looked from one to the other as the words that made no sense hung about in her brain looking for something to connect to. Charlie looked ready to explode. Levi’s expression was hard. What would he do if Charlie disobeyed his order?

Looking rebellious, Charlie sat on the little stool again and returned to milking until no more hit the pail. “Happy now?” He pushed past Beatrice.

“Take it to the cookhouse and take care of it.”

Muttering under his breath, Charlie stomped from the barn.

Levi took off his cowboy hat and dragged his fingers through his hair. “Sometimes I wonder if he’s worth the effort.”

A shiver raced down Beatrice’s spine. Did he think the same of her? Not worth the effort? She drew herself up to her tallest and faced Levi. “Is anyone who can’t do the things you do considered not worth the effort?”

His dark eyes were bottomless, revealing nothing, though the way he crossed his arms over his chest made her think he was prepared to defend his view. “It isn’t that he can’t do the chores I’ve assigned him. It’s that he doesn’t care to make the effort. He believes chores are beneath him. For that reason I find him difficult to deal with.” His gaze bored into hers. “I believe in an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay.”

She floundered to think what that meant to her. She didn’t expect to be paid, didn’t want to be. “Maybe he’s doing the best he can.”

He unwound from his position at the fence. “If I thought that I would be happy. But Charlie is capable of doing almost anything he puts his mind to. Come along, I’ll show you the cookhouse.” He paused at the doorway, retrieving the slop bucket where he’d left it. “That is, if you’re interested.”

“Yes, I am. I want to see everything.” She might have told him she found it fascinating to see life at its roots, but he seemed cross so she kept the words to herself and accompanied him across the yard to a low building. They stepped inside and she stopped to take it in. To one side, there was a long wooden table with backless wooden benches on either side. Hooks on the wall next to the door held a variety of items—bits of leather, furry leggings and two soiled hats. To the other side was an enormous black stove, a long wooden counter and pots, pans, crocks and kitchen utensils of every size and kind. Apart from that, the room was bare of any sort of decoration. The windows lacked curtains. The only bright color in the whole place was the red rim of some of the granite pots.

“What do you think?” Levi asked.

She closed her eyes and drenched her senses, then she opened her eyes and told him her impressions. “The room is sparse.” She pointed out the lack of color. “But the air is alive with spices and warmth. I smell apple pie, gingersnaps, chocolate pudding. I smell mashed potatoes in a huge bowl, fried chicken and tomato sauce rich with basil and oregano. It’s like walking into an open market with a hundred things cooking at the same time.”

His laughter rumbled. “Soupy would be pleased you can’t smell dirty boots and manly sweat.”

She opened her eyes and grinned. “There might be a touch of that, as well.” Why was it she felt trapped by his gaze when he smiled like that? As if the rest of the world had slipped away and left them standing there alone? And when had she ever had such fanciful thoughts? Certainly not with Henry, whom she’d loved, and never with the young men her father presented as suitable.

Levi turned his attention to the room. “Charlie has left the milk.” Every trace of humor had disappeared from his voice and a cold chill crossed Beatrice’s shoulders.

“I’ll have to do it. You don’t need to wait if you don’t want.” He started a fire in the stove and filled a kettle with water from the pump at the sink.

The bucket of milk stood on the wide counter. Levi pulled out a jug and draped a white cloth over it.

Curious as to what he meant to do, she said, “I’ll wait and watch if you don’t mind.”

His eyebrows arched as if uncertain what to think of her answer. “I don’t mind.” He poured the milk through the cloth until the jug was full, then covered it with another cloth that he dampened in cold water. “Normally Soupy would use most of the milk. We use a little at the house. But with him and the cowboys away, we don’t need it all. The rest will go to the pigs.” He rinsed the straining cloth then filled a basin with boiling water and rinsed it again.

He took the milk bucket to the door and set it down. “Maybe Charlie will stir himself to take this to the pigs.” He looked around for his cousin. “He’ll be trying to find a bottle about now.”

Beatrice couldn’t decide if Levi sounded condescending or worried, so she made no comment.

He hung the straining cloth to dry, took the jug of milk and the empty slop bucket and escorted her back to the house.

“I was getting concerned when you were gone so long but I see I shouldn’t have been,” Maisie said. “You were with Levi.”

“I’m sorry to make you worry.” She’d be more conscious of Maisie in the future.

“I’ll hang about while Beatrice changes your dressing, in case she needs anything,” Levi said.

Beatrice’s insides stiffened. The last thing she needed or wanted was to have Levi watching while she tackled a job she didn’t know how to do. Her spine grew rigid. Her hands curled into fists. She would do this and whatever else she must learn in order to make her own way in life.

* * *

Levi struggled to sort out his thoughts. What was there about Beatrice that kept him off balance? He wanted to see her as a city girl. Unfit for ranch life. And she was. But she was more. Or was she less? He wished he could decide.

He’d expected her to grimace when she stepped into the barn. Instead, she’d been intrigued by the odors and even managed to make them seem pleasant. Yes, she’d been put off by the smell of pigs, but he didn’t know anyone who wasn’t. And wouldn’t Soupy have been amazed at her assessment of the cookhouse? A hundred cook fires at the same time. It gave him a mental picture that made his mouth water.

He shook his head, hoping to clear his thoughts. All that mattered to him was that Beatrice took care of Maisie and that Charlie stayed out of trouble.

How did he manage to get both Charlie and Beatrice here at the same time? He couldn’t possibly be in two places at once.

“Ma, can I help you to your room?” She was able to hop about, but he preferred she didn’t cross to her bedroom on her own.

Maisie looked from Beatrice to Levi. “It’s too early for Beatrice to retire. What will she do if I go to bed now?”

“I’ll take her for a walk down to the river if she likes.” He’d said the words without thinking and now that they were out, they couldn’t be pulled back.

“I’d like that,” Beatrice said.

Maisie nodded. “Then I’ll prepare for bed and Beatrice can tend to my dressing.”

Before she could struggle to her feet, Levi jumped forward and helped her upright. He’d pick her up and carry her, but Maisie would fight him so he settled for holding her firmly as they left the kitchen and crossed the living room. He threw back the covers, eased her to the bed and lifted her injured leg, then stepped back, loathe to leave her to Beatrice’s inexperienced hands.

Beatrice eased forward.

Ma must have sensed her uneasiness. Though she could hardly miss the way Beatrice wrung her hands and the way she chewed her bottom lip.

Ma spoke softly to her. “Don’t look so frightened.”

Beatrice nodded but didn’t relax.

Maisie smiled. “Why don’t you tell me the sort of things you did to amuse yourself as a child?”

She got a faraway look in her eyes. “I read lots. Did needlework. I’m quite good at it, actually.”

Her smile was faintly apologetic.

“Didn’t you play?”

She shifted her gaze toward the window. “I was taught a young lady should properly conduct herself with decorum.”

Levi had no idea what that meant, but Beatrice made it sound as if she was not allowed to enjoy normal childhood play.

Maisie put into words Levi’s thoughts. “Maybe here you can learn life is meant to be enjoyed.”

Beatrice smiled and the tension slipped from her eyes. “I’ve already seen glimpses of that.”

Levi wanted to ask for specifics. Was he part of what she had enjoyed?

But she stepped forward. “Now let me tend your dressing.” The look she gave Levi dismissed him from the room.

His neck burned. He had no intention of seeing his stepmother with her petticoats pulled up to reveal her legs. “I’ll be in the other room if you need anything.” He closed the door behind him as he left the room, but stayed in the front room, his head turned toward the bedroom in case Maisie called for his assistance.

He heard Maisie’s calm voice, but he could not make out her words. He thought he heard Beatrice although he couldn’t be certain and took a step toward the door. Then he stopped. No need to press his ear to the door. If Maisie needed him, she’d let him know.

His thoughts wandered as he waited, searching for a place to put Beatrice in his mind. She was a city girl but anxious to be on her own. What did that mean? From a rich family but expressing pleasure at the simple things of ranch life. Light and easy in his arms. But a classy white lady.

She simply did not fit into any of his classifications. And that left him unsettled, wondering if she had the same problem trying to see where he fit.

It was obvious he was a half-breed.

She had no such problem.

Maisie’s oft-spoken words echoed in his head. “Boys, there will always be those who say things about you. Hearing them say it doesn’t make it true. You don’t have to believe what they say about you.”

He tried not to believe what others said. But Helen had taught him one thing he would never forget. What others believed about him did make a difference. In the way they treated him, whether or not they were willing to associate with him or even be seen with him.

The doorknob rattled and Beatrice stepped out carrying a basin of water and some soiled rags.

He sprang forward. How had his thoughts gotten so far off track? Was he trying to convince himself that Beatrice was like Helen? The idea condemned him. If he wanted to be judged on his own merits—not his heritage—shouldn't he be willing to offer her the same consideration? "How does her leg look?"

The water in the basin sloshed and he took it from Beatrice's trembling hands. "Are you okay?"

"She did very well," Maisie called. "Now take her out for some fresh air."

Fresh air? He'd detected no odor. "Your leg is infected?" He set the basin on the closest hard surface, pushing a stack of books out of the way to make room for it, and hurried to her side.

"Levi, will you stop fussing. No, my leg isn't infected. But remember it's Beatrice's first time at dealing with a wound. It's been a little challenging for her." Maisie lifted her head to look at Beatrice. "You did very well."

"I was so afraid of hurting you." Beatrice's voice quavered.

"You were very gentle. Thank you." Maisie squeezed Levi's hands. "Take her out for a walk. Get her to relax."

"Yes, Ma." It never entered Levi's mind to refuse until he had cleaned out the washbasin and set the soiled rags to soak in cold water.

Why had he offered to take her for walk, told Maisie he would do so, as well? It wasn't as if they had any intention of becoming friends. She was a city girl. He was country to the core and proud of it.

But she had taken care of Maisie and that was all that mattered.

He had agreed to escort her on a walk and when he said something he generally meant to keep his word.

She stared at the cupboard, though he could see nothing to hold her interest.

"Are you ready?" he asked her.

She started and drew in a sharp breath. "For what?"

"A walk?" Had she not heard Maisie's suggestion? Had she forgotten his offer? His eyes narrowed as he studied her.

Or was it his company she objected to?

But she followed him out the door and fell in step at his side as they followed the trail through the trees to the river. For several minutes before they stepped into a clearing they heard the murmur of moving water. Water flashed silver and blue, highlighted with gold from the lowering sun. The rain had freshened the air.

Levi held out his arm to signal her to stop. He could have saved himself the effort. She hadn't moved since they reached the edge of the trees.

He pointed to the right, to the huddle of ducklings following in the mother duck's wake. "Oh," she gasped involuntarily.

The duck turned, raced the babies into the shelter of some reeds and flew away.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. She looked past him. Her eyes widened.

"Levi, look."

At the sharp note in her voice, he turned slowly, thinking how foolish he was to bring her out here without a gun to defend her.

He saw no wild animal. No wild man. "What is it?"

"Look in the shadows of that rock." She pointed.

He squinted to bring the object into focus. He blinked and stared, speechless.

"It's a child," Beatrice whispered.

"I see that, but what is it doing out here all alone?"

Chapter Four

Beatrice blinked, wondering if her eyes deceived her. But no, there was a child huddled against a boulder. She could see clearly enough to make out a little girl. "Is she lost?" She turned to Levi as she asked the question and saw how bottomless his dark eyes had grown. His black shirt made his features more angular.

"I don't see anyone else around."

They eased closer as they spoke.

Levi's hand caught Beatrice's elbow. "Go slow. We don't want to frighten her."

They were close enough to see the child's almost white-blond hair had once been braided, but now hung in tangles about her tear-streaked face. Her purple dress was blotched with mud. Her bony knees stuck out from under the skirt in matching V's. A half-grown kitten was clutched to her chest.

The kitten meowed plaintively.

"Honey, are you lost?" Beatrice asked gently. "If so, we can help you."

The child's eyes widened. She sprang to her feet. Levi reached out to stop her but the child fled into the trees.

The dark shadows swallowed her up.

"Come on, we have to make sure she's okay." Levi grabbed Beatrice's hand and they chased after the little girl.

"There she is." He ran faster, tugging Beatrice after him.

She flung out her arm to protect her face against the flailing branches.

Then he stopped, her hand still gripped firmly in his.

She might have pulled free but the woods were dark and filled with all sorts of terrors.

"I can't tell which way she went. You go that way and I'll go this. We'll meet at the far side of these bushes." He dropped her hand and was gone before she could protest.

For a moment she stood immobile. The evening air had a damp coolness to it and the light from the west gave the air a golden glow. She couldn't hear Levi. Behind her came the murmur of the river. Courage returned. She couldn't get lost if she could hear the river. All she had to do was follow the sound and find the trail that would take her to the house.

That poor child had no such assurance of safety. Careful of where she stepped, she eased through the branches that would allow her to skirt the thick bushes. She stopped after a few feet to listen.

At first all she heard was her own rapid breathing, then her breathing returned to normal and she heard a faint "meow." The kitten. Unless the cat had escaped that meant the child was nearby.

Afraid she might frighten the little girl away, Beatrice stood very still and studied her surroundings. There in the shadows. The child tried to hide.

"I won't hurt you." She didn't move, feeling the little one's fear as clearly as if it was her own. She knew how overwhelming it was to find oneself in a strange place, with no parents to help and protect. "I just want to help you." She waited, letting the child take her measure of Beatrice. "Would you like me to help you find your parents?"

The child didn't move but her eyes seemed to consume less of her face.

Beatrice held out her hand. "Do you want to come to me?"

The little girl looked at her kitten as if consulting it. She shook her head.

"Oh, little dolly, I know what's it's like to feel all alone and frightened. Let me help you."

The frightened little girl took a step forward, then stopped, shuddered and took another.

Beatrice didn't move until she could reach one of the little hands and she caught it and pulled the child close. Her tiny hand clung to Beatrice's fingers.

Beatrice knelt to face the little girl. She was so fair, with contrasting dark brown eyes. A true beauty. "What's your name?"

"Dolly," the child whispered.

“As in Dorothy?”

A nod yes.

Beatrice thanked God for letting her use an endearment that made the child trust her. “How old are you?”

“Five,” she whispered again.

“Where are your parents?”

Dolly rocked her head back and forth.

“When did you last see them?”

“I don’t know,” she again whispered. Then her eyes widened and she would have escaped if Beatrice didn’t have a good hold on her.

She followed the child’s frightened gaze and saw Levi a few feet away. “Stay there. She’s afraid.” She turned back to Dolly. “This is Levi Harding. He can help us find your parents. Will you let him do that?”

Dolly nodded.

Levi edged closer, cautiously, making sure he didn’t alarm the child. He knelt by Beatrice’s side. “Were you lost last night?”

Dolly shuddered and clutched the kitten tighter. “I was scared,” she whispered.

Levi waited for her to calm. “Were you with your mama and papa?”

An affirmative nod.

“Were you with anyone else?”

A shake of her head to indicate no.

“Were you in a wagon?”

Again, yes.

Levi rose to his full height. “Then I will find them for you.” He indicated Beatrice should stand and when she did so, he whispered close to her ear, his breath fanning her hair. “They must be frantic with worry. I’ll do my best to follow her tracks back and if that fails, I’ll search the trails. The child can’t have wandered too far.”

Beatrice nodded. “I’ll stay here with her.”

He glanced past her. “You could take her to the house.”

She considered it. “I get the feeling she would be uncomfortable with that. I’ll wait.” The woods were growing darker by the moment. “I’ll wait by the river right at the foot of the path. If you haven’t returned by the time the sun drops below the horizon, I’ll go to the house.” That would give her enough time to get back before darkness descended. She turned to Dolly. “Did you hear? Does that meet with your approval?”

Dolly nodded.

“Pray I find them quickly.” He squeezed her shoulder and slipped into the shadows.

“I will,” she called, not knowing if he heard her or not. She was alone with a child in the darkening woods. Fear edged her thoughts but she clung to the courage his touch had given. She took Dolly’s hand. “Let’s go.” She followed the sound of running water back to the river and returned to where the path led to the house. “Let’s sit here to wait.” She sat on a fallen tree and pulled Dolly up beside her.

The little girl had the pungent odor of having wet her pants. Should Beatrice suggest she wash in the river?

“This is Smokey.” The whisper introduced Beatrice to the kitten. “Do you want to hold her?”

“I’d love to.” She took the kitten and let it sprawl in her lap. “It’s so soft.” She’d never had a pet. Never been allowed one. It took her about thirty seconds to realize she might have missed a source of comfort. There was something soothing about stroking the kitten, who purred loudly.

“She’s my friend,” Dolly whispered.

“Honey, why are you whispering? It’s okay if you talk out loud.”

“Mama told me I had to be quiet ’cause Papa was sick. He needed me to be quiet so he could get better.”

“I see.” Only she didn’t. How long had the father been ill that the child thought she must continue to whisper? Hopefully Levi would return with some answers.

“It’s getting cold,” Dolly whispered.

“It is, isn’t it?” She’d hoped Levi would return with the parents but the reunion would have to take place at the ranch. “Let’s go to the house.”

Dolly shrank back. “Maybe I’m bad.”

Beatrice wondered if she had heard the agonized whisper correctly. “What makes you think you’re bad?”

But Dolly didn’t answer as tears pooled in her eyes and she gathered Smokey into her arms.

Beatrice waited but when it became obvious she wasn’t going to get any answers, she rose, took Dolly’s hand and turned them toward the trail.

Dolly stood rooted to the spot.

“It’s okay. It’s a very nice place.”

“Is it your place?”

She wished the child would stop whispering. “No, I’m just helping, but they are very nice people. Levi has helped me several times.” It was hard to believe she’d been there less than a day and found herself perilously close to trusting him. Remember Henry, she reminded herself. Remember what your father was prepared to do. Never give a man any right or opportunity to again hurt you.

Dolly let out a long sigh. “Okay.”

Hand in hand, they walked the trail back to the house. Dolly drew to a stop in the clearing.

“It’s okay, little Dolly.”

Dolly nodded and allowed Beatrice to lead her inside and there they ground to a halt. Beatrice was every bit as uncertain of what to do next as Dolly.

“Would you like a bath so you’ll be nice and clean when your mama and papa get here?”

The child had very expressive eyes that at the moment revealed a whole bunch of emotions—fear, hope, sadness and embarrassment. “I had an accident.”

“That happens sometimes.” When Levi returned with the parents they would have clean clothes. In the meantime, a bath, a good hair brushing and scrubbing of the current outfit seemed in order.

She listened for any sound from Maisie’s room but heard nothing. Perhaps she’d slept through the noise of them entering the kitchen. She didn’t have to worry about Dolly, who was so quiet it made Beatrice wonder what had happened to her.

Moving as softly as possible, she put water on to heat and found a big laundry tub. As the water heated, she thought of what to feed the child. Like Levi said, there was always bread and jam and fresh milk.

Dolly ate neatly but with enough vigor that Beatrice knew she was extremely hungry and wondered how long the child had been lost and alone.

Her heart went out to the child. As an adult, being alone and lost in her new world was frightening enough. She couldn’t imagine what it felt like as a child.

By the time Dolly had eaten enough that she refused any more, the water was ready and Dolly allowed Beatrice to help her out of her soiled clothes and into the tub of water. Beatrice scrubbed her from top to bottom.

Dolly giggled as Beatrice cleaned between her toes. “That tickles,” she whispered.

“It does, does it? You mean this?” She tickled the little girl’s feet, enjoying the muted giggles as Dolly pressed her hands to her mouth as if to drown out the sound.

“There, you are all clean.” She lifted the child from the water and dried her off. With no clothes to wear, she wrapped her in a dry towel. “Now let’s get your hair pretty for when your mama and papa come.”

Again a look of fear and sadness and guilt crossed through Dolly's eyes.

Beatrice turned Dolly to face her. "Why does doing your hair make you afraid?"

"Not my hair," she whispered.

"Then what?"

"He'll never find them."

Beatrice understood that she meant she didn't think Levi would find her parents. "Why do you say that?" She brushed Dolly's hair as they talked. Long, baby-fine and so fair.

"Cause they's gone."

Gone? Had they abandoned the child? She rebraided the hair and hung the long braids in loops on either side of Dolly's head. The child was beautiful. Why would anyone want to abandon her? "Where are they gone?"

Tears filled her eyes but Dolly blinked them away and didn't answer.

Smokey, who had watched the entire proceedings from beside the stove, where she enjoyed a dish of milk, had turned to grooming herself. Dolly scooped her up and held her close. "Smoky is all I got now."

A shiver crossed Beatrice's shoulders at the finality of Dolly's words. Lord God, the One who sees and knows, please guide Levi to this child's parents that they might be reunited.

The minutes ticked away. Several times Beatrice went to look out the window but there was no sign of Levi returning. Darkness descended. She found a lamp and lit it. She washed the little garments in the bathwater and hung them behind the stove to dry, then carried the water out to Maisie's plants, though with the rain of earlier and the dishwater later, it seemed they might have had enough to drink. Instead, she poured the water around the pink rosebush and paused to smell the evening scent of the flowers before she returned inside.

Poor little Dolly's head fell to her chest and she jerked awake just in time to avoid falling off the chair.

"Do you want to go to sleep in my bed?"

Again, that look of fear.

"Maybe in this nice big armchair." She indicated the one Maisie had Levi bring from the other room.

"You're going to stay here?"

"Until Levi gets back."

"Okay." Wrapped in a big towel, Dolly curled up in the chair and fell asleep.

Giving up any attempt to be calm about Levi's absence, she stood at the window watching and praying.

* * *

Levi rode up to the barn. It was late. Likely past midnight.

He'd found Dolly's parents. He only wished he could have found them alive.

He unsaddled Buck but before he tended to feeding him, he examined every corner of the barn. The troublemakers would have had plenty of time to do their mischief with Levi gone long past dark. He discovered nothing amiss. Charlie's horse stood in the stall where Levi had left him. His cousin must be sleeping in the bunkhouse. Perhaps his presence had been a deterrent to those responsible for so many things in the last few days. He'd have a good look around outside before he went to the house.

His throat tightened at the news he had to relay to Dolly. The poor child. She'd likely been with her parents when they passed on. What an awful thing for such a young one to deal with.

He lit a lantern and circled the ranch buildings. The gates were all up, the breeding stock content in the pen. He could find nothing to cause him concern so returned to the barn and finished taking care of Buck before he made his weary way to the house.

A lamp still glowed in the kitchen window. Had Beatrice stayed up or had she left the lamp burning to welcome him home?

He paused at the door, hating to take this information to the child. A surge of gratitude filled him knowing Beatrice would be there when he did.

As quietly as possible he opened the door and slipped in. At the sight before him, he paused and smiled. Dolly curled up like an overgrown kitten in the chair Maisie had previously occupied, her little kitten beside her.

Beatrice sat at the table, her head cradled in her arms on the well-worn wooden tabletop. All three of them—woman, child, cat—were sound asleep.

A sense of rightness stirred his senses. A feeling that this was the way his life should be. Coming home to a pretty young woman and a contented child.

His jaw muscles clenched. Helen had ruined that possibility for him with her judgmental ways. Not that she was entirely to blame. It's just that he had allowed himself to think she saw him differently.

But for just one moment he let himself think of a wife and family. Then with a quiet sigh he pushed his thoughts back to where they belonged and tiptoed to the table. He touched Beatrice's shoulder.

She jerked awake, looking confused, and then recognition dawned. "You're back." She smiled.

Her smile was not one of welcome for him. At least that's what Levi told himself as he tamped down a matching response. "Shh." He indicated the sleeping child. "Come outside. I'll tell you everything."

Together they tiptoed to the door. He snagged a jacket from the nearby hook and draped it over her shoulders as they stepped outside. The night was cool and damp and filled with the scent of roses. Or was that Beatrice's unique scent? It must have been because he couldn't remember ever being so aware of the roses filling the air with their perfume before.

She turned to him, her features barely visible in the dark. He shifted so the glow from the window allowed him to see her face.

"Did you find them?" Her question jolted him back to reality.

He sought to find the right words. But how else could he say it but just say it? "I found the wagon a few miles away." He drew in a deep breath. "A man and a woman were dead inside."

She gasped. Her eyes widened.

Fearing she would faint again, he caught her shoulders and steadied her.

"She's an orphan? How awful. She tried to tell me." The truth of the situation flooded her eyes with horror. "She was with them? How long have they been gone?"

He told her everything he knew. "It looks like they died of the influenza. The sheriff agreed. I took the wagon to town, where he arranged for a quick burial. He examined the contents of the wagon. Dolly is Dorothy Knott. The sheriff discovered information that she has an aunt Martha in Ohio and will send a telegram in the morning. The aunt will take care of Dolly once she can make arrangements."

Beatrice shuddered. "The poor child. I keep thinking of her watching her parents die, being so alone and not knowing what to do. Oh, Levi, it's too awful to think about."

At her agonized wail, he gripped her arms and she squeezed his. They held each other. He found comfort in her arms and hoped she found the same in his. Two people who barely knew each other united in their concern for an orphaned child.

"What's to become of her in the meantime?" Beatrice's voice was muffled.

"The sheriff suggested someone in town could care for her until her aunt arrives, but it didn't take him long to realize everyone was dealing with either illness or death. He asked if she could stay here for now."

"You said yes?"

He inhaled the scent of roses, letting the smell soothe his senses. "I said it wasn't up to me."

She drew back and looked into his face. "Who is it up to?" Her eyes searched his for the answer.

He didn't say anything but she must have read the answer in his face.

“Me? Why is it up to me?”

“You'll be the one responsible for her. You already have Maisie to care for and the house to run.”

She stepped back. “And you don't think I can manage Dolly, as well?”

The thought had crossed his mind. She admittedly lacked experience. “Are you familiar with caring for a child so young?”

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