



*Love Inspired* HISTORICAL

# *The Rancher's Christmas Proposal*



*Prairie  
Courtships*

SHERRI SHACKELFORD

Sherry Shackelford

**The Rancher's Christmas Proposal**

«HarperCollins»

## **Shackelford S.**

The Rancher's Christmas Proposal / S. Shackelford —  
«HarperCollins»,

Mother for His Children Single father Shane McCoy has his hands full trying to run a ranch while raising two-year-old twins. His children clearly need a mother's guiding hand. An encounter with a lovely stranger on a train platform offers an unconventional answer to his predicament when she suggests a marriage of convenience. Tessa Spencer needs a fresh start far from her con man father's schemes. His latest scrape has made her the target of a vengeful outlaw. Shane's isolated ranch provides refuge, and his children easily win Tessa's affections. But as her checkered past resurfaces, only honesty and trust will make this family Christmas the first of many...

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"Why don't we get married?" Tessa declared.

They'd be here all afternoon if she waited on Shane to decipher her hints. "We already know each other. Sort of. And you said it yourself before. We each have something the other needs." Before he could speak, she rushed ahead. "No one could take the place of your first wife, I'm sure."

Something flashed across his face, an emotion she couldn't read. "I wouldn't expect anyone to."

"It's what you said," Tessa went on, relieved they were finally speaking on the same topic. "Things are different out West. Marriages are arranged for practical reasons. We're simply being practical."

"I just want to get this straight," he said, not appearing at all eager. "You're saying we ought to get married? You and me?"

Her enthusiasm deflated, and she pressed two fingers against her temple. This had seemed much more logical back in the marshal's office. Sitting here before Shane, trying to think of a good way to convince him that she was the perfect choice for a bride, nothing seemed clear.

Covering her unease, she snapped, "Of course you and me!"

Now that the words were out, her courage fled.

SHERRI SHACKELFORD is an award-winning author of inspirational books featuring ordinary people discovering extraordinary love. A reformed pessimist, Sherri has a passion for storytelling. Her books are fast-paced and heartfelt with a generous dose of humor. She loves to hear from readers at [sherri@sherrishackelford.com](mailto:sherri@sherrishackelford.com). Visit her website at [sherrishackelford.com](http://sherrishackelford.com).

The Rancher's  
Christmas Proposal  
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Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

—Philippians 1:6



To my editor, Tina James, because she can work miracles with even the most disjointed manuscripts. Even though I'm convinced that each book I turn in will end my career, she always manages to dig out a little magic. And sometimes she has to dig really, really deep.

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[Chapter One](#)

Train Depot, Wichita, Kansas, 1886

For one brief, idyllic interlude, Tessa Spencer had believed her days of living on the run were behind her.

That time was over.

Perched on her steamer trunk, she considered the list of cities chalked across the destination board, searching for inspiration. Her hasty exit had left her with few options and even less money.

Earlier that morning, a member of the notorious Fulton Gang had been asking some very pointed questions about her at the Harvey House café where she worked serving tables. She'd packed her belongings and set off for the train station before the outlaw's coffee had cooled. Since her regular shift began with the dinner service, she had until this evening before Dead Eye Dan Fulton discovered she'd flown the coop.

Her stomach pitched. Time was slipping away at an alarming rate.

"Ball," a small voice said.

She searched for the source of the interruption.

“Ball.”

She glanced down.

A bright-eyed toddler with shiny blond hair smiled up at her. The boy was smartly dressed in a sky blue sailor shirt tied with a red scarf, his feet encased in gleaming black patent leather shoes.

Tessa frowned. “Where are your parents, little fellow?”

“Ball.”

The wooden sphere he proudly displayed was obviously well loved, the painted stripes faded.

“Yes,” Tessa replied. “That’s quite lovely. Except you’ve gone and gotten yourself lost, haven’t you?”

Most likely the boy’s frantic parents had already begun their search. Keeping an eye out for stray members of the Fulton Gang, she studied the passengers milling beneath the awning of the train station, seeking any sign of a disturbance.

The boy tugged on her apricot-colored skirts. “Ga.”

“You’d best be careful,” she admonished gently. “Being lost is a lonely business.”

The toddler extended his chubby hand, offering up his most prized possession.

Tessa waved off his gift. “Oh no, I couldn’t possibly take your toy. Although I thank you kindly for the offer.”

The boy grinned. He clambered onto the trunk, and she instinctively aided his ascent. He perched beside her and scooted close, pressing the warmth of his small body against her side.

“Best to stay put when you’re lost,” she said. “Or you only become more lost. That’s what my dad always told me.”

The boy tilted his head and stared at her. “Da-da.”

“Yes, Emmett is my da-da.” Tessa rolled her eyes. “He’s a bit of a rogue. Not that he thinks of himself that way. Oh no. Emmett fancies himself a righter of wrongs, earning his living playing cards with folks who can afford to lose. Except lawmen don’t appreciate that fine moral distinction, do they? And now he’s run afoul of Dead Eye Dan and the Fulton Gang, which is even worse—I’ll tell you that.”

Heedless of her startling confession, the boy merrily kicked his heels against the trunk. She braced her hands on her knees and locked her elbows straight. Yep. She’d gone loopy, all right. At least talking to this little fellow was better than talking to herself, and she’d done plenty of that since Emmett’s disastrous attempt at robbing a bank. He’d been tasked with concealing himself inside and letting the others in after closing. Except the bank vault had already been emptied when the Fultons arrived, leaving Emmett the only suspect.

“As you can imagine,” she continued, “Dead Eye Dan is fit to be tied if he’s come looking for me. I don’t know where Emmett is hiding any more than he does, but I’m not sticking around to argue the point.”

Obviously Dead Eye didn’t know about her falling out with Emmett. Her throat tightened. She hadn’t realized until recently how gloriously unsuited she was to a solitary life. The longing to see Emmett once more had become an almost physical ache. His love had been negligent, but as she’d learned over these past months, a slipshod sort of affection was better than nothing at all.

A nearby commotion snagged her attention. A towering gentleman in a cowboy hat and boots held a crying toddler—a girl, about the same age as the boy who’d taken up residence beside her. Though handsome, everything about the man was slightly askew. His hat sat at an angle, his collar was bent on one side, and the hem of his trouser legs was partially snagged on the stitching of his boot. He frowned and studied the area immediately surrounding his feet.

Tessa reluctantly stood. Though the boy’s conversation was limited, he’d been a welcome diversion from her own difficulties. “Come along little fellow. I believe your da-da has discovered your absence. You will be my good deed for the day.”

The boy eagerly took her hand. “Ga.”

The distinctive word was obviously all encompassing. “*Ga* to you as well.”

The gentleman’s back was turned, although the woman beside him noticed the boy soon enough. From her sharp chin to the pointed tips of her black boots, she was about as welcoming as a barbed wire fence.

Her lips pinched, the woman extended her arm toward them, palm up. “The child is safe. There’s no need to fuss.”

Tessa narrowed her gaze and scrutinized the details. Emmett always said a good lookout needed to know who belonged where and why. Folks tended to pair up by status and temperament, and these two were opposites in both, meaning they were clearly not husband and wife.

The man whipped around. At the sight of the boy, his face flooded with relief.

He crouched and balanced on the balls of his feet. “Owen. You gave me a fright.”

His obvious affection touched something kindred in Tessa, and she blinked rapidly. With her hopes of ever seeing Emmett again growing dimmer by the day, the sight was all the more poignant. Everyone should have at least one person in their life who minded when they were lost.

The woman slanted a glance down the blunt edge of her nose. “Don’t reward the boy. He’ll only run off again.”

Her tone pricked Tessa like a nettle. Memories from the year following her mother’s death came rushing back. Only eight at the time, she’d been sent to live with distant relatives who begrudged having another child underfoot. Unaware of their simmering resentment, Emmett had arrived for a visit some months later. He’d discovered her huddled on the front porch, her arms covered in bruises.

Lawless or not, life with Emmett had at least been far more peaceful and far less painful.

“See, Alyce,” the gentleman assured the toddler in his arms. “I told you we’d find Owen.”

The two siblings greeted one another in a flurry of incomprehensible gibberish. They were a striking pair with their large, cobalt blue eyes and matching blond hair. Twins by the looks of them. The resemblance was even more pronounced by their clothing. Alyce wore a starched blue empire-waist gown cut from the same sky blue fabric as her brother’s sailor shirt.

The children must have inherited their mother’s looks, because the gentleman’s hair was a deep, rich brown, and his eyes were the translucent green of a tender new leaf.

“Ball,” Owen offered by way of explanation.

The gentleman flashed a boyish half grin, sending a little flutter through Tessa’s stomach.

“The name is McCoy,” the man said. “Shane McCoy. Thank you for returning Owen. He’s quite the escape artist.”

“Tessa Spencer,” she replied, extending her hand.

The quick clasp of his fingers sent a stirring of gooseflesh up her arm.

He angled his body toward his companion. “This is the children’s aunt, Mrs. Lund.”

“Pleasure,” Tessa replied, her tone clipped. The woman had her on edge.

As though addressing someone beneath her notice, Mrs. Lund gave only a slight incline of her head. “God rest Abby’s soul. She always did have a knack for leaving her troubles on someone else’s doorstep.”

Tessa absently rubbed her arms. The poor man was a widower. No wonder he was overwhelmed. Especially considering his sister-in-law hadn’t offered any additional help. Without a word of explanation, Mrs. Lund had set off in the direction of the ticket office.

“You must excuse her,” Mr. McCoy said. “She’s still in mourning.”

Tessa smothered a snort. *Not hardly*. She’d seen people express more grief over the loss of a wooden nickel.

Unlike his acerbic sister-in-law, the bleak look on the widower’s face mirrored her own despair. As much as it shamed her to admit it, she’d gladly assist Emmett with one of his swindles if only to see him once more. She’d taken for granted how much her world had orbited around caring for him.

Oh, he was a capable grown man, certainly, but of the two—she'd always been more of the parent. Maybe that was why the haunted look in Mr. McCoy's eyes resonated with her.

At a loss, she gestured toward the heap of bags and coats at his feet. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Thank you for the offer," he replied, his light tone not quite ringing true. "But as you can see, I'm beyond help." He nuzzled the top of Alyce's head. "Isn't that right, my dear?"

Alyce kissed his cheek with a delighted squeal, and something inside Tessa melted a little. "I don't believe that for a moment."

Mr. McCoy flashed his boyish grin once more. "Perhaps not."

Certainly it was the early fall sun warming her cheeks. If only her own troubles weren't quite so overwhelming. The little family was obviously in need of a good deed, and good deeds were her new stock-in-trade.

The previous year, she and Emmett had attended a tent revival on a lark. The edifying experience had set her on a path of atonement. While she hadn't been completely sold on the itinerant religion, the preacher's words had given voice to the nagging unease in her heart.

That little voice had turned out to be her conscience. Each day with Emmett, that pesky voice had grown louder until she'd realized there was only one way to silence the clamoring. Since Emmett's moral compass had never been set to true north anyway, he'd taken her desertion badly.

Tessa squared her shoulders. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. McCoy. I wish you all the best on your journey."

She wasn't certain if he was coming or going, and she didn't suppose it mattered.

"Likewise," he said. "What about you? Are you on the first leg of some grand adventure?"

"Actually." She let a small, self-indulgent sigh escape. "I'm not certain where I'm going."

"You're all alone, then?"

His innocent question had her eyes burning once more. If only her last words with Emmett hadn't been harsh. Her change of heart concerning his dubious activities had driven a wedge between them, and she should have tried harder to make him understand. If they'd been on better terms when the Fultons had approached him, she'd have talked him out of consorting with the dangerous gang.

*The Fultons.*

Her heartbeat picked up rhythm and her gaze darted around the platform. "Being alone isn't such a bad thing."

She'd been standing here like a dolt instead of keeping an eye out for trouble. A dangerous mistake.

Satisfied her lapse hadn't been fatal, she assumed her most serene smile. "I believe I'll go wherever the wind takes me."

She sure hoped the wind picked up soon.

"I miss those days," Mr. McCoy replied a touch wistfully. "Enjoy the freedom."

Alyce snatched his ear and tugged, replacing his melancholy expression with an indulgent chuckle.

Tessa's gaze lingered on his face. My, but he had striking eyes. She gave herself a mental shake. What sort of woman mooned after a widower? Quite a few, judging by the admiring gazes he received from several female passengers strolling past.

Bending to Owen's eye level, she smiled. "Stay out of trouble."

"Ga."

Unable to resist, she ruffled his hair, prolonging the moment. Her gaze locked with Mr. McCoy and they remained frozen, cocooned among the porter's calls and the shouted greetings tossed toward departing passengers. Never in her life had she felt such an immediate connection to someone. Or was her continued solitude simply taking its toll?

“I’m in your debt,” Mr. McCoy said, breaking the taut thread of awareness stretching between them.

“Anyone would do the same.” She tightened the ribbons on her bonnet and turned away. She mustn’t leave her trunk unattended for long. As she knew firsthand, there were thieves lurking everywhere. “Perhaps we’ll cross paths again one day.”

Tessa tossed the last comment over her shoulder, wondering if he’d felt the same instant kinship. Probably not. Her shoulders sagged a notch before she straightened them. That sort of nonsense wouldn’t do at all. She wasn’t the sort of person who indulged in fits of melancholy. His obvious affection for his children had stirred up her guilt over Emmett, nothing more.

Mr. McCoy appeared lost and overwhelmed, emotions she understood all too well. Though the encounter felt unresolved, she resumed her seat on her trunk, retrieved her ledger and carefully searched out an offense.

*Distracted shop owner while Emmett stole a hat.*

In the opposite column she wrote “Returned lost toddler to his father.”

Tapping her pencil against her bottom lip, she considered her admiration of the children’s father and then discarded the lapse as an offense. He was a fetching gentleman and she’d always been drawn to kindness. No harm in that. Maybe someday, after this was all over... She shook her head. *No*. That was a foolish thought.

Love always came with expectations, and if one fought against those expectations, life was a misery. Her mother had expected a child would domesticate Emmett, but he’d left all the same. Emmett had expected her unwavering loyalty for his rescue, though he conveniently forgot he’d left her with those awful people in the first place.

While there were things about her years with Emmett that she’d genuinely enjoyed, her ledger of offenses was thick and her bank balance thin. She sensed Mr. McCoy was someone who lived by a rigid code of honor. A man who’d expect the same in others.

She closed her book with a snap, blocking out her pages of dishonorable deeds.

After tucking away her ledger, she studied the chalked destinations once more. Her spotty schooling had left her without much knowledge of geography, and she was at a loss. She’d settled in Wichita only because she’d liked the sound of the name.

“If You’re up there...” she began, lifting her face to the warming sun. “If You’re up there and You have any ideas, I sure could use one now.”

A distinctive wooden toy struck the base of her trunk.

“Ball,” a familiar small voice declared.

Planting her hands on her hips, Tessa leaned forward. “You are a troublemaker, aren’t you?”

Looking inordinately pleased with himself, Owen grinned. “Ga.”

Tessa squinted at the sky. “You and I need to work on our communication.”

\* \* \*

The train whistle blew, startling Alyce, and Shane murmured soothing nonsense. He forced his thoughts away from the lovely Miss Spencer and concentrated on the task at hand. *I am doing the right thing*. Maybe if he kept repeating those words, they’d feel right, they’d feel true.

Unaware of the changes about to upturn her young life, Alyce fiddled with his collar and kicked her feet. *I am doing the right thing*.

Having left Owen with the pinch-faced Mrs. Lund, he arranged for the twins’ baggage as well as his own return ticket. Crowds of people surged around them, agitating Alyce and further darkening his mood. This was Abby’s dying wish—she wanted her children raised by her family. Only Abby wasn’t here anymore, and she didn’t see how the children’s smiles had faded beneath her sister’s dour countenance.

When he returned to where Mrs. Lund was standing, Owen was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is he?” Shane demanded.

Mrs. Lund lifted one shoulder in an unconcerned shrug. “Perhaps if he isn’t showered with attention upon his return, the boy will cease running off.”

Taller than average, Shane quickly spotted Owen pestering Miss Spencer once more. His rush of relief quickly morphed into anger. There was no way Mrs. Lund had seen Owen from this distance. For all she knew, he’d wandered onto the tracks.

Singularly unrepentant, she crossed her arms over her chest. “Proper discipline is what the boy needs, not coddling. I hope these sorts of antics won’t be commonplace with the children.”

Her voice grated on Shane’s nerves. The woman had all the warmth of a root cellar in winter, but she was also the twin’s closest kin.

“They’ve been cooped up,” he replied shortly. “They’re bound to wander.”

He and Abby had been childhood sweethearts. They’d paired up mostly because their ages matched and they were always seated together in the one-room schoolhouse. At seventeen, Abby had pressured him for an engagement. He’d thought them too young and he was already overwhelmed with his own responsibilities. His father had abandoned the family three years before, and Shane had taken over as the man of the house. Despite his best efforts to soften the blow, urging Abby to wait instead, his refusal had incensed her.

They’d gradually lost touch after her parents had died and she’d moved away. Years later, she’d arrived at his ranch, pregnant and alone. Compelled by honor and loyalty, he’d thought he was doing the right thing by marrying her, hoping their past friendship might grow into something deeper. Except she’d never stopped loving the man who’d betrayed her.

Mrs. Lund harrumphed, and her gaze shifted. “Have you made the arrangements with the bank?”

His jaw worked. “I’ll finish up this morning.”

That figured. Abby’s older sister may have lost sight of Owen, but she hadn’t lost sight of the money he’d offered for the twins’ care.

How had such a simple arrangement become this complicated? Ten years older than Abby, her sister had been married and gone by the time he and Abby had started school together. After Abby’s death, their correspondence had been brief, but Mrs. Lund had been well aware of her sister’s wishes and hadn’t balked. He’d put off the inevitable for as long as he could, but the time had finally arrived.

As though sensing his tension, Alyce squeezed her small hands around his neck. He absently rubbed her back in soothing circles.

“Everything will be fine,” he said, though his blood simmered. He turned toward Mrs. Lund and, with an effort born of sheer will, kept his tone calm. “It’s been hard on them, losing Abby. They need patience.”

“Fine talk coming from you,” she snapped. “A man foisting off his children as though they were so much chattel.”

“You know what Abby wanted,” he said quietly. “The ranch is isolated. If anything happened over the winter...”

“Or perhaps my sister regretted her choice of a husband.”

Her words slashed at his conscience. “We can finish this discussion later.”

As though his day couldn’t get any worse, he locked gazes with a pair of sparkling blue eyes. A flush crept up his neck. He didn’t know how much Miss Spencer had heard, but it was probably too much.

“We meet again, Mr. McCoy.” Despite her casual words, Miss Spencer clenched her hands before her stomach, her knuckles white. “I believe this little fellow belongs to you.”

Assuming his most stern expression, Shane switched Alyce to his opposite shoulder and reached down. “Owen, that’s twice today.”

The boy grinned, not at all sorry. Shane raised his eyebrows. Leave it to Owen to find the prettiest girl at the depot. The child was a positive flirt.

Miss Spencer's gaze darted around the platform. "I believe Owen was chasing his ball and became a little lost."

The tight coil he kept around his emotions eased a notch. Owen's champion was smartly dressed in a traveling suit the color of a ripe peach. The cheerful hue brought out the luster in her flaxen hair and the flecks of gold in her sharp blue eyes. Though clearly nervous about something or someone, she exuded an air of confidence and grace.

Her presence felt out of place on the crowded platform. As though she belonged in a private parlor—sipping tea and waiting for her Pullman car. She was the sort of woman Abby had always admired. The rope around his emotions tightened once more. The sort of woman who'd find him boring and suffocating, no doubt, just as Abby had.

"Thank you," he said. "For returning Owen. *Again.*"

"My pleasure."

Her voice had a husky quality that stirred long-dormant yearnings. Though she kept a calm visage, there was something troubled about the way Miss Spencer kept glancing over her shoulder. The more time he spent with her, the more he realized there was an air of mystery surrounding his lovely Good Samaritan. That ambiguity made her all the more alluring, and he fought against his curiosity. Mysteries had a way of ending badly.

While Shane struggled for a suitable reply, Owen tossed the ball toward Mrs. Lund.

She squeaked and dodged sideways, then snatched the boy's shirt and cocked back her arm. "You did that on purpose, you little—"

"No!" Shane shouted helplessly. With Alyce in his arms, he struggled to reach Owen.

Miss Spencer threw herself before the boy and grasped Mrs. Lund's wrist.

Gratitude rushed through him.

Mrs. Lund's face suffused with color. "Get your hands off of me!"

"I will not stand by and watch you hit a child," Miss Spencer declared.

Sensing the trouble he'd caused, Owen whimpered behind her skirts.

"I wasn't going to harm the boy." Mrs. Lund sniffed. "Not that it's any business of yours. A woman, traveling alone. You're no better than you should be."

Shane moved between the two combatants. "I won't have you insulting Miss Spencer."

"And I won't have this...this *person* questioning my intentions."

"What were your intentions?" he challenged.

His sister-in-law gasped. "How dare you question me!"

*Now what?* It sure looked as if Mrs. Lund was getting ready to haul off and wallop the boy. And if that was the case, then her actions changed everything. No matter how desperate, he wasn't leaving the children with an abusive guardian. They might not be his children by blood, but he loved them all the same, and he was honor bound to ensure they were well cared for, no matter what Abby's wishes.

Mrs. Lund's mouth worked, and after several tense seconds, she gathered herself. "We had an agreement. There's no need to fuss."

Shane rubbed his forehead. *Impossible situations.* He had a singular talent for landing in impossible situations. With winter coming, he'd lose the help he hired from town. The weather isolated the ranch, sometimes for weeks. He'd kept Abby's secret about the babies—everyone assumed he was their father—and he was bound to abide by her request concerning the children's care. Yet he questioned her sister's intentions.

People were always hiding their true motivations. Abby had claimed she still loved him, even though she was pregnant with another man's children. Mrs. Lund had claimed she wanted to raise the twins, when clearly she was more interested in the money. Even he was keeping secrets—Abby's secrets. Of the three of them, only Miss Spencer had no reason for duplicity.

As though only just deciphering the situation, Miss Spencer looked between the two of them. "You're leaving the children with *her*?"

Mrs. Lund tossed her head. “After seeing how he manages them, I can understand Abby’s insistence that I raise the children. They are in need of a firm hand.”

Shane turned his back on his sister-in-law and faced Miss Spencer. The disappointment in her eyes sent his words spilling forth in a hasty confession. “I live on an isolated ranch. We’re cut off from everything during the winter. It’s just my men and me.”

Miss Spencer swayed forward. “Your ranch is isolated?”

“It’s just south of Cimarron Springs. Completely off the map.”

“That sounds quite remote.” Her voice grew breathless. “And inaccessible.”

“Uh.” He wasn’t certain if there was a question buried in her statement. “Yes.”

Shane reached for Owen, who clutched Miss Spencer’s skirts all the tighter. His chest constricted. He wasn’t leaving them with Mrs. Lund, even if that meant defying Abby’s wishes. Though she was the children’s closest relative, he’d known her for less than twenty minutes. In that short time he’d seen how truly unsuitable she was for the task.

*Twenty minutes.*

About the same amount of time he’d known Miss Spencer. His gaze lit on Owen’s lovely rescuer. She obviously feared something or someone, though she was doing her best to cover her anxiety. She wasn’t as excited about her travels as she’d have them believe. He sensed her independent nature and her stubborn resolve, but he had his own streak of obstinacy as well.

For a moment he imagined the world from her viewpoint, and his thoughts left him unsettled. An unmarried woman without the protection of relatives had few resources. Traveling alone was dangerous, more so farther west. Did she know the trouble she courted? Was she aware of the admiring stares she evoked? A very male sense of protectiveness tightened his jaw.

Mrs. Lund reached for Owen, who cowered away. “Come along,” she ordered. “We’ve wasted enough time.”

The boy burst out crying.

“No.” Shane spoke more forcibly than he’d intended. His gaze fastened on Miss Spencer. “I’ll find another way.”

## Chapter Two

Searching for a way to gently extract herself from the tense situation, Tessa took a discreet step back. She’d already caused enough trouble for Mr. McCoy, and the more she delayed, the more trouble she caused for herself as well.

Mrs. Lund smoothed the hair from her temple. “I blame Abby for this. She never had a lick of sense. Always running with the wrong sorts of people. Look at what it got her. I suppose I should have known she’d marry someone cut from the same cloth. Blood will out, as they say.”

Tessa gazed at the two beautiful children. “Yes, blood will out.” If the twins were any indication, Abby had not been cut from the same cloth as her sister. “By way of apology, perhaps I could distract the children while the two of you speak alone.”

Shocked by her impulsive suggestion, she froze. Really, this was none of her business, and she was being terribly forward, but the poor widower looked as though he had a few choice words for his sister-in-law that were best exchanged in private.

A muscle ticked in his cheek. “I believe you’re right, Miss Spencer. Mrs. Lund and I have a great deal to discuss.”

“Call me Tessa.”

“Then you must call me Shane.”

His sister-in-law made an exaggerated show of straightening her hair and pressing her clothing with flattened palms. Tessa glanced warily between the two. There were fireworks coming, that much was certain. Mrs. Lund had best not underestimate her brother-in-law. Tessa sensed a spine of steel behind that even-tempered exterior.

Clearing her throat, Tessa drew their attention. “There’s an ice cream parlor across the street. Why don’t I arrange a treat for the children and let you and Mrs. Lund have a moment in private?”

Shane hesitated. “Are you certain?”

“Positive.” Despite his assurances, she *did* feel somewhat responsible. When she’d thought Mrs. Lund might strike the boy, she’d seen red, and her instincts had taken over. Though she didn’t regret her actions, she *had* set this chain of events into motion. “We’ll take a seat by the window. That way, you can see us as well.”

He gestured toward a young porter standing vigil near the ticket office. “Can you store the lady’s trunk?”

“Right away, sir.”

Tessa noted the cut of the freckle-faced porter’s clothing and took stock of his shiny new shoes. He was obviously well paid, which meant there was no reason for him to rifle through her belongings for valuables.

“Thank you, Shane,” she said. “For your thoughtfulness.”

“Enough.” Mrs. Lund snorted. “I don’t have all day while the two of you chatter about nonsense.”

“I believe that’s my cue.” Tessa knelt and gathered the twins close. Emmett had always discouraged the wasting of one’s charm on the charmless. “Your dad says it’s all right if I take you for ice cream. Is that all right with you?”

The two exchanged a glance.

Owen nodded. “Ga.”

“High praise indeed.”

She led them across the street and took a table near the window. Their vantage was doubly useful since Shane could keep sight of his children, and she could keep watch for Dead Eye. She didn’t suppose outlaws frequented ice cream parlors. So long as she didn’t attract more attention to herself, she was safe. For the moment.

Oblivious to the drama unfolding on their behalf, the twins were instead fascinated with the intricacies of the metal scrollwork chairs. Alyce knelt backward on the seat and traced her finger around the twisted heart pattern. Attempting to climb up as well, Owen pushed her aside. Alyce shoved him back.

“There’s no need to fight.” Tessa scraped another chair closer. “Wouldn’t you like your very own seat, Owen?”

He squinted, then crossed his arms over his chest and stubbornly glared at his sister.

Shrugging, Tessa sat and pivoted her legs beneath the table. “How very nice it is to have a chair all to oneself. Makes one feel very grown up.”

From the corner of her eye, she watched as Owen carefully rested his ball on the table and claimed his own seat. Though pleased with her success, she kept her emotions hidden lest Owen catch on.

Only a few tables in the parlor were occupied, showcasing the black-and-white tile floor and the blue-and-white-checkered curtains hanging from the windows. During the height of the summer season, the shop must burst at the seams. With a slight chill in the fall air, business had obviously slowed.

She studied the list of choices. “I believe the special today is chocolate. Chocolate is a fine choice, on any occasion.”

After taking their order, the grandmotherly shop owner clasped her hands. “My, but your children are well behaved. And so lovely, too. If you don’t mind me saying so, they’re the spitting image of you, ma’am.”

Without waiting for an answer, the woman circled back around the counter.

Tessa tugged her lower lip between her teeth. Explaining her actual relationship with the children seemed unnecessarily complicated. She'd always adored children, though life with Emmett hadn't afforded much opportunity to be around them. Considering her current predicament, she didn't suppose there'd be much opportunity in the future either. A pall fell over her once more. Always before she'd had hope, but the passing of time had relentlessly drained her optimism.

She rolled the ball across the table and Owen stopped it before it tumbled off. Alyce found the game more entertaining than tracing the metal scrollwork and joined in the fun. The task took a great deal of concentration and giggling.

An elderly couple seated nearby watched their antics with indulgent smiles.

The woman leaned toward Tessa. "You have a lovely family. Makes me think of my own children at that age. Enjoy this time. It passes quickly."

Feeling a fraud, Tessa murmured a few polite words in response. They were strangers. She'd never see them again. And yet she was no better than Emmett was—playing a game of smoke and mirrors based on assumptions. Worse yet, the game was all too familiar, almost comfortable, like donning one's winter coat after a long summer.

The shop owner returned and handed Tessa two folded flour sacks.

"Their outfits are so pretty," the woman said. "I'd hate to see them mused."

Grateful for the shopkeeper's thoughtfulness, and still feeling a touch guilty, Tessa knotted the sacks around the squirming children. A tug of longing surprised her once again. There was no reason to be maudlin. Emmett had loved her dearly, she'd never doubted that, but he'd always been slightly befuddled with having a little girl around.

Over the years, ladies from the boardinghouses and saloons where they'd stayed had occasionally taken her under their wing, showing her how to fix her hair and dress properly. Sometimes she felt as though she'd had scores of mothers, and other times she felt as though she'd had none at all. Everyone had different expectations, and she'd spent much of her life puzzling out her role with new people.

One way or another, she'd been searching for something elusive all her life. Just once she wanted affection without expectations. Someone who knew who she really was and loved her all the same. Her fingers tightened around Owen's ball. An impossible hope considering her past.

As the shop owner placed two bowls of ice cream before the children, a grim-faced Mr. McCoy stepped inside. He doffed his hat and took the remaining seat.

Alyce snatched her bowl and lapped at the ice cream. Laughing, Tessa pulled the bowl away. Now sporting a chocolate beard, the toddler groped for her spoon. Tugging the utensil out of reach, Tessa wiped the sticky mess from Alyce's face.

Shane lifted his spoon and turned toward Owen. The boy worked his mouth like a baby bird.

"They haven't mastered the fork and spoon yet," he said. "Sometimes it's best if we assist."

"Of course." Tessa stole a glance at him from beneath her eyelashes. "Is everything all right?"

"We've decided Mrs. Lund is far too busy to watch the children over the winter."

"Perhaps that's for the best. You're a good father, keeping them with you. You've done the right thing."

He flushed beneath her praise and looked away. "Miss Spencer, thank you for your help. I hadn't met Mrs. Lund before today. I had no idea she was quite so...harsh."

Tessa tilted her head. How odd the widower had never met his sister-in-law before today. Then again, she didn't know much about how regular families worked.

His expression turned severe. "She had other reasons for wanting the children. I can't abide falsehoods."

Instantly chilled, Tessa ducked her head. "Have you considered placing an advertisement? An older woman, perhaps a widow, would not attract gossip."

There was a hopeful gleam in his eyes that had her wary. For a moment the idea of living in the wilds had struck her as the perfect solution. Before she'd realized the impossibility of such a plan. Despite having been raised by an unconventional parent, she understood propriety all too well. While she wasn't particularly vain, she was too young and too unattached for the role of housekeeper. Which made losing her job at the Harvey House all the more catastrophic. There were few opportunities for single ladies. She'd seen the life of a saloon girl firsthand living with Emmett, and while she understood desperation, she'd do anything to avoid *that* fate.

Shane collapsed back in his chair and raked his hands through his hair. "Abby had certain...wishes." A shadow passed over his face. "I've backed myself into a corner. With winter coming, I'm running out of time. An advertisement could take weeks. I'd have to wait on the post. Then the applicants must be carefully scrutinized. We live in tight quarters on the ranch."

Tessa stared at the spoon clutched between her fingers. "I should never have interfered in something that was none of my concern. I've had a lot on my mind recently."

"You're afraid of someone, aren't you?"

Her head snapped up. "Why would you say that?"

Her acting skills had obviously rusted.

"A few things. Like the way you sat so you could keep an eye on the door. And before, at the train station, you were as jumpy as an outlaw in a room full of deputies. Are you a runaway heiress or something?"

Tessa fiddled with the lace at her collar. "Nothing so romantic, I'm afraid."

Clearing her throat, she glanced away. The outlaw-and-deputies analogy had struck a little too close to home.

"If someone is bothering you," he said, "perhaps I can help."

"We're quite a pair, aren't we?" Though she hadn't expected an instant shower of riches, she'd thought living a moral life might result in a bit more reward and a bit less trouble. Carefully choosing her next words, she said, "I've attracted the attention of a somewhat shady character."

That wasn't too far from the truth. Nor was it a lie. Dead Eye Dan was definitely a shady character.

Shane's eyes widened. "Who is this person?"

"He, uh...he came into the Harvey House where I work. *Worked*. He's been asking about me." Which was also the truth. Maybe not the entire truth, but a good portion of it. "I have reason to believe he's an outlaw."

A really, *really* good reason.

She imagined Dead Eye Dan trolling through town with the daguerreotype picture of her that he'd flashed at the Harvey House. The picture he'd obviously stolen from her father. She'd seen such events play out before with startling predictability. As long as the outlaw concocted a believable tale, each person she'd met this morning would proudly declare her whereabouts. People enjoyed feeling helpful. Meaning the more time she spent with Mr. McCoy, the more she put him and his family in danger as well.

Shane offered Owen another bite and caught her gaze. "Outlaws dine at the Harvey House?"

"Everyone dines at the Harvey House. We have the best prices and our service is impeccable."

"I don't doubt it." He paused. "You don't happen to know this fellow's name?"

Skirting the truth had the unfortunate side effect of leaving too many openings for pointed questions. Tessa considered making a run for the door, then discarded the idea. She'd only attract more attention. And, really, what harm was in a name?

"He's called Dead Eye Dan Fulton."

Shane scoffed, "That is the worst outlaw name I've ever heard."

“Not very clever, I know.” Tessa laughed in spite of herself. “He has a meandering eye. It’s terribly difficult to carry on a conversation with him because you never can tell which eye is looking at you... I’m rambling again.”

“I’m curious.” Shane removed the flour sacking from around Owen’s neck and wiped his chocolate-covered fingers. “Why don’t you simply turn him over to the sheriff?”

“Staying out of his way seemed the best solution. I wouldn’t want to anger him.”

Or his brothers. She couldn’t very well tell Shane about the rest of the Fultons either. Just like she couldn’t tell him that if she turned in Dead Eye, the outlaw would guess her involvement in a heartbeat.

The Fultons might not be the smartest men, but they weren’t the dumbest either. “As you can probably imagine, one does not rebuke the advances of an outlaw without consequence.”

“I see your point.” Shane tipped the glass bowl and scooped out another bite. “Then you’ve decided to abscond like a thief in the night.”

Tessa sighed. There it was again, that unfortunate reference to thievery. “Despite what the poets say, absence does not make the heart grow fonder. He’ll forget about me soon enough once I’m out of his sight.”

She hoped.

The door opened and she leaped halfway out of her chair then sat back down with a thud. The elderly couple who’d admired the children earlier were leaving. No need for panic.

“Sorry,” she said. “Thought I saw someone I knew.”

To her immense relief, Shane appeared unfazed by her weak excuse. “You’ve had a rough go of it, haven’t you?”

A sharp pain throbbed in her temple. She wasn’t lying, though, not exactly. She was withholding certain facts for his protection. Men like Mr. McCoy didn’t understand men like Dead Eye.

Despite the bolstering thought, or maybe because of it, she averted her gaze before biting the inside of her cheek.

Emmett had been certain she’d fail on her own, certain she’d come crawling back, begging for his help. He could have at least had the courtesy to be available for the begging-and-crawling portion when the time arrived. “I’m starting on a new adventure. It’s very exciting.”

Exciting in the sort of way a catastrophic train wreck was exciting, but rousing all the same.

A shadow passed before the window, and she shrank back, dipping her head and covering her face. Everyone simply assumed they were a loving family enjoying the afternoon, and she’d relaxed into the illusion. She’d taken for granted the respectability of traveling with Emmett. Alone, she attracted all sorts of unwanted stares and attention.

Bolstering her courage, she stood. She’d made her choice, and she had no one to blame but herself if the going was difficult. Her heart heavy, she reached out and brushed the backs of her knuckles along the cushion of Alyce’s cheek, then ruffled Owen’s hair.

The twins had devoured what ice cream hadn’t melted and claimed their spoons. They were having great fun sweeping their fingers around the glass bowl, seeking every last drop. The task took a great deal of concentration, which meant Tessa had lost her last excuse for lingering.

The ticking clock above the counter propelled her forward. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. McCoy. You have a beautiful family. Despite your difficulties this morning, I feel certain you will prevail.”

She squared her shoulders and focused on the door. The important part was not looking back. Emmett always said that life was not meant to be traveled backward.

Shane caught her hand. “Wait.”

She mustn’t turn around. All of her instincts screamed that he expected something from her. She knew full well she’d never live up to those expectations.

Certainly she'd never been one to linger over little heartbreaks and trivial disappointments. This morning when she'd realized her time at the Harvey House was at an end, she'd set out with dogged resolve. Though she mourned the loss of her delicate new friendships, she hadn't faltered.

Yet her feet remained rooted in place. She didn't believe in fate, but something had brought them together on that platform. Of all the people passing through the station, Owen had found her. Surely that meant something in the grand scheme of things.

The preacher at the tent revival had said that in helping others one helped oneself. But what did a retired thief have to offer?

Shane released her hand. "Hear me out. Please."

The appeal in his voice scattered the last vestiges of her good sense. "I'm listening."

### Chapter Three

Miss Spencer's direct gaze had Shane tied up in knots again, and he immediately forgot what he was about to say. There was a chance they might help each other—if he took care of the problem plaguing her first. Just once he wanted to do the right thing and have something good come of it.

Before Shane could speak, Owen reached for his spoon and slipped. His body fell forward and he splayed his hands, nicking the edge of his bowl. The glassware slid across the table. Tessa lunged. The bowl dodged between her fingers and careened off the edge. Melted chocolate splattered her skirts before the glass shattered.

Owen sobbed and rubbed the spot on his chin where he'd bumped the table. The boy reached for Tessa and she immediately resumed her seat, pulling him onto her lap while carefully avoiding the shattered glass. Owen grasped at her white lace collar with sticky fingers and buried his chocolate-covered face in her neck. Oblivious of the damage marring her pristine outfit, Tessa rubbed his back and murmured soothing words.

Shane swallowed hard once. Then twice. The twins had sought that affection from Abby, craved her attention. Instead, she'd drifted through their lives like a marionette, going through the motions without any more warmth than a carved wooden block. Everything he'd done to help had only made matters worse.

As Owen's cries turned into hiccups and eventually subsided, Tessa glanced up, her expression troubled. "I have to go. My shift normally starts at dinner. When I don't arrive, Dead Eye will start looking for me."

She was paler by the moment, her movements jerky and frightened. Shane blew out a breath. He'd always had a weakness for the marginalized. All the men he'd hired on the ranch had conquered adversity in one way or another. Finch had lost his right arm and the vision in his left eye during the war. Wheeler was a freed slave Shane had met on a tortuous stagecoach ride through the sweltering Texas heat.

The others...well, the others had seen more than their fair share of hardship. Probably that was why Abby had returned once she'd realized she was in trouble. She knew he'd never turn her away. Yet he suspected a difference in Tessa. As though she'd take any offer of protection as an affront, though clearly she was in need of assistance.

Shane scowled. The outlaw deserved a throttling for terrifying her. Barring that, he'd do the next best thing.

"Let me help," he said quickly. "Please."

Owen fidgeted in her lap and she produced a coin he hadn't noticed before. With a deft flick of her wrist, the coin disappeared. Owen snatched at her fingers and frowned in confusion. She fisted her hands a few times, turning her arm this way and that. With an exaggerated frown of confusion, she brushed Owen's temple.

"Hmm," she said solemnly. "What have we here?"

With a flourish she produced the coin from behind Owen's ear. The boy squealed in delight.

Alyce stood in her chair and leaned over, eagerly joining the game. Without answering him, Tessa absently repeated the trick. Much to the delight of the children, the coin dropped from noses and sprang from beneath dimpled chins with an elegant and imperceptible sleight of hand. Shane was as mesmerized as the children with the rapid disappearance and reappearances of the coin. Only when she dropped the money into her reticule was the spell broken.

She glanced up and he shook his thoughts back to the problem at hand, grasping for a convincing argument.

“The next train doesn’t leave for hours.” He charged ahead. “I have an idea that may help us both.”

Her face softened and his persuasions died on his lips. Abby had an odd habit of staring at a spot over his shoulder, never looking directly at him. The practice had left him feeling invisible. Tessa met his gaze dead-on, her expression open and forthright.

“I’m not sure how you can help.” She quirked an eyebrow. “Unless you have a freshly pressed dress handy or a private stage for a hasty exit out of town?”

“No.” Her directness was refreshing and disconcerting at the same time. “I’m afraid not, but I can offer you a room at the hotel.” At the startled look in her eyes, he quickly added, “To freshen up.”

She gave a sad shake of her head. “I wouldn’t mind staying out of sight and cleaning up, but I can’t displace you.”

“As you can see, our plans have changed.”

A riot of color suffused her cheeks. “Because of me.”

“Never say that. My plans have altered because Mrs. Lund wasn’t a good choice for a guardian. I might not have realized her unsuitability,” he added, “if Owen hadn’t pestered you into returning him.”

Owen grinned at the sound of his name, revealing his two front teeth. “Ball.”

“Don’t paint me as the hero,” Tessa replied, raising her delicately arched eyebrows. “I was a little reluctant to return him. He’s a very good listener.”

Shane dug through his pockets, producing the metal key. “This is the only key. I have some business in town. If you need to change, I can fetch your trunk as well.”

“Not the trunk! I mean to say, that won’t be necessary. I’m sure a dab of water will take care of this.”

Shane didn’t know much about laundry, but he figured it was going to take a lot more than a spot cleaning to erase that damage.

His doubts were forestalled by a flutter of activity. Summoned by the commotion, a woman in an apron bustled over. Together they plucked shards of glass from the floor and wiped up the mess.

Tessa brushed at the stains on her gown. “I can’t very well travel like this.”

“Definitely not.”

Reaching out, she rested her hand over the key. “You said there’s only one key.”

“Only the one.” He’d bought himself some time. With a little effort, his plan would erase the fear in her eyes and make up for the trouble they’d caused her. Then maybe he could convince her they each had something the other needed. “I’ll walk you the distance and be on my way.”

Owen showed no signs of surrendering his perch, and Tessa absently tucked him closer. The boy rested his head in the crook of her neck and stared at the shiny locket nestled at the base of her throat.

With a last glance over her shoulder, she nodded. “I accept your offer.”

Shane blew out a relieved breath. “You’ll be on your way in no time.”

Keeping vigil for outlaws with wandering eyes, Shane escorted his motley bunch to the hotel and made arrangements with the clerk. Miss Spencer was obviously not well-known in town, as none of the staff showed even a flicker of recognition.

Not that anyone could get a good look at her anyway. She spent much of the time helpfully chasing after Owen and Alyce as they reached for the vase of flowers on the round table in the lobby and crawled between the spindly legs of a settee.

The room he'd procured was at the end of the corridor and he walked her that way, then gathered the twins. Owen yawned.

Tessa hesitated. "How long will your business take?"

"An hour. Maybe two."

"The children appear tired."

"They usually nap around this time."

She reached for Alyce, who eagerly took her hand. "I could...I could watch them. You know, while you accomplished your task."

He hesitated, not wanting to take advantage of her. "If you're certain."

Her offer was ideal. Better than he could have hoped. While he was fully prepared to take the twins on his errand, he moved faster without them.

"Aren't you afraid I'll abscond with your children?" she asked, turning the key in the lock.

Her bright smile stole his breath. Her eyes sparkled and a delightful dimple appeared in her left cheek. He'd been immersed in his own troubles for so long, he'd forgotten the simple pleasure of a moment of joy.

"I'm more afraid they'll send you screaming into the streets," he said at last.

"I'm much stronger than I look."

Her dimple disappeared and he mourned the loss. "I don't doubt it."

Tessa turned the key a few times, but no click of the lock sounded.

She removed the key and studied it closely. "The numbers match but one of the teeth is bent. That must be the problem."

"I'll see if they have another."

"No need."

She reached behind her head and pulled a hairpin from the coil at the nape of her neck, then inserted the slender metal into the space beneath the key. Her brow knit in concentration, she jiggled the hairpin a few times and the door sprang open.

Shane gaped, nonplussed by her odd talent for disappearing coins and difficult locks.

"I—uh," Tessa stuttered. "I once had a temperamental lock on a boardinghouse door. I learned a few tricks."

He supposed there was nothing too odd in that. "You're quite the locksmith."

"It comes in handy at the oddest times."

The twins hugged him around the legs before he left, but seemed content to remain with Miss Spencer. Relieved at Owen and Alyce's easy acceptance of the situation, he made his way toward the train depot with only a twinge of guilt for taking advantage of Tessa's good nature. The twins had been roused earlier than usual this morning and should sleep easily. Tessa appeared as though she could use the rest as well.

Her intervention with Owen, though unplanned and unexpected, had pushed him out of his stupor. While he'd like to believe he'd have seen Mrs. Lund's duplicity eventually, viewing her through Tessa's eyes had forced him into acknowledging her unsuitability.

The telegraph office was devoid of customers, and he accomplished his task in short order. Having a cousin who served as a telegraph operator was convenient. Having a telegraph operator for a cousin who was also married to a lawman was even more helpful.

A flurry of messages were received and dispatched over the following hour, and he took a seat on the bench tucked into a corner of the small office, impatiently tapping his heel. A fine bead of sweat formed on his brow. Miss Spencer must be pacing the floors by now. He checked his watch

for the thousandth time. Another forty-five minutes passed before the sheriff appeared. Shane met him at the door in three long strides.

The man was tall and slender and as weathered and thin as a strip of beef jerky.

He presented Shane with a wanted poster. “There’s a reward for Dead Eye. Where would you like it sent?”

*A reward.* His stomach twisted. Glancing at the picture, his eyes widened at the sum listed on the bottom of the page. Tessa could hire her own private Pullman car with that amount. She certainly wouldn’t need a housekeeping job. He stuffed his free hand into his pocket and shook his head. At least one good thing had come out of this mess.

“You’ve got him, then?” Shane prodded. “He’s locked up?”

“Picked him up straightaway. Didn’t put up too much of a fight. I suppose he didn’t figure anyone around these parts would recognize him.”

For once, doing the right thing had resulted in something good. Maybe not for him, but that wasn’t the point anyway. “Excellent.”

The sheriff pushed his hat back on his head with the tip of his index finger. “And how did you come to recognize him, Mr. McCoy?”

Shane scratched his temple and stared at the floor. “Long story.”

The question had nagged him as well. How had Tessa known the identity of the outlaw? He shrugged. She probably saw all sorts with people coming and going from the café.

“Understood.” The slender man touched the gun strapped against his thigh. “You’d best not stick around, just in case.”

“Trust me, there’s not a chance he’ll connect me with his capture, but I’ll be on my way all the same.”

“Not so fast. You haven’t told me where you’d like the reward sent.”

Shane considered and discarded several possibilities. Best not to leave a trail that might lead back to Miss Spencer. “Send the money to Marshal Cain in Cimarron Springs. He’ll know what to do.”

Once Miss Spencer was settled, he’d make arrangements to have the money transferred. She’d spotted Dead Eye first, after all, and the money was hers. The sheriff jotted down a few notes and went about his business.

His steps dragging, Shane returned to the hotel. Separating from Tessa was for the best. Being around her stirred up a sting of loneliness. Always before he’d thrown himself into work when the yearnings for companionship had grown too distracting, exhausting himself in body and spirit. The children had forced him to keep a part of his heart open, and he’d be wise to be on his guard in the future. Tessa reminded him of Abby when they were young, full of hope and hungry for adventure. He didn’t want to see that optimism fade.

He rapped on the door and Miss Spencer appeared, holding a finger over her lips. A scowl darkened her brow.

“Shh,” she ordered. “They’ve fallen asleep.”

Somehow or another she’d draped the stained portion of her skirt like a fall around her waist, cleverly disguising the spots. There were damp portions around her collar where she’d scrubbed at the rest of the marks, and he forced his gaze from the charming sight. His was an honorable mission, and he did her a disservice by thinking of her in any way other than an unexpected acquaintance.

She slipped into the corridor and quietly shut the door behind her. “Where have you been? What took so long?”

“I’m sorry. I can explain.” He handed over the wanted poster. “They’ve picked up Dead Eye Dan. You’re safe now.”

Her face grew ashen. “What have you done?”

He gripped her shoulders, shocked by her violent trembling. “He’s behind bars. He can’t bother you anymore.”

She vigorously shook her head and backed away. “You don’t understand. This is worse. This is much worse.”

“There’s a reward.” His declaration only sent her stumbling farther back, and his hands dropped away. “I had it sent to Marshal Cain in Cimarron Springs. The outlaw will never guess your identity. Contact the marshal and he’ll make the arrangements.”

Her pale lips pinched together. “I wouldn’t touch a dime of that money if my life depended upon it.”

“Why not? You spotted him. You’ve earned that reward.”

“Because it’s dangerous, that’s why. Claiming the reward money will lead the rest of his gang directly to me.”

Her fear instantly made sense, but there was an easy enough solution. “Come with us to Cimarron Springs, help me with the children. I’ll pay you for your trouble. I’ll even claim the money myself and hand it over to you. That way, you’re not involved.”

She jerked her head in a negative gesture. “You’ll put yourself in danger. I won’t allow that.”

“I’m a grown man.”

“You’re a father. You should consider your children. Lawmen aren’t always honest.”

The skeptical edge in her voice stiffened his spine. “I trust the marshal in town. He’s married to my cousin. He won’t put either of us in danger.”

Her shoulders slumped. She opened the door once more and stared into the room. He caught a glimpse of Alyce and Owen asleep on the bed, curled around each other like puppies, a bolster of pillows surrounding them.

“I know you’re strong,” he said. “I know you don’t need my help, but I need yours.”

Blood rushed in his ears. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d asked someone for help. He’d been independent since the moment his father had walked out on them, and he liked it that way. As long as he didn’t count on people, they didn’t let him down. Since arriving in Wichita, he’d felt as though he was unraveling bit by bit. If he let this go on any longer, there’d be nothing left of him.

“Never mind,” he said, reaching for the key. “It’s been a long day. I appreciate everything you’ve done. I had no right to ask for more.”

She yanked her hand out of his reach. “I’ll help you.”

It was too late to take back his offer, and gratitude and shame warred in his chest. She’d agreed to help him. She’d agreed because she’d seen him weak.

Tessa hesitated. “I’ll leave Cimarron Springs as soon as the reward arrives. You know that, right?”

“I know.” Earlier, a selfish part of him had hoped she might consider staying on, just until he found a suitable replacement, but she’d obviously anticipated his appeal. “I understand.”

Tessa had called him a good father before. She’d said he was doing the right thing by keeping the children with him. The truth was far less charitable. He wasn’t a fit parent for the children any more than Mrs. Lund. By refusing to face the impossibility of the situation, he’d been lying to himself rather than doing what was best for the children.

“Four o’clock,” he said, replacing his hat. He was done being weak. Once they were all back home, he’d finally make things right, even if it shattered him. He’d put himself back together before; he knew how the pieces fit. “We leave at four.”

Now that he’d committed to his decision, a cynical relief surged through his veins. The reward money made everyone’s life simpler. Without Tessa, there’d be one less person in town who’d been disappointed by him.

As long as nothing unforeseen happened, they’d never see each other again after the journey’s end. She was as good as gone. At least there was nothing left to go wrong.

\* \* \*

“The reward money has hit a snag.” Marshal Garrett Cain spoke from his seat behind his desk.

“What kind of a snag?” Tessa demanded, covering the panic in her voice. “I was hoping to avoid a delay.”

She needed the money quickly. She’d already been in town for three days. That was long enough. Too long, really. She feared she’d run into Shane once more, and the cold shoulder he’d given her upon their arrival had made it abundantly clear that her presence was unwelcome.

“Let’s give Shane a few more minutes.” The marshal shook his head. “He needs to hear this, too.”

Tessa stifled a groan. Perched on the edge of her seat in Marshal Cain’s office, she tucked the edges of her skirts around her frozen ankles. Wind whistled beneath the door and frost coated the windowpanes.

She shivered and tugged her coat tighter. “There’s no need to bother Mr. McCoy, is there? This really doesn’t concern him.”

Though Shane’s rejection had hurt her more than she cared to admit, his absence was for the best. She was putting them all in danger the longer she stuck around.

“He’s on his way already,” the marshal said.

*Perfect.* She offered a tight-lipped smile of acknowledgment. Just what this day needed.

All the little nagging worries she’d harbored piled up around her in a suffocating heap. She’d had no more success in contacting Emmett, which meant her meager savings must stretch indefinitely. Though she’d scoffed at the reward before, a few days of introspection had given her clarity on the matter. Considering her situation, money was a good thing. Someone was going to collect that reward, and it might as well be her. Since she was no longer an outlaw, the code didn’t apply anyway.

She glanced across the desk separating them. The marshal held her gaze with a benevolent expression she imagined he normally reserved for relaying the news of untimely deaths.

“I don’t suppose your news is good news?” she asked.

“Nope.”

On that less-than-cheerful note, he stood, plucked several pieces of wood from the stack near the potbellied stove and stoked the fire. Though clearly not the best conversationalist, he was a fine-looking man with dark hair showing a feathering of gray at the temples. The lawman had a forthright manner and a direct approach that compelled honesty. The kind of man Emmett avoided at all costs.

Her mouth went dry. “You have me worried, Marshal Cain.”

And that was saying something.

The door burst open in a flurry of cold air and a young girl scooted inside. Realizing she had a brief reprieve before Mr. McCoy arrived, Tessa forced the tension from her shoulders. The newcomer flipped back her coat hood and stomped the snow from her boots on the rag rug.

The young beauty was in her midteens, showing the first blush of womanhood with her bright blue eyes and curly corn silk hair. “Shane is on his way,” the girl said. “He’s talking with Mama now.”

The marshal assisted her with her coat. “This is my daughter, Cora. Cora, this is Miss Spencer.”

The girl held out her hand. “Hello. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Tessa tucked an escaped tendril of hair behind one ear. “Surely not. I only met your father this morning.”

“I didn’t hear about you from Papa.”

Heat crept up Tessa’s neck. Shane must have spoken of her—but why? She doubted she’d made much of an impression. Touching her cheeks, she hoped they weren’t flaming as hotly as they felt.

The marshal ushered his daughter through a second door at the rear of the office. Tessa caught sight of a jail cell and a flight of stairs through the opening.

“Enough, Cora,” the marshal ordered. “You’re making our guest uncomfortable. I’m guessing your mother will be along soon. Why don’t you run along upstairs and put on some coffee? You know where to find everything.”

*Yep.* Tessa’s cheeks were definitely flaming.

A gust of winter bluster indicated another arrival. Her heartbeat thundered and the freshly stoked fire suddenly turned the room blistering hot. Shane stepped inside and turned toward the coat hooks, presenting her with his profile. The corners of his mouth drooped at the edges and his eyes were tired and bloodshot, as though he hadn't slept in a month of Sundays.

He hung his hat on the peg near the door and ducked his head. "Miss Spencer."

"Mr. McCoy," she replied, matching his formal tone.

He didn't appear at all happy to see her. Not that she'd expected cartwheels and a jig, but a friendly smile might have been nice. He'd asked for her help before and she was only here at his request, yet he was treating her as though she'd somehow offended him. Crossing her arms, she looked away.

He didn't even have the courtesy to bring the children. Certainly he knew how much she missed them.

The marshal resumed his seat behind the desk. "Thanks for coming out, Shane. I figured the two of you should hear this at the same time. I just got word from Wichita. Dead Eye Dan Fulton has busted out of jail."

#### Chapter Four

Tessa gasped and bolted upright. "When?"

"Last night."

Panic rose like bile in her throat. "Who broke him out?"

As though she had to ask.

"His brothers," the marshal replied grimly.

She didn't believe in luck, but she was starting to believe in bad luck. Here she'd been lulled into a false sense of safety, thinking she might actually claim the reward money and sleep a full night through for once.

Tessa turned her fear on Mr. McCoy. "I knew this would happen."

"I was trying to help," he wearily replied.

She splayed her fingers over her eyes. Terror definitely had a way of making her forget herself. While she had perfectly valid reasons for being angry with Shane, the outlaw's escape wasn't one of them. If she'd told him the truth about her connection to Dead Eye in the first place, then they wouldn't be in this mess. She had no one to blame but herself for this particular disaster.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Of course you meant well. I was surprised, that's all."

"What about the reward?" Shane demanded.

"Rescinded." The marshal held up his hands in supplication. "Didn't say I agreed with the decision."

"We caught him." Shane's voice vibrated with suppressed anger. "It's not our fault they couldn't hold him."

Tessa unconsciously touched his hand, instantly realized her mistake and snatched it back. "The money is the least of our worries. What if he follows us here?"

Ten minutes ago all she'd cared about was the reward money. This news had her caring more about saving her own hide. She'd given the Fultons two reasons for tracking her down: she'd serve as bait for Emmett, and they'd have their revenge as well.

Her hands trembled and she balled her fingers into tight fists. She had no desire to experience Fulton revenge.

The marshal kicked back in his seat. "Without the reward, there's no way the Fultons can trace the money back here. You're sheltered in that regard."

"I suppose that's something," Tessa muttered. The men gaped at her. "That's good for us. For both of us," she amended.

Talk about a tangled web. If only her father had been a cook or blacksmith or a farmer. Something simple and ordinary. At least Mr. McCoy and the children were safe. Dead Eye was much

more likely to connect the dots between her disappearance and his capture than a handsome widower and his children passing through Wichita.

"I have some contacts," the marshal said. "People I trust. I'll put out the word, see if we can track them."

"I'd appreciate that," Shane replied.

Her slim hope of ever living openly as Tessa Spencer evaporated like the mist. Here she'd been twiddling her thumbs while searching for Emmett, thinking he'd fix his problem and solve hers as well. No more. She had to disappear. Really disappear. Not this skulking about, hoping for the best. She'd go so deep into hiding, not even Emmett could find her. She'd become an entirely new person, with a new name and a new identity, someone no one would suspect.

She'd worry about honesty and good deeds later. Staying alive was a key factor in accomplishing those tasks anyway.

She tipped back her head. "Why are You doing this to me? I'm trying. I'm really, really trying."

You'd think there'd be a little more grace and a little less punishment for those folks who put in the effort. Why did it always seem the dreadful people of the world like Dead Eye always landed on their feet like spry cats, whereas she'd only tried to right a wrong and tumbled right off the ledge and into the abyss? Even Emmett had a talent for squeezing out of difficult situations, and he wasn't exactly a saintly figure.

The marshal frowned. "Who are you talking to?"

"God," Tessa replied with an apologetic wave toward the ceiling.

Railing against God probably wasn't the best solution. Clearly she had more work to do on her spiritual training.

Shane followed her gaze upward. "Does He answer?"

"Yes." Tessa grimaced. "Only His answers are very perplexing."

The lawman didn't appear shocked by her outburst, which was something at least. In his profession, he'd probably seen far more unusual things than a woman talking to the ceiling.

"Do you mind sticking around for a moment?" The marshal straightened. "Shane and I have another matter to clear up as long as he's here."

"Don't give me a second thought," she replied gingerly, ignoring his piercing stare.

He was making excuses to hold her here, no doubt, waiting her out in case she collapsed into hysteria. Which she had no plans on doing. She was made of sterner stuff. Emmett hadn't raised a wilting flower. She might have drooped a touch, but she definitely wasn't wilting.

Hugging her arms over her chest, she stood, crossed the short distance and stared out the window. Towns had personalities, the same as people. This one screamed *respectability!* The boardwalks had been swept clean of snow, lethal icicles had been chipped from the eaves and black smoke pumped merrily from the chimneys. Emmett had never lingered in towns like this. Respectability made him nervous. Perhaps that was why Shane had been so cold once they'd reached town. Maybe he sensed she didn't belong.

Which begged the question—where *did* she belong?

Since arriving on the train, she'd known there was no way of watching the children without attracting unwanted attention. Her previous hunch had been correct; she was too young and too, well, too unattached. She'd spent twenty minutes escaping an interrogation from Mrs. Stuart in the mercantile yesterday. Even arriving on the same train with Shane had piqued the woman's curiosity.

The marshal focused his attention on Shane. "How's that mare? The one that ran into the barbed wire?"

Letting the conversation ebb and flow behind her, Tessa formulated a new plan. First, she'd take on an assumed name. While the subterfuge went against everything she'd fought for, in order to live an honest life, she had to remain alive. Even God had to understand that. Next, she needed an income. She'd checked the board outside the church the day of her arrival, but the only listings were

for cattle hands and train workers. Neither of which was suitable. She wasn't returning to Wichita with Dead Eye on the loose, and the next larger city was even farther away. She was counting her pennies already.

"Shane, you're wound up tighter than an eight-day watch," the marshal said. He indicated the fresh blanket of snow outside his window. "You'll end up frozen in a snowdrift if you insist on traveling in this weather."

"It's not so bad," Shane said.

"Jo is worried."

"About the children?" Shane scooted forward. "What's wrong?"

Tessa's attention perked.

"They're fine," the marshal said. "It's you she's worried about."

Rubbing his forehead with the heel of his hand, Shane slumped back. "Jo's got no cause for worry."

"Don't do this to yourself," the marshal continued. "The kids miss you. Of course they do. They'll get used to the change. You might as well let them adjust now. When the weather turns ugly, you won't be able to make the trip anyway. We all know that. Things will all work out. You'll see."

The space between them thrummed with emotion. Tessa held her tongue for a full minute before blurting, "What do you mean the kids miss you?"

The two men blinked.

Shane spoke first. "The marshal and his wife, my cousin, are watching the twins over the winter."

"You didn't keep them with you?"

"You said I was a good father." He stared at his clasped hands. "I'm trying to be. They're better off this way, with people who can give them attention. This is my solution. It's for the best. Better than Mrs. Lund, that's for certain." His startling admission ignited a flurry of self-recriminations. All this time she'd thought she'd done something wrong, that he was annoyed with her or, worse yet, embarrassed by her. Even with his face averted, she sensed his guilt.

A tumble of comforting words balanced on the tip of her tongue and she held them there, hugging herself tighter. He didn't want or need her pity. Having faced tough times herself, she knew the frustration of trite phrases and meaningless assurances.

Why hadn't she listened closer before? What had the marshal said? Something about the weather. And Shane *did* look exhausted.

Tessa's thoughts raced. Instead of running again, what if she stayed put? The town was far and gone from all the Fultons' usual haunts. Dead Eye would stand out like a sore thumb around here.

"Mrs. Lund was not a good choice," Tessa agreed. Perhaps Agnes would consider letting her stay on at the boardinghouse full-time. There'd be no changing her name, the cat was already out of the bag, but she'd worry about that minor detail later. "Anyone can see you only want to do the right thing."

"It's a big change." He heaved a sigh. "We're all doing our best."

Her stomach rumbled, and she pressed one hand over the noise. The boardinghouse provided a nice breakfast and lunch, but she'd been hoarding the bread and cheese for the next leg of her journey. Though she'd counted on the reward money, she'd also been prepared for a hasty exit. Another one of Emmett's rules: hope for the best, and plan for the worst. If she ever saw him again, she'd thank him for all the excellent advice.

Right after she read him the riot act.

She recalled the reason she was in the marshal's office in the first place and her optimism faded. She couldn't put these kind people in danger.

The door Cora had disappeared into earlier opened once more and Owen and Alyce raced through. They caught sight of Tessa and charged. A wave of pure longing sprang forth. With a shriek she knelt and gathered them into her arms.

Cora followed close behind. "I tried to stop them, but when they found out Tessa was here, they were determined."

"It's all right," Shane said. "I planned on fetching them after the marshal said his piece."

"I've missed you," Tessa squealed in delight. "Have you been keeping busy?"

Owen held out his hand. "My ball."

"Yes, your ball." Tessa beamed at Shane. "That's two words together."

His grin was tinged with pride. "He started that just yesterday."

Alyce patted the ribbon at Tessa's neck. "Pretty."

Tessa's eyes burned. She'd been away from them for only a few days, and already they'd changed. They'd changed but they remembered her. She couldn't recall a time when someone had greeted her with such unabashed joy.

She scooped them close and laughed, then glanced at Shane and her smile faded. She'd never seen a man more crushed, more defeated. Being separated from his children was obviously tearing him apart, and her heart went out to him.

Though they were little more than strangers, she'd give anything to take away that pain, even for a moment. He reminded her of Emmett, making all the wrong choices for all the right reasons. Trying his best in a bewildering situation. While she assumed the marshal and his wife were good people, clearly the twins belonged with their father.

Cora planted her hands on her hips. "Shane, what you need is a wife. Why don't you send away for one of them mail-order brides like the blacksmith did a few years ago? I've never seen that man smile so much since he got hitched."

#### *Marriage.*

Tessa smothered a gasp. How had she overlooked such an obvious solution? She'd been so wrapped up in the details that she hadn't seen the broader picture. The most obvious solution had been sitting right in front of her all along. Like it or not, the only guarantee of respectability was marriage.

The edge of her ledger protruded from her satchel. The project was a lifetime of work. Instead of piecemeal efforts, what if one grand good deed erased all the other entries?

The idea took hold and gained shape. She'd have everything she ever wanted: security, safety and, best of all, anonymity. Well, everything but authenticity. Her past must be left in the past.

Owen touched the locket at her throat, fascinated by the shiny metal. The twins seemed genuinely fond of her. They adored her in the way only children could, without artifice of expectations. She envisioned their future in light of their current arrangement, shuttled from family to family, always searching for a place where they belonged. Memories of her own childhood returned with an unsettling jolt. They deserved better.

Although this was hardly a perfect solution for all of them, it was the best one she could think of. What other choices did any of them have? She glanced at Shane and a curious sensation passed through her, a gentle warmth, like the heat of the sun shining through a glass windowpane.

She'd learned his wife had passed away almost six months before. How much did he miss her? What would he think of such a suggestion? She sensed an unyielding resolution about him. Most folks took the easy way of things, drifting along like flotsam. Not Shane. He hadn't given up his children because that was the easy way out; he'd given them up because he felt it was the right thing to do.

What of her own situation? This was a clean slate. A new start. They were strangers with no preconceived notions about each other. He was a kind man, and she was a good person at heart. She'd simply never had the opportunity for demonstrating her better qualities.

There was only one little snag in her plan. Unlike the children, Shane definitely didn't adore her. She wasn't certain if he even liked her. Then again, he was a widower, and no one expected him

to fall at her feet. They only needed to get along. She'd seen too much of the darker side of human nature to harbor any hope of a fairy-tale ending anyway.

"Find yourself a wife, Shane," Cora declared. "I'm brilliant. A mail-order bride solves all your problems."

Cora was brilliant, all right. The idea was as inspired as it was obvious.

All Tessa had to do was convince a virtual stranger to spend the rest of his life with her.

*Brilliant indeed.*

\* \* \*

Alyce tugged on Shane's pant leg, and he hoisted her into his arms.

The marshal shook his head. "Leave Shane alone, Cora. He doesn't want to marry a stranger."

"You did."

Garrett's ears flamed. "I knew your mother. She wasn't a stranger. She was from town."

Shane had never seen the marshal shaken, but Garrett sure looked shaken now. Wondering if Tessa was enjoying the exchange as well, Shane grinned at her, but her expression was distant and shuttered, as though she was puzzling out some great difficulty.

"Yes, Mama was from town." Cora rolled her eyes. "But you weren't. You'd only been here a few months. You barely knew her."

"I knew her well enough," Garrett muttered, his scarlet ears turning even redder. "You've been listening to rumors again, haven't you?"

"Mrs. Stuart does ramble on," Cora continued. "But that doesn't mean getting married isn't the perfect solution. Shane is quite a catch. Any lady would be privileged to have him. Let's put his picture on the church bulletin boards in Wichita."

"No." Instantly panicked, Shane broke into the conversation. He figured his ears matched the marshal's right about now. "No one is putting my picture anywhere. Ever."

Agitated by his raised voice, Alyce hugged his neck. Shane tickled her stomach until she grinned. Taking good-natured enjoyment from the marshal's discomfort was one thing; hearing Cora talk about him as "a catch" was a whole different matter.

Garrett scrubbed his hand down his face. "Your mother and I didn't know each other very well, I'll admit that. But not everyone can be as fortunate."

Shane's amusement faded, and their friendly quarrel disappeared into the background. Alyce was staring at him with her wise, solemn eyes, and his whole chest ached. Freezing in a snowdrift didn't seem so bad if it meant seeing the children. Even if he saw them only once a week. Even if he didn't get a full night's rest until they were full-grown. He was used to hardship.

Cora's voice grew exasperated. "Maybe if Shane left the ranch once in a while, he might have more options. Except for that trip to Wichita, he doesn't go anywhere. How's he supposed to meet anyone around here? Miss Spencer is the only new single female we've had in town in months."

A strangled noise sounded from Tessa's direction, and Shane kept his attention averted. Cora was three for three—she'd mortified all the adults in the room.

The marshal ushered his daughter toward the back of his office once more. "This conversation is over. We'd best check on that coffee and find your mother. Can't leave the stove unattended." He motioned for Shane. "Bring the kids by the house when you're ready." He touched his forehead. "Miss Spencer, it was a pleasure meeting you. Let me know if I can be of any further assistance during your stay."

The door closed resolutely behind them.

While grateful the awkward conversation was at an end, Shane didn't relish being alone with Tessa after that mortifying exchange.

She craned her neck, following their hasty retreat. "What is behind that door, anyway?"

"A jail cell and stairs to an apartment on the second level. The marshal keeps the space closed off unless there's a prisoner. The deputy lives upstairs when there's an inmate overnight."

Cora's words rang in his ears. Tessa was definitely the only single female they'd had in town in a while. He almost laughed out loud before catching himself. Even if she didn't have one foot out the door, she'd never settle for someone like him. She was too smart and too pretty for a lonely widower who lived on an isolated ranch with nothing but a bunch of uncouth men for company.

All the same reasons she couldn't watch the children. Mrs. Stuart at the mercantile had practically tackled him when he'd stepped off the train with Tessa by his side. No doubt the old busybody had been watching them like a hawk, searching for any sign of impropriety.

At least Tessa didn't appear shocked by the Cains' ribbing. Their candor could be disconcerting. He shook his head. The idea was crazy. Out of the question. He'd already got married once for the sake of the children. What kind of fool made the same mistake twice? Clearly he wasn't marriage material. As for sending away for a bride, who in their right mind would come all this way to marry a man sight unseen? The idea was ludicrous.

Tessa perched on a chair and lifted Owen into her lap. "I was starting to think that door had mysterious properties."

Shane chuckled. "JoBeth, the marshal's wife, comes in through the back as well. It's a shortcut from the telegraph office where she works. She must be around here someplace. The kids didn't make that walk alone. She's probably upstairs."

Voices and footsteps rumbled overhead, and a welter of emotions swirled around him. He envied the Cains' easy camaraderie and close-knit family. After his father left, he'd quit school and supported his mother by working as a cattle hand. A man's job that hadn't left him much time for anything but eating and sleeping.

Following his mother's death, he'd worked even harder, saving up money for his own place. That was all he'd ever known—work and responsibilities. The kids were the best thing that had ever happened to him. They deserved a childhood. Although he supposed most folks didn't think about such frivolous things, having surrendered his own youth, he wanted more for them.

A burst of laughter from overhead filtered through the vents. The Cains liked each other and enjoyed spending time together. Sometimes they tried to pull him into their antics, like this afternoon, but he always kept a distance. Even when his family had been together, they'd never shared that sort of lighthearted connection, and he wasn't certain how to fit in.

He caught sight of Owen and grimaced.

The boy had turned away, making an exaggerated point of ignoring Shane. Of the two children, Owen had taken the change the hardest. He'd been sullen and withdrawn since the move. While understandable, his rejection still hurt.

Owen glared. "Want Scout?"

The demand had Shane shuffling his feet. "He's at home. I'll bring him for a visit next time."

Tessa glanced between the two. "Who is Scout?"

"A horse." Visiting Scout each morning had been part of their daily routine since before Owen could walk. He'd even had his own currycomb and took great pride in brushing the feathered hair above the animal's hooves. Over seventeen hands high, the enormous draft horse had taken a shine to Owen as well and always remained docile beneath his ministrations. "Owen wasn't happy about leaving him behind."

That was an understatement. Shane briefly closed his eyes against the memory of the boy's pitiful sobs.

Tessa pressed a hand against her stomach, and Shane recalled the rumblings he'd heard earlier.

He'd been almost rude with her before. The decision to leave Alyce and Owen with the Cains had weighed heavily on him, and he hadn't been very good company on the train ride back or even today, for that matter.

In an effort to atone for his previous behavior, he asked, "Have you eaten yet?"

She glanced up. "Not yet."

He studied Tessa's upturned face and his gut knotted. Lines of tension framed her mouth and dark circles showed beneath her eyes. He recalled the trunk he'd seen in the haberdashery window and realized why the familiar-looking luggage had caught his eye. She must be pawning her belongings. Most telling of all, she'd been frantic about the reward this morning when she'd been hesitant about the money before. Those hints might have clued him in earlier if he hadn't been wrapped up in his own concerns.

Tessa was obviously short on funds.

She'd been adamant about leaving town as soon as the reward arrived. What was she going to do now? What were her plans for the future? Forcing his questions aside, he reached for his coat.

Curiosity was holding up what needed to be done. "Join me for lunch at the hotel. I could use a bite." Actually, he'd eaten an hour ago. "I insist. You can fill me in on the gossip from town."

Owen had practically attached himself to Tessa. Most likely she'd be gone soon, another disappointment for the boy, yet he couldn't deny them their visit. At least the twins were smiling for once. All three of them had been more somber than usual lately. The finality of their situation had left Shane troubled and distracted. Assisting someone else was the perfect way to take his mind off his worries.

"Um," Tessa began. "There is one small matter I'd like to discuss over lunch."

### [Chapter Five](#)

Alyce and Owen were bundled into their coats and Shane assisted Tessa with hers. After a quick scurry down the boardwalk, their heads bent against the wind, the hotel dining room was warm and inviting with the mouthwatering aroma of fried chicken filling the air. Chairs were quickly arranged and orders placed.

Tessa rested her hands on either side of her plate and straightened her silverware. "The marshal and his wife, are they happy?"

Rolling his eyes, Shane said, "Sickeningly so."

He laughed and Tessa's mood lightened. She'd tread carefully. This was an extremely delicate situation and she must present her solution with the utmost care. If she structured the conversation correctly, he might even make the suggestion himself. Another one of Emmett's handy tricks.

Shane removed his hat and threaded his fingers through his hair. "JoBeth's courtship was the talk of the town some years back. Garrett and JoBeth married after the marshal accepted guardianship of his niece, Cora. She calls them Mom and Dad now, which seems fitting enough. It's a tough job, being the only parent. Around these parts, marriages are arranged for practical reasons as often as not."

Excellent. His story fit her plan perfectly. Already he must be thinking about the two of them together. Cora had set the wheels in motion by mentioning mail-order brides and the fact that Tessa was the only single woman available. Soon he'd put the pieces together and catch the drift of her thoughts.

"People get married for all sorts of reasons, you say." She nodded slowly, her eyes locked with his. "Like caring for children?"

He rubbed his chest as though something pained him. "Yep."

Well, that wasn't a good sign. He didn't appear to comprehend her meaning at all. He looked as if he had indigestion. "You must miss the children terribly. Not being able to see them every day. If only there was another way."

Surely that was obvious enough. She was dropping all the hints she could think of. Giving him every opportunity to realize she was open to his offer.

"Owen and Alyce love the Cains," he said quietly. "And certainly Jo and Garrett are excellent guardians, but nothing replaces seeing them every day."

Tessa drummed her fingers. Perhaps if she approached this from another direction. "And you can't possibly hire anyone because folks will gossip."

“Exactly.”

“I thought before...” She inhaled deeply. “On the trip back from Wichita, the children and I did well together.”

Maybe if she backed up the conversation and reminded him of the time they’d spent together already, he’d catch the drift of her thoughts. Once he recalled the past, maybe he’d look to the future.

He fumbled for the coffee mug the server had set before him. “You did real fine with them.”

Though she’d never been around small children before, they’d got along well. There’d been the usual tantrums and spills. She’d even scolded Owen and he hadn’t appeared to hold it against her. Children didn’t seem to hold grudges.

Owen teetered and Tessa instinctively steadied him. Yep. She was definitely developing her instincts with the children.

She folded her hands before her. “And we got along well, too, didn’t we?”

“You know I’d hire you in an instant,” he blurted. “After meeting Mrs. Stuart, you can understand the difficulties. I won’t let you endure that sort of gossip. That doesn’t mean you can’t see them as often as you want.”

“Don’t misunderstand me,” she added quickly. “I realize now how impossible it would be for you to hire me as a housekeeper.”

“Exactly,” he declared. “I couldn’t put you in that situation. There’d be talk. There’s always talk. You’re a fine-looking woman.”

A jolt of pure feminine pleasure surprised her.

She’d never much thought about her looks one way or the other before. Discreetly rubbing her damp palms against her skirts, she caught sight of Owen and Alyce peacefully rearranging their table settings. Those two never got along for this long.

Shane jolted upright. “You need money, don’t you? I should have realized that sooner. What with losing out on the reward and all. You just have to ask. I’m happy to help.”

Tessa nearly pounded her fists on the table. He’d picked up on the clues, all right. The wrong clues. “I don’t want to borrow money from you. I want to help out with the children. But not as your housekeeper.”

He frowned. “I can talk to JoBeth. I’m sure she’d appreciate the help.”

Nope. He was not catching the drift of her meaning at all. Not even close. Worse yet, they were drifting further off point with every word.

“All three of you get along real well.” He rushed ahead before she could say anything else. “Both Owen and Alyce adore you. If you settle here, the Cains will let you visit as often as you like.”

“I’d like that.” Her knuckles whitened around her own coffee mug. “Sometimes we have to change our plans. Sometimes things don’t work out as easily as we think they should.”

“No. They don’t.”

Shane cleared his throat. “I think I know what you’re hinting at.”

“Excellent.” She resisted adding a *hallelujah*. “I was beginning to think we’d be here all day.”

“You think I should consider Cora’s suggestion.”

“Yes!” *Finally*. At last they were on the right track.

“I can’t send for a mail-order bride,” he declared forcefully. “Even for the children. I know you’re all trying to help. I appreciate it. Truly, I do. But it’s out of the question.” Owen tipped a cup and he lunged before the liquid spilled. “I’m not really the mail-order bride kind of fellow.”

Tessa covered her face with her hands. What did a woman have to do to get a marriage proposal around here? She lowered her hands and sucked in a restorative breath. If he wasn’t catching the hints, she’d have to do this herself.

“Why don’t we get married?” she declared just as forcefully. They’d be here all afternoon if she waited on Shane to decipher her hints. “We already know each other. Sort of. And you said it

yourself before. We each have something the other needs.” Before he could speak, she rushed ahead. “No one could take the place of your first wife, I’m sure.”

Something flashed across his face, an emotion she couldn’t read. “I wouldn’t expect anyone to.”

“It’s what you said before,” Tessa went on, relieved they were at least finally speaking on the same topic. “Things are different out West. Marriages are arranged for practical reasons. We’re simply being practical.”

“I just want to get this straight,” he said, not appearing at all eager. “You’re saying we ought to get married? You and me?”

Her enthusiasm deflated, and she pressed two fingers against her temple. This had seemed much more logical back in the marshal’s office. Sitting here before Shane, trying to think of a good way to convince him that she was the perfect choice for a bride, nothing seemed clear. What qualifications did she have? She could pick a pocket and spot a cardsharp from across the room. Not necessarily what most men were looking for in a bride.

Now that the words were out, her courage fled. Covering her unease, she snapped, “Of course you and me!”

\* \* \*

“You caught me off guard.” Shane forced the pent-up air from his lungs, remembering to breathe. “Just making sure. You see, um, you said you had a small matter you’d like to discuss.”

“Yes. Marriage.”

“I think I see the problem,” he replied, still feeling a bit dazed. “Maybe next time you should say that you have something important to discuss rather than something small. That way I’m prepared.”

For a moment she appeared annoyed, but her expression quickly shifted to one of uncertainty. The sudden change left him even more confused.

Tessa sighed and studied the tines on her fork as though they were the most fascinating things on earth. “When Cora spoke of mail-order brides before, I couldn’t help but think about the children.”

“The children?” He was still catching up with the conversation. And who could blame him? Usually when someone wanted to discuss a small matter, they meant a broken heel on a shoe or an overdue bill at the boardinghouse.

Something small.

A marriage proposal was not a small matter.

“Clearly they’re better off with their father,” Tessa said. “They’re better off with the person who loves them most.” Her eyes took on a misty appeal. “This all must be very confusing for them. Losing their mother, moving from the only home they’ve ever known.”

Her reasoning put him at ease. She liked the children. Maybe it was because they were twins that they had that effect on people. But was affection for Alyce and Owen enough for a lifetime together? He’d been down this road before with disastrous results.

Her too-pale lips pinched together. “I realize we haven’t known each other very long, and this is an enormous decision, but I really think we could make this work.”

While he was busy reeling from the unexpected announcement, she’d obviously thought through the details already. Any man would jump at the offer, himself included. Except he didn’t want her making a lifelong decision because she was backed into a corner. He didn’t want her to do something she’d regret later.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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