

Love Inspired HISTORICAL

THE MARSHAL'S
READY-MADE
FAMILY

*To claim their future,
he'll have to face his past...*

SHERRI SHACKELFORD

Sherri Shackelford

The Marshal's Ready-Made Family

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A MARRIAGE OF NECESSITY Gentlemen don't court feisty straight-shooters like JoBeth McCoy. Just as she's resigned to a lifetime alone, a misunderstanding forces the spunky telegraph operator into a marriage of convenience. Wedding the town's handsome new marshal offers JoBeth a chance at motherhood, caring for the orphaned little girl she's come to love. Garrett Cain will lose guardianship of his niece, Cora, if he stays single, but he knows no woman could accept the secrets he's hidden about his past. The lawman can't jeopardize Cora's future by admitting the truth. Yet when unexpected danger in the small town threatens to expose Garrett's long-buried secret, only a leap of faith can turn a makeshift union into a real family.

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"Getting hitched solves all your problems."

Yep, she was JoBeth McCoy, problem solver to the world.

Garrett circled the room and sank onto a chair before his empty dinner plate. "No. This is crazy." Elbows on the table, he cradled his head. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I'm not myself lately."

He was hiding something, she was certain. She had a feeling she knew the source of his reluctance.

No matter the personal cost, she'd pry the truth from him. "Would you say yes if someone else asked?" She fought the rough edge in her voice. "Because there are plenty of other ladies in town."

Marshal Cain bolted upright. "This is the rest of my life. You're the only one I'd even consider." "Ooo...kay."

That was a decent response, right? He hadn't exactly explained why he'd choose her over someone else, but Jo guessed that was about as good an answer as she was going to get. While she might have hoped for something more revealing, at least he was still considering her suggestion. He hadn't outright refused her yet.

SHERRI SHACKELFORD

A wife and mother of three, Sherri Shackelford says her hobbies include collecting mismatched socks, discovering new ways to avoid cleaning and standing in the middle of the room while thinking, "Why did I just come in here?" A reformed pessimist and recent hopeful romantic, Sherri has a passion for writing. Her books are fun and fast paced, with plenty of heart and soul. She enjoys hearing from readers at sherrishackelford@yahoo.com, or visit her website, at www.sherrishackelford.com.

The Marshal's Ready-Made Family

Sherri Shackelford



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And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.

—1 Peter 4:8

To Barb, Jenn, Deb, Donna, *lizzie and Cheryl—otherwise known as the Friday Night Critique Ladies. Thank you for the friendship, the knowledge, the occasional argument, the food and the laughter. We always come back to laughter, don't we?

I'm a better writer for the group.

I'm a better person for knowing each of you.

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Chapter One

Cimarron Springs, Kansas

1881

JoBeth McCoy knew Marshal Garrett Cain's life was about to change forever—and all she could do was sit with his young niece until he heard the tragic news about his sister.

The towering double doors behind Jo and five-year-old Cora creaked open, and Reverend Miller cleared his throat. "You can send in the child now." He held out his hand for Cora. "Marshal Cain has been informed of his sister's passing."

Her heart heavy, Jo stood, then hesitated in the dappled sunlight. A soft breeze sent pear blossoms from the trees on either side of the shallow church steps fluttering over them like fragrant snow petals.

Cora rose and snatched Jo's hand. "Will you go with me?"

A riot of flaxen curls tumbled merrily around the little girl's face, but her Cupid's-bow mouth was solemn beneath her enormous, cornflower-blue eyes. Cora clutched a paper funnel filled with lemon drops in her left hand. Her battered rag doll remained anchored to her right side.

Jo met the reverend's sympathetic gaze, grateful for his almost imperceptible nod of agreement. He was a squat, sturdy man in his middle fifties with thinning gray hair and a kind smile.

The three of them stepped into the church vestibule, and Reverend Miller directed them toward his tiny, cluttered office. Jo paused as her eyes adjusted in the dim light.

Marshal Cain sat on a sturdy wooden chair before the desk, his expression grim. Her heart skittered, but she swallowed back her nerves and forced her steps closer.

His eyes were red, and the tail end of a hastily stowed handkerchief peeked out from his breast pocket. As though embarrassed by his tears, he didn't meet her gaze. Instead, he focused his attention on the petite fingers clutching Jo's waist. He didn't stand or approach them, and for that Jo was grateful, especially since Cora cowered behind her.

He caught sight of his niece's frightened gaze and blinked rapidly. "Hello, Cora. I know we've never met, but your mother and I were brother and sister."

Jo had only seen the marshal a handful of times, but he was an imposing sight sitting down, let alone standing. Well over six feet tall, he wore his dark hair neatly trimmed. Though he didn't sport a beard, a five-o'clock shadow perpetually darkened his jaw.

His face was all hard lines and tough angles, with a deep cleft dividing his chin. An inch-long scar slashed at an angle from his forehead through one thick, dark eyebrow. Other women might prefer a gentler face, but Jo found his distinctive features fascinating. Not that she looked. A woman simply couldn't help but notice things once in a while.

Cora took a hesitant step from behind Jo. "Mama is dead."

"Yes."

"Papa, too."

The marshal's knuckles whitened on the arms of his chair. "I know," he replied, his voice gruff.

Jo glanced between the two, her chest aching for their shared grief. From what little information she'd gathered, the girl's parents had died in a fire three weeks ago. As Cora's closest living relative, Marshal Cain had been assigned guardianship. Reverend Miller had just broken the news, and the poor man was obviously devastated by the loss.

Realizing the reverend had deserted them, Jo craned her neck and searched the empty vestibule. Everyone in town knew she had all the sensitivity of a goat at a tea party, and this situation definitely required a delicate touch.

She caught sight of Cora's dismayed expression and decided she'd best keep the two talking until the reverend returned. "Why don't you show Mr. Cain what you bought at the store this morning."

The marshal's gaze flicked up at Jo, then quickly returned to Cora as she dutifully extended her arm, revealing her precious stash of candy.

"Want one?"

"Uh, well, sure." He stretched out one hand and plucked a lemon drop from atop the mound. "Your mother liked peppermints," he added.

Cora nodded eagerly. "Me, too!"

Relieved by the girl's easy acceptance of Marshal Cain, Jo spurred the conversation. "Cora rode a train all the way from St. Louis, didn't you?"

"Mrs. Smith wouldn't let me sit by the window." Cora fingered a dangling edge of pink ribbon circling the frilly waistband of her dress. "She was grumpy."

A shadow crossed the marshal's eyes. "Sorry 'bout that. I didn't know you were coming. I'd have fetched you myself."

"Would you let me sit by the window?"

"I guess. If you wanted."

The tension in Jo's shoulders eased a bit. They'd been frantically searching for the marshal since the day nearly two weeks past when Jo had transcribed the telegram announcing his niece's imminent arrival. He'd been escorting a prisoner to Wichita and had run into trouble along the way.

By the time they'd discovered his location and informed him that he was needed back in town posthaste, the poor little girl had already arrived with her grim-faced escort. Mrs. Smith had been terrified of Indians, and certain she'd never make it back to St. Louis with her scalp intact.

Since the skittish escort was obviously frightening Cora with her hysterics, Jo had cheerfully assumed responsibility for the little girl and hustled Mrs. Smith onto an eastbound train. Three days had gone by since then.

"When are we going back home?" Cora asked.

Jo's heart wrenched at the innocent question.

"Well, that's the thing." Marshal Cain cleared his throat. "I thought you could stay out here and live with me." The raw vulnerability in his expression touched Jo's soul. "We're the only family either of us has left."

Cora's solemn blue eyes blinked with understanding. "Don't you have a mama and papa, either?"

"Nope. Your mom and I lost our parents when I was fifteen and your mother was eighteen."

Though his expression remained neutral, Jo sensed a wagonload of sorrow behind the simple words.

Cora clasped her hands at her waist. "Did they die in a fire like my mama and papa?"

Stark anguish exploded in the marshal's gaze, and Jo took an involuntary step backward. His reaction felt too bleak, too powerful for an event that must be almost twenty years past.

Covering his revealing lapse, he absently rubbed his cheek. "Smallpox."

"What's that?" Cora asked.

"It's a sickness." The marshal angled his face toward the light. "It leaves scars."

Jo and Cora leaned closer, both squinting. Sure enough, the rough stubble on his chin covered a scattering of shallow pockmarks. Jo had never been this close to the marshal before and she caught the barest hint of his scent—masculine and clean. Her stomach fluttered. Once again she couldn't help but wonder how all his imperfection added up to down-right handsome.

Cora shrugged. "Your face doesn't look bad."

Jo glanced down at her own rough, homespun skirts and serviceable shirtwaist. Men's flaws made them look tough. But a woman who dressed and acted like a tomboy, well, that was another story. A woman without corkscrew curls and lace collars wasn't worth the time of day. She'd learned that lesson well enough when Tom Walby, the only boy she'd ever had a crush on, had mocked her for being a hoyden before the entire eighth-grade class.

Turned out men fell in love with their eyes first and their hearts second. Which was too bad, really. Nettles were far more useful in life than roses.

"Did you ride a train after your parents died?" Cora asked.

"I don't remember," the marshal replied. "That was a long time ago for me."

Cora nodded her agreement, her flaxen curls bobbing. "You're old, so that musta been a really, really long time ago."

Ducking her head, Jo muffled a laugh. Marshal Cain blinked as though her presence had only now fully registered through the haze of his grief. He hastily stood, knocking his hat to the floor. They both reached for it at the same time, nearly butting heads. Jo touched the brim first. As he accepted his hat, the marshal's rough, callused fingers brushed over hers, sending a scattering of gooseflesh dancing up her arm.

Jo met his dark eyes, astonished by the intensity of his gaze.

"My apologies for not greeting you," he said, sounding more formal than she'd ever heard him. "We met in church once, didn't we?"

"Don't be sorry, Mr. Cain." For some reason, she seemed to have a difficult time catching her breath when he was near. "You've been busier than a termite in a sawmill. I'm JoBeth McCoy."

The admission earned her a dry chuckle. “Seems like you can’t turn a corner in this town without running into a McCoy.”

Jo grinned. She had five younger brothers, and they never expected her to be anyone but herself. In fact, they’d probably clobber her if she started acting like a regular girl. “They’re a handful, yes, sir.”

“Reverend Miller says you and Cora have been inseparable.”

Jo had taken a proprietary interest in Cora’s plight from the beginning. The messages concerning her care had been clipped and chillingly professional. A child thrust into such turmoil needed more than a hired guardian like Mrs. Smith. She needed love and understanding.

Jo squeezed Cora’s hand. “I work in the telegraph office. Part of my job is keeping track of unclaimed packages after the trains depart.” She winked at Cora. “Course this was a special case. Everyone needs a friend sometimes, right, Cora?”

The little girl returned the comforting pressure. “JoBeth sent twenty-six different messages trying to find you. I counted. JoBeth has five brothers. I counted them, too. I don’t have any brothers. Do you have any brothers?”

“Nope.”

The marshal and the little girl sized each other up like a couple of nervous spring foals. They were wary, yet curious, too. Suddenly, Jo realized how terribly unnecessary her presence had become. Cora didn’t need her anymore—she had Marshal Cain.

Though he’d only been in town a few months, Jo sensed his unwavering resolve. He’d spent his time quietly and methodically cleaning up Cimarron Springs, a Herculean task. Their previous sheriff had been lazy and corrupt, and every outlaw west of the Mississippi had exploited his lax law enforcement. The marshal still had loads of work ahead of him, but he didn’t show any signs of slowing.

And now that he and little Cora had each other, they didn’t need her.

A band of emotion tightened around Jo’s chest. Though she and Cora had known each other a short time, she felt a kinship.

A small hand tugged on her skirts. “How come you don’t know Marshal Cain? You said you know everyone in town.”

Jo glanced at the marshal and found him studying Reverend Miller’s book collection as though it was the most fascinating thing on earth. She wondered if he was thinking about the deluge of invitations he’d received during his first few months in Cimarron Springs. Introducing a new man in town was like tossing raw meat into a pack of wolves. A pack of female wolves.

Warmth crept up Jo’s neck. Of course, no one had considered her as a possible love interest. Not even her own parents had invited the marshal for dinner. Not that she cared, since she never planned on marrying. She’d pinched her cheeks and fluttered her eyelashes for Tom Walby and look what that had gotten her. He’d told her he’d rather court his grandfather’s mule.

She wasn’t about to make the same mistake twice.

Covering her unease, she fanned the tip of her thick, dark braid. “Marshal Cain has only been in town a few months. I guess he’s never had call to arrest me. If I was a cattle rustler, we’d be on a first-name basis by now, I’m sure.”

Cora giggled. The marshal sputtered, then coughed, and Jo immediately regretted her joke. A little ribbing always worked on her brothers when they were tense, but the marshal seemed embarrassed by her teasing. As the silence stretched out, the walls of Reverend Miller’s office closed in around her, and the air grew thick.

Oblivious to the tension gripping the adults, Cora plucked a lemon drop from her paper funnel and popped it into her mouth. “Can I have a puppy?” she spoke, her voice muffled around her candy. “Mama said we couldn’t have a puppy in the city. But you live in the country, don’t you, Mr. Cain?”

Jo caught the marshal's helpless expression before he quickly masked his thoughts. He'd lost his sister and brother-in-law and discovered he was guardian of his five-year-old niece in the course of a few tragic moments.

He didn't live in the country. He lived in a set of rooms above the jail.

Cora spit the candy into her cupped palm. "The bears won't eat my puppy, will they? Mrs. Smith said Kansas was full of giant man-eating bears."

"Mrs. Smith was mistaken," Marshal Cain replied, his voice no more than a whisper.

Jo instinctively reached out a hand, but the marshal flinched. Flustered, she clenched her teeth and let a flash of anger douse the pain. "I was just being nice. It's not like I was gonna hit you, fool man."

For years after she'd socked Tom in the eye for humiliating her in public, the boys in town had made a point of shrinking away from her in mock terror.

The marshal gingerly touched his side. "It's not that, I bruised a couple ribs in a scuffle up north."

Jo mentally slapped her forehead. Of course he wasn't mocking her, he didn't even know about her humiliation. Why was anger always her first line of defense?

"I'm sorry," she spoke quickly. "Can I get you...a...a pillow or something?"

"No need. I've suffered worse."

Every time she tried to say the right thing with a man, the feminine thing, it always fell flat. And how had Reverend Miller gotten lost in a two-room church?

She whirled and collided with the object of her ire.

The reverend steadied her with a hand on her elbow. "I see the marshal and his niece have gotten acquainted."

"No thanks to—"

A commotion outside interrupted her words. The reverend clasped his hands, his face pinched. "I believe you're needed outside, Marshal Cain." He glanced meaningfully in Cora's direction. "Tom Walby is in one of his moods."

Jo and Marshal Cain groaned in unison. Tom had grown from an adolescent annoyance into an adult bully with a nasty temper and a penchant for drinking. Every few weeks he got into a fight with his wife and took out his frustration on the local saloon. Jo flipped her braid over her shoulder.

Tom's wife never resisted the opportunity to smirk at her, still lording over her victory all these years later. Considering the prize had been Tom, Jo figured it was a loss she could endure.

"Can you look after Cora?" Marshal Cain directed his question toward Jo, and she eagerly smiled her agreement. "I'll take care of Tom as quick as I can."

The marshal knelt before Cora and enveloped her hand in his grasp. "Don't worry. We have each other now, and everything is going to be all right."

Jo's throat burned with rare emotion. They did have each other. They were a family. Not in the regular way, but a family nonetheless. If God had blessed her with a little girl as precious as Cora, she'd never let her go. Except she'd most likely never have a family of her own. Men didn't court girls who wore trousers beneath their skirts.

Jo shook off the gloomy thoughts. She had five brothers, after all. More family than one girl needed. With the boys already courting, she'd have her own nieces and nephews soon. She'd be the favorite aunt.

Just as long as she didn't end up like Aunt Vicky. The woman had fifteen goats and was known to dress them up for special occasions.

Marshal Cain slapped his hat back on his head. "Much obliged for your help."

He strode out the door, taking with him the crackling energy that surrounded Jo whenever he was near. While she didn't envy the marshal's task, she was grateful for the reprieve.

Surely by the time they met again, this strange, winded feeling would be gone. Besides, she liked him, liked the way he smiled at her, and she didn't want to ruin their camaraderie.

Cora tugged on her skirts. "You have something in your hair."

Ducking, Jo checked her disheveled reflection in the reflective glass of Reverend Miller's bookcase doors. She smoothed her fingers over her braided hair and released a scattering of pear blossoms, then threw up her arms with a groan.

She'd spent the entire conversation with white petals strewn over her dark hair.

Jo slapped her faded bowler back on her head. Even if she wanted to attract the attention of someone like Garrett Cain, she didn't stand a chance.

* * *

Garrett Cain closed the jail doors with a metallic clang. His prisoner, Tom Walby, paced the narrow space, a purple-and-green bruise darkening beneath his left eye.

Tom kicked the bars. "You don't understand, Marshal, it wasn't my fault."

"Not today, Tom."

Something in Garrett's voice must have penetrated the inebriated fog of Tom's brain. The lanky man groaned and braced his arms on the spindly table in his cell but kept blessedly silent. Dirty-blond hair covered Tom's head, and blood crusted on his chin. His blue-plaid shirt was torn, and his brown canvas pants rumpled. He'd given as good as he'd gotten in the saloon fight, but the whiskey in his belly had finally caught up with him.

Garrett spun the chamber of his revolver. Tom and his wife had two temperatures—hot and cold, love and hate. There was no in-between for those two, and their intensity terrified Garrett. He feared that sort of hard love because he'd seen the destructive force devour its prey with cruel finality.

He absently rubbed his chest. A hard knot had formed where his heart used to be after his parents' deaths. They'd been a fiery lot, too, and he and his sister had huddled together during the outbursts. The senseless deaths of his mother and father had wounded him—not mortally, but gravely.

No one in town knew the truth. That his father had killed his mother and then turned the gun on himself. The shame of his father's actions had shaped the course of Garrett's life.

Everything had muddled together in his brain...guilt, anger, fear. He'd wished more than once in childish prayers that he'd been born into a different family. Then God had taken his away. Garrett had corralled his emotions until the pain had passed, and when he'd finally emerged, he'd discovered his temporary fortress had become permanent. Nothing touched him too deeply anymore—not pain, not joy.

He was content. Good at keeping his emotions contained.

Until now.

The loss of Cora's mother, his only sister and last living relative, buffeted the walls around his heart like ocean waves. Horrors he'd spent a lifetime forgetting rushed back.

Tom paced his cell. "I saw that McCoy girl was taking care of your niece. You better be careful of that one. She'll have your little girl wearing pants and shooting guns."

Grateful for the distraction, Garrett considered his prisoner. "What's wrong with that?"

"Well, because...because it ain't feminine, that's why. I'd never settle with a girl who could outshoot me."

"Probably a good move on your part," Garrett retorted.

He didn't know why everyone in this town was blind to JoBeth McCoy's beauty. Her skin was flawless, her eyes large and exotic, and tipped up the corners. Her lips were full and pink, just made for kissing.

Now, where had that thought come from?

"The man should be the strong one," Tom slurred. "It ain't right when a girl can outscrap and outgun you."

"I don't think you give women enough merit. I've known women to endure things you and I couldn't even imagine."

Tom scoffed and spit into the corner.

Garrett shook his head. There was no use having a sensible conversation with someone who'd drunk away all his good sense. "You're making bad choices, Tom, and it's gonna catch up with you. One of these days you'll make a bad choice you can't sleep off or take back. What's gonna happen to your wife and your son when you're locked up for good?"

"What do you know about it?" Tom said sulkily.

"I know plenty."

Garrett stuffed his hands into his pockets and retrieved Cora's lemon drop. Pinching the candy between his thumb and forefinger, he let sunlight from the jail's narrow window bounce off the opaque coating.

His whole body ached from grief, as if he'd been thrown from a wild mustang. Why had God given him such a precious gift, a beautiful little girl to love and care for? He'd let his sister, Deirdre, down and now it was too late. He hadn't seen her once after she'd married, not even when Cora was born. Her husband was a good man, but visiting Deirdre brought back too many memories. Too many unsettling feelings from his youth.

Not that he'd purposefully stayed away. He kept meaning to visit St. Louis, but something would always come up. One year had passed, then two, then six—all in the blink of an eye. And now his sister was gone.

"Hey," Tom Walby said, gripping the bars with both hands and sticking his whiskered chin between the narrow opening. "Give me that candy."

"Nope." Garrett slipped Cora's gift back into his pocket. "Tom, do you ever pay attention in church?"

"Nah. I only go on Sunday when the missus forces me."

"Too bad. The reverend was preaching to you last week. He said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven."

"Ah, c'mon, Marshal," Tom garbled, squeaking his sweaty hands down the bars. "You don't believe in that Bible stuff, do you?"

Garrett considered the question. Did he? Sometimes yes and sometimes no. At times like this, he wished he found comfort from God; instead, he felt only a deep and abiding sense of betrayal. "Why don't you sleep it off."

"If only it were that easy," Tom declared, stumbling toward the narrow cot lining the jailhouse wall.

He collapsed onto his back and threw one arm over his eyes. Surprised by the man's articulate response, Garrett paused for a moment. He leaned closer, but Tom was already sound asleep and snoring.

"Yep," Garrett muttered. "If only it were that easy."

Confident he had time before Tom awoke and recalled his earlier rage, Garrett walked the short distance to the boardinghouse where JoBeth McCoy stayed. He knew where she lived. Watching her take the shortcut to the telegraph office each morning while he fixed his coffee was the highlight of his day. Even from a distance her forest-green eyes flashed with mischief as she scaled the corral fence, a pair of trousers concealed beneath her modest skirts.

He caught sight of Jo and Cora and his heart thumped uncomfortably against his ribs. They sat crouched over a red-and-black set of checkers, their heads together. Jo's hair was dark and long and stick straight, while Cora's hair was a short blond mass of wild curls. Jo's eyes were vivid green, with dark lashes, and Cora's eyes were crystal blue with pale lashes.

They reminded him of an Oriental symbol he'd once seen in San Francisco—a black teardrop and a white teardrop nestled in a circle. They were opposite, yet somehow they complemented each other perfectly.

JoBeth McCoy was different from other women, and her uniqueness fascinated him. Not that he was interested in courting—a man with his past definitely wasn't husband material—but something in Jo sparked his interest. She didn't simper or flutter her eyelashes, and he was drawn to her unabashed practicality. Too many people created unnecessary complications for themselves, like his drunken prisoner.

Garrett paused on the boardwalk, grateful they hadn't seen him yet. His eyes still burned, and emotion clogged his throat. He pinched the bridge of his nose, not wanting Jo to see him like this—vulnerable and aching to cry like a baby.

After inhaling a fortifying breath, he clapped his hands, startling the two. "Who's winning?"

"I am," Cora declared proudly.

Jo winked at him in shared confidence, and his heart swelled.

"Reverend Miller has invited you two for supper," she said.

Her obvious compassion soothed him, and for a moment the pain subsided. The townspeople were all desperately trying to ease Cora through the transition, and he appreciated the effort. "What time?"

"Five o'clock."

"Five it is, then. Speaking of food, have you two had any lunch?"

"Nope."

"Not yet."

"Why don't we mosey over to the hotel and eat."

Jo rubbed her hands against her brown skirts. "You two don't need me anymore—"

"No!" Cora exclaimed.

Her face pinched in fear, and Jo placed her hand comfortingly over the little girl's. The simple purity of the gesture humbled Garrett.

Pale blue eyes pleaded with him. "Can I stay with Jo until dinner?"

His stomach dipped. Of course Cora was terrified. Her whole world had turned upside down. She'd lost her parents, her home—everything that was familiar. Then she'd been placed on a train with a stranger and shuttled across the country into the care of yet another stranger.

Jo wrapped a blond curl around her index finger and smiled, her face radiant. "I suppose I could stay a tiny little while longer."

Garrett fought back the sting behind his eyes. Who wouldn't be terrified by all that upheaval? The little girl had been adrift and alone until Jo had sheltered her. Now they were connected. He'd seen that sort of devotion before over the years. He'd even been the recipient once or twice of a victim's misplaced allegiance. Those false attachments had quickly faded when people were reunited with their families.

Except Cora didn't have anyone familiar.

"I need you, Jo," Cora stated simply.

Garrett's gaze locked with Jo's. He couldn't mask his churning emotions, and he knew right then she saw him for what he was—exposed, terrified. Yet no censure entered her expression, only compassion and understanding. For a moment it seemed as if everything would be okay—as though she'd be strong enough for all of them.

I need you, Jo.

The truth hit Garrett like a mule kick. He needed guidance and Cora had taken a shine to Jo. He'd do everything in his power to foster the budding relationship—even if it risked his brittle emotions.

If only his life had been different.

He and Cora both needed Jo desperately. Yet only one of them was worthy of her.

Chapter Two

The weathered boardwalk planks beneath Jo's feet rumbled. With Cora between them, Jo and the marshal paused beneath the hand-painted sign for the Palace Café. A group of young boys, blessedly minus any of her brothers, dashed around them, laughing and calling to each other. Visibly alarmed by the group's roughhousing, Cora latched on to Jo's leg.

"Don't worry." Jo ruffled her curls. "They're just full of energy. They have the week off while their schoolteacher is visiting her sister during her confinement."

Another baby, and the birth had been particularly difficult. Jo stifled a shudder. Her ma served as midwife around town, and Jo often assisted. Each birth she attended crystallized her fears and renewed her vow to stay single.

While there was joy, too often there was pain. She'd swaddled the tiny bodies of stillborn infants. She'd led distraught husbands from the room and sat with them while they wept. She'd felt the hand of a laboring mother go limp as the woman's exhausted body gave up the battle for life.

After all she'd seen, she'd never experience the innocent hope and wonder most expectant mothers felt.

Not that she had any prospects in the matter, but she didn't like this strange push and pull tugging on her emotions lately. More and more often she found herself lingering over the newborns, inhaling their sweet scent and wondering what it would be like to have one of her own.

Jo mentally shook off the disquieting thoughts. It was no use pining for things that could never be. She'd been rejected before and, while she knew she could survive heartbreak, she dreaded a repeat of the humiliating experience.

Cora peeked out from beneath her pale eyelashes. "When will I go to school?"

The marshal blanched. "I don't know. I'm not sure. Should she be in school now? What should I do?"

"There's no need for panic." Jo chuckled him on the shoulder. "We'll talk with the teacher when she comes back next week."

"You're right." He mopped his forehead with a blue-patterned bandanna. "Of course you're right. There's no need for alarm. I'm just new to all this."

The marshal's dedication melted Jo's insides. Seeing a tough, hardened lawman reduced to a bundle of nerves over a tiny little girl was the most precious sight she'd ever seen. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry, hug him or chuck him on the shoulder once more. But she felt better about Cora's new living arrangements than she had all week.

She'd known the marshal was fair and levelheaded, but seeing him this vulnerable lit a warm glow in her chest. Anybody could be a tough lawman, but it took a real man to show his vulnerability.

Cora tipped her rag doll side to side, sending its yellow-yarn braids flopping. "I know some of my letters. But I can't read yet."

The marshal squinted thoughtfully. "I'll talk with the schoolteacher when she returns. Are you ready for lunch?"

"Nope." Cora glanced around. "I dropped Miss Lily's coat."

She dashed back a few paces, leaving Jo and Marshal Cain alone on the boardwalk beneath a cloudless, brilliant blue spring sky. Jo had been thinking about his rattled composure when she'd teased him earlier, and she wondered if he was embarrassed by female attention. She'd noticed the odd affliction with her brothers. They were as tough as buffalo jerky with their friends, but as fluffy as milkweed when it came to a pretty girl.

Testing her theory, Jo smiled coyly, her lips stretching with muscles she rarely used. The marshal returned the smile, his face turning pink.

To her shock, she felt her own cheeks warm.

She'd done it—she'd almost flirted with a man and he'd sort of responded. It was no wonder Mary Louise held court to all those besotted suitors in the mercantile like the queen of England.

“Hey, runt,” a familiar voice sneered.

Jo's smile faded. Bert Walby sauntered up the boardwalk, his fingers hitched into his striped vest pocket. Tom Walby's brother never missed an opportunity to bait her. She stood up straighter, bracing for his verbal attack. Tom and Bert looked alike with their gangly frames and straw-colored hair.

Gritting her teeth, Jo faced her tormentor. “You're looking awfully fancy, Bert. You going before the judge?”

He scowled. “That's funny, runt, cuz you look the same as always. You get dressed in a barn this morning?”

Chuckling, he snatched the hat from her head, then reared back and cocked his arm in order to toss it onto the dirt-packed street. The next instant, Bert staggered into the marshal. Unsure what had knocked him sideways, Jo leaped back. The two men slammed into the jailhouse wall. Bert yelped and collapsed onto his knees. Marshal Cain bent, hooking his right hand beneath the man's shoulder, and hauled him upright. The marshal whispered something in Bert's ear before shoving him forward.

With a grumble, Bert circled his right shoulder and rubbed his biceps with his left hand.

The marshal crossed his arms and cleared his throat.

Leaning down, Bert plucked her hat from the boardwalk and dusted the brim against his thigh before returning it. “I was just checking on Tom. Heard you locked him up again.”

The marshal braced his legs apart. “Tom's responsible for his own actions. You can pick him up before supper. He should be sober by then.”

“It's nobody's business what a man does on his own time.”

“Tom makes it my business when he goes smashing up property.”

Bert tossed a glare over his shoulder as he beat a hasty exit.

Jo replaced her hat and frowned at Bert's retreating back. “That was odd. He usually doesn't back down that quick.”

Marshal Cain shrugged, his expression deceptively neutral. “Seems like Bert's got a grudge against both of us.”

“We've been feuding since the eighth grade.” Jo snorted. “Since I gave Tom a shiner. The Walbys are too afraid of my brothers to settle the score outright, but whenever Tom or Bert sees me alone... You get the idea.”

“I do.” A muscle ticked along the marshal's jaw.

Cora skipped between them with her doll. Miss Lily sported a red coat trimmed in navy blue rickrack.

Garrett yanked open the café door, clanging the bell suspended above them, his attention focused on the street. His gaze settled on the spot where Bert had taken up vigil near the jailhouse. Garrett looked between the two of them, and his eyes narrowed. Jo's shoulders sagged. So much for flirting with the marshal. Now he'd see her like everyone else in town did—a rebel who scrapped with the boys.

She set her jaw. It was best not to pine for something she'd never have. Over the years she'd grown wiser, more protective of her emotions. Loosening her resolve was a road paved with disaster.

It was best if Garrett thought of her as a buddy, because a friend couldn't break her heart.

* * *

The café bustled with activity. Plates clanked together and the low hum of voices surrounded them. The succulent aroma of fried chicken filled the air. Garrett pulled out a chair for Cora and Jo in turn, then caught the curious glance of a middle-aged woman in a burgundy bustled dress.

He touched his forehead in greeting and leaned nearer Jo's ear. “Is it all right? You and I eating together. I don't want any gossip.”

Jo rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry about it. We’re fine.”

For an instant he thought he saw a flash of disappointment. The moment passed so quickly, he shook off the odd feeling. Why would Jo want people gossiping about them?

Starched white cloths draped the wooden tables, and mismatched china covered the surface. The decor was a curious blend of faded elegance and homespun crafts. In the center of the table, a pint-size milk jug tinted a clear shade of blue-green held a posy of coneflowers.

Garrett kicked back in his chair and studied his surroundings. Most of the people in town were familiar by now, and they’d moved passed their initial wariness. A few gentlemen nodded in his direction, and Mrs. Schlautman flashed him a smile.

Jo rested her menu on the table. “How’d you end up here, anyway?”

He couldn’t hold back a grin. “You sure are direct.”

“Is that bad?”

“No, no. I like it.” Too much.

Garrett planted his elbows on the table and fisted his hands. “I was bored. I needed a challenge. When I heard what I was up against, what the previous sheriff had let go on around here, I knew this was the perfect job for me.”

“Will you stay? After you’re done cleaning up the town and all?”

“Hadn’t planned on it.” His gaze slid toward Cora. “But things have changed.”

Their waitress bustled past and took their orders, momentarily interrupting his troubled thoughts. Jo and the woman exchanged a few pleasantries, their friendship obvious by their banter. The woman returned a moment later with a pencil and paper, and Cora happily accepted the distracting items.

Garrett scratched his head. “I never even thought of that.”

“You’re new to all this. You’ll learn.” Jo pressed her thumb against the tines of her fork. “Do you have any other family? Someone who could help out for a bit?”

“Just a cousin and his wife.” Garrett glanced away. “They won’t be much help.”

“I thought you said you didn’t have any family.”

“None that claim me.” He ducked his head. “I guess that’s different than no kin at all.”

There was no love lost between him and Edward. For a time after his parents’ deaths, Garrett had stayed with Edward’s family. They’d been mortified by the scandal, and resentful of the added burden of two extra children. Especially Garrett, who bore a striking resemblance to his father.

He shook his head. “It must seem strange to you.”

“I’ve never wanted for brothers, that’s for certain.” Jo drummed her fingers on the table. “Is your cousin a lawman, too?”

“Nope. He owns a sawmill back East. My father was a doctor. I’m the only one who went West.”

“I guess that explains your parents’ deaths.”

His heart stuttered and stalled. “Explains what?”

“You know, the smallpox. Doctors get exposed to all that kind of stuff all the time.”

His blood gradually resumed pumping again, moving sluggishly through his frozen veins.

“Of course,” he replied.

These people respected him, gave him their trust. What would they do if they knew of his past? A lawman, the son of a murderer. They’d run him out of town on a rail. If he and Cora settled here, he’d have to guard the secret with even greater care. He wasn’t alone anymore.

Garrett braced his left palm on the table and his right one against his chest.

Jo leaned forward, a crease between her delicately arched brows. “Are you all right? You don’t look so good.”

“Fine.”

Avoiding her penetrating gaze, he glanced instead at her fingers. They were long and tapered, the nails blunt and neatly rounded. A smudge of ink darkened the tip of her index finger.

He turned from the distraction. Cora scribbled away, her head bent in concentration. Noting his interest, she lifted her paper and proudly displayed her picture. Even with her rudimentary skills, Garrett recognized his sister and her husband on either side of Cora, their hands linked together.

Cora's lower lip trembled. "Look. I made my family."

His throat tight, Garrett knelt before her and pulled her into his embrace. She wrapped her arms around his neck and a single sob shook her delicate body.

"Oh, dear," the woman in burgundy exclaimed, half rising.

Jo gently waved the concerned woman aside. "She'll be all right. She's right where she needs to be."

Grateful for Jo's assistance, Garrett closed his eyes.

After Cora had calmed, he took his seat once more. Jo resumed the conversation as if there'd been no break, and her light chatter was a grateful distraction. As he watched her and Cora laugh, he let his mind wander. What would it be like, courting Jo? Actually courting her like a proper gentleman?

Garrett spread his work-roughened fingers over the stark white tablecloth. No use thinking the impossible. She deserved better. What if the evil that had snapped his father's soul lived within Garrett? He couldn't take the risk.

Jo rested her hand over his. "You don't have to be alone in this. I hope we can be friends."

"I'd like that."

Sour guilt swelled in his throat for even thinking about Jo romantically. She deserved someone who could love her with his whole heart, without reservations. Garrett wasn't that man.

* * *

That evening, Jo returned to her solitary room at the boardinghouse. She lit a single candle and perched on the edge of the bed. Without Cora for company, the room seemed unnaturally quiet.

Lately she'd begun to realize what a lonely place she'd carved out for herself. Rising at dawn each day, spending her shift at the telegraph office, home each evening. Every other weekend she helped her family on the farm. She kept herself busy, sure, but even that felt false.

Like at the mercantile, when Mr. Stuart ran low on supplies and spread out the remaining stock to make it look as if there were more goods available. That's how Jo felt lately, like she was spreading herself thin to make it appear there was more to her life. Covering up the empty places in her heart with bits of nonsense. Except she wasn't hiding them from other people, she was hiding from herself.

Always before, she'd known what she'd wanted, and she'd sought her goal with single-minded determination. Except she didn't know what she wanted anymore.

Jo stood and crossed the room, then pressed her forehead against the cool windowpane. She did know one thing—being with Cora and Garrett felt right.

Blowing out a warm breath, Jo fogged a circle on the glass. Garrett had accepted her offer of friendship. Together they'd look after Cora, ease her through the transition of losing her parents.

Simple as that.

The fog on the glass quickly dissipated. He hadn't shown signs of interest toward any of the single ladies in town earlier, now that he had Cora to look after... Her stomach pitched. A single man around these parts who needed a wife didn't stay single for long. There'd be no setting her cap for Marshal Cain. She'd never set herself up for that kind of demoralizing rejection again.

Jo glanced at the tips of her battered work boots. She knew what she wanted, all right: she wanted something that could never be.

Chapter Three

A week after the marshal's return, Jo shaded her eyes with one hand and searched the horizon. A kick of dust indicated his timely arrival. Her ma had finally invited the marshal and Cora for dinner. By coincidence, this was Jo's weekend home.

A soft object thumped against the back of her head. She bent and retrieved a faded leather glove from the ground.

“Hey!” Frowning at her brother, Abraham, she waved the glove. “Did you throw this at me?”

“You weren’t paying any attention.” He tugged off his second glove. “Why all the daydreaming?”

“I wasn’t daydreaming.”

No matter what happened during the week, when Jo rounded the bend and caught sight of her childhood home on the horizon, her mood lightened. Lately, she needed the comforting sight more than ever. That strange yearning hadn’t abated, and a restless need for something more in her life itched beneath her collar.

Abraham lifted an eyebrow. “It’s like working with Caleb. Are you in love with Mary Louise Stuart, too?”

Jo winged the glove in Abraham’s direction. He ducked and easily avoided her revenge. At seventeen, he wasn’t interested in courting just yet.

“I don’t see what all the fuss is about Mary Louise,” Jo grumbled. “What does anybody know about her other than she’s pretty?”

“What else do you have to know?” Abraham shrugged.

“Be serious.” Jo knelt before a hay bale and clipped the wire. “God gave her those looks. It’s not like she had to work for anything.”

“How do you think Mary Louise feels? She can’t hardly step from behind the counter without causing a stampede.”

“It’s strange, you know, when you really think about it. Some people are rewarded for how they look, not who they are.” Jo sat back on her heels. “While other people are paying the price for how they look, when none of it is their fault. And nobody’s happy about it.”

“You know what your problem is, Jo? You think too much.” Abraham kicked the loose hay over the uneven ground of the muddy corral. “Looks like the marshal and his niece are here.”

Her brother had a point. She had been thinking too much lately. Only the day before she’d offered to hold Mrs. Patterson’s baby while the new mother shopped in the mercantile. When Jo had caught herself wondering how the marshal’s coffee-colored eyes would look on a chubby little toddler, she’d promptly returned the baby and fled the store. That sort of behavior had to stop.

In desperation, she’d arrived at the farm earlier than normal and donned her comfortable trousers. She’d tackled her chores with vigor, hoping the physical exertion would ease her mental turmoil.

Her face damp with perspiration, Jo spread another bale of hay while the wagon lumbered up the driveway, stopping only when her visitors halted before the barn.

She pinched off her gloves and met them on the drive.

“JoBeth!” Cora called.

The little girl leaned out of the wagon and wrapped her arms around Jo’s neck. Marshal Cain met Jo’s gaze over the girl’s shoulder, and her breath strangled for a split second. There was something heady about having those dark eyes focused on her. She’d seen him every day this week, and his effect on her had grown rather than blunted. Each time she saw his face, her heart pounded, and her head spun as though she’d been twirling in a circle.

Attempting to break the mysterious spell, she squeezed Cora tight and pulled her from her perch, then set her gently on the ground.

Six-year-old Maxwell, Jo’s youngest brother, bounded down the driveway, his knees pumping. “JoBeth, JoBeth!” he called. “Are they here yet?”

“Peas and carrots, Maxwell. Look with your own eyes. Can’t you see? Slow down before you run us over.”

Her brother skidded to a halt before them. He wore his usual uniform of a tan shirt and brown trousers with a pair of red suspenders. A crumpled hat covered his dark hair. “Who are you?” he demanded of Cora.

The little girl clutched her rag doll close. "I'm Cora."

"How old are you?" Maxwell asked.

"Five."

The front door swung open and Mrs. McCoy stepped onto the porch. "Who do we have here?" She descended the stairs, her fingers busy unknotting the apron wrapped around her waist. "Gracious, you must be the prettiest little girl this side of the Mississippi!"

"Our guests have arrived, Ma." Jo tucked Cora against her side. The McCoy clan could be overwhelming, and Jo didn't want the girl spooked.

Maxwell dashed up the stairs and tugged on his mother's skirts as she approached them. "That's Cora. She said she's five years old."

Edith McCoy smiled, her expression full of unspoken sympathy. "We're pleased to have you. Why don't you come on inside."

Edith labored up the walk, her gait stiff, and Jo sighed. Her ma's left hip sometimes acted up, but Edith McCoy never complained. Complaining wasn't ladylike. When Jo was younger, her ma had dressed her in frills and lace, but that hadn't lasted. Despite being a paragon of feminine qualities in an untamed land, Edith had never swayed her daughter into fripperies.

Her ma waved them toward the house. "Welcome to our home, Marshal Cain. I hope you like pot roast."

The marshal flashed a wry grin. "Just as long it's not fried chicken."

"I see you've taken the fried-chicken tour of all the single ladies in Cimarron Springs." Edith chuckled. "I figured I'd wait until the spring and let you enjoy a pot roast for a change."

Maxwell danced around them, his scuffed boots kicking up a whirl of dust. "Cora! Cora! The barn cat just had kittens. You wanna see them? Their eyes are open and everything."

The little girl tugged on Jo's hand. "Can I?"

Jo waited for Marshal Cain's nod of approval. "Of course you can."

Maxwell spun around, and Jo caught him by the cuff of his shirt. "Cora isn't from the country, so you be nice. No spiders, no frogs, no beetles..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Maxwell rolled his eyes. "I know guest rules."

"Not just any guest. Cora is a special guest. I want you on your Sunday best."

"I'll be good."

Jo released Maxwell and planted her hands on her hips. "I bet Reverend Miller would have a thing or two to say about your Sunday best."

Her youngest brother scowled. "He boxed my ears last week."

"That's because he got to you before I did." Jo pointed a finger. "Now don't get Cora's pretty pink dress all dirty."

"I won't," Maxwell grumbled.

Edith McCoy sighed and shook her head. "I hope that's not her best dress, because dirt multiplies on this farm. And it doesn't wash out easy."

"Don't worry, Mrs. McCoy," the marshal replied, dusting his hands together. "She's got plenty more dresses where that one came from."

Jo and Marshal Cain followed Edith into the cozy farmhouse. The aromas of fresh-baked bread and pot roast drifted from the kitchen, sending Jo's mouth watering. Since the spring temperatures cooled after dark, a fire danced in the hearth.

"You two have a seat," Edith ordered. "I'm putting the finishing touches on dinner."

Marshal Cain pulled out a chair and paused. Jo glanced behind her. He waved his hand over the seat. "Ladies first."

A spoon clattered against the floor.

Her ma bent and retrieved the utensil. "Clumsy of me. I'll just rinse this off in the sink. If you don't mind my being forward, how are you getting along, Marshal?"

Jo snorted and flopped onto the proffered chair.

The marshal sat down across from her. “No need to apologize, Mrs. McCoy. I’m sure Jo has told you all about Cora.”

“Not Jo, no. But gossip travels with the speed of boredom around here.”

The marshal glanced around the tidy room, and Jo knew exactly what he was noticing. All of the spices above the stove were arranged alphabetically, the pots were hung by size, and even the glasses were arranged by height. When she was younger, her ma’s habits had annoyed her, but as she grew older she realized that order made even the most cramped spaces cozy and welcoming.

Marshal Cain shook his head. “How do you manage to keep everything in place with children running underfoot?”

Mrs. McCoy wiped the spoon on a towel draped over the sink. “More help, I guess. I’ve got more people to make the mess, but I’ve also got more people to help with the chores.”

“I don’t think more children will solve my problems.” The marshal rubbed a weary hand over his eyes. “I can’t keep up. I feel like my whole jailhouse was hit with a pink bomb. That little girl must have come with a magic trunk, because when I opened it, the contents tripled in size.”

Jo hid a grin. The marshal did look a bit disheveled. And she’d never heard him so talkative. As she pondered his uncharacteristic admissions, another thought darkened her mood. They’d seen each other in passing each day this week, and yet he’d never once confided his concerns with her.

The marshal pressed his thumb into the soft wax of the candle burning in the center of the table. “I hope nobody gets arrested, because Cora set up a tea party in the jail cell. I can’t put a fugitive in there with a couple of rag dolls having tea. There’s even a pink blanket on the cot.”

Jo clapped her hands over her mouth.

Her ma lifted a lid from the roaster, sending a plume of steam drifting toward the ceiling. “I can see where that would be a problem,” Edith replied, her voice ripe with amusement. “Sometimes I wish we had more pink in this house. We’re full up on boys since Jo left, and she was never one for tea parties anyway.”

Jo scowled, her amusement waning. Just because she didn’t throw tea parties didn’t mean she wasn’t a girl. She was different, that’s all. Why did everyone insist on bringing it up all the time?

“And it’s not just her stuff.” The marshal picked off a chunk of wax and rolled it into a ball between his thumb and forefinger. “Cora doesn’t eat much in the morning. Should I be worried about that? And she never stops asking questions. Sometimes I don’t know the answers. But if I tell her that I don’t know the answer, she just asks the same question in another way. Is that normal?”

“That’s a five-year-old child for you, all right. As curious as a kitten and just as precious.” Edith placed a Mason jar filled with lemonade before the marshal. “You better drink something or you’ll get parched.”

A flush of color crept up the marshal’s neck. “I guess I’ve been around Cora too much. I can’t stop talking all of a sudden.”

“Children don’t come with instructions, that’s for certain.” Her ma set out a loaf of bread and a pat of butter on wooden slab.

“I know.” The marshal slathered his bread with the softened butter. “Like, how often should you wash them? What kind of soap should you use? I only have lye soap. Is that bad for girls?” A note of desperation crept into his voice. “I don’t know what to do. What if I do the wrong thing?”

“The fact that you’re worried makes you a better parent than most others.” Edith dried her hands on the towel and crossed the room. “The bad folks aren’t worried about what’s right and wrong, you know?” She perched on a chair beside him and patted his hand. “You’re doing fine.”

The marshal raked his free hand through his hair. He paused for a moment, his Adam’s apple working. “She cries at night.”

“Of course she does,” Jo exclaimed, her heart twisting at his words. “She’s lost both of her parents. She’s lost her home. That’s enough to make anybody cry.”

Something flickered in his eyes, but it passed quickly. Jo ached to reach out and comfort him, but she knew better. She never had words for times like these—soothing, comforting words. He'd said it himself over lunch last week. She was direct.

With grudging admiration, Jo studied her mother. While the rest of the McCoy's were dark-haired with green eyes, Mrs. McCoy stood out with her pale blue eyes and dark blond hair. Even the streak of gray at her temple lent her an air of elegance.

Jo had never really valued cossetting before. Blunt truths were faster and more efficient. Now she realized there was a time and a place for coddling.

Marshal Cain pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't know what to do," he repeated.

"Love her," Jo replied. "Just like you're doing."

"Jo is right." Edith smiled and patted his shoulder. "Love goes a long way."

The door swung open, and her brother Caleb stepped into the room surrounded by a noxious aroma. Jo waved a hand before her nose. "Gracious, did you take a swim in Pa's cologne?"

The tips of her brother's ears reddened. "Mind your own business, runt." He strutted across the room in his crisp blue shirt and navy trousers.

Caleb was the oldest of the boys at twenty-two, tall and slender with the distinctive McCoy coloring of dark brown hair and bright green eyes. They all took after their pa's looks in that regard, though Ely McCoy was short and stout. Jo was the only child who'd inherited his lack of height. Much to her chagrin, she was embarrassingly petite.

Being small with five younger—and much taller—brothers had taught her a thing or two about strategy. "I think someone is going into town. This must be your third trip to the mercantile this week."

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing." Jo studied the jagged tips of her blunt fingernails. "It's just that you're not the only one visiting the mercantile on a regular basis."

The owner's daughter was a pretty blonde with blue eyes and a ready smile, and since Mary Louise had turned eighteen and started working behind the counter, the store's revenue had leaped tenfold.

Caleb fisted his hands. "Who else have you been noticing?"

"There're too many to count. You better screw up your courage for courting or she's gonna slip away."

Her brother glanced around the room, caught sight of Marshal Cain and stopped short. "Evening, sir." Caleb straightened and tucked his shirttail into his pants before glaring at Jo. "It doesn't matter because I don't care. I'm going into town because Ma is out of sugar. Isn't that right?"

Edith smiled indulgently. "Of course."

"See?"

Caleb stomped out of the room, and her ma shot Jo a quelling glance. "Don't be too hard on the boy."

"What?" Jo drawled. "I'm just trying to help."

The marshal grinned. "Mary Louise better make up her mind soon or I'll be breaking up fights. There's nothing like a pretty girl to get a young man's blood boiling."

An uncharacteristic spark of jealousy pricked Jo. Apparently, Marshal Cain had noticed the pretty little blonde, too. She crossed her arms over her chest. "I bet her pa hopes she never decides on one suitor. He makes sure all those boys buy something while they're panting after Mary Louise. I heard he even ordered a new wagon from Wichita."

"No more gossiping, JoBeth," her ma scolded from her place by the stove. "And let up on that boy. Being in love is harder than it looks."

A huff of anger settled at the back of Jo's throat. They all acted as if she had no emotions. She couldn't recall one time when her ma had told the boys to let up on her.

Jo braced her arms against the table and locked her elbows. “How come you never tell them to go easy on me?”

“Because you’re tougher than they are.” Her mother waved her wooden spoon for emphasis. “And smarter, too.”

Jo caught the marshal studying her with those dark, intuitive eyes and decided it was time to change the subject. “How are the Elders?”

Her ma’s face lit up. “I just got a letter. Watch the gravy while I fetch it.”

Marshal Cain rested his hat on his knee, his enormous palm dwarfing the crown. “I think I’ve heard that name before.”

“Probably.” Jo stood and crossed to the stove. “The Elders used to live over the rise. They moved to Paris, Texas, going on ten years ago.”

“Wasn’t there something about an outlaw?”

“Mrs. Elder’s first husband was a bank robber. He hid the loot in a cave by Hackberry Creek. The boys sell tours for a penny every summer.”

“They do what?” The marshal set down the lemonade he’d raised to his lips. “Don’t the new owners mind all those kids tramping across their property?”

“No one lives there.” Jo shrugged. “The place has been empty for years”

Her pa stepped into the room. A great bear of a man, Ely McCoy vibrated the floorboards with his heavy steps. Jo dropped the gravy spoon and dashed toward him. “Pa!”

He enveloped her in a bone-crushing hug, lifting her feet from the floor. “There’s my little girl. I heard you brought company.”

Jo’s heart soared. Her pa was the only person who treated her like a girl without making her feel weak. He was a stout man with a thick salt-and-pepper beard and a mop of unruly mahogany hair hanging over his twinkling green eyes.

“This is my pa, Ely McCoy.”

Marshal Cain rose from his seat and held out his hand. “Nice to see you again, Mr. McCoy.”

“Call me Ely.”

Her pa slapped the marshal on the back, nearly launching him into the hearth. “Glad you’re here, son. I need help balancing the pasture gate.”

Jo grimaced. She loved her pa, but he was always putting the guests to work. “Why don’t you get the boys to help you?”

“Because Caleb’s cologne turns my stomach, and David has gone to Wichita to buy a horse.”

“Glad to help,” Marshal Cain replied easily.

Jo appreciated his calm acceptance of the request. She also liked how his chambray shirt stretched across his broad shoulders. He was quiet and thoughtful, never missing a detail. She liked watching as he sized up a room. He looked at people, not through them.

What did he think of her?

Did he see her as everyone else in town did—as an oddity? Somehow or other she didn’t think so. He regarded her with the same deference he showed Cora and her ma. Maybe that’s why he appealed to her—he treated everyone he encountered as though they were important, as though they were worthy of his time.

The marshal tossed a resigned grin over his shoulder and followed her pa out the door.

As the two men left together, Jo considered how different they were. Not just in size and shape, but in temperament. Her parents were opposites, too. Ely McCoy was a loud bear of a man whose bark was worse than his bite. Her ma was more refined, more reserved than her pa. Yet they worked well together, and no one expected either of them to change.

Jo had learned early on that boys expected her to change. At thirteen years old, a boy had told her flat out that if she wanted him to stop teasing her, she’d best let him win at marbles.

Jo had decided then and there that she’d rather win.

A scant few minutes later, a knock startled Jo from her vigil at the stove. She crossed the room and opened the door. The reverend stood on the doorstep, a dark shadow against the orange glow from the setting sun.

“Reverend Miller. What brings you here this time of the evening?”

He doffed his cap and smoothed his thinning hair. “A telegram arrived for the marshal. The clerk said the marshal should see it right away.”

Chapter Four

Garrett strained beneath the weight of the gate, a fine sheen of perspiration forming on his brow. The evening air was cool and a stiff breeze whipped the hair over his perspiring brow. The incessant, relentless gales dried up the earth and left every surface dusty and gritty. When a changing weather front blew in, Garrett stuffed rags around the windows and still awoke with grit on his tongue. He sometimes wondered why the whole prairie hadn't been swept away already.

Thankfully, as the evening stretched on, the breeze gentled, and the sun sank low on the horizon. Hills rolled toward Hackberry Creek, and a smattering of trees softened the view. Garrett didn't consider himself a sentimental man, but he appreciated the quiet beauty of nature settling into nightfall.

Ely broke the silence first, saying, “That little Cora sure is a cute one.”

“That she is.”

“Heard she's taken a shine to Jo.”

“Word travels fast around these parts.”

“That it does.” Ely ratcheted the hinges tighter. “What are you planning on doing?”

Garrett gritted his teeth against the strain of the heavy metal gate. “Doing?”

“You gonna raise that little girl all on your own?”

“Not much other choice,” Garrett bit out over his exertion.

At Ely's signal, Garrett released his hold and leaped back, scooting his boots free from a possible collapse. To his relief, the hinges held firm. He flexed his sore fingers. Ely must be twenty years his senior, but the older man didn't show any signs of strain. Mr. McCoy was a tough, portly man with a fierce scowl and a ready smile. Garrett recalled how Jo had launched herself at her pa earlier. Though Ely could snap a sturdy tree limb with one hand, his children didn't seem afraid of him.

The idea gave Garrett pause. What was it like for the McCoy children, not being afraid all the time?

Ely swung the bars back and forth, examining the smooth action with a satisfied expression. “When I look at your little girl, I wish I could go back in time.”

Garrett glanced up in surprise. “Why?”

“Jo never had time to be a baby. To be a girl. By the time she was walking, we already had Caleb. Then David came along and Abraham and Michael. We had a little bit of time, but then Maxwell surprised us. With all those boys, well...let's just say she had to be tough.”

Garrett couldn't help but wonder how Jo had survived with all those rough-and-tumble boys. She wasn't as tough as she pretended. He'd seen her vulnerability. Despite her confidence and bravado, she really was a tiny little thing. Those boys should be sheltering and protecting her, not the other way around. A half grin stretched across his face. Garrett had a feeling Jo would never stand for coddling.

Ely considered his dirt-stained hands. “The missus used to dress her up. Jo wouldn't stand for it. It's funny, you know? The missus thinks they butt heads because they're too different. I think they're too much alike. You ever noticed that? It's the parts of ourselves we see in others that frustrate us most.”

Ely's insight surprised Garrett. With all those children running underfoot, who had time for speculation?

The older man paused. “Probably why David and I argue like a couple of old-timers.” He nodded. “We're too much alike.”

A sense of helplessness chased away Garrett's earlier serenity. Ely's observations hit too close to the heart of the matter. That's what Garrett feared—being like his father. The blood of a murderer flowed through his veins like an unlit fuse.

The McCoy's were unencumbered by the past. They didn't know the secret he bore like an albatross around his neck. They'd never been burdened with a scandal that had destroyed an entire family.

"Pa!" a voice called.

Garrett glanced up and saw the youngest McCoy dashing toward them.

Maxwell skidded to a halt and grasped his side, leaning over as he heaved in a noisy breath. "The reverend is here. He's got a telegram for Garrett. Says it's about Cora. And it's important. And it's bad news."

Even without the power of Ely's unexpected insight, Garrett had a sinking feeling this evening wasn't going to end well.

* * *

Jo watched as Marshal Cain paced before the fireplace, his hands on his hips, a fierce scowl darkening his handsome face. "I'll go back to St. Louis myself and fight this if I have to."

"No!" Jo exclaimed.

Her ma placed a gentle hand on her arm. "Let him be."

Reverend Miller worried the shallow brim of his black felt hat in his hands. "Perhaps it's better if the marshal's cousin and his wife raise the child. You're a single man with a dangerous job..."

"They don't want Cora," Garrett announced. "They want the money from my sister's estate. It says so right here. They want custody of Cora." He jabbed a finger at the telegram. "And the proceeds of the estate for her care and comfort." He crumpled the paper in his fist. "Care and comfort my foot. My sister's husband was an architect. Did well for himself."

The reverend hung his head, revealing the bald patch at his crown. "Still, we must consider what's best for the child."

The marshal braced his hands against the mantel and stared into the blazing fire. "That's not all. I heard a rumor that Edward's sawmill is failing. He doesn't want Cora, he wants an influx of cash for his business."

Mrs. McCoy stood and faced the group, her hands thrust out in a placating gesture. "I don't like this any better than the rest of you, but we don't know your cousin's motivations for certain. Right now it's only blind speculation."

Marshal Cain turned and shook his head. "Whatever his motivations, he's already got a judge on his side."

Ely fisted his hands beneath his biceps and propped his shoulder against the wall. "Let me get this straight. He told the judge that the little girl is in jeopardy because she has a marshal as a guardian?"

"Because I'm a single man. A single lawman. They think I can't care for her properly."

"Can you?" Edith bluntly demanded.

Four pairs of eyes turned in shock.

Jo glared at her ma, who returned the sharp glance and pursed her lips. "I don't mean because you're a man. But you voiced your own concerns rather eloquently earlier this evening. You can't have a little girl in the jailhouse with murderers and rapists."

"Edith!" Ely exclaimed. "Language."

Jo's ma directed an exasperated look at her husband. "It's the truth, whether we want to face it or not. You've got a sweet little girl living above a jail cell."

Marshal Cain adjusted the gun belt strapped around his narrow hips. "She's barely been here a week. I haven't sorted out all the details. If living in the jail is the problem, then we'll move." He faced the reverend. "What about the Elder place? The one just over the rise? I'll buy that."

“You can’t,” Reverend Miller declared. “Someone already owns it.”

The room erupted into noisy chaos.

“Who?” Jo demanded.

“Why, Jack Elder’s brother,” the reverend declared. “I heard he was driving a herd of cattle from Texas.”

Ely planted an elbow on the mantel. “When did this happen?”

“Last month or so. Haven’t heard anything in a while.”

“Longhorns, I suppose?” Ely ran a thumb and forefinger along his silver-streaked beard. “Huh. I guess there’s good grazing land on the other side of the creek. He better move quick. There’s talk of closing the borders farther east. Those longhorns bring Texas Fever.”

“Does he have any kids?” Maxwell asked from the doorway.

The adults fell instantly silent at his sudden announcement. Not a one of them had noticed his arrival.

“Back outside.” Edith broke the impasse and shooed the youngest McCoy toward the porch. “The adults are talking.”

“Sounds like you’re arguing.”

“It’s a heated discussion. You and Cora play with the kittens until I call you.”

“I still say you’re arguing,” Max grumbled, but dutifully latched the door behind him.

Edith straightened the doormat with her heel. “It’ll be nice having an Elder on the land again. We should check the roof before he gets here.”

Ely grunted. “Enough. It doesn’t matter right now who owns the old Elder farm. What matters is what’s going to happen to Cora.”

Visibly shaking off the distraction, Edith straightened her collar. “I don’t think Marshal Cain has much of a choice. Keeping law in this town is unpredictable. If a judge looks at a husband and wife, also relatives, compared to a single man. A single lawman.” She paused. “How can he think Marshal Cain is the best choice?”

“I am the best choice.” The marshal punctuated each word with emotion. “I love her. I don’t want her because she comes with a pile of money. I’ve been raising her for a week. We’re struggling, sure. But I’m trying. I’ll try harder.”

Jo groaned as her ma set out the plates for supper. Heaven forbid Edith McCoy let a simple little thing like the ruin of a man’s life disrupt a meal.

“What if you’re called away?” Edith slid a plate across the table. “It took us almost a week to find you when we received the telegram about Cora.”

The marshal made a sound of disgust.

Panic welled in Jo’s throat. Didn’t they see how much Marshal Cain and his niece needed each other? Her ma was more concerned with propriety than love.

Jo clenched her hands on the table. “I can help out if he’s called away. Cora knows me.”

“That’s only one of his problems.” Edith added flatware next to the plates with infuriating precision. “His job is dangerous. What if something happens? If he’s wounded or worse. Who will take care of Cora then?”

Marshal Cain slapped his hat on his head. “I’m not giving up my girl.” He gestured dismissively toward Reverend Miller. “If some judge in Missouri....” He glanced pointedly around the room. “Or anyone else tries to take my child, they’ll have a fight on their hands.”

His expression scornful, Marshal Cain strode toward the door.

The room erupted into noisy chatter once more as everyone began talking and gesturing in overlapping conversations.

“There’s a perfectly obvious solution—” Edith began.

“Obvious to whom?” the reverend interrupted.

“You talk to him.”

Ely touched his chest. “Me?”

Jo stomped her boot. “This is getting us nowhere.”

Her pa’s head swung between the competing conversations. The reverend flailed his arms at Ely while Edith pointed a finger at her husband.

Jo brushed past them and blocked the marshal’s exit. “Let’s get hitched.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” Jo declared. “Let’s get married.”

Chapter Five

Shocked by her own words, Jo froze. Immediate silence descended on the room. Marshal Cain’s jaw dropped. For several long moments nothing stirred the air except the steady tick, tick, tick of the clock on the mantel.

Jo felt her face flame. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? He doesn’t have a wife. As Cora’s uncle, he’s a closer relative to her than a second cousin. What can the judge say if he’s married?”

“Well, uh,” the reverend sputtered. “You make a compelling argument.”

Marshal Cain hadn’t moved. He hadn’t even blinked an eyelash. The more time stretched out without a response, the more frustrated Jo became. Why didn’t he say something? Yes, no, maybe, I’ll think about it...

If Mary Louise from the mercantile had asked, he probably would’ve jumped at the chance.

“Never mind,” she declared.

“No.” The marshal held up his hand. “Jo is right. If I have a wife, they’ve lost the balance of their case against me.”

“JoBeth—” her ma placed a hand on her shoulder “—think about what you’re saying. This isn’t a decision to take lightly.”

Ely clutched his head. “You’ve lost me, Edith. Why were you dropping all those hints if you didn’t want them to get married? Why put the idea in her head if you were just gonna talk her out of it?”

“I wasn’t talking about Jo,” Mrs. McCoy hissed through clenched teeth, her emphatic gaze encompassing their rapt audience. “I was talking about one of the ladies on the fried-chicken tour.”

Jo whipped out of her mother’s hold. “I might not have been featured on the tour, but I know what I’m doing.”

She also knew she was acting like a child, but she didn’t care right then.

“This is a disaster,” Edith snapped.

Affronted, Jo challenged her ma. “How on earth does this qualify as a disaster?”

“Everybody out!” her pa shouted with a clap, startling both women into silence.

No one moved.

“I said everyone outside.”

Spurred by the force of his booming command, Jo and Marshal Cain automatically turned toward the door.

“Not you two.” Ely rolled his eyes. “The rest of us will leave.”

He waved his wife and the reverend toward the door. Reverend Miller scooted out of the tense room as if his heels were on fire. Edith scowled and stubbornly bustled around the stove. “Let me turn down the fire on the gravy.”

Ely grasped her elbow and coaxed her toward the door. “Come along, dear.”

“But the table,” her ma protested, dragging her feet. “The dinner...”

“The potatoes will be here in ten minutes. Those two need time alone more than they need a pot roast right now.”

Her ma sputtered and resisted his gentle, persistent guidance. Ely McCoy remained adamant. The door closed resolutely on her muttered protest.

Jo gaped. It was a rare day indeed when her pa overrode her ma’s wishes.

The scrape of boots as Garrett restlessly roamed about the cramped space yanked her attention back to the problem at hand. Alone with the marshal, Jo's courage faltered. She'd acted impulsively, backing herself into a corner once again.

He paced before the hearth, his expression intense. "This could work. Cora likes you."

What about you? The question balanced on the tip of her tongue.

"And you're not the romantic sort, are you?"

Jo studied her hands, the nicks and scars, the half-moon of dirt beneath her blunt fingernails. "Of course not."

His pacing halted. "There's no one else, is there? No one else you've set your cap for?"

Jo shook her head.

"You said it yourself. We're friends." The pacing resumed. "We get along okay, don't we?"

"Sure."

"And this wouldn't be a real marriage. More of a partnership."

Her legs trembled and Jo locked her knees. "A partnership."

"For Cora."

"For Cora," Jo repeated.

She set her jaw. What had she expected? That he'd fall to his knees with joy? She'd offered a solution, and he was, at the very least, considering her offer. This was a good idea. She'd have Cora. She'd have a family. Not a normal family like everybody else, but then again, when had she ever done anything the normal way? She'd have a child without childbirth. Perfect. Fabulous. Just what she'd always wanted.

And if no man ever looked at her the way her pa looked at her ma—as if she was the only candle in a world of darkness—then so be it.

Jo straightened her spine. She didn't need that sort of nonsense. She liked the marshal, and maybe someday he'd even come to like her, too. She might not be pretty like the other girls, but certainly he'd come to appreciate her other qualities.

Thus far, he hadn't laughed in her face or mocked her, and a friendship didn't risk her heart. She'd devised the perfect solution for both of them.

Marshal Cain rubbed the stubble on his chin, drawing Jo's eyes to his lips. He'd have to kiss her when they got married, wouldn't he? Tom had once bussed her with a slobbery peck on the cheek behind the livery and she hadn't been keen on repeating the experience. Marshal Cain was different, though, and she wouldn't mind trying again.

Jo pressed a hand against her quaking stomach.

Garrett stretched his arms nearer the dwindling fire and rubbed his hands together. "We've done great together this week, taking Cora back and forth. With the judge coming through town next week, we don't even need a ceremony. We could just sign the papers and call it good."

No ceremony. No kiss. Jo flipped a length of hair off her forehead. "Nope. No ceremony."

"I mean, we're both solitary people. Independent. And people have gotten married for worse reasons."

The marshal was only repeating her thoughts. Yet her heart wrenched at his words. She had a feeling she'd discovered the source of her strange yearnings. Lately the idea of having babies didn't seem so bad. Caroline from school had five children and she'd once fainted when Tom Walby broke his nose during a game of kick ball. If Caroline kept having children, there was hope for all of them.

But the marshal didn't want a real marriage.

No matter what happened, Jo wouldn't let the marshal see that occasionally, in her weaker moments, she wanted more. "Getting hitched solves all your problems."

Yep, she was JoBeth McCoy, problem solver to the world.

He circled the room and sank onto a chair before his empty dinner plate. “No. This is crazy.” Elbows on the table, he cradled his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m not myself lately.”

He was hiding something, she was certain. Jo rubbed the back of her neck. She had a feeling she knew the source of his reluctance.

No matter the personal cost, she’d pry the truth from him. “Would you say yes if someone else asked?” She fought the rough edge in her voice. “Because there are plenty of other ladies in town.”

Marshal Cain bolted upright. “This is the rest of my life. You’re the only one I’d even consider.” “Ooo...kay.”

That was a decent response, right? He hadn’t exactly explained why he’d choose her over someone else, but Jo guessed that was about as good an answer as she was going to get. While she might have hoped for something more revealing, at least he was still considering her suggestion. He hadn’t outright refused her yet.

Garrett unfurled a pink ribbon from his pocket and stretched it between his hands. “Cora loves you. You’re all she talks about these days.”

Jo’s shoulders sagged. Cora. Of course, that’s what he’d meant. He was thinking of his niece, not her.

She’d capitalize on his reluctant admission. Carefully formulating her response, Jo skirted the table. When she’d gathered her thoughts, she knelt before him and gently tugged the pink ribbon free. “We have to think of what’s best for all of us.”

A half smile lifted the corner of his lips, and her mouth went dry. She definitely wanted to try kissing again—just as a comparison. Gathering her wayward thoughts once more, she studied his hands, tanned and dwarfing her own. She didn’t feel weak when he was near. She felt buoyant and powerful, as though his strength melded with hers. Despite her own certainty, she sensed his persistent doubt. If this marriage was going to happen, they both needed faith.

Jo swallowed around the lump in her throat. One thing she’d learned over time was never to predict the future. This might not be the ideal solution for Jo—she had an uneasy sense one of them had more at stake in the marriage than the other—but this was the best solution for Cora.

The marshal and his niece had been through so much, had lost so much. If Jo could hold their family together, she’d pay the personal price.

Perhaps in bringing peace to Cora and Garrett, she’d find a measure for herself. “It’s just like you said earlier. Neither of us is the romantic sort. We’re not bothered by love. We’d be doing this for Cora. She needs a family, and, well, things are changing for me.”

The marshal raised his head and met her steady gaze. “How do you mean?”

Stalling, Jo let her attention drift around the familiar room. “The boys will be marrying soon.” “How does that change things for you?”

“Caleb is a farmer, like Pa. He’ll stay here and work the land. The house is already crowded as it is, and with another woman around...well, they won’t need my help anymore.”

Garrett flashed a wry grin. “Looks like Caleb will be spending a lot of time at the mercantile.”

“I suppose.” Jo resisted a smug rejoinder. Caleb definitely had it bad for Mary Louise. “And once he’s married, David won’t be far behind. Those boys have always followed each other.”

“Even if your parents won’t need as much of your help, you’ll still have your job in town. At the telegraph office.”

“I know. But I want more.”

“What more could you possibly want?”

What do you want? His blunt question threw her off guard. No one else had thought to ask her what she wanted. She’d thought about what was best for her parents, for her brothers, for Cora and even for the marshal. But she’d never considered what was best for her.

Her ma had certainly given up on Jo ever marrying. While she loved her family, she wanted more. When her friends got married, it was as if they were automatically considered adults, but since Jo hadn't gotten hitched, they still treated her like a child. All a man had to do was turn eighteen and he was considered grown, but a woman wasn't given that luxury.

It was odd, really, since as far as she could tell, getting married didn't automatically endow you with more wisdom than anyone else. But everyone around her seemed to think so. Her married school friends would smile and give her a patronizing nod, as though they'd somehow been granted admission into a secret club and Jo wasn't invited.

Marrying the marshal bypassed all that courting and foolishness. And at least the marshal hadn't said he'd rather court his grandfather's mule.

Jo glanced away. "I love Cora. I can't explain how it happened, but when she stepped off that train, I felt a kinship. Mrs. Smith was pacing the platform and wailing about Indians, but Cora just stood there with those big, solemn eyes. She was lost and alone, but now she has us. We can make a family."

"I know what you mean about Cora." The marshal ran his hand along his chin. "When I saw her that day at church, peeking out from behind your skirts, I felt the same way."

Jo's heart soared at his reluctant admission. He was softening toward her idea, she could tell.

"This is a lifetime decision, Jo." His dark gaze ran the length of her and Jo suddenly realized she was still wearing trousers. "You're young. Someday you'll fall in love."

She pulled out the chair beside him and hitched her pant legs over her knees, then she sat facing him. If Garrett was disappointed in what he saw, that was his loss.

No matter what happened, she wouldn't change who she was—not on the inside, and certainly not on the outside. "Maybe this is God's way of bringing two people together who wouldn't normally marry otherwise."

"But what if you want children of your own someday?" he spoke, not quite meeting her eyes.

The memories of all the births she'd attended rippled through her. All the fragile bodies she and her ma had swaddled in christening blankets for untimely burials. Not every mother survived the process, and not every baby. Garrett might be a marshal, yet Jo was certain she'd seen more death than he had.

She pushed back a wash of sadness. "We'll cross that bridge when we get there. No one knows what the future will bring. But we do know what needs to be done right now."

She leaned forward and cradled his hands. They looked at each other for a long moment, and her breath grew shallow. His shoulders were broad, strong and capable. Sitting this close, the room bathed in lamplight, she noticed how his eyes were rimmed by a darker circle, making the color appear even deeper.

Could she do this? Could she spend the rest of her life as his friend without wanting more?

He rubbed the pad of his thumb over the back of her hand and her whole body pulsed with his touch.

Jo tightened her grip. What choice did she have? She could marry him and risk her heart, or risk never seeing him again. As much as she adored Cora, they were a package deal. She couldn't have one without the other.

He dragged his hands away, stood and turned his back. A sudden sense of emptiness overwhelmed Jo. In that moment, the room appeared lifeless, abandoned. Unfinished place settings covered the table, unfilled waterglasses sat near the sink, empty chairs remained strewn haphazardly around the room.

When he faced her again, his face had smoothed into an unreadable mask. "We can't rush into this."

A heavy weight settled on Jo's chest. She felt him moving away, physically and mentally, regretting his hasty words already. Her last, best chance for a family of her own was slipping away. Was she selfish for wanting him to agree?

Her stomach churned. "Please don't make any decisions without telling me first."

"I couldn't keep something from you even if I tried." He tossed her a knowing look. "Not with Cora around."

"You can't keep secrets with a child underfoot."

He chuckled, the sound more grim than amused. A flash of lightning sparked in the distance, brightening the room for an instant and illuminating his somber expression.

Garrett squinted out the window. "Looks like we might get some rain. That's bad timing with the creek rising fast from the melting up north."

"Not much use in worrying about something you can't control. My pa likes to say, 'Keep your faith in God, and one eye on the river.'"

"I like the sound of that."

The image of the raging creek resonated in Jo's head. It felt as though her beliefs about herself were slipping away, eroding beneath a deluge of new possibilities. Somehow, she'd always imagined things going on just the way they had. The boys growing and marrying. Her little room at the boardinghouse. Coming home for dinner on Sundays.

Then she'd found herself picturing her own family, having her own Sunday dinners.

Marshal Cain approached her and grasped her shoulders, his touch light. "You have to know something about me. I'm not good husband material. If you're looking for love, if you think this might grow into love someday, you'll be disappointed." He interrupted her murmured protest. "It's not that I don't like you, admire you, but I just can't."

Can't or won't? Once again the words balanced on the tip of her tongue, but her courage deserted her when she needed it most. Besides, what did it matter?

She must remain focused on the true problem. "We'll be friends. We'll both love Cora, and that will be enough love for all of us."

"I still need to think." He rubbed his forehead. "I'm not saying no, but I need to think this through. We can't make a rash decision. There are things about me you don't know."

He said the last words so quietly, she barely registered them.

"You said it yourself," Jo urged. "People have married for worse reasons. At least you and I have good intentions. How can things go wrong if we're making a decision based on what's best for Cora?"

"Things can go wrong." He tipped back on his heels, his voice somber. "Believe me, things can always go wrong."

Jo glanced at her scuffed boots. Once again she wondered if he'd make a rash decision if she looked like Mary Louise at the mercantile. Probably so. Men made rash decisions about pretty women every day. With tomboys, they made rational, thoughtful decisions based on logic.

Jo plucked at a loose thread on her trousers. Was she willing to change? For Marshal Cain? For a man?

Never.

But what about Cora?

Jo yanked the thread loose, exposing a tear in the fabric. Even if she could change, she didn't want to. She liked the person she was—inside and out. Marshal Cain either accepted her the way she was or not at all. As simple as that.

"Maybe," Marshal Cain spoke, his voice hesitant. "The answer is maybe. Let's leave it there for now."

Tears threatened, and Jo hastily blinked them away. This was no time for going soft. In life, maybe meant no. "Promise me you'll think about it."

"I promise."

“Can I still take Cora to the telegraph office with me tomorrow?” she added hopefully.

“Of course. This doesn’t change anything.”

“Of course.”

With fisted hands, Jo rubbed her eyes in tight circles. Her hasty words had changed everything. Yet she didn’t regret them, not for an instant. “Either way, we should think about finding you and Cora a new place to live. Outlaws and tea parties make strange bedfellows.”

The marshal threw back his head and laughed, a rich hearty sound that vibrated in her chest and sent her blood thrumming through her veins.

“I can’t argue with you in that regard.” He swiped at his eyes. “Thank you. I needed a good laugh.”

Feeling brazen, Jo grinned. “Can you imagine if word reached Wichita there was a pink afghan in the jailhouse?”

“Maybe crime would go down. It’s hard to be a tough guy when there’s a doll in your cell.”

“This could be the best thing that happened to Cimarron Springs in a long while.”

Garrett stared down at her, and Jo tipped back her head. Their gazes collided and they stood frozen for a long moment.

He reached out and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, his finger coasting along the sensitive skin of her neck. “I had a job in Colorado Springs before this. My deputy told me I was a fool for coming to Kansas. He was wrong. Coming here was the best decision I ever made.”

“Even with all that’s happening?”

“Especially now. You’ve been heaven-sent for Cora.”

His admission awakened a sliver of hope. “I have next Monday off from work. Cora and I are picking mulberries down by the creek.”

Garrett grasped her hand, caressing her blunt nails. “Come Monday afternoon, you’ll have purple fingers.”

“And purple lips.”

His eyes widened and he made a strangled sound in his throat. “Uh, well,” he muttered as he dropped her hand and stumbled back a step. “I’d best get Cora home. I don’t want her out in the rain.” He jerked one thumb over his shoulder. “The wagon and the rain and all.”

Frowning, Jo touched her cheek as he made a hasty retreat. Why did he run off every time she thought they were making progress?

She crossed her arms over her chest. The fool man was running hot and cold and his indecision was driving her mad. Either way, he had to make up his mind on his own. She wasn’t chasing down someone who didn’t want her, no matter how stupid he was for rejecting her.

Even if she wasn’t pretty on the outside like Mary Louise, she was worthy on the inside.

How did she convince Garrett of that truth?

Chapter Six

Garrett plucked a stuffed bunny from his favorite chair and collapsed onto the seat. In five short days, Cora had stamped herself indelibly on the few rooms he occupied above the jailhouse. Before the little girl’s arrival, he’d thought the space more than adequate. Now there simply wasn’t enough room for all the fripperies that accompanied a little girl.

As he dug a pink ribbon from beneath the cushions, a soft whimper caught his attention. Garrett cocked his head and realized the gentle noise was coming from Cora’s room. Worried, he heeled off his boots in a jack and crossed the distance in his stocking feet, then peered behind the partition. Cora rested on her side facing him, her rag doll clutched against her chest.

Tears streamed down her face.

A nauseating wave of sadness buckled Garrett’s knees. He knelt beside Cora’s bed and brushed the damp curls from her forehead. Her eyes remained closed, and Garrett realized she was crying

in her sleep. Hesitant and uncertain, he murmured soothing nonsense words and gently rubbed her back until her sobs eased.

Surrounded again by silence, long-buried memories leaped into his head. He'd been strong for Deirdre after their parents had died, and he'd be strong for Cora, too. He gently tucked the blankets over Cora's thin shoulders.

Doubt chipped away at his resolve. Cora was younger, more innocent and vulnerable than Deirdre had ever been. He and his only sister had been old before their time. Their lives had been torn asunder by their father's frequent rages. A devastating back injury during the war had driven him into constant pain, and the alcohol he'd used to dull the agony turned him mean.

Garrett's father had been a physician, and his inability to heal himself had driven him mad. Garrett used to believe the whiskey bottle held madness, because with each drink, the bottle drained and the rage in his father grew.

When the alcohol had ceased working, he'd turned to laudanum. That's when the hallucinations had started. He'd see things. Hear things. He'd relive the war, shouting commands and calling for his dead comrades. His paranoia ruled the family. Then one day he'd mistaken his wife for an enemy soldier.

He'd shot her.

When he'd sobered and realized what he'd done, he couldn't live with the pain.

Garrett and Deirdre had set out on their own for a short time before staying with his uncle. There had been no love lost on the siblings when they'd been thrust upon his aunt and uncle all those years ago. In desperation Garrett had fled, joining the army scouts at seventeen. He'd hoped they'd treat Deirdre more kindly without him around as a constant reminder of their father.

His sacrifice had been unnecessary—Deirdre had soon married a fine man, an architect with good standing in the community.

No matter what happened, Garrett wouldn't let Edward raise Cora. His cousin had a pinch-faced wife with a perpetual expression of sour disappointment. They also had four more children on whom they doted. Garrett might as well send Cora to an orphanage.

Fifteen years had passed and the wound still ached. And now Garrett had another soul to protect. Cora was innocent of all the tragedy in the past. She deserved better than a set of rooms above the jailhouse.

Jo's solution tugged at his conscience.

His legs stiff from the awkward position, Garrett pushed himself upright. The town had been mercifully quiet, but what would happen if he was called out late at night? What happened if a prisoner had to stay downstairs in the jail overnight or longer? A jailhouse was no place for a little girl and he couldn't count on Jo every time he needed someone to watch Cora. He was already too beholden to her already.

Not to mention his other problem. Truth be told, he liked spending time with Jo and he didn't know what to make of his new affliction. Garrett absently rubbed his chest. She deserved someone without a past. She was too honorable for her own good. She'd sacrifice herself to make Cora happy. He couldn't let her.

What did Garrett know about making a woman happy? The only thing he'd ever seen in his life had been pain. Jo needed more. She deserved what she'd had growing up—love and warmth. The only love Garrett had known was hard love, and he was a hard man for it.

He paired up Cora's discarded boots and glanced at the farm-filthy dress hanging in the corner of the room. Mrs. McCoy hadn't lied—dirt sure had a way of finding you on the McCoy farm. When he'd arrived, even Jo had had a charming smudge on her cheek.

Jo.

He wasn't a fool. He recognized the signs of fear—heart pounding, palm sweating. But what was he afraid of?

He was terrified Jo was someone he could love.

The more time he spent around her the more time with her he craved. He wanted to protect her from bullies like Tom and Bert Walby. He wanted to hear her laugh. He wondered if she ever thought of him, too.

Only this morning the shaving lather had dried on his face while he pondered whether or not he looked better with a beard. He'd bought two new shirts and he didn't even really need new shirts. His old ones were fine except for a little wear around the seams. He couldn't recall when another person's opinion of him had carried such weight.

Garrett didn't know if he believed in a higher power, but he knew right then he was lost. Always before there had been a clear path in his head, a clear way out of trouble. Not anymore.

"Dear Lord," he pleaded. "Guide me. I've never asked for anything for myself, but Cora deserves better."

He'd done the right thing by Deirdre. He'd given his sister a fresh start by taking with him the reminders of their father. The reminders he carried with him every day—in his looks, in his mannerisms, in his very voice. Things he couldn't change or alter.

Since he hadn't refused Jo's proposal outright, he'd left her a sliver of hope. His weakness didn't serve either of them.

Garrett had thought leaving Deirdre behind was the greatest sacrifice he'd ever made. Little did he know, one day he'd meet an even greater challenge. Turned out facing a difficult choice was a whole lot more agonizing than running away.

Chapter Seven

The following morning, Jo crossed the distance to the jailhouse fifteen minutes before her shift at the telegraph office began. This was her favorite time of day, watching and listening as the town sputtered awake. In the distance, the steady clang of the blacksmith's hammer beat out a comforting rhythm. The mercantile owner flipped his window sign reading Open and propped up a slate board declaring the daily specials meticulously spelled out in chalk.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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