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YEARS

WINNING THE WIDOW'S HEART

*A surprising
encounter...*

SHERRI SHACKELFORD

Sherri Shackelford

Winning the Widow's Heart

Аннотация

Rich and powerful historical stories of romance, adventure and faith featuring spirited heroines and strong, honourable heroes. **IN THE CARE OF THE LAWMAN** When Texas Ranger Jack Elder stormed the isolated Kansas homestead, he expected to find a band of outlaws. Instead, the only occupant is a heavily pregnant woman—and she's just gone in to labor. A loner uneasy with emotion, Jack helps deliver widow Elizabeth Cole's baby girl and can't get back on the trail fast enough. The robber and murderer he's after killed one of Jack's own—and he vows to catch the man. But when he returns to check on Elizabeth and her little one, he discovers that she may hold the key to his unsettled past—and his hoped-for future.

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Rare longings for a home of his own surprised Jack with their intensity.

He didn't want a family, a permanent place to live. He was content with his work, satisfied with his contribution to society. But the widow had him picturing a life where he returned home every night to enjoy a hearty meal before a roaring fire. A home where he watched his own children grow.

He'd chosen his given profession for a reason. He didn't want to be tied to the family ranch like his brothers, buried beneath the uncertainty of droughts and blight. He controlled his own destiny. And right now he controlled the destiny of an innocent man. If he forgot that, he surrendered his honor.

Elizabeth and her daughter had unleashed his protective instincts, that's all. He'd quiet these disturbing yearnings for home and hearth once he found proof that Elizabeth's husband had been involved with the outlaws. There was something here.

He just knew it.

He'd steeled himself from the crushing loneliness of life on the trail before, and he'd harden his feelings once again.

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 sherrimshackelford@yahoo.com, or visit her website at sherrishackelford.com.

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Sherri Shackelford



www.millsandboon.co.uk

God setteth the solitary in families:

he bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land.

—Psalms 68:6

To Mothers:

To Rita Rounds Shackelford, for the beautiful soul

I never had a chance to meet, for all the extraordinary books she never had a chance to write. Thank you for giving me the most precious gift of all: my husband, Todd. Your generous spirit shines through your children.

To Bonnie Preble, for always believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself.

To the three greatest characters ever conceived:

Jocelyn, Shawn and Noah

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Chapter One

Outside Cimarron Springs, Kansas, 1870s

A shrill scream from inside the homestead split the frosty air.

Jack Elder flattened his back against the cabin's rough-hewn logs, his Smith & Wesson drawn. Icy fear twisted in his gut. He couldn't think about the woman inside, couldn't let himself imagine what had ripped that tortured sound from her.

Head cocked to one side, he strained to hear voices over the howling wind. How many men were inside? Was Bud Shaw one of them?

Dense clouds draped the afternoon in an unnatural twilight. Fat, heavy snowflakes sheeted from the sky, pillowing in heaps on the frozen ground. Jack nudged the deepening slush with his boot. No footsteps showed in the fresh covering. No animal prints, either.

The glass-paned windows had been covered with oilcloth to keep out the cold air and curious eyes. He cautiously edged toward the rear of the house, his shoulders hunched. A sharp gust of wind sucked the breath from his lungs. He stretched one hand around the corner, relieved to feel the raised surface of a door

latch.

Another harsh shout mingled with the raging blizzard. The desperate cry hardened his resolve. He didn't care how many men were inside—he couldn't let that woman suffer any more.

Mustering his fortitude, he whipped around to face the door and kicked. Hard. Wood splintered. A gust of warm air scented with fresh-baked bread knocked back his hat. He lunged inside, his pistol arm leveled. A woman's startled blue eyes met his shocked gaze over the silver barrel of her Colt .45.

Jack froze.

The lady standing before him was young, and nearly as round as she was tall. Her pale hair clung damply to her forehead, and a shapeless gingham dress in drab hues swathed her from head to toe. She kept her body partially obscured behind a tall chair, as if the flimsy wood might somehow repel a lead bullet.

Her hands shaking, the woman wrestled back the gun's hammer. "Take one more step and I'll blow your head off, mister."

Jack thought he'd planned for everything, but staring down the barrel of a quivering Colt .45 was proving him woefully wrong. An armed woman hadn't been on his list of contingencies.

Carefully pointing his own weapon at the ceiling, he cleared his throat. "I'm a Texas Ranger," he called out loud enough to reach anyone who might be hiding. "You're safe now, miss."

Her face screwed up in pain. She tipped forward, clutching her stomach. Her gun weaved a dangerous path in the air. Fearful

of a wild shot, Jack extended his arm toward her.

“Don’t touch me!”

He searched her panic-ridden features for any sign of injury. “Where are you hurt?”

“Nowhere.” She warned him back with a wave of her gun. “So get out.”

His instincts flared. She was obviously in pain, not to mention she’d been screaming loud enough to wake a hibernating grizzly moments before, yet she still refused help. Was she trying to warn him? Had the outlaws set a trap?

Jerking his thumb, he indicated a door on the far side of the room. “Is he in there?” he asked, his voice hushed. “Where’s Bud Shaw?”

“No one here by that name,” she gasped. “Now get out. I don’t want any trouble.”

Liquid splashed onto the wood plank flooring at her feet. Her face paled, and her eyes grew as large as twin harvest moons. Frigid air swept through the broken door.

The truth hit Jack like a mule kick. She wasn’t plump, she was pregnant. Very pregnant. He hadn’t stumbled into Bud’s hideout—he’d barged into a peaceful homestead. The lady of the house was understandably spooked, and about to give birth at any moment.

He didn’t need a sawbones to tell him the woman’s bag of waters had just broken. Jack raised his eyes heavenward and offered up a quick prayer for guidance.

“Lady, you got a heap o’ trouble,” he said at last, “but I ain’t part of it.”

She staggered to the left, the weapon still clutched in her hand.

With a quick sidestep, he dodged the business end of the barrel. “Ma’am,” he spoke, keeping his voice quiet and soothing, “I’m holstering my weapon.”

She aimed her gun dead center at his chest.

Anxiety rose like bile in his throat. Nothing was more unpredictable than a frightened civilian with a firearm. Not to mention she was unsteady on her feet and in obvious pain. The sooner he disarmed her, the better.

His decision made, he crept forward, his arms spread wide to display his empty hands. “Where’s your husband? Has he gone to fetch help?”

She glanced away, as if considering her answer.

His stomach clenched. “You’re alone here, aren’t you?”

Her full, rose-colored lips pursed into a thin line. She shook her head in denial.

Annoyed by her refusal to look him in the eye, Jack grunted. He could guess the meaning of those loaded pauses and hesitant answers.

His sharp gaze surveyed the room once more. An enormous cast-iron stove dominated the space to his right. A single pine table and four crude chairs filled the corner behind the woman, a side cupboard and a pie safe flanked the open kitchen area. No masculine boots rested on the rag rug. No overcoat hung on the

sturdy hooks beside the door. Ten years as a Texas Ranger had given him a heap of insight into people.

Everybody lied, just not for the same reasons.

He assumed his most charming smile to put her at ease. “I’m Jack Elder, and I’m not going to hurt you. I’ve been tracking a gang of bank robbers through Kansas. You haven’t been robbing any banks, have you?”

She scowled at his joke, then another pain racked her body. She doubled over, pressing her free hand beneath the shelf of her belly.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Jack caught her around the forearm. Her startled gaze flew to his face. Though her wild, frightened eyes pierced his rigid control, he held firm. Careful to keep his touch gentle, he pried the Colt loose from her trembling fingers, swiftly releasing the hammer with a seasoned flick of his thumb.

She narrowed her eyes. “Are you really a Texas Ranger?”

Jack stepped away, hardening his heart against her suffering. Emotions clouded judgment—and poor judgment got people killed.

After hooking his finger into the gun’s trigger guard, he flipped back the collar of his jacket to reveal the silver star he’d carved from a Spanish coin. Uncertainty flitted across her face, followed by reluctant acceptance of the tarnished evidence of his profession.

“Ranger or not,” she said. “You have no right to be here.”

Habits honed from years on the trail had heightened his senses. The woman had a curious lilt to her voice, the barest hint of an accent in the way she spoke. She wasn't from around these parts, but then again, who was?

He let his coat fall back into place. "Ma'am, you need to lie down. That baby is fixing to come."

"No," she cried, stumbling away. "It's not time. I checked the calendar. It's too soon."

"I don't think your baby is on the same schedule."

"But I can't have the baby now. I'm not ready."

Jack heaved an inward sigh. Marvelous. She was delusional and in labor. He definitely hadn't planned for this. She appeared oblivious to the telling mess at her feet, to the growing chill in the cabin, to—well—to everything. As if ignoring the situation might somehow make it all go away—make him go away.

He shifted his weight, considering his options. Best not to push her too hard. Mother Nature would deliver the full realization of her circumstances soon enough.

She mumbled something beneath her breath and vigorously shook her head. "No, it's definitely too soon. I have everything planned out for the last week in November."

Another glance at her rounded belly heightened his trepidation. A little nudge in the right direction never hurt. "You look plenty ready to me."

Her expression turned icy. "And what do you mean by that?"

"Well..." he stalled. "You're, you..."

A flush crept up his neck. While there was no polite way to indicate the most obvious symptom of her condition, she was a little too far along in the birthing process for his peace of mind. Wherever her husband had gone, it didn't appear the man would be returning home anytime soon. Without another person to watch over the woman, Jack's options were limited. Unless he took control of the situation and found a reasonable way to extract himself, they were both in a mess of trouble.

"Do elaborate," she demanded. "I'm what?"

Suddenly hot, he slid the top button of his wool coat free. He'd just come from Cimarron Springs, and it was forty-five minutes to town for the doctor. Leaving the woman alone that long was out of the question. Grateful for the breeze from the busted door, Jack released the second button. Surely someone was watching out for the woman? Even in this desolate land a person was never truly alone. She must have friends or family in the area.

A teeth-chattering shiver rattled her body, buckling her defensive posture. She wrapped her arms protectively around her distended stomach. "This is my home, and I want you to leave."

"You and me both."

He'd rather face an angry rattler than a fragile woman any day. But the sight of her pale face tugged at his conscience. Of course he'd do the right thing. He always did the right thing, especially when it came to women and children.

That code of honor had been ingrained in him since his youth. "I can't go until I know you're settled."

Conscious of the dropping temperature and her growing discomfort, he backed his way to the broken door, his attention riveted on the woman. Snow swirled around his ankles, dusting the cabin floor with white flakes.

Her gaze skittered to the gun in his holster. “You’re trespassing on my property.” She tightened her arms over her rounded belly, highlighting the swell. “Return my gun this instant.”

He nudged the sagging door closed with his heel. Wind whistled through the cracked hinges. “I can’t do that. You might need my help, and I can’t have you shooting me.”

He rested her Colt on the sturdy worktable before the stove, then covered the weapon with his hat. “I might be a Texas Ranger, but my family owns a cattle ranch. I haven’t delivered any babies, but I’ve brought a passel of calves into this world, and I’ve got a fair understanding of the process. Once your bag of waters breaks, there’s no going back.”

She started, as if noticing the wet floor for the first time. “Oh, my goodness. What a mess. I—I need a cloth.”

She waddled to the side cupboard, swinging the door wide to rummage through the shelves.

Jack blew out a hard breath, letting her prattle about her chore. He’d seen that same vacant stare plenty of times before. His first year as a Ranger, he’d come upon a homestead after a Comanche raid. The woman of the house was setting the table for supper, her clothing torn and bloodied, while her husband and three young children lay slaughtered on the dirt-packed floor.

His chest constricted at the memory. He'd never forget the mother's dark footprints circling her dead children's bodies. From that moment on, he'd hardened his feelings to the suffering he witnessed in order to preserve his own sanity.

The pregnant woman faced him, her chin set in a stubborn angle, a square of linen clutched to her chest. "The man you're looking for isn't here, so you can leave now, mister."

"What's your name?" he asked, his tone deliberately brusque. Most decent folks responded honestly to a direct question.

"Elizabeth. E-Elizabeth Cole."

He offered her another friendly grin. His questions had the added benefit of keeping her distracted. "See, that wasn't so hard, Elizabeth." He also found people answered to their own name, even when they ignored everything else. "Where's your husband?"

Her eyes welled with tears. Sniffling, she blinked them away. "He's dead."

Jack bowed his head, shielding himself from the agony in her steady gaze. She definitely wasn't lying now. The way her emotions paraded across her expressive face, she'd make a terrible criminal.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he replied.

She was awfully young to be a widow. Jack sometimes felt the good Lord had let evil concentrate west of the Mississippi.

He opened and closed his mouth a few times to speak, finally deciding to give her a moment to collect herself before any more

questions. Judging from her condition, the man couldn't have been gone for too long. In this harsh land, it was best not to get attached to anything, or anyone.

When she finally glanced up, he asked, "Do you have any family or friends in the area?"

"The McCoys live just over the rise."

Hope sparked in his chest. "Is there a Mrs. McCoy?"

"There's a Mrs. McCoy, a Mr. McCoy—" she ticked off each name with a finger to the opposite hand "—and five little McCoys."

Relief weakened his knees. Delivering babies was best left to women and doctors—and he didn't qualify as either. "Thank heaven for the McCoys."

He'd find a way to contact the family as soon as Elizabeth was settled. With his immediate worry eased, he stepped forward, motioning with one hand. "Let's get you someplace where you can rest, Mrs. Cole."

She eyed him with obvious distrust.

Flummoxed by her stubbornness, Jack paused. Now what? Give him a raging outlaw or a drunken killer any day. He wasn't equipped for this kind of sensitive situation. Those teary blue eyes were sorely testing his vow to remain detached.

She lurched to one side, clutching the ladder-back chair for support. "Oh, dear," she moaned.

Feeling helpless and out of his element, he cupped her elbow. Her wary gaze swept over his thick wool coat, lingering on his

stamped, silver buttons. Her jaw clenched. He had the uneasy sensation she had just sized him up, and found him lacking.

Jolted by her odd reaction, he dropped his hold. "I'm not going to hurt you, Elizabeth."

She pinched shut her eyes against another pain, then fumbled for his hand, threading her fingers through his in a silent plea for comfort. His heart stuttered at the unexpected gesture.

How long since her husband had died? How long had she been pregnant and alone, solely responsible for the grueling work required to run this homestead?

After a long, tense moment, her delicate features relaxed. The grip on his hand loosened.

"That one wasn't so bad," she said, though her wan smile indicated otherwise.

"Let's get you away from this breeze." He nodded toward the back of the house. "Someone near broke your door in two."

"I hope that same someone repairs the damage before he leaves."

She lowered her head, then yanked her hand free, as if surprised to see their fingers intertwined.

Keeping his gaze averted, he flexed his fist a few times to shake off the lingering warmth of her skin. He didn't want to look at her, didn't want to see the raw edge of fear in her eyes. Didn't she realize he was one of the good guys?

Following the strangely intimate moment, an awkward silence stretched between them. The widow was a curious mix of bold

courage and heartbreaking vulnerability. She'd been in labor, isolated and alone, yet she'd met his forceful entrance with rare fortitude. Despite her blustery grit, he sensed her reserve of energy was running lower than a watering hole in July.

She brushed the hair from her forehead with a weary sigh. "Maybe I will have a rest."

"That sounds like the best idea I've heard all day."

She leaned heavily on his arm as he eased her past the cast-iron stove, through the doorway to another room. An enormous four-poster bed dominated the space. A wedding-ring quilt in faded pinks and dull greens covered the mattress. An old porcelain doll with matted chestnut hair rested between two fluffy feather pillows.

Jack scratched his forehead. "That's quite an impressive piece of furniture."

Her cheeks flushed pink. "My husband and I bought the homestead from another family along with the furniture. They made it almost six years before they gave up." Avoiding his curious gaze, Elizabeth shuffled to a sturdy oak dresser. A red kerosene lantern with a floral-etched, fluted cover lit the room. She tugged on the top drawer, sending the flame flickering, then glanced at him askance. "I'm sorry I lied to you earlier. I didn't want you to know I was alone."

"I didn't give you much choice."

She kept her eyes downcast, her discomfort palpable. While he appreciated the awkward impropriety of the situation, his

nagging concern for her welfare took precedence over their mutual embarrassment.

They had a more pressing problem to solve. “Is this your first baby?”

She nodded.

“How long have the pains been comin’?”

“About four or five hours.”

The knot of anxiety in his chest eased. The birthing processes often took hours, sometimes even days. “If there’s one thing I do know, it’s that first babies take their good sweet time in coming. I’ve got three older brothers, and they’ve blessed me with two nieces and six nephews. Not a one of them took less than twelve hours to be born.”

She met his gaze, her pale blue eyes full of hope. “Then you can go to town. Cimarron Springs has a doctor. Two of them.”

“Ma’am, there’s a snowstorm blowing in. I’ll be lucky to make it to the McCoys, let alone town.”

Her shoulders slumped and his heart went out to her. Pain and fear had a way of sapping a body’s strength.

“This isn’t exactly a church social, I know that.” He paused, searching for a way to alleviate her fears. “Tell you what. I’ll get my horse out of the weather and check on the animals. Won’t take me more than a minute. You can change and lay down for a rest. Keep track of the pains, though. They should keep coming closer together. When you’re settled, I’ll skedaddle over to the McCoy’s spread for help. With five children, they should be well

versed in delivering babies.”

She bobbed her head in a distracted nod, pressing her knuckles into the small of her back with a grimace.

He scooted to her side. “Don’t hold your breath through the pains. Just let ’em come.”

“Is that what you tell the cows?” she snapped.

“I heard the midwife say that to my sister-in-law. I tell the cows to moo through the pain.”

A reluctant smile appeared through her scowl.

“That’s better.” He’d paced the floor with his brothers through enough births to know Elizabeth was going to need all the humor she could muster. “You’ve got about six to eight minutes before the next pain. I’ll be back lickety-split.”

A feather-light touch on his sleeve stilled his retreat. “When you return from the McCoy’s, you can bunk down in the barn until the weather clears.” She swallowed, glancing away. “But that’s all. I expect you to clear out at first light.”

Jack tipped his head in agreement. The widow was still a might skittish about his intentions. Considering their less-than-cordial introduction, he couldn’t blame her. “Don’t worry, Elizabeth. Everything is going to be all right.”

“Easy for you to say, mister. You’re not the one having a baby.”

Jack couldn’t help a dry chuckle. There was nothing like a crisis to reveal a man’s true character, and he was encouraged by her fortitude. “You’ll manage. You faced down an armed

intruder, after all.”

She cut him a sidelong glance full of wry skepticism before turning her back. Inexplicably annoyed with her cool response, he toyed with the wick on the lantern to cover his confusion. When had his social skills slipped? Usually a few charming words and a friendly smile were enough to put most people at ease.

With a shrug he closed the door to allow her privacy, then crossed through the kitchen. He loped out the splintered rear exit, snatching his hat on the way.

Driving snow pelted his face, stinging his bare cheeks. He tucked his scratchy wool collar beneath his chin as he fought through needle-sharp wind to his disgruntled horse. The gelding snorted a smoky breath, tossing its head. Icicles had already matted in the horse’s thick mane and tail.

Jack tugged on the reins. “Sorry, Midnight. I’m just as frustrated by the delay as you are. I should have known that potbellied old sheriff in town couldn’t tell a homestead from a hideout.”

The gelding nuzzled his shoulder.

“If I’d known the weather was going to change faster than a sinner on Sunday, I never would’ve risked the journey. Almost makes a fellow believe in divine providence.” He tipped his head to the sky. “Mrs. Cole needs us to fetch help, even if she doesn’t want to admit it yet. I know as much about the surface of the moon as I do about childbirth, and that ain’t saying much.”

The quicker he found help for the widow, the quicker he could

continue on his journey. The more time passed, the colder the trail out of Cimarron Springs grew. Jack couldn't afford any additional dead ends and delays. If an innocent man was hanged because of his mistake, he'd never forgive himself.

His thoughts dark, he fought through growing snow drifts, sinking to his calves with each step. A flurry of movement caught the corner of his eye. Jack drew his pistol, searching the blowing snow. Wouldn't that just be the bee's knees if the outlaw was squatting right under his nose?

When no one sprang from the shadows, he tucked his gun away. He'd most likely seen one of the farm animals searching for shelter. The sheriff's mistake was troubling him, making him jumpy. He'd take a gander at the horses inside the barn before he returned to the main house. The outlaw he was searching for always rode a distinctive bay mustang. Men around these parts knew horseflesh better than humans, which might explain the sheriff's confusion.

Another thought sent him stumbling. A curtain of snow slid off his hat.

He'd forgotten the Colt sitting on the worktable.

"Well, Midnight," he muttered to the horse, "I hope Mrs. Cole has given up the idea of shooting me."

Jack swung up the bulky T-bar latching the barn door, then heaved the sliding panel to one side. The hayloft hook twirled in the wind above his head, banging forlornly against the loft door. Even before Midnight whinnied, shying to one side, Jack sensed

a trap.

* * *

Elizabeth pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, holding back the painful burn of tears. She panted through another sharp pain, her heart still thumping uncomfortably against her ribs.

She'd almost shot a Texas Ranger.

When the oilcloth over the window had flipped up during a wind gust, she'd nearly fainted to see a stranger's dark form lurking outside. She'd grabbed her gun and waited, expecting the worst.

She wasn't expecting a lawman.

With his easy charm and fancy silver buttons, Jack Elder reminded her of her late husband. That charming behavior was bound to wear off, and she hoped he was long gone when it did. Aside from his useless good looks, she didn't need him returning to town with tales destined to send the gossip's tongues wagging.

A familiar sorrow weighed her down. She'd had enough of interfering busybodies as a child, and enough of autocratic lawmen as an adult. If the Ranger wanted to make trouble, there was nothing she could do to stop him. She'd fought the sheriff to stay in her home after Will's death, and she'd fight anyone else who threatened her tenuous security.

Recalling the scene in the kitchen, her blood pounded, and her face grew hot with humiliation. Thank heaven he'd be gone by morning.

Elizabeth cradled her belly, hesitant to offer up another

prayer. She'd prayed for a husband, and God had sent her a smooth charmer named Will. She'd prayed for a child, and Will had deserted her rather than care for his growing family. She'd prayed for Will's return, and God had sent her his body to bury.

Hurting and desperate, she'd prayed for help, and God had sent her a lawman. She let out a reluctant sigh. While he wasn't what she'd prayed for, at least he was willing to fetch help.

Elizabeth choked back a desperate laugh. She'd been hoping for a break in the weather, or more time to prepare before the baby arrived—anything but a great bear of a man treating her like a half-wit. Delivering cows, indeed. Thank heaven he wouldn't be delivering this baby. After hearing him talk, he'd most likely try to sweet-talk the infant through the process with a rakish grin, or expect her to moo through the contractions.

Overwhelmed by the day's events, she tucked her worn Bible beneath a stack of neatly folded cotton shirtwaists, fearful of praying for anything else lest she inadvertently unleash a plague with her clumsy words.

The only person she could truly count on was herself.

A violent cramp twisted around her middle. Shouting, she slid down the wall, crumpling to the floor. Her vision blurred. A great weight pressed on her stomach, like a full-grown bull sitting on her belly. The torturous spasm kept building stronger and stronger. The urgent need to push overwhelmed her.

"Mr. Elder," Elizabeth called, her faint voice no match for the brutal prairie winds.

That flashy lawman was wrong—this baby was coming. Now.

Chapter Two

The pain let up just as quickly as it had begun. Stunned by the intensity of the last contraction, Elizabeth panted. Each time she assumed the agony had peaked, another violent spasm proved her wrong.

A hopeless sob caught in her throat. She wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, amazed at how quickly her body swung between chilling cold and suffocating heat.

She needed help. She needed to stop blubbering and pull herself off the floor. Mostly though, she needed her mother to be alive, holding her hand and easing this devastating fear.

Elizabeth struggled to form a plan, but her brain refused to function properly. Her thoughts flitted from subject to subject until the torturous pain demanded her undivided attention.

Through the haze of her agitation, the rear door banged open. Surprised Mr. Elder had returned so soon, Elizabeth craned her neck to peer around the corner. She'd seen the panicky look in his eyes at her condition earlier. Once he realized the increasing gravity of the situation, he'd saddle his horse and ride away as if a pack of wolves was nipping at his heels.

She shifted to press her palms against the floor. Her brief marriage had taught her one thing about men—they had a tendency to stay when they should go, and go when they should stay. Her arms collapsed like wet noodles beneath her weight.

Rallying her strength, she stretched to brace her hand against

the dresser. This inability to force her body to respond frightened her as much as the pending birth. She had to be stronger. After all, she didn't need a man's dubious help. She'd survived for months without any assistance. She'd survive another day. The eminent desertion of one Texas Ranger was the least of her worries. The weak attempt to comfort herself failed miserably.

"Mrs. Cole," a familiar voice shouted.

Relief swept over Elizabeth like the first warm breeze of spring. "Jo," she called back. Here was the help she had prayed for. "I'm in the bedroom."

The young McCoy daughter burst into the room with her usual boisterous energy. Her frantic gaze swept across the bed. Elizabeth waved a limp hand from her wilted position near the dresser to catch the girl's attention. Jo's eyes widened at the sight of her employer slumped at her feet.

"What happened?" Jo demanded. "Did that man hurt you?" The girl knelt, whipping off her scruffy hat to reveal two long, serviceable braids. "Don't you worry none. I locked him in the barn."

"Oh, dear." Elizabeth struggled to sit up straighter. A band of steel wrapped around her abdomen like a vice. The pressure consumed her, blocking out all thoughts of the trapped Ranger. "It's the baby," she gasped.

"Is that all?" Jo flashed a crooked grin. "Don't you worry, Mrs. Cole. I told you at least a hundred times that I've helped my ma deliver plenty of babies. You don't understand 'cuz you're from

back East, but most folks around these parts don't cotton to no doctor."

Elizabeth bore down on the pain, clenching her jaw against the agony. Jo checked her progress, then squeezed her hand. "The baby's dropped, Mrs. Cole, but I'm pretty sure you still have a ways to go."

"Are you certain?" Elizabeth choked out.

"Pretty sure."

The contraction eased, releasing the aching tightness around Elizabeth's belly. She drew in a shaky breath. "I guess we'll have to muddle through this together for a bit."

"I knew there was something wrong earlier." Jo shot her a black look. "Why didn't you say you were hurting?"

"I didn't know—" Elizabeth stopped herself before she told a lie. Of course she'd realized something was wrong. Knowing Jo would sense her distress, Elizabeth had fought to hide her growing discomfort. The girl was more perceptive than most people twice her age. "I didn't want to worry your mother. You said she wasn't feeling well."

A shadow darkened Jo's bright green eyes. At fourteen, Jo was the oldest of five children, and the only girl. Awash in a sea of males, she'd taken to dressing and acting like a boy herself. She'd been helping Elizabeth with the chores since Will's death six months ago.

Elizabeth trusted the girl's ability to help until they unlocked Mr. Elder and sent him to fetch Jo's mother. "That man you—"

“I couldn’t go home, anyway,” Jo interrupted, her voice thick with emotion. “Pa shooed me away at the gate. There’s influenza in the house. The town’s had five deaths already. If Ma dies, I’m all Pa’s got to take care of the little ones.”

A sound of distress caught in Elizabeth’s throat. Concern for the McCoys overshadowed her own worries. “Your family will be fine, Jo. I’m sure. Your mother is a strong woman.”

Elizabeth wanted to offer more words of comfort, but another contraction robbed her of speech. An eternity later she gasped, “Oh, my, that hurts.”

“I know.” Jo patted her hand. “It’s going to get worse before it gets better. Mrs. Parker hollered so loud, my ears rang for a week. ’Bout squeezed my hand off, too.”

Horrifying images of Mrs. Parker’s suffering flooded Elizabeth’s thoughts. They were alone. With the storm raging, and the nearest farm quarantined, no help was coming. “Perhaps we could save these stories for another time?”

“Oh, right.” Jo flicked her head in a quick nod. “What is it Ma’s always saying?” She snapped her fingers. “I remember now. She distracts ’em by talking, and telling ’em to concentrate on that beautiful baby they’re bringing into the world.”

“That’s better.”

“Hey, remember all those clothes we sewed this fall?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “You’re the worst seamstress in the county. I sewed all those clothes while you complained you were dying from boredom. You’d rather be out shooting game than

threading a needle.”

“See? You’re doing better already.” Jo sat back on her heels. “Now deliver this baby so we can decide what to do about that man I locked in the barn.”

“I’m a Texas Ranger.”

Jo gasped at the intrusion. Hands fisted, she twisted to block Elizabeth while keeping her defiant gaze fixed on the Ranger.

Slanting a glance upward, Elizabeth found Mr. Elder filling the doorway and looking madder than a wet hen. His coat was torn at the shoulder, and an angry scratch slashed across his cheek.

Gracious. This day just kept going from bad to worse.

“He’s a lawman all right,” Elizabeth replied, restraining Jo with a limp hand to her forearm.

The girl relaxed her stance. “How’d you get out of the barn?”

“Just you never mind, missy.” He plucked a length of straw from his hair. “What’s going on in here?”

“Are you touched in the head, Ranger?” Jo flung out a hand. “Can’t you see she’s having a baby?”

“Imprisoning a lawman can get you the firing squad.”

“You don’t look imprisoned to me.”

Elizabeth shouted as suffocating pressure bore down on her pelvis. The two combatants fell silent, their identical shamefaced expressions almost comical. She panted through the contraction, ignoring the accusatory glares they shot at each other over her head. Silent now, Jack knelt at her side, a concerned frown

puckering his brow.

When the pain eased, Elizabeth flashed the younger girl a reassuring smile. “I hope this doesn’t take much longer. I was hoping to start another batch of bread later.”

Given the girl’s pitying smile in return, her joke had fallen on deaf ears. Too exhausted to care, Elizabeth rested her head against the wall to stare at the ceiling.

She’d thought she was capable of delivering a child without collapsing like a fragile greenhorn, but the endless cycles of pain had sapped her strength. Recriminations for her own foolish behavior rattled her composure. Why hadn’t she thought to send Jo into town earlier? Instead, she’d dawdled over her chores, thinking she had weeks to prepare. Without Mrs. McCoy or the doctor, she and the younger girl were going to have to deliver this child alone.

Elizabeth turned to Jack. Regrets were a luxury she couldn’t afford. “You can go now. We’ll be fine.”

Jo’s head snapped up. “Not on your life. I need a pan of water and linens. As long as we’ve got ourselves a real, live Texas Ranger, we might as well put him to good use.”

Elizabeth held up her hand in protest. Lawmen asked too many questions.

Mr. Elder rose to his feet. “I’ve got whiskey in my saddle bags for the—”

“Wait.” Fear pierced Elizabeth’s heart. “You won’t bring whiskey into this house.”

“Ma says it keeps the baby from getting dysentery,” Jo added softly. “I need it to clean my hands.”

Elizabeth sensed pity in the girl’s eyes, but she brushed aside the feeling. How could Jo know about Will? Elizabeth had confided in no one.

“Can we get Mrs. Cole onto the bed?” the Ranger asked.

“No!” Elizabeth cried.

Every nerve in her body bore down on the pain. Desperate for the agony to end, she didn’t want to be jostled or moved. The contractions were coming closer together, giving her less and less time to recover before the next increasingly agonizing spasm.

Her energy waned with each pain. The months following Will’s death had been filled with turmoil, leaving her little chance to concentrate on the pending birth. Her shock and grief, her fear, had drowned out all thoughts of the future.

When the nagging backache from this morning had grown worse, she’d refused to heed the signs. As if, with the baby growing in her womb, her dreams were still possible. She’d pictured her future with a loving husband and half a dozen children running underfoot. The hopeful plans for her new life and a growing family had dwindled. She was a widow, alone and vulnerable.

“Mrs. Cole.” Jack touched her shoulder, his voice filled with compassion. “Your baby needs you to be strong.”

Elizabeth grimaced against another contraction. A salty tear caught on the corner of her mouth. The weakness shamed her,

but she was exhausted from maintaining her rigid composure. It was time she faced the harsh reality of her circumstances. Women died in childbirth all the time.

She'd never ducked away from a difficult choice and she wasn't about to start now. "Promise me something, Mr. Elder."

Apprehension widened his eyes.

Elizabeth didn't know anything about the Ranger, didn't know if she could trust him, but she sensed a quiet determination behind his wary gaze. Unlike the local sheriff, he appeared to be bound by a code of ethics. While most men were only interested in their own pleasure, Mr. Elder's job forced him to take the needs of others into consideration.

She clasped his hand, comforted by the hard calluses covering his palm. Will's hands had been soft and smooth. The disparity gave her hope. Perhaps this man was different from her late husband. "Mr. Elder, if something happens to me, you'll see that my baby is raised by a real family. Don't let my child grow up in an orphanage."

He blanched. His Adam's apple bobbed. "You're going to be fine, Mrs. Cole."

"Prom—"

The Ranger held up his free hand to quiet her protests. "There's nothing to worry about."

Jo scowled. "Never mind him. My ma can take the baby."

Elizabeth shook her head. Mrs. McCoy worked harder than ten men combined. She ran her household on a budget barely fit

for a pauper. Heaven knew the overtaxed woman didn't need an additional burden. Not to mention the time and cost of rearing another child.

"JoBeth McCoy," Elizabeth scolded, "your mother has enough to worry about with five children at home. She doesn't need another mouth to feed."

Jo ducked her head, silently acknowledging the truth. Another violent cramp hardened Elizabeth's belly. She panted, clutching the Ranger's hand.

When the contraction eased, Mr. Elder refused to meet her pleading gaze.

She was pushing him, a stranger, to make a difficult promise. Even if he agreed, she would never know whether or not he had fulfilled his pledge. Despite the uncertainty, she needed him to say the words. She needed to clutch a glimmer of hope for her baby's future.

She wanted a better life for her child. "Promise me."

Jack turned. His hazel eyes shined in the dim light. "I promise."

His assurance released the floodgates of her emotions. She sobbed through another searing contraction, the most powerful yet. Black dots collected at the edges of her vision, growing larger. The room clouded. Voices came to her from a great distance, as if she were tumbling down a well. Down, down, down to a place where there was no pain, no loss, just darkness.

"Please, God," she whispered. "Save my baby."

* * *

Cold panic tore at Jack's insides. "Wake up, Elizabeth," he ordered.

He clasped her chin in his hand, humbled by the fragile bones. She was so delicate, so young to be facing this pain. Beneath his touch, her head rolled limply to one side. Her glazed eyes slowly cleared. His heart soared as dawning recognition focused her attention. She was still too pale, but a faint blush of color had infused the apples of her cheeks.

She drew in a breath, her shoulders rising and falling with the effort. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and her pale blue eyes had lost their luster.

"I can't do this," she sobbed.

"You're doing real good. It's almost over."

He said the words out loud, though he didn't fully believe them in his heart. There were no certainties for anyone. With only the two of them to assist her, if something went wrong, they were lost.

Alarmed to find his heart beating like a stampeding bull, he pressed the widow's hand to his chest, sharing his strength. His emotional reaction startled him. He'd paced the floor with his brothers, but not a one of his sister-in-laws' births had affected him this way.

Jack squared his shoulders. He was immune to suffering. He'd seen plenty of people die, men and women both. He'd buried children, marking their graves with rough wooden crosses or

crude piles of stones. Nothing moved him anymore.

A shrill cry shocked him from his stupor. He swiped at his forehead with the back of his hand. He'd never felt so helpless. He was sweating as much as the widow now. All the comforting words he'd spoken to his brothers while their wives were in labor came back to haunt him. He blinked the perspiration from his eyes. What a bunch of inadequate nonsense.

Humiliated to be at the mercy of a prickly girl who couldn't be more than fourteen, he gave Jo a pleading look.

She met his gaze, her face revealing nothing. "The baby's head is crowning. I'll need a pan of water and some fresh linens."

He hesitated to leave the women alone.

"Sometime today, Ranger!"

Jack stumbled to his feet, clumsy and out of his element. He rushed to gather the supplies, grateful for something to do besides worry.

He fled to the kitchen and gingerly tossed the contents of a sturdy creamware bowl out the back door. His fellow Rangers often chided him on his cool, collected demeanor, saying icicles ran through his veins instead of blood. They'd eat their words to see him now. Returning to the sink, he pumped the lever arm to prime the well, his hands stiff and uncoordinated.

After filling the bowl, he pawed through his saddle bags, searching for the whiskey. Fear strummed through his body with each of Elizabeth's jagged cries. He yanked a handful of linens from the side cupboard, sending the rest of the neat stack

tumbling to the floor. His arms full, he returned to the bedroom, then knelt beside the perspiring widow.

Jo glanced up. “Scoot in behind her and help her brace when she pushes. This baby’s a might stubborn.”

Beseeching him with her eyes, Elizabeth jerked her head in a nod. Her silent plea humbled him. She looked on him as if he might actually soothe her pain—as if he was something more than a giant lump of useless male. For a moment, he wanted to be everything she needed.

Jack snorted softly to himself.

Who was he fooling? He was about as much use in this situation as a handbrake on a canoe. He rubbed his damp palms against his pants’ legs, wishing he’d never followed those bank robbers out of Texas. Wishing he’d stayed in town. Wishing that potbellied sheriff had directed him anywhere but here. Even as the traitorous thoughts filled his brain, he helped Elizabeth sit up, his work-roughened hand dwarfing her slim shoulder. He slid one leg behind her back, bracing his boot against the dresser as he hunkered down.

The pungent smell of alcohol stung his nostrils. Jo rubbed the whiskey on her hands, then wiped them clean with a dry cloth. The girl’s fingers trembled, but she managed a wobbly smile. “When the next pain comes, I want you to push as hard as you can.”

For a moment Jack didn’t know who was more frightened—the widow, the kid or him. Like a battalion of warriors mustering

for war, the three of them nodded in unison.

Elizabeth clasped his hand in a now-familiar gesture. He cradled her against his chest, willing his strength to infuse her exhausted body. Her blond hair had tumbled loose from its bun, catching on his coat buttons. He carefully untangled the strands, then brushed the silky locks aside.

“You know how to pray, Ranger?” Jo asked.

This time he didn’t hesitate. “Dear Lord, if you’re looking down on us, now would be a good time for some help.”

“Amen,” JoBeth murmured.

Elizabeth’s body stiffened.

“You’re almost there,” he soothed. “You can do this, Elizabeth. You’re almost done.”

Curling forward, she squeezed his hand, her whole body straining with effort. Her agonizing shout of pain ripped through him like a bullet.

“Oh, my goodness,” Jo cried. “It’s a girl. It’s a girl, Mrs. Cole! You have a beautiful girl.”

Following her announcement, a heavy silence filled the room. Jack waited, hearing nothing but the sound of his own heartbeat thundering in his ears. Jo carefully wiped the child dry with a towel. Her worried gaze met his over Elizabeth’s head. At the stricken message in her eyes, his heart seized.

The bundle squirmed. A lusty squall exploded from the infant, startling them all into relieved laughter.

Jo carefully placed the baby on Elizabeth’s chest. The widow

cradled her bellowing child, laughing and crying at the same time. “She’s so beautiful.” Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder, catching his gaze. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

His eyes stung. He cleared his throat, recalling all the times he’d teased his older brothers for their weeping and wailing every time a niece or nephew was born. He’d never understood the vulnerable emotions those wet, froglike creatures inspired. Seeing Elizabeth’s joy, her newborn, the miracle of life where there once was none, something in his chest shifted.

“Yes,” he said, his voice husky. “She’s beautiful.”

While the two women laughed, awkwardly hugging each other over the baby, the walls crowded in around him. The air in the room turned dank and suffocating. His nerves tingled, warning him of an attack. He needed to escape.

This time, though, he feared the danger rested within his own heart.

Chapter Three

Elizabeth awoke in darkness to the clang of pots and pans and the mouth-watering aroma of frying bacon. Stiff and sore, she gingerly rolled to her side to check on the baby. The surge of energy she’d experienced immediately following the birth had plummeted soon after. A rare fatigue had overcome her, sapping her of strength and leaving her weak and listless.

Barely able to keep her eyes open, she’d mustered just enough energy to change out of her ruined dress with Jo’s assistance. Her legs had proven too weak to hold her weight, so Mr. Elder had

assisted her onto the bed. Silent and flushed red from his neck to his ears, he'd lifted her with treasured care.

He'd lingered to help Jo change the linens and tidy up the room, both of them waging a hushed, muttering war on the proper way to accomplish even the most minuscule task. Each time the Ranger had chanced a glance at Elizabeth, his cheeks had darkened to such a deep crimson, she'd feared he would burst into flames.

After ensuring the newborn was settled, a gown lovingly drawn over her body and crocheted yellow booties covering her feet, Elizabeth's two helpers had left mother and daughter alone in the hushed glow and hiss of kerosene lamps.

The infant had nursed voraciously, then stretched and yawned before falling into the peaceful slumber afforded only the very young, and the very old. Cocooned in a blanket of serene contentment, Elizabeth had been reluctant to surrender her gift from God. She'd dozed off with the infant cradled in her arms, her daughter's gentle breath whispering against her neck.

Swaddled tightly, the baby now rested beside the bed in a drawer Jo had extracted from the dresser and lined with blankets. Sighing, Elizabeth extended her hand over the edge of the mattress. She brushed the backs of her fingers over the supple, downy softness of the baby's cheek, then buried them in the shock of dark hair covering her head.

"How did I create something so perfect? So beautiful?" she whispered. "Thank you, Lord, for this is Your work."

Her heart swelled. Now more than ever, she needed to be strong. The awesome burden of responsibility weighed upon Elizabeth alone. Her daughter's survival in this wild, untamed land was at the mercy of her mother's courage. The prairie was brutal, especially for women and children.

Elizabeth glanced toward the darkened window, the glass panes frosted over like sugared candy. A tangle of memories pulled her into the past.

Her first month in Kansas, she'd stumbled between a cow and her calf. The animal had butted her to the ground, knocking the wind from her lungs. Will had been angry at her carelessness, chastising her for coming between a mother and her offspring. Elizabeth finally understood his warning.

The changes in her life over such a short time threatened to overwhelm her. In one short year, she'd been a wife, a widow and a mother. Last November she'd married Will after a three-week-long whirlwind courtship in New York and moved West. Three months later she was pregnant and three months after that Will was dead. The entire year had brought her full circle to this new life.

She might not know anything about raising children, but she loved her daughter already, had loved her since that first moment she'd felt the baby stirring in her womb. She'd die to save her child.

A child who currently had no name.

Elizabeth pressed her numb hands against cheeks burning

with shame. How could she have been so thoughtless? She'd fallen asleep without naming her baby.

A vague memory took shape, Mr. Elder leaning over the infant, running his index finger reverently over the baby's cheek. "We'll name you tomorrow," he'd said. "When your mother has rested."

Gracious. Not only had she failed to name her child, she'd abandoned poor Jo to deal with the Ranger, alone.

So much for courage and fortitude.

She'd abandoned those dearest to her to fend for themselves—while she slept.

A lump of regret clogged her throat. "Oh, baby," Elizabeth sighed. "What a mother you have."

She caught the sounds of someone pattering in the kitchen, whistling a merry tune. Perhaps she was being too hard on herself. Nothing awful could have happened for Jo to be so cheerful. With the baby nestled snugly in her makeshift bed, and Jo busy in the kitchen, no one had suffered unduly for Elizabeth's absence. After all, she'd just delivered a baby. An exhausting task, to be sure.

As for their uninvited guest, considering the late hour, Mr. Elder was probably long gone. Once a man wanted to leave, no one could stop him. She wouldn't be surprised if he was halfway to Texas already.

A twinge of loss stirred up her turbulent emotions. She recalled the way he'd held her hand, the encouraging words he'd

murmured. How odd to think she'd never see him again.

She pressed a fist against her mouth to stifle uncontrollable sobs, alarmed by her inability to hold back the tears. She never cried, ever. Not when her father had died, not when she'd been escorted to the orphanage by two somber nuns while her mother looked on, not even when Will had left her for good. Yet over the past few days she'd been nothing but a watering pot.

Determined to quell the flood of emotion, she swiped at her cheeks. Weak women did not survive. Her baby was depending on her. She'd had enough trouble after Will's death, she couldn't let down her guard.

Heavy footsteps approached the door. A tentative knock sounded. "Are you all right?" a male voice called.

Her heart flipped. She absently smoothed her hair and tugged her heavy wrapper higher over her neck. Why was Mr. Elder still here? Had the weather changed for the worse? Had something happened to Jo?

She lifted the baby from her cozy nest, and cradled the bundle against her chest. "I'll be right out," she called, unable to disguise the quiver in her voice.

The infant's cupid-bow mouth opened and closed in a yawn, her tongue working. Elizabeth pressed her cheek against the baby's forehead, willing herself to be strong. Tears escaped her tightly clenched eyes, dripping down her cheeks. Frightened by her lack of control, she bit her lip. Another telling sob slipped out.

The doorknob rattled. “You don’t sound all right.”

A long pause followed while Elizabeth struggled to find her voice.

The door opened a crack. “I hope you’re decent, because I’m coming in.”

Mr. Elder swung the door wider, his gaze searching the room, his lips set in hard line.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded.

“Nothing.”

Elizabeth sniffled.

His fierce expression turned hesitant. He crossed his arms over his chest, then dropped them nervously to his sides before finally planting his burly fists on his hips. “I’ll just be going then.”

He reached for the exit, his feet still rooted to the floor.

She sniffled again.

One hand clinging to the doorknob, he sighed heavily. “If nothing’s wrong, why are you crying?”

Tears dripped onto the baby’s forehead, startling the infant. Sleepy eyes blinked open, catching Elizabeth’s gaze. She stared into their depths, caught in the dark and mysterious vortex, fascinated. It was like looking at an old soul in a new body. “My baby doesn’t have a name.”

“Is that all? I thought something bad had happened.”

“Well,” she huffed. “I wouldn’t expect a man to understand. A good mother would never fall asleep without seeing to her child first. I left Jo all alone with you and...and...” A fresh wave of

tears spilled down her cheeks. “This poor child has been on this earth all afternoon, without a name.”

His gaze swung between her and the baby as if he was puzzling out a great problem. “It’s not like she understands the difference.”

“Oh, you, you...” Elizabeth fumed. “I cannot say anything nice to you, so I am not going to say anything at all.”

She clenched her teeth to prevent a torrent of angry words, so resentful, she wanted to lash out.

“No need to upset yourself.” Mr. Elder hovered in the doorway like a wild-eyed buck poised for flight. “It shouldn’t be too difficult to name a baby. Did you and your husband have any names picked out?”

Elizabeth choked back another sob. The only thing Will had ever called their child was a “nuisance.” He’d ridden away the day after he’d discovered she was pregnant.

Her blood turned to ice. What if the child found out she was unloved by her father? Unwanted? Everyone deserved to be loved. All children deserved a name.

She cradled her daughter protectively against her chest. No one knew the truth about Will, and she’d keep it that way. Certainly plenty of people suspected her late husband of cheating at cards, and not a few had grown suspicious of his shallow, jovial smile. But no one knew his true character. He’d saved that part of himself for the people he no longer needed to impress. Like his wife.

Elizabeth had a safe, peaceful home now, and nothing else

mattered. Not even an insensitive lawman. She canted a sideways glance at the baffled Ranger.

Mr. Elder hesitantly straddled the threshold—one foot in the room, one foot in the kitchen—as if he couldn't quite commit to his escape.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “There are some beautiful names in the Bible. Rebecca, Mary. And, uh, some more I can't think of right now.”

The infant stretched out a single, tiny hand. Her five perfect fingers opened to the world. Love shimmered in Elizabeth's chest. Instantly calmed, she stared in wonder, awed by this exquisite, fragile human being God had entrusted to her. This miracle of life.

“There's Rachel,” Mr. Elder continued. “And—”

“Wait,” Elizabeth cut into his mumbled list. “Rachel.” She liked the way it sounded, the way the syllables rolled off her tongue. “This is my daughter, Rachel.”

The name fit.

Peace settled over Elizabeth like a down comforter on a cold winter's night. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” He leaned forward to peer at the baby, still keeping his body half in, half out of the room. “You can always settle on a middle name later.”

Her heart sank.

His stricken gaze darted to her face. “You don't need to make a decision now.”

“I guess not.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “Glad that’s settled.”

“Don’t let me keep you,” Elizabeth muttered.

Mr. Elder groaned. Pulling his foot into the room, he leaned one elbow on the chest of drawers, then rested his chin on his fist. “What was your mother’s name?”

Elizabeth conjured up the one hazy memory she had clung to all these years. She pictured a blond-haired woman with kind, sad eyes. For ten years Elizabeth had clung to her anger and betrayal. Why had her mother relinquished her only child to an orphanage? Why hadn’t she fought harder for Elizabeth? Perhaps it was time for forgiveness. How proud her mother would have been of her first grandchild. Right then, Elizabeth felt as if she could forgive anything. Even Will.

“Rose,” she said. “My mother’s name was Rose.”

“Rachel Rose.” He smiled, his teeth even and white against rugged, wind-chapped skin. “That sounds like the perfect name for a little girl.” He turned on his heel to leave, then paused. “Are you hungry?”

Her stomach rumbled. In all the confusion she hadn’t eaten all day. “Starving.”

He chuckled, threading his fingers through his dark wavy hair, ruffling the neatly cut strands.

A sense of foreboding wiped the half grin from her lips. She’d never again trust a man who spent more time at the barber than he did with his own family. She’d learned that lesson the hard

way with Will.

The Ranger smoothed his hair back into place. "I thought you'd be hungry. I'll fix you a plate."

"I'll help you." Scooting her legs to the side of the bed, she winced as her tender muscles screamed in protest.

"Don't get up," he admonished. "I'll bring supper to you."

His casual declaration kept her frozen for a long moment. Her eyes narrowed on his face. Was he sincere? Save for a hint of beard shadowing his jaw, Mr. Elder appeared as fresh and crisp as a spring crocus. He wore his dark gray shirt tucked into his trousers, his leather vest neatly buttoned, the gun holster conspicuously absent. Before she could protest, he ducked back into the kitchen.

"Wait," Elizabeth called. "Where's Jo?"

"She's in the barn, doing chores." He stuck his head around the corner. "That's one tough young'un."

"I didn't think you two were getting along so well."

"She's awfully opinionated for a youngster. But I'll let it pass since she took such good care of you. A lot of grown men don't have that kind of grit." He fisted his hand on the door frame, his head bent, his gaze fastened on the toe of his boot. "Are you sure you're all right? It's been a rough day."

A hint of blush tinged his handsome face, the scratch on his cheek from his barn escape barely visible. Elizabeth suppressed a grin. She found his awkward attempt to inquire about her health painfully endearing.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I’d like to think it’s been a day full of blessings.”

He exhaled a pent-up breath. “Yes, it has.”

With a parting nod he disappeared again, taking with him the strange tension she felt in his presence. Bemused, she stared at the empty space he’d occupied. Though a large man, he carried himself with an easy grace. His gestures were spare and clipped, but he managed to speak volumes with his brief answers.

Her stomach rumbled into her musings.

She brushed her nose against Rachel’s. “This should be a novel experience. Most men aren’t interested in fetching and carrying for a lady unless they’re courting. And we certainly aren’t courting.”

Elizabeth wanted to be annoyed with her frailty—she’d just declared her independence, after all—but the hunger gnawing at her stomach silenced her protests.

After pressing her cheek against Rachel’s smooth forehead, she laid the baby on the bed. Twisting, Elizabeth fluffed the pillows behind her, sank her hands into the mattress and shimmied backward until she sat up straight.

She cradled her daughter in her palms. Rachel cooed, the sound no louder than the purr of a kitten. Tiny fingers worked in the air. Elizabeth kissed all ten tips, captivated by the miniature oval nails. She’d never seen anything so small, so absolutely flawless.

She inhaled Rachel’s sweet essence, her heart swelling until

she was sure it would burst right out of her chest. She'd been adrift for months, unsure of the future, and afraid to face the past. With Rachel, everything felt right. The way God had intended.

Mr. Elder returned a moment later with a steaming mug of coffee in one hand and a platter overflowing with food in the other.

"I can't eat all that!" Elizabeth laughed.

"You might be surprised."

Despite her protest, her gaze searched the plate, her mouth watering. He'd heaped a great mound of eggs next to a hearty slab of bacon. An enormous hunk of generously buttered bread balanced on the edge.

Worry dampened her enthusiasm. If this was what he had prepared for Elizabeth, how much had he eaten already? "Have you and Jo had supper?"

Purchasing more supplies didn't worry her. She had plenty of cash. Following Will's death, the somber undertaker had marched up to the house in his navy blue suit, his bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows drawn into a fierce scowl. He'd slapped a fat wad of bills he'd discovered in Will's saddle bags into her limp hands. As if begrudging her the virtue of his honorable gesture, the disagreeable man had whirled and stomped away.

Money definitely wasn't the problem. It was the trip to town that had her stomach in knots. Traveling to Cimarron Springs meant facing the people who resented Will, even after his death. The people whose money and property he'd won in card games.

The people who thought Will was a cheat. She'd felt the hot sting of their accusations as she'd run her errands on previous visits. The way the ladies had sniffed and swept their skirts aside when she passed, as if afraid of being tainted by association, was painfully burned into her memory.

Even the sheriff, a man who'd shared more than one raucous evening with Will, had accused her husband of being a cheat. He'd even threatened to seize her homestead if he discovered proof.

"I had a tin of beans earlier," Mr. Elder said, startling her from her gloomy thoughts.

Elizabeth blinked. "Wherever did you find those?"

"I packed them from town. I didn't want to deplete your food supply," he spoke matter-of-factly. "The weather has let up, but you never can tell in this part of the country. You've got enough to worry about without a full-grown man eating your winter supply. Might be a long season."

"Oh, yes, of course. I didn't think... ."

Confounded by Mr. Elder's kindness, Elizabeth placed Rachel in the makeshift crib while he patiently held her supper. She accepted the plate from his outstretched hand. Their fingers brushed together. The dark hairs on the backs of his knuckles felt rough and foreign against her calloused fingers.

He set the mug on the nightstand. "Anything else you need?"

Surprised to note her quickened pulse, Elizabeth shook her head.

He gestured in Rachel's direction. "She appears to be healthy and all. No worse for wear."

"She's perfect." That same warm light shimmered around Elizabeth's heart. "Would you like to hold her?"

He shook his head, backing up so quickly his hip slammed against the dresser. "I'll pass."

With a curt nod at Rachel, he strode out of the room.

Elizabeth glanced around the room. Was something burning? Certainly a big, strong man like Mr. Elder wasn't frightened of a baby. Something else must have spooked him.

She shrugged off the Ranger's odd behavior and returned her attention to supper. The nutty aroma of fresh-brewed coffee wafted from the night table, mingling perfectly with the scent of freshly toasted bread. She speared a hearty chunk of bacon, her taste buds dancing in anticipation. Chewing slowly, she savored the spicy, salt-cured meat.

An unexpected stab of guilt dampened her enthusiasm. She felt as if she should apologize to Mr. Elder. But for what? For assuming he'd eat her food? It wasn't as if she'd actually accused him of anything. Still, no matter the circumstances, her lack of tolerance was unacceptable. So far, he'd been nothing but kind.

Her thoughts drifted back to the only other man who'd ever showed her the least hint of kindness. Hadn't Will started out in a similar fashion? She'd been sweeping snow from the walk outside the bakery where she worked in New York when he'd tipped his hat at her while strolling by. The gesture had stunned

her. She couldn't recall a time when anyone had actually noticed her, much less acknowledged her with a greeting.

When he came back the following day, he'd called her "ma'am" and smiled so wide she'd blushed. By day three, she found herself jumping each time the bell chimed over the door, hoping he'd return. All day she waited, only to be disappointed. When she'd turned the closed sign for the evening, she found him lounging against the lamppost, his thumbs hooked in his pockets. Three weeks later they were married and on a train bound for Kansas.

He'd cared for her in the beginning, showering her with gifts and attention as if she were a shiny new toy. But after the novelty had worn off, he'd changed. Elizabeth was certain that the Ranger was no different. He'd reveal his true colors soon enough, and this time she wouldn't be taken by surprise.

Elizabeth attacked her food with a new vigor. Considering her appalling display of blubbering this afternoon, she must work harder than ever to prove her independence. In order to survive, she had to be strong. More than just blizzards and Indians threatened her home, and she had to be prepared.

* * *

Jack sucked in a lungful of frosty air, then kicked another enormous stump into place. Two days had passed during his self-imposed exile on the widow's homestead. Two days of letting the outlaw's trail grow colder. He stepped back, swinging the ancient ax he'd found rusting near the wood pile high over his head.

Exhaling a vaporous breath, he swung the tool in a neat arc, burying the blade three-inches deep into the dry wood. Repeating the motion, he circled the stump, kicking fallen pieces back into place until he had a satisfying jumble of split wood. His shoulder aching, he rolled another stump into position.

The physical labor, the satisfying crack of the blade, cleared his thoughts. The pile grew taller, but he didn't slow his pace. Driven by a need to accomplish a useful task, he forged ahead. Someone had already cut the smaller branches. The pie-shaped pieces were neatly stacked in a long, sturdy wall covered in oilcloth and mounded over with snow. But the unwieldy stumps had been heaped together to rot, wasted.

Jack didn't like waste.

The work put him in control, gave him a sense of pride and accomplishment. He swung the ax until his biceps burned and sweat trickled down his collar, until Elizabeth's screams of pain during childbirth stopped ringing in his ears.

He knew she was fine, but he couldn't shake his impotent rage at his own helplessness. He'd borne that same weight on his shoulders staring down at his sister-in-law's prone body. Doreen had done nothing wrong. She'd been running her errands when she'd arrived at the bank on the wrong day, at the wrong time. She'd walked right into an armed robbery, and the outlaws had shot her. The senselessness of the act had shaken Jack's faith, making him question God's plan. Why Doreen?

The dark-haired beauty had married his older brother when

Jack was barely sixteen. When he'd decided to join the Texas Rangers instead of working the ranch like his older brothers, she'd been the only member of the family to support his decision.

After the shooting, he'd let his emotions overtake his good sense. When an enraged posse had tracked down a man named Bud Shaw and declared him guilty, Jack had gone along for the ride. Even when every instinct in his body told him the man was innocent. During the following weeks, he'd split his time between the family ranch and a Paris, Texas, jail. Questioning the imprisoned man at length had only cemented his doubts. There were two Bud Shaws roaming the central plains, and the man rotting in jail, waiting for his own hanging, was innocent.

Jack had pulled every favor owed to him by the local judge to buy the wrongly convicted man half a year's clemency. Three long months had passed since then. Every day without locating the real outlaw weighed heavy on his conscience.

His nieces and nephews deserved justice—but so did the innocent man sitting in jail. The one decent lead Jack had followed had led him to this isolated homestead in the middle of nowhere. Dawdling here wasn't going to bring justice for anyone. Jack had lingered over the widow and her newborn long enough. He was party to a grave injustice, and he couldn't rest until he set it straight.

He slid the last stump into place. Squinting at the horizon, he wiped the sweat from his brow with his leather-clad hand. The day looked to be overcast, but clear and calm all the same. If he

left in the next hour, he'd be back in Cimarron Springs by lunch. His hands tingled with expectation. The familiar anticipation of embarking on another journey focused him, chasing away his lingering unrest. He had a goal, a purpose.

The widow and her child were none of his concern. Jo's family, the McCoys, would see to her well-being. Besides, a pretty woman was never alone for long in this part of the country.

The ax missed its target.

Jack windmilled his free hand, managing to right himself just before he tumbled into the woodpile. Straightening, he darted his gaze to the house. No mocking faces appeared in the square windowpanes. Satisfied his gaff had gone unnoticed, he slung the blade over his shoulder.

"Guess that about does it," he muttered to himself.

With his thoughts focused on the multitude of tasks to accomplish before his journey, he barely noticed the frigid, knee-deep snow on his trek to the barn. He'd saddle up Midnight, say his goodbyes and be gone. Simple as that.

A rare thread of regret tugged at his heart. He forcibly pushed aside the nagging concern. Mrs. Cole had survived this long on her own, there was no need to think she needed his assistance. He was a lawman, not a nursemaid. He had a job to do.

Jack slid open the barn door, relieved to find the cavernous space empty. He inhaled the pungent aroma of hay and feed. The scent reminded him of home, of his youth. He'd grown up mucking out barns, working from dawn till dusk on his

family's cattle ranch. The familiar sights and sounds released an unwelcome longing to work with hands, to build something lasting, to recapture the camaraderie he'd once shared with his brothers.

Chickens clucked and a cow lowed. Midnight, one of two horses in the four stalls, whinnied.

A sound outside the usual barnyard racket caught his attention. Jack paused, tilting his head to one side as he heard it again. He recognized that sound all right.

His jubilant mood fled. Someone was crying. Not the pained howling of a body in agony, but a quiet whimper of despair.

Jack groaned. There was only one person on the homestead who'd hide in a stall rather than cry out in the open. Determined to slink away before he got sucked into another emotional conversation, he backed to the door. He'd already dealt with one weeping female this week. His problem-solving skills were limited to things he could shoot or arrest.

He had one hand on the door when another faint snuffle doused his annoyance. Compassion for Jo dragged his feet to a halt. The code of honor ingrained in him as a child reared its ugly head. He pressed two fingers to the bridge of his nose. He'd tackle this one last obstacle, and then he'd leave. After all, he'd comforted Elizabeth.

He was practically an expert on women now.

Chapter Four

Jack had an idea where to find the weeping girl. He crept

through the barn, his boots silenced by the hay strewn over the floor. He should be saddling Midnight instead of chasing down the source of those muffled sobs, but his conscience drove him forward against his good sense.

Dust motes stirred in the shaft of light sluicing through the hayloft. The wind had blown the door open almost half a foot. No wonder he'd nearly frozen to death these past two nights. In his haste to escape Jo's trap, he hadn't fully latched the hayloft. He'd been so cold he'd almost hunkered down next to the milk cow for warmth.

He added another chore to his growing list. Better for him to climb that rickety ladder than risk having one of the women break a leg. The third rung from the top was nearly rotted through. Unfortunately, sealing his impromptu exit had to wait until he dealt with his current problem.

Stalling, Jack lifted his shoulders and stretched, easing the cramps from sleeping on the hard-packed floor. He tugged his gloves over his exposed wrists. The barn had given him shelter and little else. A feather bed in town called to him like a prayer.

He peered into the first stall, his gaze meeting the sloe-eyed stare of the caramel-colored milk cow. He inched his way to the second stall, glancing over the half door. Jo huddled in the corner, her thin arms wrapped around her legs, her forehead pressed against her bent knees. Two long braids brushed against the tops of her boots.

Midnight whinnied, stretching a velvety nose out the last

enclosure. Jack saluted his companion with a finger to his brow. “Soon, I promise.”

The girl jerked upright, her face averted.

Jack rested his elbows on the half door, chafing at the delay. He adjusted his hat forward before reminding himself this wasn't an interrogation, then set the brim back on his head in the “I'm friendly and approachable” position.

He didn't even know what was wrong, let alone how to fix the problem. Once again he cursed the mistake that had led him here. Why hadn't this homestead been teeming with hardened outlaws instead of weeping women?

He recalled Jo's mention of influenza. She was probably just concerned over her ailing family. Jack added the sheriff's failure to inform him of the influenza outbreak to his growing list of gripes against the incompetent lawman.

Sucking in a breath of a chill air to fortify himself, he contemplated his strategy. “Something bothering you?”

“Nope.”

Jack bit back a curse. Didn't women love to talk? That's what all the fellows complained about, anyway.

As much as he'd like to turn tail and run, his feet refused to move. Frustrated, he reached into the stall, yanked a length of straw from a tightly cinched bale and twirled it between his fingers. “Seems like there's something bothering you.”

She swiped her nose with an exaggerated snuffle. “You're touched in the head, Ranger.”

The spark in her voice encouraged him. Rage was an emotion he understood, and inspiring anger in a touchy female was easier than shooting tin cans off a flat stump. “Then why are you crying?”

She threw him a withering glare. “I ain’t no weeping female, so why don’t you do something useful, like ride on out of here?”

“Maybe I will.”

Undaunted by her harsh words, he continued to twirl the hay between his fingers. A chicken flapped through the barn, pecking at the dirt around Jack’s feet. He let the oppressive silence hang between them. People generally didn’t like silence. Most folks would rather fill up an empty space, even if that space was better left empty.

Jo kept quiet, a trait that won Jack’s increasing admiration. At least she wasn’t crying anymore, another positive sign. If she didn’t want to talk, then he sure wasn’t going to force the situation. Looked as if he was going to make it to town before lunch, after all.

She bumped her hand down the length of one dark braid, her gaze focused on the hay beneath her feet. “Mrs. Cole says you were chasing bank robbers when you barged in.” She shot him a sideways glance. “What if you make another mistake? What if someone gets hurt?”

His fingers stilled. He had the uneasy sensation this conversation had nothing to do with bank robbers. “You make a mistake, you make amends. That’s all the good Lord asks of us.”

“How do you make amends for lying?”

He busted the straw in two pieces. Everybody lied, he reminded himself. Just not for the same reasons. “You make up for lying by telling the truth. You wanna start now?”

“I told Mrs. Cole I could deliver that baby. But I couldn’t.” Her chin quivered. “I was so scared I wanted to run away.”

Relief shuddered through him. He’d been expecting to hear something much worse. She was barely more than a child herself, no wonder she’d been terrified. He was making a fast slide past his thirtieth year, and he’d considered running away himself. “You delivered a baby. That’s a grave responsibility. Being scared doesn’t mean you lied, just means you’re human.”

“You ever get scared?”

“Every day.” He barked out a laugh. “You wanna know a secret?”

She scrambled to her feet, brushing at the baggy wool trousers tucked into the tops of her sturdy boots. A voluminous coat in a dusty shade of gray completed the tomboy uniform. She flipped the braid she’d been worrying over one shoulder.

Her clear, green eyes searched his face. “What secret?”

“Truth is, I might have beaten you to the door. I wanted to hightail it out of that room faster than a jackrabbit out of a wolf den.”

“Truly?”

He chuckled. How many times had he done the same? Judged someone’s face, watching for subtle hints to test the sincerity of

their answers? “I was terrified.”

Midnight butted against the neighboring stall, reminding Jack of his purpose, of the unfinished business weighing on his conscience.

As Jo absorbed his confession, her shoulders relaxed.

He mentally patted himself on the back for his inspired handling of the situation. A few more words of assurance to wrap things up, and he could leave. He'd have to regroup in Cimarron Springs and interview the sheriff once more. Judging by the lawman's lazy work habits, the task of gathering information was going to take all afternoon, further postponing his trip.

He'd decided to visit Wichita earlier that morning. Every two-bit thief in Kansas wound up there at some point or another. The frontier city was the key to locating the outlaw, Bud Shaw.

“You're a brave girl for sticking it out,” he encouraged.

He'd settled Jo's fears. He'd be in Cimarron Springs by this afternoon.

Jo looked him up and down. “You still chasing them outlaws?”

“Outlaw. There's only one left.”

“What happened to the rest? How many were there all together? Do you always chase outlaws?”

Jack held up a hand, halting the deluge of questions. “There were three all together. They shot a...they shot a woman during a robbery in Texas. On their way out of town, the sheriff gut shot one of them, a man named Slim Joe.”

“Did he die?” she asked eagerly.

“That kind of wound doesn’t kill a person right off. Slim Joe had a lot of time to talk. He turned over his partners, Pencil Pete and Bud Shaw. We caught up with Pencil Pete right off and threw him in jail. Then we found Bud Shaw. Except, well, I think we made a mistake.”

“Then Bud Shaw isn’t one of the outlaws?”

“I think there are two men named Bud Shaw. I think the outlaw decided to take advantage of a man with the same name, and frame him.”

Jack didn’t want to expand, he’d already said more than he intended. Unease itched beneath his skin. There were two Bud Shaws, of that much he was certain. He’d discovered too much evidence to refute the fact in his own mind. Just not enough to convince the judge.

Jo glanced at him, her expression skeptical. “But what if something else does go wrong?”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.” Jack threw up his hands. “Why are you worrying about something that hasn’t happened yet?”

“What if you can’t find him? What then?”

“Standing around here talking about the future ain’t gonna change anything. Why solve a problem before it happens?”

“Don’t get all riled up, Ranger. You’re spooking the animals.”

Jack pressed the brim of his hat tighter to his head with both hands. Women confounded him. He had one female concerned about naming a baby that was too young to answer, and another

looking for a solution to a problem that hadn't yet occurred. What was a man to do?

Gritting his teeth, he forced a smile. "Well, you did real good delivering that baby."

"Better than you. I thought you were going to throw up."

"So did I," he retorted, his voice more forceful than necessary.

She tossed back her head and laughed at his shouted confession. Jack scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. Her infectious laugh soon had him chuckling. The sound rumbled low in his chest, rusty and neglected, then bubbled to the surface. He couldn't recall the last time he'd truly laughed, especially at himself.

He used to laugh with his brothers all the time—when they weren't beating the tar out of each other. They'd roll around in the dirt and blood, bent on killing each other, until one of them said something smart-alecky and the whole group erupted into raucous laughter. He missed that. Missed the camaraderie of his family.

Things had changed after their pa's death. His older brothers had ceased brawling, and started slicking back their hair. Weddings had followed, and then a new niece or nephew every year after. His mother had reveled in her role as grandmother before she'd died. Lord knew they'd all been lost without her. Jack was too young to take over the ranch by himself, and too old to be ordered around by his brothers.

He'd joined the Texas Rangers instead, and Doreen had

supported his decision. Jack pictured his sister-in-law the last time he'd seen her. How the white-linen pillow had framed her ashen face, the growing pool of red seeping through the bandages.

His smile waned. Three months, and he wasn't any closer to catching the real Bud Shaw than the day he'd ridden out of town. He'd failed the one person who had always believed in him.

"You okay, Ranger?" Jo asked.

"Yeah, sure."

"You look like someone just walked over your grave."

"Not mine," he growled.

He'd crushed all the joy from their exchange, but he didn't care. "How far does a man have to go to find some peace around here?"

He pivoted on his heel, stalking out of the barn. The sooner he brought the right man to justice, the better.

* * *

Elizabeth hoisted the empty laundry basket onto the bed. Her weakened body protested the exertion. The past two days had been so chaotic, so full of change, she craved a task to ground her. A mindless chore. Something familiar and comforting.

She turned, catching her disheveled reflection in the looking glass above the dresser.

"Oh, my," she groaned.

Her hair hung in a tangled mess down her back. Her cheeks were flushed a bright pink in stark contrast to her pale face. Dark

circles rimmed her eyes. She looked no better than one of the beggars she used to pass on her way to work in the city. She lifted her brush from the dresser. Tugging the bristles through the snarls, she worked the knots loose. The heavy mass soon smoothed and shined.

Elizabeth didn't approve of vanity, but even she had to admit her hair was pretty. She had the same blond hair as her mother, thick and long. Wispy tendrils usually framed her face, falling in soft curls around her cheeks. The past days' toil had left her forlorn ringlets drooping and lifeless. She'd love nothing more than another thorough washing and a decadent soak in the galvanized tub, but that would have to wait.

She braided her long strands with practiced fingers, twisting the coil over the top of her head and securing the thick rope with pins. She rubbed her lips together to add a flush of color, unsure why she bothered. There was no one here to care about her appearance, least of all her sleepy daughter.

The extra effort buoyed her spirits, though, and she needed all her mustered strength to face the mess the Ranger had surely made while she'd been laid up.

She reached behind her for the basket, her gaze drawn to Will's trunk. The domed black chest sat just where he'd left it six months ago. He'd always been possessive of the battered piece of luggage. He never opened the lid in her presence, and he kept the hinge securely locked when he was away.

In the early days of their marriage she'd been obsessed with

the contents, curious as to why he kept secrets from her. When the undertaker had delivered Will's personal belongings in a wooden crate, she'd expected to find a key.

Instead, the grim-faced undertaker had ignobly presented her with his grim bounty. An enormous sum of cash carelessly wadded together and secured with a band. The funds for Will's escape from domestic responsibilities.

Later, at the funeral, the undertaker had looked her up and down, suspicion in his lifeless gray eyes. The amount of money had been too excessive for a humble railroad worker, especially given Will's propensity for spending his paychecks before the ink had dried on the paper. Only a cheat could have acquired that much money, the undertaker's eyes seemed to accuse.

She'd decided then and there that what she didn't know couldn't hurt her. From that moment on, she lost all desire to peer into the trunk. The more details she discovered about Will's hazy past, the less certain she became of herself, of her judgment. By opening the trunk, she risked opening wounds that had only just begun to heal. Later, when she wasn't feeling so fragile, she'd delve into the skeletons he'd left behind during his hasty exit.

While Rachel dozed, she lined the laundry basket with another patchwork quilt she'd sewed especially for the baby, then laid the swaddled infant snugly inside.

"A basket and a drawer." Elizabeth clicked her tongue. "We should have named you Laundry Day instead of Rachel Rose."

The baby blinked, her somber gaze trusting and innocent. A

disarming tide of emotion rolled over Elizabeth. The awesome responsibility of shepherding this new life into the harsh world stunned her once again. She didn't know anything about babies. The years before her job at the bakery and then her marriage had been spent in an orphanage where the children were segregated by age.

While most of the older girls had chosen to work with the infants, Elizabeth had taken a job in the kitchens. Seeing those helpless babies, abandoned and alone, had been unbearable. She shuddered at the memory of sparse iron beds lined up against cold, bleak walls. The endless rules and constant chores. Thank heaven Rachel Rose would never have to suffer that life.

Elizabeth tipped her head to the timbered ceiling. "I think I know what you were trying to tell me. I was praying for myself when I should have been praying for others."

God had never been a presence in her life. Maybe that's why He hadn't answered her prayers. Mrs. Peabody from the orphanage had marched them to church on Sundays, their smocks pressed and their hair brushed smooth, but the service had been in Latin. Though Elizabeth had been entranced by the sheer beauty of the church, she'd never understood the words.

She'd been anxious to attend a service in Cimarron. Unfortunately, despite his earlier pious claims, Will had harbored an aversion to churches. They'd even been married by a justice of the peace. A ceremony so rushed, she'd barely registered the event before Will had whisked her to the train depot and settled

them on a Pullman car bound for Kansas.

Elizabeth shook off the unsettling memories. Living in the past was a dull and lonely business. One thing was for certain, she'd never trust another man until she had seen a true test of his character.

She lifted Rachel's basket, then marched to the kitchen, her weary body braced for a full day of scrubbing. She raised her head, jerking to a halt. Every surface shined. Even the copper kettle gleamed in a shaft of light streaming through the clear glass windowpanes freed from the dimming oilcloth.

Her eyes wide, Elizabeth glanced around the room. Jo must have been up all night to have accomplished such a feat. The brightly polished tin pots and pans hanging against the wall had been neatly arranged by size.

Setting Rachel on the worktable before the stove, Elizabeth made a note to give the girl extra wages this week. Will's money might as well benefit someone deserving of the blessing.

While she admired the spotless kitchen, Mr. Elder shouldered his way through the back door, his arms full of split wood, his hat set low on his head. A gust of frosty air swept a dusting of snow in his wake.

"I thought you'd be gone by now," Elizabeth blurted, astonished to find her heart thumping against her ribs. Certainly she wasn't afraid of him any longer. He'd shown himself to be honorable, if a tad overbearing. Heaven knew he'd had more than ample opportunity to take advantage of them.

His silver star caught the sun, reflecting light. The sight of the lawman's badge caused the memory of the sheriff's threats to explode in her head. There was more than one person in Cimarron Springs who'd like to recoup their losses with the sale of her belongings. Will had been a gambler, and everyone in town had lost money or property to him at one time or another. Yet despite the sheriff's threat to confiscate her property, he'd been too lazy to prove his suspicions.

She didn't need him spurred into action by another lawman.

Jack wiped his feet on the rag rug before stepping into the room. He jostled the wood in his hands for a better grip. "I didn't mean to startle you. I had some chores left." He jerked his head in the direction of the splintered hinges.

"That's very kind of you, but there's really no need... ."

Their eyes met and held for a long moment. She'd thought Will handsome, but her late husband paled in comparison to Mr. Elder. While Will had been fair with washed-out blue eyes, the Ranger's features were bold, exaggerated, not at all perfect. His crooked nose indicated he'd broken it, more than once judging by the flattened bone. A faded scar ran the length of his strong jaw, visible through the stubble shadowing his chin. Deep lines creased his forehead between the dark slash of his eyebrows.

Taken separately, the imperfections should have lessened his attraction, but each one of those minor flaws worked together to lend him a rugged, earthy appearance. His scars revealed a man who had been tested and lived to tell the tale. The realization sent

a tingle of apprehension down her spine. She sensed the Ranger's restless need to leave, his barely leashed discontent, even while he lingered, making minor repairs he might have abandoned with impunity. The discrepancy confused her.

Unsure what else to say, she tore her gaze away. She opened the oven door, and stoked the scarlet embers before setting a pan on the stove and pouring in a measure of fresh milk to warm.

Mr. Elder trudged through the kitchen three more times while she arranged her workspace, his arms heaped with a new batch of wood on each trip. She dusted her hands together and shook her head. At this rate, she wouldn't need to refill the woodpile until next fall.

Grasping a tin scoop, she heaped flour along with two generous pinches of salt into an enormous creamware bowl, then pressed her fingers into the mound, digging a hole. After brushing her hands on her apron, she reached into the pie safe and pinched off a corner of yeast, crumbling the moist leaven into the center of the flour. With the milk properly scalded, she added a dollop of bacon grease, stirring until the ingredients melted together.

While the mixture cooled, she wiped down the table with a damp rag. Once she'd gingerly tapped the side of the pan to ensure a lukewarm temperature, she poured the thickened milk into the well of flour. Waiting for the yeast to dissolve, she gradually added a generous handful of sugar.

The Texas Ranger pounded on the back door as she worked.

Elizabeth winced at the hammering. Rachel barely stirred.

He paused his work at one point, stepping into the snug kitchen with his hat in his hands. “Is the noise too much? Am I disturbing your daughter?”

Her heart jolted. Hearing someone else call Rachel her daughter made the whole experience real. This is my family. Something no one could take away. “Looks like this child would sleep through dynamite.”

He gestured toward her face. “You’ve got a bit of, umm, flour on your...”

Elizabeth’s hand flew to her warm cheek. She scrubbed at the mark. “I didn’t notice.”

His own cheeks red and chapped with cold, he cleared his throat with a curt nod, then backed away to resume his work inside. She took in his appearance, smiling at the way his expensive wool coat with a fresh tear in the shoulder stretched over his broad shoulders. He was a large man with an enormous chest tapering down to a lean waist, but he kept a respectful distance, never using his size to intimidate.

He glanced over his shoulder on his way out, catching her curious regard.

Confused by the fluttering in the pit of her stomach, she ducked her head to tighten the apron around her waist. With the Ranger gone, she focused her attention on the liquid mixture foaming merrily in the center of the flour. Satisfied she’d waited long enough for the yeast to develop, she folded in the dry

ingredients, invigorated by the familiar process. Making bread was her favorite chore.

She loved the silky texture of the flour, the way the dough gradually came together beneath the heels of her hands to form a smooth, elastic ball. The way the yeast smelled like a summer's day, warm and comforting.

Mr. Elder returned again, his saddlebags slung over his left shoulder. He'd packed to leave. To her chagrin, that curious fluttering resumed.

He snatched off his hat. "I replaced the hinges. You shouldn't have any problems."

"I appreciate that."

"I cut the stumps for kindling."

"Thank you."

An emotion she couldn't quite read flitted across his face. "Well, then. I filled the woodpile in the parlor."

The barren room was hardly a parlor, but she appreciated his concern. "I saw. Was there any room left to sit?"

He flashed a lopsided grin. Not the charming smirk he'd plastered on his face that first night to put her at ease, but a genuine smile. "Just enough."

She was struck by how young he looked without his usual scowl. His abashed expression softened the lines of his face, smoothing the customary crease of worry between his eyebrows. His hair wasn't black, as she'd supposed that first night, but more of a deep chocolate. His hazel eyes sparkled with flecks of gold

around the irises, lightening the somber effect of his austere demeanor.

She was unaccustomed to such relaxed behavior in a man. Though he'd been delayed on his journey, he didn't prowl around the house like a caged animal, or burst into action with unleashed energy. He held himself straight and tall. Even when he feigned casual indifference, she sensed a stiffness in his spine, a certain resolve in his stance.

A sudden need to capture this moment overwhelmed her. She wanted to remember the way he circled the brim of his hat in his hands, the way he kept peeking at Rachel when he thought she wasn't looking.

There had been so few moments in her life she had tucked away, saving like priceless treasures. Why this one? She glanced at Rachel Rose, swaddled in peaceful slumber. This unfamiliar emotion bubbling to the surface, this sensation of warmth and safety wrapping around her like a velvet cloak must be attached to the infant.

Elizabeth floundered for something to say, anxious to avoid the troublesome feelings Mr. Elder aroused. It was best he left now, before she was disillusioned, before time and familiarity revealed the cracks in his facade.

He stuck his hat on his head, lowering the brim to shield his eyes. "I should be going."

Elizabeth busied herself with separating the dough. "Thank you for everything you've done. Someday I'll tell Rachel the story

of her birth. How you thought I was a bank robber.”

They both chuckled, her own forced laugh hollow and strained.

When the awkward silence fell once more, he peered at her from beneath the brim of his hat. “When I tell the boys this story, I’ll be painting a more heroic picture of myself.”

“You did just fine, Mr. Elder.”

“After all we’ve been through, I think you can call me Jack.”

Suddenly shy, she met his sheepish gaze. The name suited him. It was strong and solid. Elizabeth let her gaze skitter away from those compassionate, hazel eyes. “Goodbye, Jack.”

“Goodbye,” he replied. “I’ll just be going.”

Neither of them moved.

A sharp sorrow robbed her of breath. She attacked her kneading with renewed vigor.

“Jack,” she spoke, prolonging the moment, “can you check on Jo? I don’t know what’s taking her so long with chores.”

“I saw her in the barn earlier.” His boots scuffed the floor.

Elizabeth suppressed a grin. He probably didn’t even notice his own nervous fidget, the boot scuffing that reminded her of a young boy, but she found the gesture charming.

Her somber mood lightened like a leavened pastry. “Tell Jo I’m making bread.”

She squelched the urge to slap her forehead. Of course she was making bread. Why had she said such a silly thing? What was wrong with her? She was behaving like a giddy schoolgirl.

Jack cleared his throat. "I will."

"Where will you go after this?"

She didn't even know why she'd asked, except that talking meant he wasn't leaving just yet, and she missed the company of another adult.

"I've got to see the sheriff."

Her effervescent mood plummeted. Clearing her throat, she stood up straighter. "Tell him we're doing fine. Just fine."

He nodded.

Another moment laden with unspoken words passed between them. She grasped for an elusive farewell, a way to thank him that encompassed her diverse emotions, but no words came. Jack pinched the brim of his hat between two fingers, tipping his head in a parting gesture before the door closed quietly behind him.

She pressed the back of her hand to her brow. The temperature in the room seemed to drop. Those pesky, annoying, infuriating tears were clogging her throat once more. What on earth was wrong with her?

A lank strand of hair had fallen across her forehead, and she shook it away with a sigh. She was tired, that was all. Rachel had awakened three times last evening to be fed and changed. All this weeping must be due to her exhaustion.

The growing fatigue pulled her to slump on the stool before the worktable. She didn't need a man around the house.

Rachel's face pinched up a like a dried apple, her lips trembling in distress. The infant's faint mewling reverberated in

Elizabeth's chest.

Better that Jack left now. Keeping this home meant keeping her family together, and a wandering lawman asking questions about her past didn't bode well. She was glad he was gone. For good. She was doing just fine on her own.

Just fine.

If she repeated the mantra often enough, maybe she'd even believe her own lies.

Chapter Five

If Jack hadn't been so furious, he might have seen the humor in his current situation. First off, he'd never seen a man so partial to drab brown—the exact color of the hindquarters of a bay mare. Dressed head to toe in the unflattering hue, Cimarron Spring's sheriff resembled a great mound of lumpy, oozing mud.

The older man's dirty-blond hair was saturated with gray, and his eyes mirrored the washed-out beige of his stained and wrinkled shirt. An extra-long pair of suspenders stretched over his shoulders. A leather belt hooked on a freshly notched hole, perilously near the ragged tip, strained to cinch his spreading waist. Ferretlike eyes took Jack's measure.

The sheriff smacked his flabby lips together. "You shoulda told me you was lookin' for a live horse," he cackled, his enormous belly undulating with laughter. "Now, that's a different story."

Clenching his teeth, Jack let his molten anger cool into hardened steel. He failed to see the humor in sending a fellow

lawman on a wild-goose chase. “I’m looking for a live horse and a live man. A man who murdered a woman during a bank robbery.”

Jack had been in Cimarron Springs for several days, waiting for a meeting. Both the sheriff and the town doc had been unavailable. While Jack understood the doc’s busy schedule causing a delay, he’d yet to discern the cause of the sheriff’s stalling. As far as Jack could tell, the only pressing item on that man’s schedule was his next meal.

Under Jack’s unyielding scowl, the jovial smile on the sheriff’s face gradually dissolved into a blank stare. “Don’t get all uppity on me, Ranger,” the man spoke, his tone defensive. “I’ve got a lot going on here. There’s a flu epidemic crippling the town. We’ve had six deaths already. The undertaker had to pile the bodies in the lean-to. Good thing it’s winter or we’d a had a putrid smell.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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