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# Mail-Order Christmas Brides Boxed Set: Her Christmas Family / Christmas Stars for Dry Creek / Home for Christmas / Snowflakes for Dry Creek / Christmas Hearts / Mistletoe Kiss in Dry Creek

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**Tronstad J.**

Mail-Order Christmas Brides Boxed Set: Her Christmas Family / Christmas Stars for Dry Creek / Home for Christmas / Snowflakes for Dry Creek / Christmas Hearts / Mistletoe Kiss in Dry Creek / J. Tronstad — «HarperCollins»,

USA TODAY bestselling authors Jillian Hart and Janet Tronstad will capture your heart with stories that celebrate the joys and excitement when you combine Christmas with mail-order weddings. Enjoy six romances of adventure and faith in one great bundle!A little girl longs for a new mother for Christmas so she convinces her single father to advertise for a mail-order wife, whose arrival offers them the chance to forge a real family.A would-be bride discovers her intended groom has abandoned her before she even arrives but then she unexpectedly falls for the groom's brother.A gruff rancher's marriage offer to a widowed single mother is based solely on convenience…until it becomes a matter of the heart.The six charming individual stories are:HER CHRISTMAS FAMILY by Jillian HartCHRISTMAS STARS FOR DRY CREEK by Janet TronstadHOME FOR CHRISTMAS by Jillian HartSNOWFLAKES FOR DRY CREEK by Janet TronstadCHRISTMAS HEARTS by Jillian HartMISTLETOE KISS IN DRY CREEK by Janet Tronstad

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Jillian Hart

To Jenny Blake, from Janet and Jillian. Meeting you face-to-face in Spokane last May after being online friends for so many years was a true blessing. You are a great friend, Jenny. You have been an inspiration and encouragement to both of us. We love you. Blessings always.

For You shall enlarge my heart.

—*Psalms* 119:32

## Chapter One

*Montana Territory December 20, 1886*

The steel *clickety-clack* of the rails slowed as the town of Miles City came into sight. Mercy Jacobs felt her heart catch. Being a mail-order bride was nerve-racking. With every mile and every stop on the route, her new home of Angel Falls came closer and closer.

And so did the reality of meeting the stranger she'd agreed to marry.

"Ma?" Her seven-year-old son fidgeted on the seat beside her, straining to see above the lip of the windowsill to get a better view of the approaching town. "Will Angel Falls be like this one?"

"I don't know, George. Maybe." She smiled past her nervousness. Cole Matheson, the man whose advertisement she'd answered, had written of a friendly railroad town lined with shops, one of which was his own.

"Will it be snowy, too?" Those wide baby-blue eyes filled with a child's hope.

"I reckon so, as your new pa said in his last letter to bundle up, that our first Christmas in Montana Territory was guaranteed to be white."

"Boy, I sure do wanna go out and play in that." George sighed wistfully. As the train chugged a little slower, the view of snowy fields, rolling hills and the snow-mantled roofs of homes clustered along the outskirts of town became crisp, no longer blurred. Easy to soak in and dream a little. George let out a sigh of longing that fogged part of the window. He swiped it away with one hand and watched two children building a snowman in their backyard.

Snow had been hard to come by at their home in North Carolina.

"Miles City, next stop!" The conductor's voice carried above the conversations of passengers in the crowded car, packed with folks traveling to be with family for the holiday.

"Well, that's me." Maeve Flanagan turned around in her seat to smile back at Mercy. The small child seated beside her peered out the window, too. "This is as far as we go."

"Are you nervous? You look nervous. Why, you're absolutely pale." Mercy leaned forward and caught her new friend's hand. They'd met back East when Maeve had boarded the train, a mail-order bride, too. "Take a deep breath."

"I'm fine. It's merely last-minute butterflies." Maeve smiled gently. She was truly striking at nearly six feet tall with beautiful red hair and blue-green eyes. "This is what I've been waiting for this entire journey. Meeting Mr. Noah Miller."

"He'll be everything you've been hoping for, I just know it." Mercy gave Maeve's gloved had a squeeze of encouragement. "Our prayers will be answered."

"We've prayed so often on this trip, surely the Good Lord has heard us." Maeve paused as the train's brakes squealed, making conversation difficult.

The train jerked to a stop, bouncing them in their seats. With the final jerk, all motion ceased. Her time with Maeve had come to an end, but she knew regardless of where their separate paths led them, they would always be friends. Some journeys bound hearts together, and this was one of them.

"Why, it's my two mail-order brides." The conductor, kindly Mr. Blake, paused in the aisle with a sympathetic smile on his round face. He might be a big man and built like on ox, but his heart was bigger. "I've been praying for you lovely ladies. Think of the happiness awaiting you. Why, I can't imagine a thing more romantic. It's almost like a story, first declaring love with each other through your letters and then finding a deeper love when you meet. It must be all poetry and declarations of the heart, like a fairy tale happening just to you. Not only am I a happily married man, so I know what's waiting for you, but it's the Christmas season. Love and happy endings are in the air."

"That's very kind of you," Maeve said gently, as if she wasn't so sure.

Mercy was even less sure. Love was not the reason she had traveled across the country to wed a stranger. She managed a weak smile.

Mr. Blake was not derailed easily. He pulled something from his pockets. He held up two sprigs of handsome green leaves bearing small white berries. A tiny bow of thin velvet ribbon added a festive touch. He grinned widely. "Think of this gift as a wish and a prayer for your happy marriages. For your first kisses on Christmas Day with your new husbands."

"It's mistletoe!" Maeve exclaimed, surprised.

"Oh, thank you." Mercy accepted hers, touched by his thoughtfulness. She wished to say more but he'd already touched his hand to his cap and moved on to help an elderly lady with her valise at the end of the car.

"Bless you, Mr. Blake." Maeve quickly pinned her spray of mistletoe to her collar. "I appreciate the thoughtful wish."

"And you'll have mine, too." Mercy gave Maeve a brief hug. "My prayers for you won't cease."

"Nor will mine for you." With that, Maeve grabbed her young daughter's hand. Little four-year-old Violet was adorable with her dark auburn hair, cherub's face and violet-blue eyes. She looked up at her mother expectantly. Maeve appeared grim as she stepped into the aisle. "Be happy, my friend."

"You, too." She knew how Maeve felt—hollow, knowing that Mr. Blake's wishes for them could not come true. A business arrangement did not a real marriage make. She hugged Maeve and said goodbye to Violet, and they were gone, traipsing down the aisle.

*Lord, please grant her happiness in her new marriage,* Mercy prayed. *Somehow.*

Her stomach clenched as she settled back into her seat. Soon, it would be her turn to step off the train and meet the man she'd agreed to bind her life to. She smoothed George's flyaway blond hair with her hand. That cowlick always stuck straight up, regardless of what she did. Love for her boy filled her heart.

He was the reason she'd accepted this mail-order situation. Regardless of the type of man Cole Matheson turned out to be, if he was a good father to her son, she would be content. She would endure any disappointments silently and be grateful for a convenient marriage, one without love.

* * *

"Hurry, Pa! We'll be late for the train." Amelia's voice echoed through the dry-goods store, rising above the rustle and din of Christmas customers filling the aisles. The tap of her impatient gait struck like a hammer in uneven raps through the store as she skirted knots of customers and arrowed straight for him. "You promised, Pa. You said you'd keep an eye on the time."

"It's been a busy day." Cole Matheson looked over the top of his reading spectacles, pausing in tallying up Mrs. Lanna Wolf's purchases. He frowned at his daughter. "I haven't heard the train whistle. It's not time yet."

"It's four o'clock." The thirteen-year-old skidded to a stop in front of the counter, her apple cheeks pink from running, her strawberry-blond hair threatening to escape her braids, strands tumbling loose to curl around her face. She looked as if she'd been playing outside with the boys again, with chunks of snow melting in her hair and her blue flannel dress wet in spots. She gestured toward the clock on the wall. "The train's late and so are you. C'mon, we've got to hurry."

"I have to finish helping Mrs. Wolf," he said sternly, for all the good it did. Amelia was used to his ways and wasn't troubled by them. "Now politely apologize to Mrs. Wolf."

"I'm sorry, ma'am." Amelia bobbed in a quick curtsy. "But my new mother is coming on the train today, and Pa isn't nearly as excited about it as I am."

"Why, this is wonderful news. I hadn't heard." Lanna Wolf smiled gracefully, apparently not troubled by the child's behavior. "Congratulations to you both. What a happy thing to have happen right before Christmas."

"It's my Christmas present," Amelia was quick to explain. "It's the only gift I've asked for every Christmas for three Christmases in a row, and this year I finally wore Pa down. All I had to do was mention how I needed a ma on account of one day soon I'll be needing a corset, and that did it. It changed his mind on the spot."

"I suppose it would." Lanna laughed, seemingly unaware he'd turned two shades brighter than a beet.

"And she's really nice. I read every one of her letters and even wrote her two. She answered them both. I think she'll be a really good ma." Amelia released a dramatic, satisfied sigh. "It'll be the best Christmas present ever."

For his daughter, at least. Cole slipped his glasses higher on his nose and squinted at the column of figures. He doubled-checked his addition and gave Mrs. Wolf her total.

"Just add it to my account, please, Cole." Lanna settled her warm winter hat on her elaborate knot of hair. "Can you deliver this all by supper time?"

"My delivery boy will do his best." He scribbled a note to the boy on the slip, letting him know that Mrs. Wolf was a priority customer. "Hard to say with the storm moving in."

"Yes, it has the feel of a blizzard out there," Lanna agreed while his daughter bounced up and down in place with her "hurry, Pa" look. "Blessings on your new marriage, and Amelia, I'm so happy you'll have a new mother. What are the odds, I wonder, that she knows what she's getting into?"

"I'll behave, I promise." Amelia's sweet, heart-shaped face shone with earnestness. Amelia was a good girl, but she was rambunctious, regardless of how much she tried otherwise. Perhaps a prim and proper mother's influence would help curb that.

It was his only prayer. Mercy Jacobs came across in her letters as quiet and sensible, and heaven knew that was exactly what his daughter needed. Curbing Amelia's unladylike behavior was the true reason he'd agreed to marry a complete stranger. Every woman he'd approached in town either laughed at his convenient marriage proposition or gaped at him with horror.

At least he hoped Amelia was the reason those women had looked at him that way.

"I'll take over, boss." Middle-aged and efficient Eberta Quinn bustled over in her sensible brown frock. "I'll finish wrapping Mrs. Wolf's packages."

As Lanna hurried off to her next shopping errand, other customers piled in. They all had that hungry look, since Christmas was a handful of days away. Cole frowned, debating. "It's getting busy. I don't want to miss an opportunity for a sale. I should stay. Maybe—"

"No," Eberta scolded him, shaking her head. "I know it's a good time for business, but if you don't meet that lady at the train, what will she think? It will make a bad impression."

"This is a marriage of convenience." He'd been clear about that in his advertisement and in the many letters he'd exchanged with Mrs. Mercy Jacobs. "She's hardly expecting a bouquet and courting words. She'd likely appreciate a friendly greeting. Perhaps you could do it."

"Pa." Amelia stepped in, rolling her eyes and shaking her head at him as if she wasn't surprised by this at all. "For once, leave the shop to Eberta. This is really important."

It wasn't the shop he cared about as much as the fact that he wasn't so good at relationships. On this side of the counter, he understood his role. He felt comfortable with it. Greeting customers, totaling up purchases, helping people find what they were looking for. This was a transaction he understood.

His true worry that he would disappoint Mercy Jacobs, the woman who'd traveled so far with the heartfelt promise to love his daughter. What if she was secretly hoping for some semblance of a real marriage? What if she'd been wishing for a man capable of loving her?

His heart had been broken so long ago, and he couldn't even remember when it had been whole.

A whistle sounded in the distance, faint through the walls of the shop.

"It's coming! We need to hurry." Amelia's much smaller hand crept into his. "Oh, I can't wait to meet my new mother."

She held on so tight, the way she used to do when she was small.

It was a reminder that she was still a little girl, that while she'd grown tall and slender, she absolutely needed the woman who would be getting off that train.

* * *

"Angel Falls, next stop!" The conductor's friendly voice boomed through the car.

A frantic flutter of heartbeats tapped against her sternum. Mercy drew in a slow breath, trying to steady her nerves. This was the moment of truth. When she discovered whether everything Cole Matheson had written about his town, his daughter and himself were true. Her palms went clammy as she worried for her son. How would George feel if Mr. Matheson wasn't the man he claimed to be?

She smoothed down the boy's flyaway cowlick, willing it to stay down for a good first impression. *Just trust in the Lord,* she told herself. *Trust the feelings and the signs that have brought you here.*

"Look, Ma!" George went up on both knees, struggling to get a good view as the train started its slow descent on the town. "There's horses in that field. *Horses.*"

"So I see." She leaned in, love in her heart for her son, daring to hope for him. "Look at them run."

"They're racin' the train. Wow." George pressed his nose against the glass, hungry to lap up the sight of the majestic creatures in shades of blacks and browns galloping against the snowy-white world. His boyish shoulders lifted up with satisfaction. "What if those are Mr. Matheson's horses? What if one of 'em will be mine?"

"That would be nice, wouldn't it?" She let her son dream, her sweet good boy, giving thanks for the man who'd promised to give George one of his horses and riding lessons. Everything George had been dreaming. Her throat closed up tight. She needed to believe Cole was a man who kept his promises. Her late husband, Timothy, had meant well, but he hadn't been so good with that. She hoped history wasn't about to repeat itself.

A touch on her sleeve caught her attention. The conductor stood there, smiling down at her, his gray hair peeking out from beneath his cap. "I'll get your satchels for you, ma'am. You have your attention full with your fine son."

"I'm gonna learn to ride like a real cowboy." George beamed, his grin ear to ear, his button face flushed pink with pleasure. Why, she'd never seen his navy blue eyes so bright.

She didn't know what she'd do if Cole Matheson let him down. Tears burned behind her eyes at the thought and she smiled weakly up at the conductor. "Thank you, Mr. Blake."

"My pleasure." The kindly man set both her and George's satchels on the floor at her feet. "I see you're wearing your mistletoe."

"I pinned it on. I need all the help I can get." She tried to laugh to hide her reservations, but she feared she didn't quite succeed.

Something that looked like understanding flashed in the older man's eyes. The anxious flutter in her chest doubled. So much depended on this first meeting. She thanked the conductor, who moved along to help another passenger with her bags, and looked out the window with George.

*It does look like a friendly town,* she thought over the squealing sound of the brakes. She drank in the sight of tidy streets, the white steeple of a church spearing up over the storefronts and the school bell tower not far away. The train made a final jerk to a stop, and the depot's platform stretched out before them. A half-dozen people waited for the train, searching the windows anxiously as if eager to be reunited with loved ones—all except for one man.

He was brawny, muscled and tall. His black Stetson tilted to cover half of his face. What she could see was his strong, square jaw, a chiseled mouth that naturally drew into a straight, stern line, and a dimple carved into an angled chin. This man stood apart from the others, staring at the plank boards in front of his black cowboy boots. Maybe in his mid-thirties, she guessed. He wore denims, a black duster and a look of resignation.

As if he felt her scrutiny, he lifted his head higher, knuckled back the brim of his hat to reveal a granite face, high cheekbones and startling blue eyes. Across the distance, their gazes met and she felt the shock of it strike through her like a lightning bolt. All the way to her soul.

Cole Matheson, she thought, beyond all doubt. And by the look of him, he really was a cowboy. All he was missing were spurs.

That was a good sign, right? He hadn't exaggerated that piece, anyway. Hopes for her son broke loose and she smiled, truly smiled.

Maybe it was another sign—and not a good one—that Cole Matheson didn't smile back.

Chapter Two

"Pa! Do you see her?" Amelia bounded ahead of him, skirts and wild strawberry hair batted by the icy wind.

"Yes, I see her." He swallowed hard against a thickness in his throat, surprised to hear his voice strained and not sounding at all like his own. Through the glazed glass, the prim-and-proper lady was shadowed, hardly more than an outline of a colorful hat and the delicate curve of cheek and chin. Eyes too far away to see the color through the glass fastened on his, and he felt the plea and worries as if they were his own. As hard as this was for him, he thought with a sigh, it had to be the same for her.

This was the moment of truth. Resigned and grim, he squared his shoulders and marched forward like a dutiful soldier. He was about to find out if this mail-order marriage idea was a mistake or a solution.

"Oh, she's pretty. That *has* to be her." Amelia glanced over her shoulder to throw him a happy look. Sparkles gleamed in her blue eyes; the wind's bite and joy turned her dear face pink. "She's wearing the brown hat with the purple flower like she said she would, and look at the boy with her. He's blond. That's George."

George. Something hollow twisted in Cole's chest, in a place that had been empty for so long. Eagerness he hadn't felt in aeons surged through him and he turned his attention to the child. Round face, a tumble of blond hair, big worried eyes. Then the boy was gone, disappeared from the window. Cole froze in place, not wanting to move forward in enthusiasm the way Amelia was, needing to be reserved. He needed that shield, that protection.

"Mrs. Mercy!" Amelia rushed toward the passengers disembarking, her shoes pounding against the planks of the platform. Most unladylike, but he didn't raise his voice to rein her in. That would mean he would have to move closer, draw attention to himself and make the elegant, willowy woman easing down the steps glance his way.

She was beautiful. Really beautiful. His jaw dropped in disbelief. His pulse screeched to a stop. Surprised, he could only stare at the unexpected loveliness of her face, her carefully carved, china-doll features, porcelain skin, graceful sloping nose and lustrous blue eyes that made every person on the platform turn and stare at her. He couldn't look away. Why on earth did she need to be a mail-order bride?

The woman spotted Amelia, and a caring smile transformed her reserved beauty into sheer loveliness radiating such warmth it made his throat close up entirely. This lady was kind, kinder than he'd ever dared to imagine, he thought as she took her son by the hand and helped him make the leap off the lower step and onto the board platform.

How could this be? he wondered. How could this lady be everything he'd wanted for Amelia? A man like him didn't get that lucky, and he'd given up looking for blessings a long time ago. God had forgotten about him an hour after his stepfather had married his widowed mother. But Amelia... The Lord hadn't forgotten Amelia. That was all that mattered.

"Or can I call you Ma?" Amelia gushed, wrapped her arms around Mercy Jacobs as if she'd known her forever. She bounced back and boldly grabbed hold of both Mercy's satchels. The girl's shoulders sank from the weight of the heavy bags, but she refused to let go.

"Ma?" Mercy's forehead crinkled, her soft mouth tilting upward. "It's not official yet. Should the wedding come first?"

"I don't care. You're *going* to get married. Maybe that's not what you want me to call you, but I've been practicing. Mrs. Mercy is probably best, that's what Pa says I should call you, because Mrs. Jacobs is too formal, like I don't know you at all, but I really know you because of the two letters so we aren't *complete* strangers."

"You may call me whatever you like, dear girl." To her credit, Mercy Jacobs bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing. Her expressive dark blue eyes telegraphed caring, as if she'd already fallen in love with the child. "But I don't want you to feel as if I'm replacing your mother."

"Oh, I hardly remember her, not that I don't love her, too, but I want to call you Ma." Amelia looked as if she were about to float away with pure joy at any minute. "I want you for a mother so much."

"Just the way I want you, Amelia." Warmth. Gentleness. The kind that only a mother could bring. That's what he saw as Mercy Jacobs gently brushed strawberry-blond tangles out of Amelia's eyes. "I've always wanted a daughter, too. Something tells me I couldn't have found a better one if I'd looked all over the world."

Overcome, Amelia fell silent, tears standing in her eyes.

George watched the woman and girl curiously, standing back from his mother, obviously a shy boy. Quiet.

Just like Cole had been at that age. Still was, if truth be told. He didn't like emotions, did his best to avoid them—he squared his shoulders, wrangling down every last one. He watched Mercy Jacobs introduce her son to Amelia, who greeted him with enthusiasm. She thought she might like having a brother, the girl explained, as her best friends were boys. Did George know how to sled?

The boy shook his head and cautiously took his mother's hand.

"I'll teach you," Amelia promised.

Cole winced, wondering what refined Mercy Jacobs might be thinking of that. Determined to protect his daughter and to keep her from seeming unladylike, which she was and which he had to believe Mercy could change, he bolted forward.

"Cole." Mercy faced him, fastening the power of her unguarded gaze on him.

He stumbled. He'd never seen anything as genuine and sincere as the hope and silent plea in those navy blue depths. Feeling inadequate, he extended his hand. "Mrs. Jacobs."

Maybe it was too formal. She seemed surprised for a moment. She squared her slender shoulders, a little bit guarded, and reserve crept into her gaze. As if he wasn't meeting expectations.

He winced, as she wouldn't be the first woman to size him up and react the same. He cleared his throat, attempting to sound hospitable. "Nice to finally meet you."

"It is." She looked a little nervous, just as he was, and faced him directly. "I have to say the town is charming, and as for Amelia, well, she's obviously everything you said she was."

"Beware, I may have left out a few key pieces of information about my daughter." He shrugged, feeling more awkward than he could remember being in a long while. "Just thought I should warn you."

"Pa! I can't believe you said that." Amelia whirled to face Mercy. "Really, Pa has this old-fashioned notion that girls can't do anything that boys can do."

"I didn't say that you can't. Only that you shouldn't," he corrected.

"I think this is going to be interesting." Holding her son's hand in hers, Mercy smiled. She extended her free arm to his daughter and drew her in against her side, as warmly as her real mother should have done.

Amelia beamed, gazing up at Mercy Jacobs as if she'd hung the moon and all the stars.

This was so much more than he'd ever hoped for. The woman was not only caring, but just as prim and proper as he'd deduced from her letters. Her blond hair was tucked up behind her brown hat, every strand in perfect place. Her brown wool coat, while showing a lot of wear, was in good repair, buttoned to her throat. The toes of her polished albeit patched shoes peeked from beneath her skirt ruffle. But it was her face that told him the most about her, the wholesome goodness shining from her, the cautious set of her mouth, the demure way she lowered her gaze from his. The concern she showed for her son, the caring she extended to Amelia.

A lump rose in his throat, and he was ashamed of giving in to his feelings. It was simply too much to bear. Mercy Jacobs had lived up to her word.

Now it was his turn to live up to his.

"Hello, George." He knelt down so he was eye to eye with the quiet boy who'd been studying him beneath the brim of his cap. Cole held out one gloved hand. "I've been looking forward to meeting you since the first time your mother wrote me about you."

"You have?" The boy gulped, surprise and hope flashing in his eyes. Shy, the boy blushed, searching for words, perhaps not knowing what to say next.

Cole sympathized with the kid. He knew what it was like to be without a father. He knew what it felt like to look at a man and wish more than anything he could be the father you needed. With a grimace, Cole closed the door on his memories, the ones from after his mother's marriage, of the disillusionment and fear he'd felt at the hands of his stepfather. He choked up, vowing little George would never know such things.

"I've wanted a son all this time," he told the boy. "I work long hours in my store so I don't have as much time as I want to ride my horses. If I teach you to ride, like I promised, will you help me out by riding them for me?"

"Uh-huh." George vigorously nodded his head, a world of hope filling him up, showing his dreams.

"Good." Cole had dreams, too, ones he'd been trying to hold back. He loved his daughter with all he had, but he'd wanted a bigger family. Daughters to protect and care for, sons to teach and share his love of horses and inherit his store. Not knowing how to say these things, he reached out and gripped the boy's shoulder. The childish feel of him, small and vulnerable, filled Cole's heart. Just filled it.

Good to know at least there was room for dreams to come true, even at this time in a man's life.

"C'mon," he said to the child, holding out his hand. "Let's get you out of this cold. Look, it's starting to snow."

"It's real snowy here." George let go of his mother, gazing up at her as if to ask permission.

"Stay where I can see you." She nodded. "Don't run ahead."

"I won't," he said, puffing out his chest. "I'll stay right beside my new pa."

* * *

George placed his hand in the man's much larger, stronger one. Seeing those capable fingers enclose around her son's gave her the courage to let him trail ahead of her. It wasn't easy letting go, trusting a man she didn't know well with her son's heart. But Cole seemed to take the responsibility seriously as he led the boy across the platform.

"You have to see the place we fixed up for you." Amelia surged ahead, holding on tight. "There are rooms Pa rents above the store, but he kept one for you and George. Temporarily, until you get married. It's got everything you'll need in it. Me and Eberta, she works for Pa in the store, we got the prettiest things we could find."

"That sounds wonderful. I can't tell you what that means." She tapped down the stairs, checking on George's progress. Already he was tripping along the boardwalk alongside Cole while tiny airy snowflakes danced in the air around him. She turned back to the girl, her soon-to-be daughter, and drank in all her wonderfulness. Strawberry-blond hair, enthusiastic blue eyes, a faint trace of freckles across her nose. Her zest for life was refreshing. "I'm so happy to be here with you, Amelia."

"I know! That's just how I feel, too." The girl's grip tightened, as if she never intended to let go.

Affection welled up, unexpected and instant. Just like that, she felt a mother's bond to this child. As if God had meant for them to be together, as if He'd sat in His kingdom knitting their kindred hearts together. Gratitude filled her as she headed down the boardwalk, making her eyes blur.

"That's the post office right there." Amelia pointed across the tidy street. Snow was shoveled into piles against the base of the boardwalk, keeping the way clear for shoppers. A horse and wagon rolled by with a rattle. "There's the milliner's shop."

Mercy blinked against the grateful tears, bringing the town into focus. Colorful awnings protected the boardwalk from the snow, cheerful front display windows advertised presents and

Christmas decorations adorned front doors and hitching posts. Garlands and wreaths and Christmas trees lit by tiny little candles.

The snow fell harder now, driven by a brisk wind. It clouded her view of George ahead, casting him in silhouette. Little boy, hand in hand with a big man. His new pa. Gratitude rushed up so strongly, her eyes blurred again.

*Be everything you promised to my son,* she asked, watching the faint, impressive line of Cole's broad shoulders. *Please.*

"There's Grummel's Barber Shop." Amelia danced ahead, pointing across the street. "Right next to Lawson's Mercantile. We get our groceries there. Oh, and this is our store."

"Matheson's Dry Goods." Mercy tilted her head back to read the sign swinging in the wind. Icy flecks of snow tapped her face as she squinted at the long bank of front windows belonging to the shop.

My, she'd never expected a man who advertised for a mail-order wife to be prosperous. Her jaw dropped at the size of the building, at the tasteful displays of fine products behind the glass and the expansive, impressive oak counter spanning two sides inside the store. A merry bell jangled as Cole opened the door.

"Eberta and I decorated the windows. Didn't we do a good job?" Amelia tugged her across the threshold, through the door Cole held for them.

"Yes, it's lovely. I love the way you decorated the Christmas tree." She breezed past him, aware of him watching her carefully, aware of a sort of sparkle in her heart as their sleeves brushed. Just for a moment, just for an instant, and it was gone. She stumbled after Amelia, breathless, not sure at all what had happened.

"You must be Mercy." A kindly plump woman circled around the counter, her salt-and-pepper hair tied sternly back into a strict, no-nonsense bun. She wore a brown dress with no adornment, but a friendly smile chased away any impression of sternness. "I can't tell you how good it is to meet you. This has been a long time coming in my opinion. If there's anything this one needs, it's a mother's guiding hand."

"I'm not sure how guiding I'll be, but I'll do my best." Mercy took the woman's offered hand, squeezing it warmly. When she looked into those dark eyes, she saw a friend. "You must be Eberta."

"Yes, and no matter what that man tells you, I am more than capable of running this store without him." The elder woman arranged her pleasant face into a schoolmarm's glare. "Yes, very capable indeed. Cole, what are you doing back so soon? I thought you were taking the rest of the day off."

"There's thirty or so more minutes left of the business day." Cole closed the door with a jangle of the overhead bell, swiping snow off his hat. "It is the busy season."

His casual shrug belied his true feelings, or so Mercy suspected. She untied her hat, snow sifting to the floor, watching the man. Here, in the lamplight, she could see things she hadn't been able to spot in the shadowy gloam outside. The deep lines radiating from his eyes, the sadness in them, the air about him as if he'd given up on hope entirely.

She recalled what he'd written in his letters. He'd told her his heart had been broken long ago. He had only pieces of it left to give, but he would give what he had to George.

She'd taken that to mean there were no pieces left over for her. And that was fine. George was what mattered here. She wasn't exactly sure why that made her sad.

"That man, it's all about work with him." Eberta waved her hand, dismissing him, in the way of a good friend. Caring warmed her voice, softened the scowl she sent him. "We'll see if you can change that, Mercy. In my opinion, it would be an improvement."

"So you're telling me this man needs to change for the better?" She couldn't help teasing, keeping her tone gentle and soft, so that perhaps he would understand. "I suppose that's true of every man, but I've vowed to accept Cole as he is."

"Bad decision," Eberta quipped, bustling back behind the counter when a customer approached. "Don't you think, Mrs. Frost?"

"Absolutely." A lovely blonde lady nodded emphatically as she set her purchases on the counter. "Goodness, my Sam was a disaster when I first met him. He took a lot of training up."

"Funny." Cole's face heated, turning bright red. "I seem to remember Sam was just fine to begin with."

"A man *would* say that," Mrs. Frost teased as she pulled several dollar bills from her reticule. She rolled her eyes, good-naturedly. "If only they could see themselves from a woman's perspective. Mercy, is it? I'm Molly. So glad to meet you. Something tells me you are exactly what a certain someone needs."

"Hey, you can say my name," Amelia spoke up sweetly. "It doesn't hurt my feelings. I know I'm incorrigible. Pa tells me all the time."

"Incorrigible?" Mercy noticed the way Cole winced, and also the fond look the customer, Mrs. Frost, sent the girl. She liked the sense of community here. She liked the friendliness these people had for one another. It chased away more of her anxieties. Whatever was ahead, Cole was clearly a man others thought well of. She winked at Amelia. "No one mentioned incorrigible in their letters."

"I did warn you there would be surprises." Cole looked terribly uncomfortable as he shrugged off his wool, tailored coat. His green flannel shirt looked to be new, of high quality, fitted well to his muscled shoulders and granite chest. "Molly, perhaps it would be best not to point this out until after the wedding?"

"Right, what was I thinking?" Molly winked, accepted her change from Eberta and her packages. "Mercy, it's lovely to meet you. I hope to see you again soon. Amelia, try and stay out of trouble."

"I'm never in trouble." Amelia grinned widely. "It all depends on how you look at it."

"Hmm, you sound like my girls." Molly laughed, smiled warmly at Mercy as she passed and leaned in to say something quietly to Cole. She waved at George, slipped through the door Cole opened for her and was gone, leaving them alone.

Even in the busy store full of bustling shoppers, even with their children between them, she felt alone. Lonely. Mercy sighed quietly, for this was what she had expected. It was what she knew, what her first marriage had become. Why would this relationship be any different? As if not knowing what to say, either, Cole turned to help George off with his coat, for one of his buttons had gotten stuck. She'd sewn it on too tightly when it had popped off on the train.

"Amelia," Cole said as he worked the button free. "Why don't you take Mercy and George to their rooms? That is, unless you want to stay here and help me in the store, George."

George bit his bottom lip, debating. Torn between going with his mother or staying with his new father-to-be. His blue eyes met hers imploring. "Can I stay here, Ma?"

"Of course you can. You come upstairs and find me when you're ready." Her words felt scratchy, sounded thick and raw with the emotion she felt. A mix of gratitude and relief and sadness. In gaining this marriage, she had to let go of George just a little bit, to share him with Cole.

This was for the best, she hold herself, knowing deep in her stomach it was true. Look at the care the man took with her son. Leading him around the counter, talking to him kindly, telling the boy he was just the helper he needed. Dreams for her son, the ones that had brought her here, filled her heart. George gazed up at the man with adoration, eyes wide with wonder.

Yes, a loveless marriage was worth that, she thought to buoy herself, letting Amelia pull her away. She touched her fingertips to the sprig of mistletoe pinned to her coat collar, remembering the conductor's kindness. Well, she did not need a kiss on Christmas. No, she wanted a happy son and a happy daughter. It was the children who mattered.

Chapter Three

"It's getting dark." Amelia dropped both satchels on the landing outside the door at the top of the narrow staircase, turned the knob and burst across the threshold. Her shoes tapped a merry rhythm as she darted ahead into the twilight room. "But Eberta lit the fire for you. It's toasty warm up here."

"Yes, it is." Mercy unbuttoned her coat, moving into the shadowed rooms. Her steps echoed around her. "Can I help?"

"No, I've got it." A flame snapped to life and Amelia carefully lit a glass lamp on a table next to a horsehair sofa. A nice, comfortable-looking sofa. The girl carried the match to the second lamp on an identical table, careful to protect the flame. "What do you think? Eberta and I worked real hard."

"You surely did. It's wonderful, Amelia." Her throat ached at the thoughtfulness. What a comfortable room. A warm wool afghan graced the back of the sofa, quilted throw pillows added color to the room and lacy doilies lent an air of elegance. Warm braided rugs made the space cozy. "Thank you. I've never felt more at home."

"Eberta made all of the afghans and lacy things." Amelia lit the second lamp, shaking out the match.

Light danced to life, flickering into the recesses of the room, showing off a small kitchen and an eating area in the corner. A doorway must lead to the bedroom. After such a long journey, sleeping on the train, the thought of a warm comfortable bed made her weak in the knees. She eased onto the edge of the sofa, hand to her heart, more thankful than words could say.

"I think Eberta was hoping I'd take a notion to try the needle arts," Amelia explained as she grabbed a pot holder and opened the potbellied stove's door. Reddish-orange flames raged inside the metal belly. "Nope, there's plenty of fuel. You know, I have no interest in learning to knit and stuff, but Pa says I have to learn. I suppose it would be okay if you taught me, but I want you to know my feelings."

"I hear you loud and clear." Mercy reached out to smooth a stray strawberry-blond lock of the girl's hair. What a sparkle she was, full of life and light. "It might be a nice way for you and me to get to know each other. My ma and I would sit for hours on a Sunday afternoon knitting or sewing away, just talking."

"What was your ma like?" Amelia tilted her head to one side, curious. "Was she like you?"

"Goodness, no. She was very refined. Very cultured. She was the youngest daughter of a very wealthy man and ran away from home to marry someone her family didn't approve of. She became a farmer's wife, but she never regretted it. She said love was the greatest treasure in this life."

"Pa says children are." Amelia grinned, full of mischief. "Except for me. He says I'm nothing but trouble."

"Is that so? I'm dying to know what kind of trouble you are." While she waited for the girl's answer, the motherly side of her couldn't help wondering about George. Or the man with him, the tall and tough-looking store owner. Was that the rumble of Cole's baritone through the floorboards? And why was she straining to listen?

"Well, you know about the sledding." Amelia scrunched up her face, most adorably. She rolled her gaze toward the ceiling, thinking. "I tend to get in trouble at school for whispering or writing notes to my friends on my slate."

"I have a hard time imagining that," Mercy gently teased.

"I know! I try to be good, I really do, but I'm naturally bubbly." Amelia didn't seem all that troubled by it. "I have snowball making down to a fine art. No one can make a better one than me. The trick is to spit on it just a little. It ices up, so it holds together better when you throw it."

"Good to know." Mercy wondered just exactly what kind of influence Amelia might be on poor George. An aspect she hadn't considered when she'd been in North Carolina, trying to decide which newspaper advertisement to answer.

A tap of footsteps caught her attention. A floorboard squeaked as a man's heavy gait marched closer, accompanied by the patter of a boy's. Her attention leaped, eager to gaze upon her son and

see how he was doing, but her senses seemed focused on the tall, shadowed man pausing outside the open door to grip the fallen satchels.

Oh, my. His thick dark hair swirled in a thick whirl around his crown and fell to his collar. As he straightened, hauling the satchels with him, muscles bunched and played beneath the material of his shirt. He strode powerfully into the room like a man more suited to the wild outdoors, hefting a rifle at a bear, perhaps. He dominated the room and made her pulse skid to a stop. He looked immense with his broad shoulders and muscled girth. When he caught her watching him, he jerked his gaze away, staring hard at the floor.

"I'll put these in the bedroom." The smoky pitch of his tone came gruff and distant. As if he didn't want to talk to her. He said nothing more, crossing behind the couch, where she couldn't see him, where his step drummed in the room like a hollow heartbeat. "George, did you want to come along?"

"Yes, sir!" The boy hurried after him, disappearing into the shadowed, narrow hallway.

Mercy didn't know why her chest ached so much it hurt to breathe. Her husband-to-be was doing his best to avoid her. He was courteous and responsible toward her, but she felt a vast distance settling between them. It felt lonely.

"Pa?" Amelia hopped to her feet with a flat-footed thud. "What about supper? We are gonna have Ma and George over, right?"

"She's not your ma yet." His voice thundered from the far room, sounding muffled and irritated. Something landed on the floor. Likely the satchels. "It'll be best to let Mercy and George settle into their rooms. They've traveled a long way. They must be tired, right, George?"

"Sorta." The boy's thin response sounded uncertain. "I was kinda hopin' to see your horses."

"I have tomorrow set aside for that." Cole's tone warmed and he strode into sight with the child at his side. What an image they made. Towering man, little boy. "You want to be rested up because it'll be a big day. A good day, I promise you that. Besides, I'm going to bed early to be set and ready to go come morning."

"Then I will be, too." George nodded, his face scrunching up determinedly. "Will I really get to ride tomorrow?"

"My word of honor." Cole ran his big hand lightly over the top of the boy's head, a fatherly gesture. "But there's more to riding horses. You also have to learn how to take care of them."

"I know. I'm good at sweeping the steps whenever Ma tells me to. That's sorta like cleaning a barn. Do I get my own pitchfork?"

"I got one especially for you. I'll teach you everything you need to know." Cole stepped away, and for an instant a father's longing flashed across his face. When he glanced her way, the look had vanished. He squared his shoulders, his reserve going up. "Eberta is finishing with the last customer downstairs. When she's done, she'll head over to the diner next door. Amelia's going with her. George can go, too, if you wish. They can fetch your meals, while you and I talk."

*Talk.* Her chest tensed up so tightly her ribs felt ready to crack. "I suppose that sounds like a wise plan."

"Good." Cole nodded in his daughter's direction before turning to warm his hands at the stove.

"C'mon, George. Let's go." Amelia hopped forward, skirts swishing, and held out her hand. "The diner has the best cookies. If Eberta is in a good mood, and something tells me that she might be, we can talk her into getting us dessert."

George quietly took the girl's hand, hesitating to glance across the room. Mercy recognized his worried look, so she nodded reassuringly, letting him know it would be all right.

"I'll be right here waiting for you," she told him, her good boy. He blew out a breath, perhaps shrugging off his anxiety, and took Amelia's hand. The two trotted off, Amelia chattering away, as if determined to make them friends.

The room felt lonelier without the children in it, with only the two of them and their marriage agreement. Mercy's palms grew damp as the silence stretched. She didn't know if she should stand up and join Cole at the stove or continue to wait for him to speak. Since she wasn't a meek woman, she scooted farther up on the cushion, poised on the edge of it and studied the man with his back to her, rigid as stone.

This wasn't easy for him, either. That realization made it easier to break the silence.

"George already adores you." She folded her hands together, lacing her fingers, staring at her work-roughened hands. "Thank you for being so welcoming to him, for being everything you promised in your letters."

"Why wouldn't I keep my word?" His tense back went rigid. His wide shoulders bunched. Then he blew out an audible huff of breath. "We agreed to be honest with one another."

"We did." She could sense an old hurt in the air, maybe something from his marriage. Heaven knew she had issues from hers. "Amelia is delightful. Everything I knew she would be."

"Even rambunctious?" A slight dollop of humor chased the chill from his words.

"I suspected from her letters that she had a zest for life." Slowly, she stood. Uncertain, she bit her bottom lip, wanting to reach out to the man, to her husband-to-be. "I was less certain what you would be like from your letters, although I read so many of them."

"Likely I disappoint." More of that humor and something else, something that seemed to make the shadows in the room darken, creeping ever closer.

"No, I may be the disappointment." She brushed at a wrinkle in her wool dress, hoping he hadn't noticed the fraying hem she hadn't been able to mend on the train. "I wasn't prepared for you to be so prosperous. And, well, I'm—"

"Just what Amelia needs," he interrupted firmly, turning to face her. Resolute, confident, certain. Muscles jumped along his set jaw. "I learned a lot about you from your letters. You are honest and loyal—you worked hard for your son. You are unselfish enough to endure a marriage to a stranger for his sake."

"Endure?" Her voice wobbled, betraying her, letting him know how difficult this really was. "That rather sounds like a jail sentence."

"I didn't mean it to be." Part quip, part serious. Sadness eked into his gaze, darkening his eyes to a night blue, as if all the light had drained from the room. He shrugged one capable shoulder. "Maybe we can come to an agreement so we both won't be disappointed. Rules to live by, that type of thing. We're going to be bound together in this life. Don't know why we can't make it tolerable."

"Gee, now I'm really excited about marrying you." She smiled, and her gentle teasing softened the stony cast to his face. He broke into a half smile, and the lean planes of his cheeks creased into manly crinkles. He had dimples. Who knew? Mercy grinned back, feeling a little fluttery. Not only did her new fiancé have dimples, but he was handsome.

Very, very handsome.

"That's what I want to talk to you about." He raked one hand through his thick, dark hair. "I know we wrote about a simple wedding. Just the four of us in front of the minister the day after you arrived."

"Seeing this room set up so comfortably..." She gestured at the nice sofa and matching overstuffed chair, the small drop-leaf end table set up with two chairs near the kitchen area window. "It's obvious you want to postpone the wedding."

"For Amelia's sake." He blew out another sigh, looking tense again. "I didn't think to tell her what we agreed to. Something simple, quick, no fuss. But the problem with that is it sets a bad example of what marriage ought to be. This between us is—"

"A sensible arrangement," she finished for him, seeing how hard this was for him to talk about. It was hard for her, too, remembering the young bride she'd been when she'd married Timothy, so full

of hopes and joy she'd practically floated down the church aisle. "You want her to keep her illusions of marriage. You want to protect her."

"So, you do understand." Relief stood out starkly on his face, carving into the grooved lines bracketing his mouth. He folded his big, six-foot frame into the chair. "I didn't realize she had her heart set on a proper ceremony with a new dress and family and friends attending. Not until I spotted this."

He reached for a child's school slate set aside on an end table. "Amelia has been dying to show you her plans."

"For a real wedding?" Mercy's hand trembled as she reached for the slate. She had to lean in to grab the wooden frame, close enough to feel the fan of his breath against her cheek. She breathed in the pleasant scent of clean male, winter wind and soap.

Little flutters settled in her stomach again, which was strange. Surely she wasn't attracted to him. She bit her bottom lip, uncertain what to think. Perhaps she'd simply gone too long between meals. Heart pounding, she eased onto the sofa cushion, taking in the girl's wedding plans, written out in a careful, cheerful script on the slate's black background.

Her heart dropped at the list. *To do:* Amelia had written. *Invite everyone. Flowers for the bride. Candles for the church. The dress in Cora's shop window, the one with the lace and velvet for my new ma. A big cake for the celebration. A Christmas Eve wedding.* Beside the last item, Amelia had drawn a little heart.

"She has her hopes set higher than I realized," Cole said quietly, the deep timbre of his voice rolling over Mercy like a touch, as if imploring her to understand. "I know we agreed on a simple ceremony. You said that was what you wanted. No fuss, no pretense."

"But this way, with your friends as witnesses." Mercy's fingertip hovered over the words Amelia had written, over the plans she'd made. Her chest ached, torn between the old and the new. "What will they think?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm not a man given to pretense. They knew the truth, Mercy. This is an agreement, simple as that." He swallowed hard, as if he were troubled, too, perhaps plagued with memories like she was, of a love that was gone for good. Burying a spouse was a sorrow that lasted. He shot to his feet, pacing to the window. "I understand if you'd rather keep to our arrangement."

"I never expected to walk down the aisle again." Carefully she set the slate aside. Everything inside of her began to spin. Her thoughts. Her hopes. What she'd resigned her life to be. "I never thought such a bright spot could come my way. I really adore your daughter, Cole. I don't want to disappoint her."

"Neither do I." He turned from the window, grateful. "We do this for the children?"

"For the children." The agreement stood between them, precious and unyielding, the one thing they had in common. When he managed to smile at her with his lopsided half grin that was sad at the same time, she smiled back. The distance between them didn't feel as enormous.

Or as lonely.

"Thank you, Mercy." The muscle twisted in his jaw, harder this time, giving her a hint of how hard this must be for him.

What had he gone through? she wondered. His loss was as great as hers. She knew what walking the road of grief as a surviving spouse and parent felt like. For the first time she could see—truly see—that the things she'd prayed for when she'd read his letters and wrote to him in turn could come to pass. They could do this, make things good between them. Two strangers knitting their lives together. "I should be the one thanking you. These rooms are homey."

"Good, that's how I want you to feel—at home." His one-sided grin returned and he jammed his hands into his denim pockets. "Eberta and Amelia robbed our house to make you comfortable here. I didn't object."

"This is from your home?"

"*Our* home," he corrected.

"But what are you and Amelia sitting on?"

"We have some furniture left, don't worry." He glanced out the window, squinting down at the dark street keeping a sharp eye out for the kids. He liked that she was concerned. Yes, she was everything he'd hoped for. A widow, who'd lost her heart, too. Kindly, for Amelia's sake. Proper and soft-spoken, the way he wanted Amelia to be. This might just work out all right.

Relieved, he watched the snow fall. When he caught sight of George hopping out of the diner and onto the boardwalk, the hard tangle of emotions eased. Yes, this was a rare blessing. Not that he believed God even remembered him these days, but surely the Lord watched over the children. He reached for the curtain ties and let the fabric fall over the dark glass and lacy sheers. "We have a few more minutes to ourselves. I want to talk about those rules."

"Rules." She brushed a few stray blond curls out of her face, silken soft wisps that had escaped her simple, braided bun. "What did you have in mind?"

"First off, I want to agree not to talk about the past." He felt as if he was suffocating just thinking of it. Those dark times were better off behind him. "And I expect you to live on a budget."

She didn't bat an eye. Perhaps some women in this situation would be outraged, others defensive. Mercy sat spine straight, delicate jaw set, not even mildly surprised. "I'm a widow supporting a son. I'm excellent with budgets. I'll expect you to stay on the budget, too. No reckless spending."

"Agreed." There he went, smiling again. This woman had an effect on him. He hadn't expected to actually like her. He pushed away from the window. "I want my house clean and meals on time. I like order."

"I see." She bit her bottom lip, as if holding back laughter.

What did he say that was so funny? He circled around to sit back down in the chair, facing her. Amusement glinted in her eyes, so blue they took his breath away. The color reminded him of summer night skies and summer breezes. His breathing hitched, startling him. It wasn't like him to think this way. He wasn't a man given to whimsy. "Am I amusing you?"

"Yes." Her smile could light up a room. Sweetness beamed from her like golden rays slanting down through the clouds from the heavens. She tilted her head to one side, the lamplight finding her, burnishing her hair, caressing her soft cheek. "I have some rules for you, too."

"I suppose that's only fair."

"You may tell me what to do only two times a day." She arched a slender eyebrow at him in a gentle challenge.

"Only twice?" he inquired, curious, grinning against his will.

"Keep in mind I may not oblige you." She folded her hands neatly in her lap, just sheer loveliness. Her heart-shaped face was guileless and unguarded. Anyone just looking at her could see she didn't have a mean bone in her body.

Whoever her husband had been, he'd been a blessed man, Cole thought. He was more than thankful to have her as Amelia's mother and his helpmate.

"All right," he agreed. "We'll not boss each other around."

"Agreed. I'll not say an unkind thing to you ever, if you do me the same courtesy." Her chin hiked up a notch, a delicate show of strength. Something sad flashed in her eyes so briefly he barely noticed it. He opened his mouth to ask about it, but then remembered his own rule. Keep the past in the past. And he shut his mouth with a click of his teeth.

*Not your business,* he reminded himself. Knowing about her and what she'd been through would only soften his defenses, and he didn't want to like her. He didn't want to care. It was best for all around if they kept this strictly a convenient arrangement.

The door swung open, hitting the wall like a gunshot. His daughter sashayed in, balancing a wrapped meal in both hands, practically skipping. Her skirts swirled around her, and her smile was so big it was all he could see.

"We got you a real good supper, Mercy." Amelia beamed her full-strength charm Mercy's way. "George told me your favorite, and so that's what we ordered. We even got you lots of cookies, too. George said that's his favorite."

"Yep, it sure is," the kid confirmed with a nod, tromping through the doorway and into the room, cheeks pink, dusted with snow, cute in that way of small boys.

Cole's chest tightened, aching with hope. It was going to be nice having a son. In all honesty, he'd found a good one. He cleared his throat, hoping he didn't sound gruff when he spoke.

"You and your ma have a nice meal, settle in and have a good night." He almost reached out to the boy, to tousle the kid's hair, but something held him back. Maybe it was the ache dead center in his chest, the one that hurt like hope coming to life, as if a frozen part of his heart was starting to awaken. But that couldn't be right. Too many pieces were gone for good. So he didn't know why it hurt, why he felt overwhelmed as he nodded to Eberta, who was carrying the other meal into the room.

He knew only that it was time to leave before the pain became too much and he stopped breathing entirely. "I reckon a soft bed will be a welcome thing after sleeping on the train."

"More than you know." Mercy took a step toward him, her dark blue eyes radiating a quiet communication.

He nodded, sensing her thankfulness, understanding what she could not say. It was how he felt, too. He crossed the threshold, heading down the stairs, calling for his daughter to follow.

## Chapter Four

All through the night, he was plagued by dreams of a golden-haired lady with a silent hope in the midnight-blue depths of her eyes. Cole woke the next morning to the silence that came after a great storm. He stared at the shadowy ceiling in the early morning's darkness and contemplated the day ahead. It was Sunday, so he would send Amelia to church with Eberta, and they could pick up Mercy and George on the way. He frowned, biting the inside of his cheek, wondering what Mercy would think of him missing the service.

Why did it matter so much what she thought of him? Troubled, he tossed off the warm covers and braced for the blast of icy winter air. Teeth chattering, he pulled on his robe and slippers before charging downstairs, rubbing his hands together to keep them from going numb.

Let Mercy think what she wanted about him, Cole decided as he knelt before the fireplace in the front room. His cold fingers fumbled with the iron shovel. He uncovered last night's embers, wondering why he was letting himself care at all. He was feeling far too many emotions for his own comfort. Best to wall off his heart. Mercy was a kind lady. Amelia was lucky to have her. But that didn't extend to him. She would be basically a housekeeper with access to his charge accounts, nothing more.

So why did that image return, the silent plea in her eyes, the wordless expression of appreciation? As he slowly fed dry kindling to the glowing coals, he went over in his mind the things she'd left out of her letters, the things he'd noticed. Her well-cared-for clothing that had seen much better days. The fraying sleeve hem of her coat, the wash-worn dress, the polish on her shoes hiding a patch. George's clothes were modest, but in a newer state. Clearly she spent her money on the boy, not on herself. He wondered just how hard she'd struggled as a widow working long hours to support her son.

Wait. That wasn't his business, either. He shook his head, disappointed in his willpower. Hadn't he just told himself to stop wondering about her past? Annoyed with himself, he added a small, dry piece of wood to the grate, watched the growing orange flames lick over it, popping and crackling.

"Oh, good!" Amelia's feet drummed on the steps, her voice echoing down the stairwells. "You're up! I couldn't sleep because I was so excited. Mercy's gonna come here today. I can't wait to show her everything."

"I'm sure you can't." He glanced over his shoulder in time to see his wild-haired daughter leap to the bottom of the stairs with a thud. "You aren't usually up at the crack of dawn. If I'd known it would have gotten you out of bed, I would have found you a new mother before this."

"No, because then she wouldn't have been Mercy." Amelia skipped across the room.

"Do I really have to remind you?" He grimaced, reached for a piece of wood and popped it into the fire. "No running in the house."

"I know, I just can't contain myself." Amelia skidded to a stop, hugging herself. "I get to walk into church this morning with a ma, just like all my friends do. I'm gonna wear the new dress Eberta made for me. Pa, do you know what this means?"

"That you're finally going to start acting like a lady?" He brushed bits of bark and moss off his hands and reached for the little fireplace broom. A few sweeps and the bits flew into the fireplace. "This getting-married thing is a good idea. You'll be getting up early, acting ladylike. It's like a dream come true."

"Honestly, Pa." Amelia rolled her eyes. "You're supposed to love me the way I am."

"Oh, sorry." He put the broom away, hiding his grin. "I didn't know. Maybe that's one of those rules we can break and toss out the window."

"Very funny." She rushed up to him, wrapped her arms around his chest and squeezed tight, tipping her head back to sparkle up at him. "Hurry up with breakfast 'cause I'm gonna be lightning fast. I get to go see Mercy!"

"I'm gonna need some mercy if you keep this up." He winced at his own pun. *Well,* he thought, *a man has to amuse himself where he can.*

"Oh, Pa." Amelia gave him an eye roll and was off, pounding back upstairs, leaving him alone in the room.

Well, looked like they'd have a few more mornings like this alone together before the wedding changed things. Only three more days until Christmas Eve, until Amelia's hoped-for ceremony. He hung up the broom, crossed the room and felt thankful to Mercy for understanding. He wasn't sure how he felt about a church wedding. He still hadn't recovered from the last one. Gritting his molars together, determined not to think of it, he veered into the kitchen, knelt in front of the cookstove and stirred the coals. When he should have been planning his morning of chores and repairs, his mind took an entirely different path.

He remembered that glint of humor when she'd been seated on his sofa, gazing up at him with part challenge, part amusement, all concealed strength. *You may tell me what to do only two times a day,* she'd said with a slender arch of her brow, pure challenge and likability.

He sighed, reaching for the kindling. It was going to be hard to keep from liking her, but he was tenacious and determined. He would give it his best shot.

* * *

"Ma," George called from one of the front room windows. "Are you sure they're gonna come for us? I don't see 'em yet."

"Amelia promised they would be by." Frowning at her reflection in the bureau's small mirror, Mercy untied her hat ribbons and tried again. "I don't think they would leave us to find our own way in a strange town."

"I could help," George answered confidently. "I can see the church steeple from here. I could take you right to it, and if I got lost in the street I'd just look up to find it."

"That's a very good plan." She adjusted the bow, figured that was as good as it was going to get and raised her gaze to her face. She pinched her cheeks, hoping to put a little color in them. Too bad there wasn't something she could do about those circles under her eyes. She'd barely been able

to sleep a wink, although the bed was comfortable. She pushed away from the bureau and grabbed the shawl she'd laid on the foot of her twin bed, circled around George's bed and stepped into the hall. "What are you doing?"

"Lookin' at the horses." George's excitement seemed to fill the room with a vibrating, little-boy energy. "There's a black one. He's real shiny. What color do you think my horse is gonna be?"

"I don't know." Mercy reached for George's coat. "What color do you think?"

"Maybe brown?" George scrunched his face up, thinking on that for a bit. He took the garment she shook open for him and stabbed one arm into the sleeve, lost in thought. "There's a lot of brown horses, so yeah, he'll probably be brown. You see 'em all the time. Maybe most horses are brown."

"What if he's as white as the snow?" Seeing his collar was folded over onto itself, she pulled it out and smoothed it down. "What if he's spotted?"

"Then he'd be both white and brown." George gazed out the window, lost in his favorite game. "Unless his spots are black."

"Or red," she added, unhooking her coat from its peg on the wall.

"Or palomino, or roan or gray," George continued. "Oh, I just can't wait for my horse."

"I know, kid. It won't be much longer now." She slipped into her coat, unable to resist glancing down at the street below.

Great snowdrifts ran down one side of the street like a miniature mountain range, and because it was Sunday no one was out shoveling the boardwalks. A few vehicles rolled by, pulled by horses struggling through the new accumulation as far from the miniature mountains as they could get. As she watched a bay team pull a sleigh past the storefront below, she realized she didn't even know what kind of horse or vehicle Cole drove. In their correspondence she hadn't thought to ask if he would provide her with a horse and vehicle. Hmm. More things to discuss later, she thought.

"Ma! Look!" George nearly shrieked, both hands splayed across the glass. "That's the best horse I've ever seen. Look. He's as white as the snow."

"And he's stopping in front of the store." She leaned in, too, feeling the cool glass against her cheek. Why her heart kicked up a crazy rhythm, she couldn't say. Something within her strained, as if longing for the first glimpse of Cole climbing down from the sleigh.

He wasn't there. A red-capped Amelia rocked her head back to gaze up at them, grinned when she saw them and waved with a mittened hand. Mercy waved back, fighting disappointment as Eberta set down the reins and hopped from the sleigh.

"C'mon, George," she said gently, strangely bereft. "We don't want to keep the horse standing in that cold."

"No, it's not good for him," he said, heading toward the door at a run.

All the way down the stairs and through the silent, echoing store, she tried to remember what Cole had written about his church life. Had he ever said he attended Sunday service? Funny, she realized as she caught sight of Eberta through the glass panes of the shop's door, busily unlocking it. She couldn't recall if he'd mentioned actually being a churchgoer himself. In his second letter to her, he'd mentioned how Amelia had commented on being the only girl in church without a mother, and Mercy had simply assumed he attended Sunday services.

Now, she could see she'd been wrong. The door opened, an icy blast of raw, wintry air whooshed in, and George bolted onto the boardwalk, eyes focused on the horse.

"Hi, Miss Eberta," he said on his way by. "Is that your horse, or is it my new pa's?"

"It's Cole's," she answered fondly, as if completely understanding the boy's love of horses. "Good morning, Mercy. I trust you slept well."

"I was very comfortable." That was the truth. She'd never slept in such a fine bed. "Thank you. I know it was you who went to the trouble."

"Oh, pshaw, it wasn't much." Pleased, Eberta relocked the door with a jangling of her keys. "Amelia wanted it nice and it's hard to say no to that girl. If you're going to be her ma, it's a skill you'll have to learn."

"I do have some practice saying no to my son," she answered breezily, sharing a smile with the older lady. They headed down the steps together, sinking into snow midway up their calves.

"I can see it would be hard to say no to that one, too." Eberta nodded in approval. "Someone has to take a firm hand with that girl. Not to scare you off before the wedding."

"That would be impossible," Mercy confessed, coming to a standstill in the deep snow, mesmerized by the sight of George gazing raptly at the majestic white horse, too afraid to approach the animal.

"He's the prettiest one I've ever seen," he breathed, wide-eyed and awestruck. "Is he really gonna be our horse to drive?"

"When you're with your pa," Eberta answered. "It's his driving horse. He bought you a fine mare, gentle as can be, Mercy. So you can get around and take the children where they need to be going."

"My, he *bought* a horse?" Mercy swallowed. She couldn't say why that gesture touched her. The comfortably furnished rooms, and the knowledge they would be just as comfortable in his home, were enough. "He didn't need to go to that trouble. Horses are expensive."

"You're marrying a man who can afford it." Eberta climbed onto the front seat of the sleigh. "Heaven knows that man saves every penny he can get his hands on. He's been needing a wife to spend his money for him for years."

"Oh, I didn't come to spend his money." In fact, she clearly remembered last night and his rule about the budget. "I'm used to being careful. My job didn't pay terribly, but it didn't pay well."

"And all that's behind you. Get in. George, are you going to stare at the horse or come to church with us?"

Mercy's attention was stolen by the shivering girl, trying to keep her teeth from chattering as she held out one end of the thick flannel-lined buffalo robe. Huddling under it, Amelia shook harder when cold air slipped beneath it.

Not wanting the girl to get any more frozen, Mercy slipped in beside her. "George, come sit beside me."

"I can't believe that's gonna be our horse, too." George clamored out of the snow, nearly stumbling because he couldn't take his eyes off the gelding. He dropped beside her with a fulfilled, happy sigh. "No one's ever had a horse as nice as that one."

"You'll have to ask Cole if you can pet him. And what his name is." She shook the robe over her son, tucking him in snugly. Her teeth began chattering, too.

"It's Frosty," Amelia volunteered as the sleigh jerked to a start and Frosty was off, bounding on his long legs through the sheltered part of the street, as gleaming white as the snow.

"Wow," George breathed as the animal gained momentum. "We're in a real sleigh, Ma. Being pulled by a real horse."

"Haven't you been in a sleigh before?" Amelia asked curiously, a few strands of reddish-blond hair escaping her knit cap to curl around her adorable face.

"We owned work horses for the farm long ago," Mercy said quietly, her chest tightening at the memory. Some of the daylight seemed to drain from the sky, and she lifted her chin, determined not to let the disappointments of the past shadow this new future. "We put runners on the wagon box in the winter. That was before my husband passed on, when George was too little to remember. Those were our last horses."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Amelia seemed flustered, as if that hadn't been the answer she'd been expecting.

*Leave the past where it belongs,* she reminded herself. "So that's why this is so exciting for us. To be whisked to church instead of walking through the snow. And we've never been in finer company."

"I can't wait for everyone to see you." Amelia bumped Mercy's elbow gently, a show of connection. "Look, we're already turning down Second."

"I can see the steeple!" George called out.

"Will your father be meeting us?" Mercy asked quietly as they drove along, straining to search through the crowd of tethered horses and vehicles along the street in front of the church. It looked as if men gathered there, talking amiably. Although she already knew Cole wasn't one of them.

"Pa doesn't go to church anymore." Amelia shrugged, falling silent, as if there was more to the story.

Sensing sadness there, suspecting it was because of the loss of Amelia's mother, Mercy gave her a silent nod of understanding. Sometimes a broken heart simply had to find his own way.

"Look at that palomino!" George shouted, his voice high-noted with glee. "It's the most golden horse I've ever seen. Maybe that's the horse I like the most."

"I can see why." Mercy straightened George's cap, which had gone somehow askew, to keep his ears warm. It seemed every handsome horse her boy saw became his new favorite. "Eberta, I'm so glad you've come with us."

"No worries. One thing I don't miss is Sunday service." Eberta pulled Frosty to a stop at a vacant spot at the block-long hitching post. "Are all those curious eyes getting to you?"

"Why, are people looking at me?" She pulled her attention away from the men and horses, where Cole Matheson was not, and realized it was true. A circle of ladies, standing off to the side of the walkway, studied her.

Shyness washed over her and she stared at the edge of the buffalo robe feeling terribly alone. She'd been prepared to meet so many new and unfamiliar people, but she hadn't realized how at ease she'd expected to feel with Cole at her side. Not that she needed a man to lean on, goodness no, but the companionship would have felt nice. Somehow she felt terribly alone.

This was the way a marriage of convenience was, she reminded herself. And, more importantly, it was no different from how her first marriage had turned out, in the end. She pushed back the buffalo robe, folding it up for later use.

"Hi!" Amelia called out to the crowd, standing up to wave. "This is my new mother, Mrs. Mercy Jacobs, but by Christmas she will be Mrs. Matheson. And this is George."

"Hello." A friendly woman stepped forward, her blond hair tumbling out from beneath her stylish bonnet. Her smile looked familiar. "We met in the dry-goods store briefly. I'm Molly."

"Yes, so good to see you again." Like a sign from heaven, the sun chose that moment to peer between the thick mantle of clouds, smiling down on the wintry world. Mercy felt the brightness and warmth brush her cheek like an angel's touch, and it was the assurance she needed. Everything was going to be all right. "Are you here with your family?"

"See those twin girls over there?" Molly smiled at Amelia, who was hopping down from the sleigh, and nodded toward the corner of the yard, where a bunch of little girls were lying back down in the snow, making snow angels. Two identical girls with black braids hopped to their feet to admire their work. One wore green, the other blue. Molly sighed happily. "Those two are mine. Nothing but trouble, and I'd say they're about your little boy's age."

"They'll be in school together, then." She watched over George while he climbed from the sleigh and into the deep snow. He wasn't interested in the girls. He had eyes only for the horses. "Are you happy with the teacher here?"

"Why, yes, we've been most blessed with Miss Young. She's a fine teacher," Molly said, enthused. "I'm sure you'll love her. My girls do."

"That's a relief to know." Yet another one of her many worries alleviated. Mercy's smile felt wider, her spirit lighter. She glanced down at her son, who was standing half behind her, and then at

Amelia, who reached out to proudly grab her hand. Such a tight grip, such a big need. Mercy prayed she could be everything the girl hoped for in a mother. What if she failed? Her chest ached at the thought; she was already in love with the girl.

"Hello, Eberta." Another woman came over, waving to the older woman.

"Howdy there, Felicity." Eberta gave the knotted rein a testing yank and, satisfied, trudged away from the hitching post. "How is that family of yours?"

"Wonderful. Tate's business is growing by leaps and bounds, and Gertie is keeping me busy." The cheerful, beautiful woman patted her midsection gently, her condition hid delicately by the drape of her fine wool coat. "Four more months to go until this one arrives."

"You'll be even busier then," Mercy found herself adding, pleased when Felicity shared a smile with her. "Congratulations."

"Thank you. We are so happy." Felicity glowed with the truth of that statement. Mercy had never seen the like of the genuine joy and love that radiated from her when she glanced toward a dark-haired, impressive-looking man standing with the others, leaning on a cane.

True love. Mercy could feel the power of it like the sun warming the world. Once, she'd hoped for such a thing with Timothy, God rest him. Heaven knew how hard they'd tried. A touch of sadness crept in and she pushed it away. At least with Cole she would have no such disappointments, even if she would not have true love.

Who needed true love, anyway? She took George by the hand, thankful for him and Amelia—for her children. While the women chatted, leading the way down the shoveled pathway toward the open door of the church, the sunshine seemed to follow them, laying a golden path at their feet. Sign enough, she told herself, even if she felt a little lonely for more.

"That's my best friend and her ma!" Amelia pointed out, gesturing toward a horse and sleigh pulling to a stop in front of the church. "Oh, I'm so glad you've come, Mercy. We're going to invite all of them to our wedding. And I'm glad you came, too, George."

"Uh, me, too," the boy said, glancing over his shoulder one last time at the men and horses. Mercy realized why, now that she took a more careful look. It wasn't just the horses that had captured his attention, but the men with their sons at their sides. Fathers.

Knowing she wasn't the only one wishing Cole was here, she gently squeezed George's hand.

## Chapter Five

"That's our house." Amelia jabbed her arm to the north, where the prairie rose into a graceful roll of snow glittering in the sunshine.

Mercy caught her breath, staring at the proud two-story home with dormer windows on the top and a wraparound porch, light gray siding and sparkling windows surrounded by a sea of white. This was their house? She stared, not quite able to believe. Cole had described his home as modest. But it was nothing like the modest cabins and shanties they'd passed on the half-mile ride from town. It was like a dream, like nothing she'd ever thought she'd live in.

"Where's the shanty?" George asked, confused. His face scrunched up, his forehead furrowed. "Is it around back? Is that where we're gonna live?"

"No, George," Amelia said warmly, as if she already thought of him as her own little brother. "There's no shanty. You are going to live in the house with me and Pa. That's why we're having a wedding. So we can all be a family."

A family. Amelia's words moved her heart. Mercy swallowed against the sudden lump in her throat. Her eyes stung, and she tried to blink away the unexpected tears. The girl clearly didn't know everything Cole had written in his letters, that he'd been so adamantly clear this was a formal arrangement, not a personal union.

"That sounds mighty nice to me." Mercy cleared her throat, slipping one arm around the girl to draw her closer. She did the same with George. It felt pretty fine to be seated between the children, knowing that she already had what mattered, what she'd traveled so far to find.

Well, *almost,* she thought, remembering the churchyard scene earlier and those fathers with their sons.

"Keep in mind we moved some of the furniture into town," Eberta explained as she urged Frosty along the circular drive curving in front of the steps. "The front room is a little empty, but that'll fix itself after the wedding."

"In three days," Amelia reminded them. "Don't worry, I have everything planned out."

"Your father showed me your slate."

The sleigh squeaked to a stop in front of the house. My, it was larger than she'd first thought. More impressive. The windows and porch gave it a smiling, welcoming look. Her pulse kicked up, and she tried to let it sink in. This house—a real house, not a tiny cottage like the one she and Timothy had shared during their marriage, not a shanty like the ones she'd lived in growing up and after she'd been widowed. Not in her wildest dreams had she imagined this much.

"It's not a mansion." Eberta hopped off the front seat. "But it's cozy and well-made. Cole built it himself. Did a fine job, too."

"I've never lived in a place with so many windows," she said, dazed, as she tumbled out of the sled behind Amelia. Looking up, she counted at least three bedrooms. And that was only on this side of the house.

"Ma, is this really where we're gonna live?" George tumbled from the sleigh, head tipped back, staring intently up at the second story, taking in the windows. "It's enough for lots of families."

"Oh, it's not that big," Eberta laughed kindly, patting the boy on the shoulder. "It's a nice-size family house. Don't know what you're used to, though."

"A rented shanty on the outskirts of town." Her shoes tapped on the steps as she trailed Amelia onto the porch. "This will be perfect come summer. I can plant flowers in the border beds and think how pleasant it will be to sit right here and watch the sun set."

"That's how I like to pass a summer evening." The front door opened and Cole stepped into the slant of sunshine, dressed in a dark wool coat, his Stetson hiding his eyes, pulling on a pair of gloves. "Sounds like we are compatible on that front."

"Yes." The sight of him made her breath catch. A lump lodged in her throat. Her stomach fluttered nervously, because she didn't know how this would turn out after he'd heard what she had to say. "Amelia, I'd be most grateful if you could take George inside and show him around the house."

"Sure. C'mon, George." Amelia tromped across the porch, tossing a grin at her father on her way by. "Pa and I couldn't decide what room you'd like, so let's go pick one out."

"You mean I get my very own room?" George asked, blue eyes glinting incredulously. "Thank you, Pa."

"You're welcome." He looked right past Mercy, as if he could read her mood. His gaze landed on the boy, and that granite set to his face softened a fraction. "You go on in. Pick out your room. And try on the riding boots I brought home for you. Make sure they fit comfortably."

"Riding boots?" George froze midstride, jaw dropping. "I looked around, but I didn't see any horses here."

"Because they are on the other side of the hill." Steady and easygoing, that voice. Just like the man. "You'll be able to see them from the windows. Go on. When you're done, we'll take Frosty down to the barn and you can meet the other horses."

"You mean, you'll let me *lead* him?"

"I'll let you drive him."

The realization sank in. George gave an excited whoop. "Oh, boy. Just oh, boy!"

"You'd better hurry," Mercy advised him, relieved to see him happy again. "You don't want to keep Frosty waiting for too long."

"No, ma'am!" George earnestly charged through the doorway, feet churning, shoes pounding on the boards. The door smacked shut behind him.

"I'll be getting home," Eberta called out, circling around the corner of the house on foot. "Good luck, Mercy. I'm praying you don't need it."

"Thanks for the ride, for the company, for just everything." Mercy turned her back to Cole, leaning over the railing. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Count on it, missy." Eberta winked, tossed the tasseled end of her scarf over her plump shoulder and trudged around the corner of the house. A mule bayed, just out of sight. The animal must belong to Eberta, Mercy decided, startled when Cole joined her at the railing.

His dark shadow fell across her and she shivered, although he blocked the wind with his big body. Alone with him again, she was aware of every inch of his six-foot height and of her five foot three. She was unprepared for a confrontation. In the past, discussions had often not gone well with Timothy. How this would turn out was anyone's guess.

Although her stomach clenched up tight, and her palms began to sweat, she couldn't put this off. No, best to find out what kind of man Cole truly was. She fisted her hands, braced her feet, mentally preparing herself for the ordeal. "You didn't come to church."

"No, I didn't think to mention that last night." He shrugged, keeping watch as Eberta rode out of the shadow of the house on a gray mule. "You look as if you mind."

"I would appreciate you being up front with me." She watched the mule swish his tail as he walked along, heading back toward town. The sunlight blazed across the landscape, bringing the snow to life, making it shine, making it glitter. Inside she felt dark and afraid. What if by speaking up to protect George she lost him his new father? Her stomach clenched tighter at the thought. "Why don't you attend? Amelia does."

"I used to, but I stopped going." What looked like grief carved lines into his handsome face, crinkling around his eyes, bracketing his chiseled, firm mouth into a reserved frown. "I have no objection to anyone else attending. I just lost the faith for it."

"Oh." What on earth did someone say to that? She tried to swallow past the lump in her throat, wishing she knew what to do. "In truth, for the entire year after Timothy passed, I couldn't force myself to attend a single service. Not even Christmas."

"But you went back."

"I needed to. I needed faith. Life isn't the same without it." She squinted into the sun. Eberta was a shadow against the endless white. "Maybe one day you'll go back, too."

"I tried. I couldn't." His throat worked. He turned stonier, all the gentleness fleeing from his face, all the softness, all the feeling. "I tried for years until I finally gave up. It hurt too much to try. I don't plan on going back. Hope that isn't a deal breaker for you."

"What about the wedding?"

"Guess I can't disappoint Amelia, not about this, not with you." He shrugged his brawny shoulders. He looked compelling and yet rugged at the same time. Human, but unreachable. "This one time only."

"I see." She leaned against the railing, facing him, pulse skittering. "That isn't a deal breaker for me, but perhaps what I have to say will be one for you."

"I'm listening." He went rigid. Tense cords of tendons bunched in his neck. Strained muscles jumped along his jaw line as if he expected the worst.

"I understand, but George didn't." Her voice broke, betraying a tremor of emotion she hadn't meant to express. She sighed. "Today at church, he was the only little boy without a father beside him. Again. I can't tell you what it has been like watching how painful that is for him, hurting because he is hurting. For years, he's been the boy watching all those fathers and sons, wishing. Just wishing. It's been a terrible hole in his life and in his heart. I thought that was over for him, but it wasn't today."

"Oh." Cole closed his eyes. It was as if all six feet of him winced in painful realization. His dependable, wide shoulders slumped. He stared down at the toes of his boots, still as stone. "That wasn't my intention."

"I realize that now." Hands trembling, she splayed them against the wooden rail, needing something to hold on to. Relieved that he wasn't angry with her, relieved that he was very much the earnest man she'd met through his letters, she took a deep breath of the cold air. It burned in her lungs like an icy rush. "This is, after all, about the children. If there's something I'm failing to do for Amelia, you should let me know."

"Right." He nodded, staring intently down at his boots, refusing to look at her. He looked as remote as the mountains in the distance, as icy as the land mantled in snow. But when he raised his head and his gaze met hers, life shone there. She read his promise in that look, felt the solemnity of it, could see all the way to his heart. She didn't know why a son was so important to him, why he'd chosen her and George out of all the letters he must have received, but she was appreciative beyond words.

"Guess I'll figure out a way to face church. I'll do my best to make sure it doesn't happen to George again." Determination showed in the lift on his square, chiseled chin. "If it does, I'm sure you'll remind me."

"Yes, I'll be right on that. I have a sharp eye." Now she was smiling, amazed how fast that vast distance between them seemed to vanish, how quickly he could change from remote to approachable. Somewhere inside beyond all the defenses, he had a very good heart.

"Mercy!" Amelia's faint shout penetrated the outside walls of the house and the closed door. "Come see!"

"Now it's my turn," she said gently. Without realizing it, she reached out to touch the man. Her fingers landed on his arm, the act as natural as breathing. Aware of what she'd done, her breath hitched. She raised her eyes to his. She read confusion there, but he didn't move away. She did, removing her fingers from his coat sleeve, her fingertips tingling sweetly from the contact.

She felt the lingering weight of his gaze on her back as she crossed the porch and opened the door. Something had changed between them, something that went beyond words, something she could not describe. But the sun seemed to shine more brightly, the wind held less of a bite, and when she stepped into the house and closed the door behind her, the warm, friendly feeling within her remained.

"Mercy!" Amelia dashed toward her, grinning widely, blue skirts swirling around her, braids flying. "You have to see what Pa got George."

"Come look, Ma!" George's voice echoed from deeper inside the house, out of sight. "I can't believe I'm a real cowboy!"

Oh, the delight in his voice. The sound of it made her forget everything else. Her shoes tapped a merry rhythm against the hardwood floor, barely noticing her surroundings. The big gray stone fireplace, the windows letting in light and mountain views, the two overstuffed chairs in an otherwise sparse room.

A staircase rose to her right, ascending to the second floor. The kitchen was airy and pleasant, but she hardly noticed the oak cabinets and counters, the shiny new range or the round oak table seated in front of a big window. No, those details paled in comparison to the sight of her son standing by that table with a Stetson on his head and cowboy boots on his feet.

"They even fit, too!" George grinned at her, happier than she'd ever seen him. "I can't believe it. They're my very own. Amelia said so."

"Be sure and thank Cole." She blinked happy tears from her eyes, hands clasped together, just drinking in the sight of her delighted boy. "You look like a real cowboy ready to ride."

"You surely do," Amelia agreed. "Hurry, go show Pa. He's waiting to show you your big surprise."

"My horse?" George choked out, as if too overcome to say more. He hugged himself like a boy whose every dream had come true. "Oh, boy. I gotta go. 'Bye, Ma."

"'Bye, kid." She felt choked up, too. "Go and have fun with your pa."

"I will!" His boots made a hammering sound, pow-powing through the house as he made a mad dash away.

She listened to his progress, heard the door open and Cole's rumbling baritone as he said something to the boy. The door shut with a click, cutting him off. She swiped happy tears from her eyes.

"George was really excited." Amelia wandered over to the stove. "Pa is giving him an old horse to learn to ride. Howie's big, but don't worry. He's as gentle as a lamb. I wanted to learn to ride him. I begged and begged and pleaded and pleaded. I was sure I could wear Pa down and he'd agree."

"And it didn't work?" Mercy asked, amused, imagining reserved Cole's reaction to his daughter wanting to ride astride like a boy. Think how upset he got over a sled! She gave a soft huff of laughter. What a pair she and Amelia were. "Once long ago I wanted to learn to ride horseback."

"You did?" Surprised at such news, and apparently intrigued, Amelia dropped an oven mitt. It tumbled to the floor and she stooped to pick it up. "Did you ever get to?"

"Alas, no. My parents were shocked I would suggest such a thing." Mercy laughed again, love filling her at the memory of her folks, long gone now, and of those happy times long past. *Perhaps happier times could come around again,* she thought hopefully, taking in the pretty kitchen. Goodness, it was larger than her shanty. By twice, maybe three times.

"Too bad about the riding," Amelia sympathized. She opened the stove's warmer. "Have you ever gone sledding?"

"No. It looks fun." Mercy crossed over to take a look inside the warmer, from which Amelia extracted a bowl. Residual heat radiated off the stove, and it felt good. It was going to take some time to get used to the cold Montana winters. "Is this lunch?"

"Emmylou made it yesterday. She's our housekeeper," Amelia explained, carefully setting the bowl on the counter. "At least, she will be until the wedding. Then you take over."

"Ah, so in marrying me, your father is saving some money," she quipped. She liked knowing that she wouldn't be a burden to him, two more people for him to support. That was another relief. Her gaze drifted to the window, where the stretch of shining white snow and rolling meadows was broken only by precise split-rail fencing and a gray barn, trimmed in white.

A dozen horses strained against the rails, each jockeying to be the one getting petted by George. My, wasn't that a sight. She bit her bottom lip, overcome once again, watching as Cole stayed at George's side, appearing to talk gently to him, perhaps telling him about each animal. George listened intently, his little hand petting one horse nose after another, nodding solemnly to whatever the man said.

This was everything she'd hoped. Just everything.

"The palomino in the middle, the tallest horse?" Amelia leaned on the edge of the counter, going up on tiptoe straining to see what had captured Mercy's attention. "That's Howie. That's George's horse."

"My, he's mighty big." She gulped, trying not to be alarmed. That was one large animal for such a small little boy. Cole knew what he was doing, right? She gripped the edge of the counter, trying to suppress her motherly instincts until the enormous horse lowered his head and George flung his arms as far as they would go around the creature's neck. The horse, as if he were a very fine gentleman indeed, tucked the boy beneath his head protectively, as if he intended to love and look after the child.

"Emmylou left us chicken to use for sandwiches." Amelia tapped over to the pantry and flung open the door to reveal tidy shelves stacked full of food staples. "One of my chores is taking care of the chickens. In the summer, we have a big garden. And the orchard is full of trees to climb and fruit to pick."

"It sounds wonderful." Like a dream come true. Mercy glanced around, taking in the sight of her happy son and stoic husband-to-be, of her new daughter setting out a plate of covered leftover chicken onto the counter, of this home—a real house—full of sunshine and comfort and safety. She could not believe her good fortune. After working twelve-, sometimes fourteen-hour days at the hotel, day in and day out, scraping together a living, wanting better for her son, it had happened.

"I spotted a loaf of bread in the pantry," Mercy said, after one last glance at the window. "Let's get lunch made and on the table. Do you think we can tear George and your pa away from those horses?"

"It'll be tough." Amelia grinned, opening a drawer to extract a knife. "We may have to throw dessert in. Pa has a real sweet tooth."

"Good to know." Especially since she loved to bake. Maybe she could find out Cole's favorites. He certainly deserved all the effort she could give to make his life better, for what he was doing for George. The letters Cole had written telling of his life here had been no exaggeration, nor had his promises and intentions.

*I don't know how I was chosen for this, Lord,* she prayed, lifting the bread from its shelf. *But thank You so much. And please look after Maeve and Violet,* she added, thinking of her dear friend who was also settling into her new life. *Help all of us to find happiness.*

For the first time in a long while, that felt possible. Maybe she and Cole weren't marrying for love, but perhaps they could have a happy life helping one another. Maybe even become friends. That notion put a smile on her face as she sidled up to the counter next to her beautiful new daughter so they could make sandwiches together.

Chapter Six

"Mercy, thank you for lunch." Cole dropped his cloth napkin on the table, pushed back his chair and resisted the pull of the woman's magnetic presence. Something about Mercy kept urging him to look, to smile, to notice things about her he oughtn't be noticing. Like the Cupid's-bow shape of her lips, as blushed as new roses. Or the refined beauty of her heart-shaped face, the wide slash of her deep blue eyes, the curl of her honey-brown lashes, the dainty slope of her nose.

No, it was smarter to keep his head down, grab his hat and coat on the way to the door and not look back.

"Take your time and eat up, George." He called over his shoulder. "Come down to the barn when you're ready."

"I'm ready!" The boy hit the floor with a two-footed clatter. "Ma, Pa said he'd teach me to ride right after lunch. That I get to sit up on Howie's back and everything. I love Howie, he's my very own horse. For keeps."

"I'm sure he loves you, too." Mercy's melodic, caring words tempted Cole to look. Why she affected him, pulled at him, like this, he didn't know. Gritting his teeth, he stabbed his arms into his coat and turned his ears off to the rest of what she had to say.

If he wanted to keep not liking the woman, it would be best not to get pulled in by her, not to care. He pushed open the door and escaped into the lean-to, where his boots waited. As he jammed his feet into them, he felt the weight of her gaze on him. Had he thanked her for lunch? He searched his mind for any memory of it. Yes, he had. Shaking his head at himself, he shoved his foot into a boot. Maybe that was a sign of how worked up over her he was. Having a woman around, making the commitment to marry wasn't easy. His life was changing, and he didn't like change.

"Pa?" George's quiet voice broke into his thoughts.

Gazing down at the boy's face crinkled up into a worried, silent question, he realized he was frowning. Cole blew out a breath, replaced the frown with what he hoped was more of a grin than a grimace and patted the bench by the door.

"Need help with those boots?" he asked his son. His son. Satisfaction filled him. This was one change he liked.

"Nah, I can do it." George plopped down on the bench with little-boy exuberance, his blond hair tousled and wrangled his way into his new boots. "I'm a cowboy now."

The back of Cole's neck tingled. He turned around inexorably, as if he were destined to do it, as if he had no will or control over his own eyes. Mercy stood at the table, gathering the dirty plates, a willowy wisp of blue calico and grace.

In that moment as she stood before the window, blessed by sunlight, burnished by gold, she was no longer the stranger he'd corresponded with, widowed when her husband fell ill with diphtheria. She was no longer just the woman who'd stepped off the train, the one he'd decided was best for Amelia.

He could inexplicably see inside her, read the scars of loss that grief and hardship had made on her heart. Feel the commitment to their children. See the loneliness and the hope for a connection shadowed in those midnight-blue depths. He froze, hands fisting, unable to stop the sensation of the world fading away, the floorboards at his feet, the walls surrounding him, the children chattering.

As if in silence, as if haloed by light, there were just the two of them. Just him. Just Mercy. The emotional distance separating them vanished. His fingers wanted to unclench and reach out for hers, to take her hands in his, to ease the pain of loneliness within his own soul.

Fortunately he came to his senses in time, jerked away, turned his back and closed the door. George stared up at him, still wrestling with his second boot. Worry arched his brows and widened his eyes, as if he was frightened he hadn't been fast enough.

"It's okay," Cole soothed, knowing he'd turned away from the boy too quickly, but it wasn't George he needed to get away from. A man had to protect himself. He'd gotten by this long without being close to a woman. He saw no reason for that to change now. "Your sock is bunched up. Pull it up straight and your foot should slide in."

"Okay." George bent his head to the task, full of little-boy sweetness and intent. Task completed, he grinned and bounded to his feet.

"Button up all the way," he reminded the boy, opening the lean-to door for him. "It's cold out there."

"I know, it's not even melting." The kid tromped down the steps and landed in the snow. "If it snows like that again, will Santa be able to come?"

"Sure. Santa's used to snow. He lives at the North Pole, remember?" Cole caught up to the boy, plowing side by side with him through the drifts. "Even if we get a bad storm on Christmas, he'll make it through."

"If I were Santa, I'd have horses instead of reindeer," George commented. Up ahead several horses poked their noses out of their stalls, curious to see what was going on. Howie's golden nose was one of them. The gelding's dark eyes lit up at the sight of the boy. Howie had a soft spot for kids, and came bounding into the snow, nickering an eager welcome.

"Look, he likes me!" George clasped his hands together, overcome.

*Hard not to like this kid,* Cole thought, chest aching. He laid a land on the boy's shoulder. "C'mon. I'll put you on his back."

"Oh!" George trotted ahead, grabbed hold of a fence rung and pulled himself up to stand on the bottom of it. All the better to reach Howie, who arched his head over the fence, knocked George's Stetson askew and nibbled the boy's cheek with a horsey kiss.

"I love you, too, Howie." The boy's delighted giggle filled long-broken places in Cole's soul.

Maybe that was why he could suddenly feel more sharply than ever the tangible touch of a gaze on his back, how he knew Mercy stood at the window watching him with her son. His response to her troubled him, but it didn't stop him from turning nor did it stop the acres of snowy land from shrinking until it felt as if there were no distance between them at all.

This *connection* to her wasn't what he'd signed on for. This wasn't what he wanted, he thought, jaw set, hands fisting, gaze connecting with hers. His pulse fluttered in recognition of her, and an unfamiliar peace came to his soul, healing him more. Emotion he couldn't name gathered behind his eyes, burning and stinging. He felt her silence like singing. He jerked away, palms damp, the back of his neck sweating, needing the separation from her. He didn't understand what was happening, but he feared what she silently wanted.

Hadn't he made it clear in the numerous letters they'd exchanged? Mercy knew that. She'd written as much, but while that assurance had mollified him at the time, he kept worrying about it

now. A woman like Mercy could find love again. She was beautiful, kindhearted and grounded, but he wasn't looking for an emotional attachment and never would be. He'd tried that before and it had destroyed his heart. He forced his gaze to focus on George, who was busily chatting with Howie and stroking the gelding's nose.

"George, let's get you up and riding." He strode to the gate and unlatched it. Several horses rushed over, friendly brown eyes searching him for any signs of food or impending affection. He waved them back, gave Patty a shove, scrubbed Chester's nose, chuckled at Polly's antics, all the while aware of the small boy behind him, who was unsure at being surrounded by so many horses.

"Don't worry, they won't trample you." He caught the child's gaze reassuringly. Funny how he remembered being younger than George, following his father into the corral for the first time. How enormous those horses had seemed back then. "They might give you a lot of kisses. And watch out, Polly will steal your hat. Wait, give that back, girl."

George laughed, which only encouraged the bay mare to lift the hat higher, gripped lightly between her teeth, and give it a shake in the air as if to say, *come and get it.*

Ready to oblige, Cole scooped George up by the waist and held him high enough to grab his hat.

Polly lifted her head higher, stretching her neck as far as it would go, happy eyes twinkling mischievously.

"Hey!" George protested with a soft laugh. "Is she giving me sass?"

"I think she is, buddy." Cole meant to retrieve the hat for the boy, but Howie beat him to it. The big gelding moved in to bump Polly, a protective look dark in his gentle eyes. With a sigh, the game over, Polly lowered the hat into George's outstretched hands.

"Thank you, girl," he said, earning a horsey grin from Polly and a nibbling kiss on his cheek.

"That tickles." George giggled. "I think she likes me, too."

"You are charming my horses, kid." As he remembered those long-ago times, it was as if he could feel the soul of his father brushing close, feel the echo of his childhood with his pa. "You are a natural born horseman, George."

"I am?" Pleased, the boy's grin was powerful enough to change the air, warm the winds and burrow into Cole's heart.

Howie, ready to do his horsey duty, shouldered Polly out of the way completely. No one was going to get his boy, apparently. The gelding stood expectantly as Cole hefted the child onto the horse's back. Howie nodded with approval and crooked his neck far enough around to check on the boy, as if to make sure he was sitting snug and holding on.

"See that clump of hair at the bottom of the mane?" Cole leaned in. "That's right. Hold on tight. It won't hurt him."

"I'm really doing it." No one in the history of time had ever grinned as widely or as joyfully as George as he seized a handful of mane, vibrating with excitement, ready to ride. "I'm on my very own horse. I'm riding him."

"That's right. Now sit up straight, grip him just a little with your knees, enough that you don't fall off." Cole made sure George was sitting well enough before taking hold of Howie's halter. Howie stood tall and still, full of pride and concern. Perhaps it was good for the old horse to feel loved and needed again. Every soul longed for that.

Even his own? Cole wondered, glancing over his shoulder. Mercy was gone from the window and he felt bereft, as if missing her. Which was ridiculous, he told himself with a wince. He was never traveling down that treacherous path again. He wasn't equipped to do it. He didn't have enough heart to give. He couldn't stand the thought of disappointing her.

Howie blew out his breath, impatient to move. George looked ready to burst, waiting for the horse's first step. Cole clucked, tugging gently on the rope bridle and remembering that father-and-son moment when Pa had been the one holding the bridle, leading the horse, and he'd been the boy

riding for the first time. Like his own father had done, Cole kept a hand on George's knee and kept it there, making sure the boy didn't slide or fall.

"What do you think, kid?" he asked, already knowing the answer as Howie ambled along, ears pricked, turning his head to keep an eye on the boy, too.

"This is the best thing that's ever happened to me!" George looked giddy. He was an entirely different child. Unspoken were the things Cole had read between the lines in Mercy's letters, the things she hadn't said. All the opportunities George never had with no father to provide and to be there for him, all the hardships and penny-pinching and doing without.

Well, that had changed for good, Cole thought, fonder of the boy than he'd ever imagined he could be. "Hey, you really are a natural. You haven't slipped even once."

"I must be really good at this."

"Yes, you are, George." Cole assured him, remembering how his father had done the same for him. "Let's go faster. Are you ready?"

"Uh-huh."

Cole broke into a lope, and Howie smoothly transitioned into a slow cantor. The rocking movement didn't unseat the boy, although he slipped a little. Cole kept a good hold on his knee, keeping him in place.

"Ma! Do you see me?" George squealed with glee. "Look!"

"I see," sang a sweet voice, carried by the wind. "Is that a real cowboy, or is that you, George?"

"It's me!"

Mercy's burst of laughter, soft and sweet, threatened to undo him, to reach deep inside him and slip past his defenses. She was somewhere behind him on the hill, perhaps trudging through the snow to watch her son's first ride. She couldn't know what her presence did to him, how it threatened to crack his heart, the glacier it had become. He wished he had more to give her, that he was a better man. Focusing on the horse and boy, guiding Howie away to the far side of the corral, he hoped the distance would help.

It didn't. She filled his senses. The dainty crunch of snow beneath her boots, the rustle of her petticoats in the wind. The trill of her laughter, as sweet as lark song; her praise of George's riding skills, as gentle as a hymn. She was a splash of color against the white, wintry world. Golden hair, rosebud cheeks, flashing blue eyes, matching blue skirts, brown coat, purple flower on her hat. Color and life, in a way there had been none before.

And in one gloved hand, she pulled a rope attached to the front of Amelia's sled—the sled he'd forbidden the girl to use. The sled she'd bought off the Gable boy at school one day and hidden for two weeks before, while out on a delivery, Cole had spotted her speeding down Third Street with the boys. The outrage still haunted him, flaring to life when he realized Amelia traipsed behind Mercy, instructing her on the best way to ride on a sled.

His feet stopped moving while he stared in disbelief, not comprehending what his eyes were seeing. Howie halted, keeping an eye on the boy, as Mercy lifted her hand in a wave, flashed him a smile and sat down on the sled. His jaw dropped as Amelia gave a running push, let go, and Mercy —prim-and-proper Mercy, the lady he'd expressly chosen to be a model of female propriety and decorum—gave a whooping laugh as she raced down the slope, hair and skirts flying, a colorful, laughing blur against the white.

"Wow!" Amelia bellowed when Mercy had stopped at the bottom of the slope. His daughter cupped her hand to her mouth. Surely something she'd learned from the boys. "You went a lot farther than I usually do. That's like a record."

"That really was fun!" Mercy popped off the sled, brushed snow off her skirts, as if there wasn't a thing wrong with her behavior. "I can see why you like it so much. George will like this, too, I think—"

She paused, as if aware of his glowering and glanced his way. He must be frowning fiercely again, because her face paled. She fell silent, her eyes rounding. He didn't remember lifting George to the ground or crossing the field, only that he was ducking between the fence rungs and plowing fast and hard through snow up to his knees.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, letting anger take over, letting it fill him. It was better than the other things threatening to take him over. Tension coiled through him, snapping his jaw muscles tight, so tight it was hard to speak. "I told Amelia she was never to touch that sled again."

"Oh, I didn't know." Mercy took a step back, studying him as if debating whether, in his anger, he was capable of hurting her or not. Then her chin went up, as if she was a lot stronger than she looked. "You mentioned not liking that she rode her sled in town, where everyone could see. I didn't think way out here that it would matter. It's just the four of us."

"It matters," he ground out, his outrage losing steam because there was no way she could know the true reason behind his anger. And because he had that rule about keeping the past where it belonged, he hadn't told her. He was afraid of failing his daughter, of not raising her in the proper way. Angry with himself now, he realized he was towering over the woman and took a step back. "This isn't good for her, Mercy. Surely, as a mother, you know that."

"See, if you wanted to make me mad at you, you have succeeded." Her chin ticked up a notch higher, her dark blue eyes snapping fire. "I fail to see the harm. Sledding is actually quite fun. I intend to do it again, after Amelia takes her turn."

"She's not taking a turn. She's not riding that sled."

"Fresh air and exercise is good for a girl," Mercy told him. "It's not fair that you and George get to be out here riding the horses and we can't. Hmm, maybe what we need is a sidesaddle."

"I see what's going on." He glanced up the hill, where Amelia was shading her eyes with her hands, intent on watching what was going on down below. "You two are ganging up against me."

"Not at all." Mercy's hand lit on his upper arm, a familiar, bridging touch, one meant to calm him down. It did. Her touch radiated something that soothed, a special, unnameable something that made him lean in, that made his entire being wish for what he could not have.

He stood there, mouth open, mind blank, not at all sure how to summon up one single word in protest because his brain had simply stopped working. Gaping like a fish out of water—like a man moved by a woman's caring touch—he watched Mercy turn on her heel, dragging the sled up the slope after her.

Tiny, airy flakes of snow chose that moment to come tumbling down, brushing his cheek, clinging to the sleeve where she'd touched him. The sensation of connection, of her caring concern for him, lingered.

It did not fade.

## Chapter Seven

"Here are some things for George." Cole's voice echoed in the stairwell outside her rooms above the store. He hesitated in the night shadows, as if a part of them, head down, staring at the floor. Looking as if stepping into the light was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Things?" she asked quietly, curious, closing behind her the door to the bedroom where George slept. "What have you done for him now?"

"Picked out some clothes from the shelves downstairs." With a shrug, Cole shouldered into the room awkwardly and held out several folded pieces of clothing. "I noticed his things were starting to wear out. Guessing they were hand-me-downs."

"Yes." From the church donation barrel back home. Those pesky tears returned, burning her eyes and blurring her vision. She blinked them away, stepping toward him, close enough to see the dark stubble on his jaw from a day's growth. Her fingers itched to touch him there, to feel the rasp against her fingertips. It was foolish to want to get closer to him, this man who'd been clear he wanted

none of that. So she squared her shoulders, tamped down the wish and took the stack of clothes he offered her.

"Brand-new." She stroked the flannel shirt, blue to match George's eyes. There were a week's worth of shirts, she noticed, and denim trousers to match. Her chest ached at Cole's thoughtfulness. "George will be thrilled. Thank you for this, for providing for him."

"Just keeping my bargain." Cole dipped his chin in an awkward bob, as if there were far more feelings behind those words than he chose to admit. "Boys his age grow like weeds. He may need underthings and socks. You can choose from the shelves downstairs, whatever he needs. Just let me or Eberta know what you take for inventory purposes."

"I will." It was very generous of him to think of so many new things for George. "This is nice of you considering I have the feeling you are upset with me. Over the sled."

"Yes, I had hoped you would side with me on the sled issue." He ambled past her and squatted in front of the cold, dark potbellied stove. The door opened with a squeak. "Guess I misjudged the kind of woman you are."

"Oh." His words hit her particularly hard. He'd been pleasant but reserved through the afternoon and over a warmed-up supper of stew Emmylou had made the night before. But, she realized, the children had been around them. Now it was only the two of them. "I'm sorry you're disappointed in me, but I can't go against what I believe is right."

"Oh, that girls need fresh air and exercise, too?" He arched a dark brow at her, reaching for the fireplace shovel. "A nice walk wouldn't have been better?"

"It certainly wouldn't have been as much fun." She bit the inside of her lip, trying to figure out just how mad he was. Remembering how angry he'd been when he'd marched over to her in the pasture, she realized now that his upset hadn't blown over. He hadn't let it go. What she needed to do was reassure him. "You don't need to bother with the stove. It's just me, and I don't need a fire."

"So this is how you made ends meet, did you?" He ignored what she had to say and stirred the embers until they glowed bright red. He added a handful of kindling from the nearby wood box. "Once your son was warm in bed, you'd let the fire go out and sit in the freezing cold?"

"Until bedtime. To save on the cost of fuel," she said, her cheeks heating. "It was financially prudent."

"In my house, that's not the way it works." He sounded angry again, his granite shoulders tensing as he watched the tiny flames flicker and dance. "You'll keep the fire burning until your bedtime. You'll do what I ask this time, or I'll put an end to the sledding."

As if curious about her reaction, he cut his gaze to her, studying her briefly out of the corner of his eye. Their gazes met and she felt her heartbeat pause, as if it were about to cease all together.

"You strike a hard deal, Cole," she told him, understanding dawning. He wasn't without a heart, not at all. "I'll agree to your terms."

"Good." He added small pieces of wood and, satisfied, closed the door. "At this point I wouldn't want to send you back to North Carolina. I'm rather fond of George."

He looked away, pushed off the floor and rose to his impressive six-foot height. The silence as he brushed moss and bark off his hands said more than his words ever could. His affection for George had won her devotion. He'd spent the entire afternoon teaching the boy how to ride, saddle and rein, and after supper the pair had disappeared into the barn to clean stalls and care for the horses.

"I'm rather fond of Amelia," she confessed and went quiet, too, letting her silence say much, much more.

"I'm glad." He cleared his throat and finally spoke, though he looked unsure of himself. It was endearing that for all his strength and size, he was basically shy. Why that stole her heart just a bit, she couldn't say, either.

He reached for the broom, but she beat him to it. He raised one eyebrow and his face turned to stone. She was starting to recognize his angry look.

"This is the least I can do for the man who built the fire for me." She seized the broom and swept the small amount of debris into a tidy pile. "You're going to have to get used to me doing things for you, too. I understand that it's going to be a challenge for you, as I've been alone for so long, as well."

"I see." His gaze raked over her face, and she shivered. Perhaps from the cold air, for the fire in the stove was not strong enough to begin heating the place. He sounded amused as he grabbed the nearby dustpan and knelt to hold it in place for her. "You would have been happy never marrying again?"

"It probably seems that way." She swept, sending the tiny pieces of moss and bark into the dustpan. "I would have preferred to marry, but finding someone who would be good to George was a problem."

"You had offers?" He rose, emptied the pan in the wood box.

"Several. We lived in a very small town, but every widower who came along asked for my hand." For once she was with someone who could understand her choices, unlike her friends and coworkers who'd been critical of her decisions. "One was a man who had a farm to work and five daughters. He said he'd take me on as a wife because of George, who could learn to do the work of a man in the fields."

"That's terrible." Cole took the broom from her and put it away, sympathy knelling low in his voice. "But I know men like that. They use their children as free labor."

"Yes, and that's not what I wanted for George. Better that I work long hours and have my great-aunt watch him than to expose him to that heartache." She felt surprised when Cole reached for her elbow, guiding her to the sofa, gesturing for her to sit. It had been a long time since a man had shown genuine caring for her. She settled on the cushion, telling him what she'd never told anyone. "That wasn't the worst offer I received. A salesman, who came through town regularly and stayed at the hotel where I worked, offered to make me his wife if I left George behind. Apparently he wasn't interested in raising another man's son. Nothing but trouble, he said."

"With offers like that, no wonder you were cautious with me. I was cautious, too." He shook the teakettle on the stove, listened for the sound of water in it and carried it to the kitchen nook. "It took you and me writing over a dozen letters each to reach this point. I've learned from several of my customers most folks in a mail-order situation just write a few times."

"That's what I've heard, too, but we have children. We had to be sure." She watched in amazement as Cole filled the kettle from the water pitcher. Timothy had never done such a thing, nor had any man she'd heard of. But there he was, standing in the shadows, doing something for her. "How about you? I told you my stories. It's only fair you do the same."

"Oh, I asked a few stern-looking widows before resorting to writing an advertisement," he confessed, carrying the kettle to the stove. He set it down with a clunk. "They were all horrified. Of me, or wild Amelia, I've never been sure."

"It was you," she assured him, laughing for no reason at all. "Amelia is a gem."

"Right." Humor lit his face, softening the chiseled planes of his cheekbones and the carved line of his mouth. It drove away the shadows from his eyes, leaving a sincere openness in those depths of blue. For an instant he looked approachable, unguarded. He settled on the sofa beside her. "Yes, it must have been me. I'm told I'm a difficult man."

"No. Not difficult." She wanted to lay her hand on his sleeve, to bridge the distance between them, but it wasn't necessary. He'd never felt so close, so real. She rather liked this man. A whole lot. "Life has dealt you a blow, that's all. Sometimes we're never the same afterward."

"No, we're not." The muscles in his jaw worked. He leaned forward, away from her, planting his elbows on his knees, hands to his face. He took a moment, breathed in and out. "You must have loved your husband very much."

"I did. I married him when I was seventeen, starry-eyed and full of dreams." She hardly recognized that girl she'd been, standing at the front of the church with her friends and family

watching, vowing to honor the dashing farmer who'd stolen her heart. "I was more in love with him than he was with me, I'm afraid. It took me a while to learn to see the real man, instead of the one I'd wanted to see."

"Oh, I'm sorry." He pulled his hands away from his face and straightened, his empathetic gaze searching hers. "I just assumed you had a happy marriage."

"I did, for the most part, but Timothy had his struggles." She stared at her hands, too, hesitating. "I loved him. I was devastated when he died."

"I know how that feels." He paused, letting the silence take over. But since it was broken by the rumbling of the teakettle, he got on his feet and rescued it from the stove top before it whistled and woke the boy. "When Alice passed, it was like the sun going out, never to shine again. I've been in the dark ever since."

"That's the first time you've talked about her."

"I try not to." Other than mentioning he was a widower, he'd purposefully avoided anything to do with Alice in his letters. It hurt too much. He grabbed the kettle's handle with the hem of his shirt and carried it to the kitchen nook. The darkness in the room's corner made it easier to open up. "She was my world. After the way I grew up—my father passed away from a field accident when I was about George's age. Because of our financial situation, we were about to lose the farm, Ma had to remarry. She had nothing if she didn't and three children to provide for. Her biggest fear was being homeless and us starving with no place to go. So she married a man from our church."

"That had to be so hard for her, to marry without l-love." Her words caught, as if she felt not only sympathy for his mother, but sadness for herself.

That's when he knew for sure. He could feel it in his gut. Deep down, Mercy was hoping for a connection between them, for something more than a simple, courteous convenient marriage. Troubled, he measured tea into the ball, hands shaking. Tea leaves likely fell onto the small table, but it was too dark to see them. He dropped it into the teapot and reached for the kettle.

"It was a hard sacrifice Ma made." He listened to the water pour, rushing into the pot. Telling by ear when it was full. He set the tea kettle aside, aching in a way he couldn't describe. He hung his head, drew in a breath and hoped—no, prayed—he was wrong about Mercy's hopes.

"The man Ma married was well-thought-of by many, but we saw his true colors." He did his best to keep at bay those old memories of the scared and vulnerable boy he'd been, struggling to hide his wounds from his ma. "My stepfather was brutal. I was the oldest, so I made sure I bore the brunt of it."

"To protect your younger siblings," she said, as if she'd memorized every fact he'd ever written during their correspondence. Not only committed them to memory, but to her heart. Her caring warmed the air, drove back the shadows, made her lovelier than ever. "Is that why you are so good to George?"

"Partly." He reached down a mug from the shelf and held himself very still. The truth—the admission—didn't come easily. "Alice died in childbirth. Our son was stillborn. She lived long enough to see his face and then she was gone, too."

"Oh." Shocked silence followed. Mercy bowed her head, as if she'd been struck. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea. That had to be unbearable for you."

"Unbearable," he repeated. It was the closest word to what he'd gone through. He'd nearly died of sorrow, too, but Amelia had been three years old and he'd had to find a way to go on. "My heart broke for the final time that day. I walled off the pieces, picked myself up and I'm still getting by the best I can."

"And so that's why you want a convenient marriage." Her soothing, sympathetic tone reached out to him. She studied him over the back of the sofa, her beautiful face soft with understanding.

He'd never seen anything more lovely or compelling. He didn't know why he could see inside to her heart or why he could read it so easily. But he saw there the dashed hopes for an emotional

connection between them, the sorrow for his lost wife and son, and the understanding of what his heart had been through. Without a word, he nodded, acknowledging what he'd seen in her. She smiled sadly, knowing what he meant.

"That's why I was so interested in you," he confessed, reaching for the teapot and filling the cup. "You'd lost a husband, so you know what it's like. And you had George."

"Yes, George." Her tone came falsely bright, layered with too many emotions to name. "You are a blessing to him."

"As he is to me." He carried the cup toward the light, toward her, and gave it to her. "I can't tell you what this afternoon meant. Teaching him to ride. Watching him discover the joy of having a horse. I hope what I gave to him had at least as much value as what he gave to me today."

"More." She blew on the tea to cool it, because she needed time to gain control of her emotions or she wouldn't be able to hide the most private ones from him. "George was floating he was so happy. I've never seen him like that."

"Good." As if buoyed by that, Cole nodded, sank onto the edge of the sofa and steepled his hands. Half in the shadows, half in the reach of the lamp's light, he made a stunning image of light and dark, of strength and heart. "I think George and I are going to get along just fine."

"I do, too." She took a sip of tea, although her hand was trembling so it wasn't easy. She burned her lip, scorched her tongue, and spilled some on her dress. None of that mattered next to the enormous swell of affection and grief filling her. "If you could have seen him before, watching our neighbors back in North Carolina. Mr. Fulton would be out in the alley playing catch with his sons or in the backyard rubbing down their horse, and the yearning on George's face would make me cry every time. You've done something for my boy, something you don't even know."

"I do." His throat worked, the tendons cording with the strain of his emotions. "I've been yearning for a son, too."

Tears filled her eyes, thinking of the hole in Cole's life, the son he never got to know. She blinked hard, willing those tears back. Too bad she couldn't do the same with her affection. It welled up, unbidden, rising through her like hope on the darkest winter night, like starlight in a cold Christmas sky. She took another sip of tea, swallowing the hot liquid blindly, ignoring the scald. How could she not love the man who loved her son?

"Well, I'd better go." Cole stood, lost in the shadows again. He moved in the darkness, a shadowed line of his shoulder, a curve of his capable hand. "Like I said, be sure and take what you need from the store, for you, the boy or the house. I expect you to make the place your home, any way you want. Amelia made an appointment for you at Cora's dress shop tomorrow."

"Oh, for the wedding dress." She thought of the slate, of the girl's hopes written out in a tidy, organized list. Quite extravagant, but now she understood. As George had longed for a father, as Cole had longed for a son, so Amelia had yearned for a mother and a wedding to celebrate it. "Of course. Anything Amelia wants."

"Within reason." Cole's firm tone held warmth, too. "No sledding in town. No horse riding. No Stetson. She keeps threatening to trade in her sunbonnet for one."

"I'll do my best." Mercy set the cup aside and rose, too, trailing after him to the door. The affection she felt for him seemed to keep expanding, growing beyond all bounds. She prayed she could keep it secret from him, to be the wife he wanted and deserved. "I'm worried about what Amelia wants for my wedding dress versus what you can afford."

"I've already spoken to Cora about that." The door whispered open and he stood in the darkness before it, towering over her, close.

So close.

Her skin tingled sweetly, as if a mellow summer breeze had blown over her. She lifted her chin and swallowed, praying her feelings didn't show in her voice. "Good. I've never been dress shopping in a store before. Growing up, Ma always made our clothes and so I've always made mine."

"How old is that dress you're wearing?" he asked, his tone firm and caring at the same time.

"I sewed it when Timothy was alive." The last time she'd been able to afford fabric for a new dress.

"That's been a long while," he commented. "At least four years."

"Five, but it's quite serviceable. It still has another good year left. Maybe more."

"Sorry, that's not going to happen." He gave a soft bark of surprised laughter. He couldn't believe this woman. She thought of the children before herself. She really didn't realize that he'd wanted to better her life, too, not only Amelia's and George's, when he'd written his proposal. Something about her had hooked him. Now he knew what. "I told Cora you need more than a wedding dress. You need a new wardrobe."

"Oh, no. Absolutely not." She sounded scandalized, horrified. "That would be a terrible expense."

"It's mine to pay," he reminded her. "Remember my second rule?"

"Oh, yes, the budget. How is this living on a budget? It's too extravagant." She truly sounded distressed. The reaches of the lamplight strained to find her, to highlight the golden glints in her hair, to caress the curve of her face. Crinkles dug into her forehead as she gazed up at him. "No, that makes no sense. I told you in our correspondence. I don't need anything. I'm not the one in need."

He begged to differ. He looked at her and saw all kinds of need. The need for her son, for a home, for family and for love. That was the one that stabbed at him, that cut like a blade. It was the one thing he could not give her. The one thing he did not have to give.

It saddened him greatly, because he wanted so much for her, for this woman who'd given him a son and who'd made his daughter happy. He still could hold on to the hope that she'd help mold Amelia into an acceptably behaved daughter. After all, a man had to hold on to something.

"It doesn't matter," he told her, his chest hurting so stridently it was as if he'd been kicked in the ribs by seven wild horses. "I'm the head of the household. I'm the man. What I say goes. You'll get new dresses. End of story."

"I thought we agreed not to boss each other around?" Amusement tugged her pretty mouth upward, and there was a hint of challenge in her eyes.

He liked this woman. Very much. "Sure, we agreed to that, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm in charge. On this matter, you need to do what I say."

"Buy myself dresses I don't need?" Her amusement faded; the challenge remained. Her delicately carved chin hiked up another notch. "I'm not in need."

"Yes, you are." She'd been struggling in poverty for too long and that was over. The overwhelming need to take care of her, too, rushed through him like a flash flood, knocking down some of the barriers he'd had up for years. Thankfully some of his defenses stayed standing, the iron-strong ones, the ones closest to his heart. "You will be a store owner's wife, and how you dress reflects on me. You need to look the part."

"You're just saying that. I don't believe you mean it." Her chin dipped, as if she, too, could look inside him and see the truth.

His fingers reached out on their own accord to curl around her delicate chin. Her skin felt warm and silken-soft as he nudged her chin up so their eyes could meet. She was a woman of pride. He saw that, and he saw, too, what his gesture meant to her. No more patched dresses, faded from years of washing. No more quiet desperation struggling to make basic ends meet. They were a team, meant to help each other.

"I mean it," he told her, pretending to be tough when he was crumbling. His ribs felt broken, his internal organs ripped and bleeding. How could feelings hurt so much? "I won't go around town overhearing folks talking about how ragged my wife's clothes are. I deserve better than that."

"So, buying new things is a wifely duty?"

"Yes. Glad you understand me." His throat closed up, overcome by the cracking pain inside him. He hated the emptiness he felt within, the void of his lost heart, the one that Alice and their son had taken with them when they'd passed. With no hope of getting it back, he felt like a failure, feared the disappointment to come. But did that stop him from leaning forward? No, not one bit. His lips brushed her forehead with the faintest touch. He breathed in her rose and soap scent, and the emptiness inside him throbbed like an open wound.

That kiss was a mistake. Reaching out to her at all was a mistake. Ashamed of himself, of what he'd done, he turned away and strode out the door. What was she expecting now? That there might be more kisses in their future, more closeness, even love? He winced, knowing he would fail her. He had nothing to give to her.

"Good night, Cole." She broke the silence, sounding practical, like the woman from the letters he'd come to trust. As if she knew his heart, her voice consoled. "I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to spending your money tomorrow."

A joke. That helped, he thought, feeling the pain within him ease. He managed a grin as he caught hold of the doorknob, crossing over the threshold. "Now I'm actually feeling like a married man."

"Excellent practice for the real thing," she teased back.

"Wait, I'm thinking about changing my mind." He winked, but it was too dark for her to see or to realize he was telling the truth. Like a wounded man, he headed down the stairs, his gait unsteady, feeling winded and reeling from the sort of pain that comes from a wound that had never healed.

"Sorry, no changing your mind now," she gently kidded, her voice echoing down the stairwell. "Not when I finally get to spend your money."

While her words were light and breezy, meant to make him smile, there was something else there. An emotion he sensed, an awareness. He'd not hidden his true feelings from her, after all.

He grimaced, alone at the foot of the stairs, as the door closed, blocking off all sight of her. He turned around, staring up into the deep shadows, feeling the night's cold wrap around him. He longed for her the way the dark yearned for light. He wished he had a heart to give her.

## Chapter Eight

"Yep, that's the dress," Amelia declared with a decisive nod in the sunniest corner of Mrs. Cora Jones's dress shop. The girl gave her braids a toss. "I knew it the second I saw it in the front window. It makes you even more beautiful, Ma."

*Ma.* Mercy's hand flew to her throat. She would never get over how good that felt. She smiled at her daughter, held out the green skirt and slowly twirled. "Isn't it a little festive for a wedding? I was expecting something sedate and very somber."

"Oh, no, this is just right." Amelia tilted her head to one side, considering, absolutely serious. "It's a Christmas dress. See the sprigged holly on the bodice? And the velvet skirt is my absolute favorite. Pa won't let me wear velvet. He says I'm too young, but I'm dying to."

"Perhaps together we can sew a dress for you. I'm thinking we can find a way to put some velvet on it." Loving that idea, Mercy turned to eye the plentiful bolts of fabric in this upscale shop. She'd never stepped foot inside such a fancy establishment before or worn a dress like this, with mother-of-pearl buttons and trims of dainty lace and silk.

"Why, that looks lovely on you." The shop owner bustled over with genteel grace and genuine friendliness. "The perfect dress for your wedding in, what, two days?"

"One and a half now," Mercy said shakily. "It's counting down more quickly than I thought."

"A Christmas wedding is terribly romantic." Cora Jones selected a red velvet bonnet from the nearby display and set it on Mercy's head. "I met my husband during the Christmas season. It's a time for joy. I've known Cole a long time. You couldn't have found a more wonderful man."

"I think so, too." Mercy squinted at herself in the full-length mirror, hardly recognizing her reflection. Was she really this woman with a twinkle in her eye, looking slender and elegant in a finely tailored, fashionable dress? Her cheeks were rosy, her skin glowing. She felt so full of life.

The last time she'd felt this way had been her first wedding day. The realization slammed into her, forcing the air from her lungs. She gasped, covering her mouth to hide her dismay. No one noticed. Amelia was busy conferring with Cora about the hat. Cora had turned around to choose a different bonnet. Mercy felt her heart break, remembering that girl she'd been, so full of hope. Love hadn't turned out quite like she'd expected. She and Timothy had struggled, and while they'd loved one another, they'd grown apart a little more each year of their marriage. She'd longed to be closer, working hard to repair the distance between them up until death took him.

Love and marriage were complicated and not easy, and she'd loved Timothy deeply. Her grief had healed over time, and a new wish had taken hold of her, that one day she would find love again, but this time with a man who loved her at least as much as she loved him. That it could be even better next time around. Of course, it had been only a hope. George's welfare and happiness came first, which was why she'd agreed to look for a husband when she'd caught the boy climbing down from the backyard tree last summer, wiping tears from his eyes. It hurt not having a pa, he'd said. Agreeing to find a good man to marry hadn't been about her dreams.

It had been about George's. Her gaze went to the front window, where the boy was visible bundled in the new winter coat Cole had let him choose from the dry-goods display. George was keeping their mare company, the one Cole had bought for her and given to her earlier in the day. George's blue knit hat bobbed around as he petted Polly's nose. The red mare, the gentle lady she was, patiently kept her head low so the boy could easily reach her.

Mercy slipped off the hat and handed it to Cora, who had consulted with Amelia to choose a dark green velvet bonnet. As Mercy took it from them and angled the simple, tasteful hat onto her head, she watched a boy approaching on the boardwalk wave to George. They looked to be about the same age. The other boy had his mother with him. They appeared to be Christmas shopping, judging by all their packages. The boy greeted George with a smile and they instantly started talking as if destined to be friends, the new boy petting Polly, too.

Yes, this was everything she'd hoped for her son. What were her needs compared to that?

"That's perfect on you," Cora breathed. "You're a vision."

"I've never seen anyone so beautiful," Amelia agreed. "Not ever."

"You're sweet." Mercy gathered the girl in her arms and gave her a quick hug. Definitely sweet. "What about you? Do you have a special dress for the wedding?"

"We already have that taken care of." Cora patted a wrapped bundle on the counter behind her. "Now that we have a dress for the wedding squared away, we need to get you some everyday things."

Mercy started to protest, but then she remembered how important this was to Cole. Last night he'd broken her heart with his story. She'd seen a side of the man that moved her still. Last night, he was all she'd thought about when she'd been tossing and turning, trying to sleep. All through the morning he stayed on her mind as she'd gone about wedding preparations and Christmas-type errands in town. She couldn't forget the brush of his kiss to her forehead, so infinitely gentle, making her fall in love with him even when she knew there was no chance he could ever return her love.

A kiss on the forehead was all the affection she would ever receive from him.

But this wasn't about her, she reminded herself. It was about George and Amelia. Another glance at the window told her George's new friend had moved on, but he appeared happier, smiling away as he petted Polly.

"Ooh, finding new dresses for you is gonna be so much fun," Amelia said, diving toward a rack of lovely winter dresses. "Hmm. George is gonna get real cold if he stands out there for much longer. Mrs. Jones, would it be all right if I got him a cup of hot chocolate?"

"Absolutely." Cora brightened as if she liked the idea very much. "In fact, I'll be happy to make you both a cup. Mercy, would you like some, too, or would you prefer a cup of tea?"

"Tea, please." She took one last took in the mirror as she removed the bonnet. The Lord had answered every one of her prayers. He'd found a good husband for her and a fine father for George. They had a safe home, plenty of food, basic necessities met. They even had Howie and Polly.

*I'm so thankful, Father,* she prayed silently, her gaze fastened on the window and on her son. *Am I wrong for wanting more?*

She felt that way. She felt selfish, when as a mother her only concern should be her two children. As if heaven agreed, the sunshine chose that exact moment to dim, fading away to gray shadow. The first snowflakes fell, chunks of white plummeting straight to the ground. No-nonsense, as if driven by a sense of duty.

It felt like an answer.

* * *

"So *thrilled* for you, Cole." The young Mrs. Ruby Davis beamed at him from the other side of the store's front counter. "Eberta told me all about your upcoming marriage. Best wishes to you."

"Thank you." He did his best to force a smile, as he'd done throughout the afternoon whenever a customer had gushed about his good fortune. Looked like he'd best give Eberta another talking-to or she'd be unstoppable, telling any customer who would listen about his impending marriage.

He grimaced, handing over the new bride's purchases. Happiness lighting her up, Mrs. Davis accepted the package, likely a Christmas gift for her husband, Lorenzo. She looked like the very picture of what a joyful wife should be, and it brought to the forefront all his doubts.

"Merry Christmas, Cole!" Ruby said over her shoulder on her way toward the door. "I'm looking forward to meeting your bride."

"So am I." A woman with a heart-shaped face, curly brown hair and compelling eyes stepped up to the counter and plunked down a bundle of wooden train tracks from the toy section. Mrs. Christina Gable, glowing from her pregnancy, radiated another kind of happiness he remembered well.

And reminded him of the man he'd become. He was aware of that a lot lately, he thought as he tore paper off the roll to wrap the purchase. The nearness he'd allowed with Mercy yesterday troubled him. It had been too close, too familiar, too everything. Frowning, he handed the package back to Christina Gable and reached for his account book.

"What a blessing a new wife will be for you," Mrs. Gable said kindly. "You've been alone for so long."

"Intentionally," he said without thought, wincing because the truth felt so harsh.

"Broken hearts can mend," she merely said, as if he hadn't been rude at all. She tucked her package under her arm, understanding etched into her face. "Remember that. Maybe the best is yet to come in your life."

"Merry Christmas," he said with a nod, ignoring the wrenching crack of pain in his chest. Thinking of Mercy and a future with her made him hurt with the same strident, unrelenting pain of his long-ago grief. He gritted his jaw so tightly his teeth ached. That was a good thing. It distracted him from his troubles.

"That's the last customer of the day," Eberta announced the moment the door closed behind Mrs. Gable, and she turned the lock. "Whew, what a day we've had. My feet are complaining."

"You're welcome to quit at any time." He scribbled Mrs. Gable's purchase onto her account and closed the ledger. "It would be preferable to you telling everyone in this store about my wedding."

"Why wouldn't you want everyone to know?" Eberta asked slyly. She knew him well enough to guess why he'd been silent all day, except for necessary conversation with customers. She tapped toward him, concerned. "You're having second thoughts, aren't you?"

"No, not second thoughts." He tucked the ledger into place on the back shelf. "Fifth, sixth, seventh thoughts maybe."

"I see." Eberta sighed heavily, her disappointment in him echoing in the store. "What about Amelia? What are you going to tell her?"

"I haven't decided for sure." The pain behind his ribs wrenched harder at the thought of disappointing his daughter. Of having to let go of George. The children weren't the issue.

Mercy was.

"Well, you think long and hard before you turn away that nice woman." Eberta's tone held a note of understanding. She'd been his employee back then, too, stood beside him during the double funeral where they'd lowered his wife and his son into the ground.

Emotion clogged his throat and he swallowed hard, trying to force it down. But the sorrow stayed. He'd never had the strength to deal with it. The grief had been too huge, too much to handle; it would tear him apart, destroy him, leaving nothing of him.

So he coped by turning to his work. He opened the small closet door behind the counter and hauled out a broom and dustpan. "I'll take care of cleanup. You get home before the storm worsens."

"A little snow won't hurt me, I'm too tough for that." Eberta marched around the counter and stole the broom from him. Her jaw was set, but her gaze compassionate. "I insist on closing up and I won't take no for an answer. Amelia is waiting for you. George will be there. Mercy is fixing supper."

Oh. His step faltered. He hung his head. She'd been haunting him all day, sneaking into his thoughts, tormenting him. And that kiss. He'd let his guard down too far last night. He was in danger of letting her in. In the decade since he'd become a widower, no one—*no one*—had gotten this close. At a loss, he blew out a breath, fisted his hands and unfisted them.

"Thanks for all your hard work today." The words croaked past the tightness in his throat as he headed toward the back door. The frantic urge to stay and keep working, to remain busy to delay the inevitable, overtook him, but Eberta was right. He needed to go home. He had to figure out what the right thing to do was—and he feared it wasn't marrying Mercy.

In the back room, he shrugged into his coat, hardly noticing what he was doing, and launched out the door into the alley. Thick, busily falling chunks of snow hailed toward the ground, and he knuckled down his hat to shield his face. Mercy. He wasn't looking forward to facing her. The sick feeling in his gut told him he already knew what he had to do.

She was young and beautiful, and regardless of what she'd agreed to, she wanted a loving marriage. She deserved that. As he trudged down the alley between buildings toward the intersecting street, snowflakes struck his face like tears. He cared about her. He couldn't help it. Last night, talking with her, sharing his painful past, had opened up a door to that pain he could no longer close. He could not live like this day after day, with the agony of what he'd lost wringing him out over and over.

"Why, it's Cole Matheson," a friendly voice called out. Reverend Hadly climbed out of his sled in front of the livery stable. "I was just thinking about you and your upcoming wedding. Christmas Eve ceremonies are my favorite. There's something special about them on such a sacred night."

"I agree." His throat closed up and he was barely able to squeeze out the words. Seeing the minister reminded him of the commitment he feared he couldn't make. That failure troubled him. "I hope you are on your way home. The temperature is dropping."

"It surely is. I'm trying to keep my teeth from chattering. Now, what about you?" Hadly's round face crinkled with concern. "You look troubled. It's natural to have a hard time moving on. Amelia brought Mercy by the church this morning, and anyone can see she is a gift from God. A much-needed blessing for your life."

"God doesn't need to bless my life." The confession felt like an anvil on his chest, the truth of it was something he'd kept inside since he'd lost wife and baby. "I'm fine. I don't need anything. It's the children who matter."

And Mercy. He ached more thinking of what he couldn't be for her. He could not be what she needed, what she deserved. He'd lost his heart, so he could not love her. He was no longer a man capable of deep feeling. He swiped snow off his lashes and spotted one of the stable workers, who

nodded at him and disappeared, hurrying to fetch Frosty. Another appeared to take the reins of the reverend's horse.

"An arrangement for the children's sake can be a blessing for you, too." Hadly brushed snow off his hat, turning to head home. "Maybe God has been waiting all this time to bring the right woman into your life. He knows your heart."

*Then He knows my failings,* Cole thought, watching the veil of snow close around the minister, stealing him from sight. The jingle of a harness speared his attention. The sight of his gelding clomping toward him, led by the stable worker, reminded him of where he was headed next. Home. There was no more delaying it. No more denying it.

He mounted up, riding bareback through the outskirts of town. The driving snow chilled him and hastened Frosty's quick gait along the snowy road. When he'd proposed to Mercy, he'd imagined her to be hardened by the world, weary of hardship, content to find the sanctuary of a convenient marriage and a good home. From her letters, she'd sounded like a practical, no-nonsense kind of lady. A good mother, gently spoken, proper to a fault.

Just what he'd been wanting. Instead, he'd gotten a beautiful young woman full of hopes and full of life. He could still picture her zipping down the hillside on Amelia's sled, skirts flying. The music of her laughter, the pull of her heart on his, the way she'd dismantled half of his defenses with a single, caring touch. She was tearing his world apart.

Worse, he acknowledged as the countryside rolled by, she was tearing him apart.

The house came into view on the knoll just outside of town. The windows glowed golden with lamplight, drawing him like a candle in the darkness, the only light by which to see. He rode close enough to spy a figure pass in front of the kitchen window and linger.

Mercy. *She must be preparing supper,* he reasoned, noticing the way she leaned slightly forward, intent on a task before her. Light gleamed on her blond hair, polished the lovely curve of her cheek, highlighted her soft full bottom lip as she turned to smile at someone else in the room. Likely his daughter. Mercy's face lit, radiating a mother's love. Nothing could be more beautiful. His pulse stammered, affected, and his heart vibrated with agonizing pain.

It was too much. He tore his gaze away, dismounted and led Frosty into the barn. The horses, who'd retreated to their stalls for shelter from the storm, poked their heads over their gates to welcome him with neighs and nickers and curious eyes. Howie looked especially dapper, his brown gaze shining with happiness. Cole didn't need to guess why. Clearly George had spent part of the day with him.

As he put up Frosty and closed the rest of the horses into the barn, he held himself as still as he could, letting his broken heart rest. No thinking of Mercy, or the wedding or the decision he had to make. He shook his head, bit his lip. How could he marry her like this? He could not be what she wanted, and he was sorry. Very sorry. He didn't even know how to be the man of deep feeling he'd once been, when he'd been whole, when wife and baby hadn't taken the best part of him with them. He was left with the shell of the man he used to be, and it was no good for anyone. Not Amelia, not George and especially not Mercy.

He'd wanted a wife to step in and be the parent he could not be, caring and involved, emotionally there for Amelia. At her age and with the changes of womanhood coming, she needed that. But he couldn't endure a wife who reminded him of the emptiness within him, the hollow place that remained where his heart used to be. Where his love used to be.

He couldn't endure the knowledge of what that would do to Mercy.

The minute he stepped foot outside the barn, closing the doors behind him, her light drew him through the storm. He tried not to look up; he tried not to be moved by her. The anguish inside him strengthened until it felt as if every bone he owned was breaking. Snow tapped against his hat, brushed his cheek, clung to his coat as he marched up the hill toward the house. The minister's words stayed with him, too. *She is a gift from God. A much-needed blessing for your life.*

*A blessing shouldn't hurt,* he thought, his mind reaching upward as if in prayer. The God he still believed in would not lead him to more pain.

He stepped into the fall of light from the front window. Standing on the steps, ready to knock the snow from his boots, he saw into the house. A green spruce tree stood proudly in the drawing room, grandly holding up paper chains and popcorn strings on its evergreen boughs. George went up on tiptoe to hang a paper snowflake by a yarn loop. The boy bit his bottom lip, button face scrunched up in thought, before choosing the exact spot he wanted for the decoration.

Amelia breezed into view, bubbly and bouncing, happier than he'd ever seen her. Relaxed, delighted, somehow more mature and elegant as she handed George another snowflake to hang. The boy took it gladly and the two of them contemplated where to place it. At their feet lay brightly wrapped presents tied up with ribbons and adorned with bows. The scene looked like something out of a Christmas dream.

This was Mercy's doing, Cole thought, hand to his chest, grimacing at the soul-breaking crack of his heart. She was changing everything with her love and gentle kindness. Bringing life back to his house, bringing Amelia to her better self, making a home for her son.

Mercy waltzed into sight, resplendent in a new dress, obviously from Cora's shop. The finely tailored garment, as red as a holly berry, skimmed her slender shape and brought out lustrous red tones in her blond hair. She looked taller somehow, as if no longer bowed down by hardship, her beauty more radiant. Joy polished her with a rare luster.

The sight of her changed him. The faint, muffled lilt of her laughter penetrated the walls and seemed to burrow within him, touching his agonized heart. He swore he felt a hand on his shoulder, a touch of reassurance, but when he looked there was no one there, nothing but the snow.

The rending of his heart deepened. It felt as if he were breaking all the way to the bottom of his soul. He splayed a hand against the siding, holding himself up when the pain became excruciating. Tears burned behind his eyes, and he realized it was not tears, but feeling. Emotion, raw and pure and true. The last stone walls around his heart fell, tumbling and crashing into bits, leaving the broken emptiness within him exposed.

"Cole." Mercy's voice, muffled by the wall, drew him, and when he looked up she was crossing toward the door, her loving smile the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Or felt.

The door whisked open, and the warmth and light of home tumbled over him like grace. Mercy smiled up at him. "You're home."

"Pa!" two children cried out, turning to run at him, pounding across the room.

But his attention remained on Mercy, her quiet welcome saying so much more. When her hand lit on his sleeve, he felt everything. The gentle weight of her touch, the impact of her caring, the potential of her love. The world was no longer filled with ice and snow, but with merriment and hope, with children running to throw their arms around him and pull him into the house, talking over one another telling him about their day and the tree and the decorations.

The sensation lifted from his shoulder, leaving him alone, his heart whole. He realized the pain had been his heart coming to life, that he was no longer empty. That the pain was gone and Mercy was there, so he took hold of her hand. Her surprised gaze met his and without words, without the need for them, he knew she felt with her heart what he could not say.

Epilogue

*Christmas Eve*

"Look, Ma!" Amelia breathed incredulously at the blaze of lights gleaming through the church's windows as the sleigh eased to a stop at the hitching post. "Everyone must have come for the wedding, just as I hoped. Oh, it's gonna be beautiful. Just beautiful."

"Yes, it is." Mercy glanced behind her to the two children tucked into the backseat, bundled beneath warm furs to keep out the evening's chill. "How could it be otherwise? Tonight we become a real family."

"The best Christmas present ever," Amelia declared.

George wearing his new suit, nodded enthusiastically, too overcome to speak.

Yes, this was the best Christmas present. Joy warmed her up, chasing away the icy winds and the snow drifting down from the heavens. She smiled at the man seated beside her, who took her hand in his.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked, his tone rumbling with caring, with the kind of regard she'd never dreamed of finding. He chuckled. "We can delay a few more minutes, if you're feeling nervous."

"Not nervous. Not at all." How did she begin to describe the way she felt? The moment when he'd walked through the door yesterday, his shadows gone, his heart whole and healed and shining in his eyes, she'd felt her world shift. Her soul had come alive as if for the first time. They'd decorated the tree together as a family. They'd laughed, they'd joked, they'd been closer than ever. And still were. "I can't wait to become your wife."

"I can't wait, either." His hand engulfing hers squeezed gently, letting her know he meant every word. His gaze fastened on hers, full of promise of a future made new. She saw the years roll by, laced with their children's laughter, with love and togetherness. There would be more babies, happy memories to be made and above all, the devotion and tenderness of a man who loved her with all the depths of his heart.

Just the way she loved him.

"You kids go on inside," Cole said with a wink. "I want to say a few things to your ma before we go in. There won't be a chance, what with all those people Amelia invited to our wedding."

"And they're all waiting for you, Pa," Amelia reminded him as she tossed off the robe. "C'mon, George. This will be mushy, anyway. We don't want to hear it. Besides, there are some boys your age in the church, I'm sure. I'll introduce you. They like to sled, too."

"Okay!" George said, bouncing into the snow with her. "I'm hopin' Santa brings me my own sled."

"I have a good feeling he will," Amelia answered, heading off in the snow at his side.

"We'll have to see about that," Cole said, rolling his eyes, although he knew Mercy had already chosen a sled from the store for George. It seemed he was going to have to learn to live with the sledding.

But as he gazed upon his remarkable wife-to-be, he didn't mind. All he could ever want was right here. He folded back the robe and helped her down from the seat. The children ran ahead, leaving them behind in the darkness and snow. It drifted down like grace, like hope, and he could feel the change in his heart, the awareness of the grace he'd been too broken to feel. It was everywhere around him, sweet and saving and renewing. He was thankful it had renewed his heart. So very thankful.

Mercy had done that, too. He turned toward her, the calm places in his soul filling. She looked beautiful tonight, as a bride should, in a fancy green hat, bundled up warmly in her new gray coat and matching scarf and mittens. She took his breath away. She was his heart.

"What did you need to say to me?" she asked as he shook out Frosty's blanket and covered him with it. Not one to be idle, she tethered the gelding to the hitching post, granting him several nose pats in the process.

"Oh, the usual thing a man says to the woman he's about to marry." He shrugged, bending to secure the buckle beneath Frosty's belly. "This is a big step we're about to take."

"Yes, I've been certain about you from your first letter. I saw how much you loved your daughter, how glad you were I had a son." She looked vulnerable with the snow tumbling all around her, airy and sweet, like little pieces of heaven. "But I never dreamed it would be as good as this."

"Me, either." Done with his task, he patted Frosty's shoulder and turned toward his bride. Emotions—hope, faith, joy—filled him, but one outshone all the others for it was the most important of all. He drew her close, brushed snowflakes out of the wisps of gold framing her dear face. That emotion rushed through him without end, without limits. "I love you, Mercy."

"I love you." She gazed up at him, affection deepening her blue eyes, unmistakable and true. "I will always love you."

"Not more than I will always love you." He offered her his arm. "Let me escort you to the church. If you're ready to marry me, that is."

"I'd run if the walkway wasn't so icy." She looped her arm in his and they took off together, marching toward the light and merriment, to friends gathered to celebrate their marriage. Their real marriage. Not one of convenience. Not one of duty.

But of love. That was the best gift of all. Bliss filled her as she climbed up the steps and into the shelter of the church's foyer, with Cole at her side. How wonderful he was, holding the door for her, helping her with her coat, hanging it up for her, gazing at her as if she was his greatest blessing.

No, *bliss* was too small of a word for what she felt, and for what waited her as his wife.

"What's that?" Cole asked, gesturing toward the sprig of mistletoe pinned to her dress collar, tied with a thin red ribbon. "It looks like mistletoe."

"Yes, it is." She thought of the train conductor, Mr. Blake, and his kind wishes. Wherever he was, she wished him well. And as for the dear friend she'd made on the journey to Montana Territory, she prayed Maeve had found the same kind of unexpected happiness, that God was writing a happy ending for her and her daughter, too.

"Well, if that's mistletoe, you know what we have to do next." Mischief flashed in Cole's blue eyes as he gathered her in his arms. Just the two of them, alone in the vestibule, haloed by lamplight and serenaded by the happy sound of festive conversations ringing in from the sanctuary. He leaned in, his gaze sliding to her mouth. "We have to kiss. It's a rule."

"Not more of your rules," she laughed, already going up on tiptoe.

"From now on," he said, gazing down at her with love. "I have only one rule. I intend to make you the happiest woman ever."

"Too late. I already am." She rested her hand on his chest, felt the thud of his heartbeat, slow and sure. "Merry Christmas, Cole."

"Merry Christmas, my love." He cradled her face in his large, strong hands and kissed her.

Her pulse went still as their lips met. His kiss was pure sweetness, the kind of fairy-tale kiss that promised happily-ever-afters and love everlasting. When it ended, she had tears in her eyes and forever in her heart.

* * * * *

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to my third novella with fellow author and good friend, Janet Tronstad. We had such a great time writing our previous mail-order-bride stories, how could we not do it one more time? We met in Missoula, Montana, on a sunny September day to discuss, brainstorm and create the ideas for our stories. What a fun time we had! Once again, our heroines meet on the westbound train and become friends while riding the rails, wondering how their lives will turn out as mail-order brides. My heroine, Mercy, has decided to accept a convenient marriage, one without the chance of love because of her young son, George. He wants a father so badly and Cole Matheson, her husband-to-be, is very much looking forward to having a son. The problem? Cole has no heart to give her, for his has been shattered by grief. Can happily-ever-after prevail? I hope you enjoy this Christmas tale where God's love heals.

Thank you for choosing *Christmas Hearts.*

Wishing you peace, joy and love this holiday season,

Jillian Hart

*Questions for Discussion*

1 What was your first impression of Cole? How would you describe him? What do you like most about his character?

2 How would you describe Mercy and Cole's first meeting? What did you learn about her character? What makes you care for Cole?

3 What do you feel for Amelia? What do you like most about her? What do you feel for George? What do you like most about him?

4 When did you know for sure that God meant for Mercy to be Amelia's mother? That she and Cole are meant to be together?

5 What is the story's predominant imagery? How does it contribute to the meaning of the story? Of the romance?

6 Do you see God at work in this story? What meanings do you find there?

7 How would you describe Mercy's faith? Cole's faith?

8 What do you think Mercy and Cole have each learned about love?

## Mistletoe Kiss in Dry Creek

Janet Tronstad

I am grateful for the many who prayed for my sister, Margaret, when she was ill with cancer. She is now dancing in heaven with Jesus, but your prayers made her feel so loved here on earth. Thank you.

*Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*
*—Hebrews* 13:2

### Chapter One

*Montana Territory December 20, 1886*

With her wool shawl wrapped tight around her shoulders, Maeve Flanagan stepped off the passenger car onto the railroad platform in Miles City and stopped suddenly. She and her four-year-old daughter, Violet, had watched the swirling snow as the train rolled west last night before finally entering the desolate prairie of the Montana Territory. Watching the storm this morning hadn't prepared her for the icy wind that hit her face when she climbed down to the platform, though. It was worse than any gale off the bay in Boston. She lifted the shawl to warm her cheeks. Maybe she had been a fool, trying to escape her past by traveling so far from home to marry a stranger.

Putting her hand over her stomach in an unconscious effort to shield the life that grew within her, she reminded herself that she'd had no other choice. She'd feel better when she met Noah Miller and stood in front of a preacher with him.

Of course, he might refuse to marry her when he found out about the baby.

She hadn't known for sure that she was increasing until the week she received the train tickets. It seemed indelicate to inform Noah of her condition by telegram, especially when she might be wrong. Besides, she wanted him to have time to be charmed by Violet before she said anything. If he liked one child, he'd probably be agreeable to another. She did not know what she'd do if he didn't want them. Infant or no infant, she had nothing left in Boston.

Maeve put a hand up to keep her hat on her head before doing her best to look around. She'd tell Noah of the baby as soon as she could and certainly before they said their vows. He knew she was a recent widow; the baby brought no shame to her. Searching the area, she saw that two rows of painted wood buildings lined the main street of this frontier town. Directly across from her, the Broadwater, Bubble and Company Mercantile had an imposing sign that was visible even in this storm.

Snow had partially turned to hail and caused the few people standing on the store walkways to move inside. Those on the railroad platform huddled together in small groups. The sounds of the

horses and wagons that were being driven on the street in front of them gave a faint rhythm to the steady howl of the wind. Maeve didn't see any man standing by himself so Noah must not be here to meet them.

Maeve shivered before turning to the opening behind her and used both hands to reach for her daughter. The train had been early, she assured herself. Noah would be here soon. She would not allow herself to think of any other possibility.

"Cover your head, sweetie." She took the shawl off her shoulders and wrapped it around Violet. The child's thin coat wouldn't keep her warm in the wind. Maeve then swung the girl off the train and moved them both to the side so the next person could exit.

Ash and cinders from the train's smokestack fell with the hail. Maeve kept her arm around her daughter as she looked around the platform more intently. Violet was snug under the shawl, but Maeve's gray wool dress, while her best and the only one made for this kind of weather, did not do much to stop the cold. She couldn't stand out here in the wind for long.

She searched the area again, trying not to worry. When Noah had sent for her, she had wept in relief. She had left her rented room in Boston the day her money had run out and boarded the train to arrive here. God was giving her a second chance. She had begun to wonder if He had abandoned her forever.

Now, she carried a copy of Noah's ad in her Bible. The ad read: *Passable cook wanted as wife to Montana Territory rancher. Marriage in name only. Must be able to serve up three meals a day for ten to twenty cowboys. Mature widow preferred. Rail fare provided. Separate quarters.*

Maeve wouldn't recognize Noah if he was standing in front of her. He had told her he lived near Dry Creek, a growing ranch area some distance from Miles City. But hadn't said anything about his appearance in the one letter he'd written after she answered his ad. Every man she knew bragged about himself, and Noah's silence in the matter had given her pause. He was probably short and portly. She had wondered about him offering separate quarters until she realized he might be hideously disfigured and wanted his privacy.

No matter, Maeve had told herself firmly at the time. For all that she was only twenty-five-years old, she was long past girlish dreams. She didn't need her pulse to quicken with romance at the sight of her husband. She needed a home for her family. As long as Noah was a good man, they would get along.

Suddenly, Maeve noticed that the wind wasn't blowing. She turned and saw a man standing behind her with a blanket spread high in his extended arms to stop the onslaught of hail. She was tall at nearly six feet, but this man stood at least three inches higher. He was fit, too. His legs were firmly braced on the wooden platform as he stood against the wind with the blanket flapping behind him.

"Flanagan?" the man demanded to know. Snow and pebbles of ice covered the brim of his Stetson hat, but she could tell from his beard that his hair was dark. His eyes were moss-green and seemed steady. Not friendly exactly, but not stern, either.

Maeve nodded as her heart raced. He was neither old nor short. From what she could see of it, his face was strong and probably appealing under his whiskers. Her friend Mercy Jacobs, with whom she'd traveled on the train, had warned her that men in the West were not as refined as those back East, but the man standing in front of her was close to perfect. He might have a beard, but it was trimmed. He didn't need to place an ad asking for a wife. Surely women around here would line up to be courted by this man.

Before she could say anything, the man brought the blanket down over her shoulders and Maeve realized how very cold she had been, standing there shivering. She needed to take better care of herself now that she knew about the baby.

Just then another strong gust of wind hit her, threatening once again to dislodge the old black wool hat she'd securely pinned over her copper hair. She didn't have a chance to put her hand up before the man took the blanket from her shoulders and draped it over her head, hat and all.

"There," he said as though he'd accomplished something. "We better get going before this storm gets any worse. I need to get back to the ranch and we have to stop by the mercantile and then the church."

He took her arm and looked ready to walk away.

"But—" Maeve burst out and stepped back. The blanket kept her face in shadows and she couldn't see well. "Violet."

The cover shifted as she turned and, through the opening around her face, she saw his bewildered expression. Maeve had answered a half dozen other ads and none of the men wanted a woman with a daughter. A healthy son could be of some help, they had all said, but not a daughter. She hadn't known she was pregnant when she answered those ads so she hadn't mentioned a baby, but when it came time to answer Noah's ad she had simply said she had one child.

He had not asked whether it was a boy or girl or how old the child was; he had just sent two train tickets. At the time, she had thought the man was tolerant and willing to accept any child.

"My daughter," Maeve added as she bent over to tuck her shawl more firmly around Violet. Now that she was here it felt unseemly to mention the babe growing inside her until she and Noah had looked each other in the eyes and smiled in acknowledgment of the bond they were contemplating.

"Oh," Noah said as though he'd forgotten she even had family.

"She won't be any trouble," Maeve said quietly as she drew the girl closer to her and stepped even with Noah. She was beginning to realize that he had not been kind earlier but, instead, indifferent. She felt a chill go through her that had nothing to do with the storm. She adjusted the blanket, but kept it wrapped around her head. She wished he looked less handsome and more welcoming.

Violet pulled away slightly and Maeve thought it was because the girl sensed her own growing dismay over the man. But then her daughter turned and pointed at something behind them.

Maeve followed Violet's finger. Mercy and her son were knocking on the train window to get their attention. They were on their way farther west to Angel Falls, where Mercy's future husband waited for them.

"My friend," Maeve said by way of explanation to Noah as she lifted her arm in a wave. She and Mercy had said their farewells on the train and Maeve hadn't expected a chance to do so again. They'd promised to write, but she was glad to see her friend's face.

"We don't have time," Noah said impatiently.

"Go-odbye," Violet stuttered as she whispered and waved shyly.

Maeve stood up straighter. Her daughter's trouble with speaking, like the nightmares, had started after seeing her father stabbed to death. Her late husband had taken Violet to some waterfront bar, telling her to stay in the corner, and then he'd sat down and proceeded to be inappropriate with a young lady whose irate father had found them and confronted him. The two men had fought, a full brawl breaking out that had involved the other patrons, and it had all ended badly for her husband. Maeve grieved that he had died, but a larger part of her blamed him for making her a widow.

The train had started rolling again, and Maeve gave another wave and smile to Mercy. When her friend was out of sight, she turned back to Noah.

"Ready?" he asked. He didn't wait for a response, but started moving toward the steps that led down from the railroad platform.

Maeve gathered Violet closer and hurried to follow him.

Just then a young woman ran past them and into the arms of a man standing on the far side of the platform. His whoop of joy made it clear he'd been expecting her. He even took the woman in his arms and kissed her.

Violet stopped and stared at them. "Is she a bride, too?"

"I don't know," Maeve said, her lips pressed together, wondering how she was going to explain to her daughter that not all marriages were filled with happiness.

She had tried to stop the conductor on the train from talking about how wonderful it was going to be when she and Mercy met their respective husbands-to-be. The conductor had even brought by sprigs of mistletoe for the two mail-order brides. He'd said the mistletoe was for their first kisses on Christmas Day with their new husbands.

Maeve looked at Noah out of the corner of her eyes. He didn't look as if a green sprig would tempt him to kiss anyone. His face was as foreboding as the storm clouds. He'd stomped down the wooden steps and stood on the snow-covered street, looking toward the west.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

If he was troubled about something, then she didn't want to approach him about the baby.

"Just that we're late," he said as he turned to her. "The clouds coming in look worse. And now the clerk in the mercantile should be coming back from his noon meal and I don't see him."

"Oh, well, that's—" Maeve stopped. He had a frown on his face, but he didn't appear overly angry. If she didn't tell him now, when would she?

She took a deep breath and glanced down because she couldn't bear to watch his eyes as she said what she had to say. "Maybe he has a baby at home and is taking a moment to rock the wee thing. The little ones can be sweet, don't you think? Makes us all wish we had one."

She realized she had to see him to judge his reaction so she looked up at him.

"He's not married," Noah responded as he stood there, his eyes bland as they watched hers curiously.

"Oh." She looked at his eyes and waited a moment longer.

His green eyes didn't darken even with the clouds overhead. He showed no sudden spark of understanding.

Finally, his eyes broke away from hers.

"The clerk's life is his own that way," Noah mused idly as he stared down the street again. "No one to answer to."

He sounded as if he envied the man. Maeve didn't know what to say to that, but she apparently didn't need to say anything as her future husband continued on.

"Of course, he's not responsible for taking care of a bunkhouse of men so he might not understand how important it is for us to get our order in for supplies."

"Working men need to eat," Maeve agreed cautiously. Noah had been clear that he wanted a cook for a wife. She kept trying not to let that dismay her. Many marriages started out with less. She wished he had smiled at the thought of babies, though.

Noah gestured across the street to the general store. "We'll have to hurry. We don't have time to do much looking around. As it is, I'll have to ask the boy who works there to bring most of what we order out in his wagon after the storm. And the preacher will be at the church soon."

With that, Noah turned and held out a hand to help her down the steps. Then he gestured as if to lift Violet down to the street, but Maeve said she'd do it. Once she had her daughter next to her, she pulled the girl close and faced them both in the right direction.

As they walked across the snow-covered street, Maeve convinced herself there was something reassuring about the man. He might not be friendly, but he was clearly used to taking care of others. Besides, his gruffness would likely go away when he got to know her and Violet better.

She hoped she was right as she pushed back her fears.

Maeve felt the wind stop again as Noah stepped up onto a wooden walk that was in front of the mercantile. He stomped the snow off his boots.

Frost outlined the window that looked into the establishment. Various items were right inside on a table. Maeve's breath caught when she saw a doll in a red dress lying near a flowered teapot.

*Oh, no, Christmas Eve,* she thought. She'd almost forgotten the holiday and it was four days from now.

She had no money for presents, not even for Violet. The girl had wanted a doll like the one in the window ever since she'd been able to crawl. Months ago, Maeve had decided her daughter would finally have her wish this Christmas. Her husband had been making money—he'd told her he'd gotten some work at the waterfront—and Maeve had been putting in extra hours as a scrubwoman.

She almost had enough saved up for a doll when everything turned upside down. She'd been fired from her job because the lady of the house didn't want "that man's widow" working for her any longer, even though all Maeve ever did was scrub the floors and do the heavy washing. She was given no references when she was told to leave. She'd finally bought a newspaper and read the awful things people were saying about her late husband. And about her.

People said that she had known about her husband's scheme to seduce rich young women and then threaten to expose them unless their families offered up a fair amount of money. The reporters even speculated that she had some of that money left and creditors came to her door demanding payment on her late husband's debts. They showed her papers he had signed for gambling debts and she'd been unable to pay them. She didn't know what her husband had done with the money he'd forced from the families. Likely, he had gambled it away. The only thing he had ever given her was the odd coin here and there that he added to their savings for the doll.

They'd been destitute when Noah's letter had come with the train tickets.

"Pretty," Violet whispered and pointed. The doll had auburn hair and blue eyes like hers. "What's her name, Mommy?"

The blanket no longer kept the cold away. Maeve shivered, but she noticed Violet didn't hesitate in her speech at all, not when talking about the doll.

"Hush now," Maeve said quietly. "The doll doesn't have a name."

"Oh." Violet breathed in dismay. "Doesn't she have a daddy to love her?"

Maeve almost broke down. As unfaithful as her husband had been, he'd always charmed their daughter. He told her he'd named her for his favorite flower, the most delicate, beautiful blooming plant in the whole world. The truth was, Maeve had discovered at his graveside, Violet had been the name of one of his several lovers. He must have thought it was quite the joke to name their daughter after a woman he had been free with since before he married Maeve.

"The doll doesn't care about love," Maeve told the girl, her words more harsh than she intended. Her heart had been broken all over again when her husband's lover had confronted her that day, demanding to have a token of him for a remembrance, preferably something with a precious stone that she could pawn.

Maeve forced her face to relax and smiled reassuringly at her daughter.

Violet didn't look convinced, but she didn't say anything more.

Maeve looked over at Noah, hoping he hadn't been listening. He was reaching for the doorknob and didn't seem to have been paying any attention to them. She was relieved.

"Maybe they'll still have a doll like that next Christmas," Maeve whispered finally, softening her voice and offering her daughter what hope she could. The girl nodded solemnly and Maeve resolved to put together a sock doll for Violet for Christmas. It wouldn't be the beauty in the window, but her daughter would have something to hug as she went to sleep at night.

* * *

Noah stomped the snow off his boots as he opened the wide door leading into the mercantile. It was darker than usual inside because of the coming storm, but it was warm. The place smelled of coffee, and he saw a new barrel of pickles sitting on the floor by the counter. Bright bolts of cloth were on a shelf to his right. Cans of peaches and bags of dried beans were to his left.

Noah watched to be sure the woman and girl made it through the door. He had yet to even see the Flanagan woman's face since she kept the blanket hooded over it. His impression of her on the railroad platform was of a tall drab woman with an awful hat pulled down to cover her ears. From what he could tell, she was thin. He hoped she was up to cooking for his crew. His men knew how

to drive cattle and they were loyal, but there had been grumbling in the bunkhouse about the burnt biscuits and tough meat the ranch had served up for the past two years. Last fall, he'd ordered one of the cowboys, Dakota, to take over feeding the men. The cowboy hadn't been much of a cook and he was anxious to have the duty taken away from him.

The men would give anyone who didn't feed them better than Dakota a hard time. It was worse in the winter when they spent half of their time in the bunkhouse dreaming of donuts and pies—the kind of delicacies, they said, that required a woman's hand to make properly.

He suspected it was all the idle time that had caused his men to come to him with the idea of placing an ad for a female cook. He told them there was no point. Women were so scarce in the Montana Territory that no woman would stay longer than a couple of weeks before she got married and left. They knew that as well as he did, but Dakota refused to accept it. He said he was going to find a way to get a cook who would stay.

The next thing Noah knew, he'd received a letter from a woman who had answered the ad Dakota and the men had put in a newspaper asking for a mail-order bride—for him. He'd demanded to see the ad and the ranch hands had given him a copy. He had been glad to see Dakota had some sense and had indicated the marriage would be in name only. Then he'd wondered if an older widow might just be interested in the kind of an arrangement his men had proposed. He checked the dates and saw that the ad had run for a full month and a half before he received even that one reply. He figured that meant there had been no confusion about the offer being made. Most women had discarded it.

Noah had intended to throw the letter he received away, but it had sat on his bedside table for two weeks. Every night he'd read it and tried to write some words to tell the woman there had been a misunderstanding. He'd had one wife and had no intentions of ever seeking another.

But the sparse words on the plain piece of paper had haunted him. He could almost feel the woman's desperation as she penned the few words telling him that she was an immigrant from Northern Ireland, a mature widow who had worked as a scrubwoman until her husband had been killed and she'd lost her job. She had no other family and was looking for a home for herself and her child. She had taken lessons to improve her speech, she said, and she knew also how to sew. Maybe it was the lack of polish and detail that had spoken to him. He'd known discouragement so deep it threatened the soul. He'd sensed this woman had nothing but a fragile pride stopping her from begging for help.

Finally, one night he'd written to her, telling her to come if she hadn't already found another position. And he'd prayed that she had. He had repeated that he had separate quarters for her, hoping to assure her that he didn't mean to take advantage of her plight. Once she had saved some money, he would offer to have the marriage annulled if she wanted. He knew how easily women, especially immigrants, starved to death in cities like Boston after they lost their husbands and their jobs.

"I mean to pay you," Noah said as he turned around to speak to the woman. "They didn't mention that in the ad, but—"

She wasn't there. She hadn't followed him over to the counter like he had assumed. Instead, she was bent over the little girl, speaking in a low voice. All he saw was the top of her blanketed head, but something about her and the child made him uneasy. She hadn't mentioned her age in the brief letter she'd written, but mature surely meant someone old enough to be a grandmother. He was thirty-three and he figured someone of that description had to be in her fifties. But not many women that age would have a young child.

The girl was probably her granddaughter, he told himself in relief. Maybe she thought he would frown upon her bringing a child who wasn't hers.

Just then Jimmy, the boy who ran errands in the store, came out from the back room.

"Help you?" He nodded in greeting. "I got some of your order in the wagon. I left room for a couple of trunks. But I got in the ham you wanted and a side of bacon. I'll bring the rest out later."

"My wife is going to put in a full order for that later delivery, but you'll need to pick up her trunk from the railroad station now," Noah said loudly enough for the woman to hear. "Flanagan is the name."

His words got her attention and she turned away from the display and started walking closer to him. He couldn't see anything on that table to appeal to a woman unless it was the china teapot.

"Put the pot in the window in our wagon, too," Noah whispered as he leaned in and spoke quietly to Jimmy. "Wrap it in a sack and see if you can find some red ribbon to go around it, too."

Noah was pleased with himself. He hadn't bought anyone a Christmas present since his wife ran away over two years ago. Oh, he always gave the ranch hands a twenty-dollar gold piece each. But a woman liked a gift.

"I'm sure you know what to stock for supplies in the kitchen," Noah said once the woman reached him. "Just tell Jimmy here. He can write it down."

"I don't know." She sounded a little alarmed.

The wind had made it hard to hear her earlier, but inside here he caught a hint of gentle Irish brogue in her voice. He liked it.

"They have almost everything you'd want in the mercantile here," he assured her.

She was silent for a moment.

"I'll just get your usual order," she finally said, sounding hesitant. "Until I've had a chance to check on what spices you have and everything."

Noah frowned. "There's not much on the shelves. We haven't had a cook on the place since my wife left two years ago."

"Your wife?" The woman looked up at that, no longer timid in her tone. If the sky outside wasn't going dark, he would have been able to see her face fully. He was sure there'd be some spark there, but the shadows hid her.

"She divorced me." He didn't like talking about his wife, but the woman deserved to know his past, especially since he'd brought it up. "She didn't think I could give her enough fancy things—you know, clothes and furniture. Things like that."

Flanagan didn't say anything and he was grateful for her tact.

"She wasn't much of a cook," he added. "Could barely make pancakes. Either raw in the middle or so thin there was nothing to them. But she did order in spices and tins of oysters."

He supposed it was during his marriage that he had become accustomed to poor cooking. His wife had had visions of entertaining visiting dignitaries, but he didn't know any such people so the few imported tins gathered dust on the shelves. He'd been so miserable during that time, he hadn't cared about eating and his men, maybe sensing how bad things were between him and his wife, hadn't complained much about the food, either.

Noah turned to the boy behind the counter. "Add a few cases of canned peaches to the order." He figured his men deserved something festive to eat. And maybe their ad would work out better than he'd expected. "Put the peaches in the wagon. I think there'll be room since there's only one trunk."

"Oh, and tell the clerk when he gets back that he'll be taking his supply orders from my wife from now on," he added with a nod to Maeve.

Jimmy looked between him and the woman and nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir."

Noah suddenly realized the youngster had learned more about him in the past few minutes than most adults in town had learned in the decade he'd lived here.

"Well, we best get going," Noah said as he turned to the woman. "The church is only a few doors down."

"I'd like to talk to you before we see the preacher," she said then, her voice low and serious.

Noah felt his heart sink. He feared she was going to back out. Although why she would, he wasn't certain. She hadn't seen much of the country around here. His wife had always said the mercantile wasn't as well stocked as stores back East, but that seemed a small reason to leave. It might be the

weather, though. Some people couldn't tolerate the bad storms they had here, especially if they found themselves snowbound. But she was Irish. And from Boston. Shouldn't she be used to the cold?

Noah looked around. There were no private places in the mercantile and he didn't want his business spread all over the territory. If he was going to be left at the altar, he didn't want everyone to know. The divorce had done enough damage to his pride.

"We can take a moment in the church," he said finally.

The woman nodded and took the hand of the girl.

They walked to the door.

"The preacher is expecting us," he added as he stepped over to open the door. "So he'll be there when we arrive."

He turned back to Jimmy. "You'll have to finish loading the supplies in the wagon. Remember the peaches."

A knowing twinkle appeared in the boy's eyes. "I'll get them there. And congratulations."

Noah frowned, but nodded his thanks. He supposed it was impossible to keep the wedding plans a secret even if the woman backed out. The ranch hands had probably already announced it to everyone they'd seen in the days since he'd told them Maeve had boarded the train in Boston and was heading south to pick up the rail line that would bring her west.

Noah reached over and opened the doors.

"Just follow me," he said to the woman as he stepped out to the street.

The wind hit him and he hunched his shoulders. He was a God-fearing man and he didn't believe in superstitions, but he wondered if it was wise to get married with a snowstorm brewing. His first wife would have been calling the whole thing off by now. Maybe the widow was wise to have second thoughts.

## Chapter Two

Tiny hailstones were still falling as Maeve followed Noah out of the mercantile. The damp cold hit her face and she reached down to scoop Violet into her arms. She wrapped the blanket around both of them, even though she could barely carry her daughter.

A huge amount of snow covered the walkway. Maeve had worn her best leather shoes and didn't want to ruin them so she began to gingerly place her feet in the trail of footsteps Noah had left behind. These were her church shoes, and, before she left Boston, she had promised Violet that they could go to church when they got settled here. She didn't want anyone to look down on her and Violet so she'd need the shoes. The church people in Boston had been very particular about what a woman wore on her feet and on her head. That was even before they'd rejected her on account of her late husband.

Maeve had taken only two steps when Noah turned around. The clouds had darkened since they'd gone into the mercantile. He had his Stetson firmly pulled down on his head, but his beard was whiter in the snow.

"Here," he said as he held out his arms. "I can carry her."

"I don't know." Ever since the stabbing of her father, Violet had been skittish around men. They scared her. Maeve didn't know how to explain all of that to Noah, though, especially not standing in the freezing wind in the middle of the walkway. "She's content under the blanket."

"She'll still have the shawl if I take her," Noah said.

Maeve hesitated, but she supposed the girl needed to get used to Noah at some point.

She bent down to whisper to her daughter. "The man's going to carry you so you're out of the cold faster. Is that all right?"

It was a moment before she felt her daughter nod her head slightly.

"Thank you," Maeve said as she held her daughter out.

Noah took the girl and kept walking down the street. Now that Maeve was free to pick up her skirts, she stepped a lot faster behind him. She didn't want to be too far away from him in case Violet needed her.

Noah waited for her in front of the small white church. She liked it. There was no formal steeple like they had back East. The place looked almost friendly and she saw smoke coming from a chimney in the back. The windows on each side were small and rimmed with frost. She doubted they had been pushed open since the last day of fall. Snow had blown against the casings and collected all around. She believed this church would not turn a woman away because of her husband's sins.

After she arrived at the church steps, she looked at Noah. "I'll need a few minutes to talk to you."

He nodded as he opened the door and gestured for her to go inside ahead of him.

The smell of burning wood greeted her as she walked into the church. The blanket, while still wrapped around her head as best as she could manage, was cold and damp as she stood there. Some of the snowflakes on the wool must have melted while they were in the mercantile. Now a musty scent was beginning to rise from the covering as the heat become more pronounced.

It was dark enough inside the church that her eyes needed to adjust. A cast-iron heating stove stood in the far corner next to a pulpit. That was where the heat was coming from. Student desks were pushed against the sides of the church and, she noticed, there was a blackboard in the front of the room. A faint gray line on the floor, which looked as if it had endured many scrubbings, divided the room. This was Saturday and benches were lined up in the room now. She'd heard these frontier churches often used the same building for a schoolhouse and a church.

Maeve relaxed her grip on the blanket wrapped around her head and felt it fall to her shoulders. As the wool slid off her head, it took her hat with it.

She felt a moment's unease. Her thick, riotous copper hair had given her trouble in the church she'd attended back East. People seemed to think a woman kept her morals in her hair knot and strands of hers were always coming loose. And that was before her husband had been loudly denounced from the pulpits in Boston. Maeve hadn't trusted the clergy since then. It was the ministers who had turned her employer against her.

"Welcome." A man's voice came from the front of the room and she saw a figure rise from a chair next to the stove. Tall and dressed in black, the white-haired man swayed a little as he walked. "I'm Reverend Olson. I've been expecting the two of you."

She blinked the last of the snowflakes off her eyelids and saw him lean on his cane with one hand as he walked down the side of the benches with the other hand outstretched.

"Excuse me, I should have said the three of you," he added as he smiled at Violet even though the child had her face pressed against Noah's chest and couldn't even see the reverend.

"My wife is going to be here any minute," the preacher continued, beaming at them all now. "She'll bring our neighbor Mrs. Barker with her so you have the witnesses you need for a legal marriage certificate."

"I need to discuss something with Noah first," Maeve said. She couldn't marry him without telling him about the baby.

Then she heard a choking sound behind her and turned.

Noah was staring at her. "Your hair."

Maeve squared her shoulder. If the man had something against red hair, he should have mentioned it earlier.

"I told you I was from Northern Ireland," she told him defiantly. "Everyone knows a lot of women in that part of the country have hair like this. I can't change the color. I've been working to tame my voice so it sounds American, but there's no changing my hair."

Maeve knew she should back down. This man held her future. If he was going to reject her because of her hair, he certainly wouldn't accept her with a baby.

She'd forgotten Reverend Olson had been talking until she saw that he was waiting patiently at the end of the row of benches. He'd given up on shaking anyone's hand, but he was watching Noah and her with some interest.

"You haven't changed your voice as much as you think," Noah finally said as he sat Violet down on a bench.

Maeve glared at him. "I've done my best."

"There's music when you speak," Noah said, his voice clipped as if he was angry, even though she didn't know why he would be. He had removed his hat and set it down by her daughter. He ran his hand through his damp strands of hair.

"I like to sing," Maeve said defiantly. She looked into the man's eyes. The color had darkened and they were almost dark brown instead of green. She didn't know why she fought when she was afraid, but everything in her seemed to lead her that way.

Noah nodded as he studied her some more, obviously trying to decide something.

"I suppose I could put blackening in my hair if the red color bothers you that much," Maeve forced herself to say. She couldn't stand against the man's wishes. Not when she remembered how destitute she was. How would she care for a baby and her daughter? She glanced over at Violet and saw the girl was watching both of them intently. She'd sacrifice anything to give her children a decent life, even her pride.

Noah shook his head. "Your hair is magnificent. Like the sun in a red sky at night."

He didn't say it as if it was a good thing, but Maeve was still relieved. She wasn't sure she could walk around with blackening on her head.

"It's just I thought you were a widow," Noah said, his voice tinged with reproach.

Maeve felt her heart beat faster. "Who would lie about being a widow? My husband died seven weeks ago. You can read any of the Boston papers if you don't believe me. They certainly covered his death long enough."

Everyone was silent for a moment. Maeve could hear the crackle of the fire and noticed the preacher had left the door to the stove open, no doubt to warm the room faster. It reminded her that the coal bin for the small fireplace in her rented room would have been empty by now, regardless of whether she had been able to leave or not. She'd burned only enough coal to keep them from freezing. She couldn't take her children back to that life; they might not survive next time.

"You're too young for the kind of marriage I have in mind," Noah finally said. "That's why I asked for a mature widow." He looked at her, and this time he didn't bother to hide his reproach. "Why, you're scarcely old enough to be a wife, let alone a widow."

"I'm twenty-five-years old," Maeve said as she straightened her back so she was her full height. She was tall enough to intimidate most men, but she didn't seem to move Noah. "Old enough to have a daughter and lose a husband in a very public and humiliating fashion."

Noah was quiet. "I'm sorry."

She wasn't ready to mention the baby. Not in anger like this.

They were both quiet for a moment.

"I'm sure you've had some hard times," he finally added, "but life can change. You're young enough to find a happy marriage. You're not who I expected."

Maeve had traveled over two thousand miles, breathing the smoke of the train and pretending to be grateful for the stale butter sandwiches, the only food she'd had to pack with them when they'd left. Her daughter was suffering from bad memories; it was almost Christmas; and before long, Maeve would likely have bouts of morning sickness.

"Violet and I might not be the kind of people you expected," Maeve said, her voice growing strong. "But we are who you got."

Noah looked a little stunned at the force in her voice and she had to admit she was surprised herself. But she was at the end of her road. She didn't have money to wait for another mail-order husband. Not that she was likely to find one now that she'd have a baby to consider as well as Violet. Besides, she thought indignantly, Noah shouldn't have put an ad in the newspaper unless he expected someone to answer it.

Maeve looked over at the reverend.

"I just need to discuss something with Noah," she said. "If you'll excuse us."

She willed her nerves to stop racing around in her stomach.

The preacher nodded as a couple of middle-aged women came through the door, brushing snow and hail off their garments.

"My wife," the reverend gestured to a plump, kindly looking woman.

Then he introduced the other woman, who had dark hair and a stern face. "Mrs. Barker."

"Pleased to meet you both," Maeve said with a smile for the women. They nodded in return.

Maeve reached up to her hair. Curls sprang from her head the way they did in damp weather. The whole bunch of it had escaped its pins and was, no doubt, spreading out around her head like a wild dandelion on fire. She looked down and saw her hat had rolled under one of the benches. She walked over and bent down to retrieve it. The cook at the house where she had worked had given her that old wool hat so she could take Violet to church without having anyone gossip or complain that she wasn't dressed in the right church clothes.

When she stood up, she saw that Noah had walked close to her.

"I don't mean for our marriage to be real," he said to her. He spoke low, clearly not wanting the others to hear. "If that's what you want to talk about, don't worry. I thought the ad made it clear that I'm suggesting we have one of those—what do they call them—marriages in name only?"

"I read the ad. I know you don't want a regular marriage."

She meant to keep her voice quiet, but she was troubled. What kind of a wedded life would they have? No affection. And no more children after the baby that was coming—which he didn't even know about she realized with a sinking heart. Maybe he didn't want more children.

Maeve barely noticed the gasps of the two older women. She was watching the deep red spread over Noah's face.

"I thought you'd be fifty years old at least," he protested, no longer trying to be quiet. "A marriage in name only means sleeping apart."

"I know what it means," Maeve snapped.

Noah's jaw was clenched and his words came out low. "You're too young to give up your life for a steady job. I'm trying to give you a chance to avoid this marriage. If it's a matter of money to get home, I can give you some—with extra."

"I don't take charity," Maeve said defiantly, even though it wasn't true. After she'd lost her job, she wouldn't have been able to provide food for her and Violet if her only friend, the cook at the house where she used to work, hadn't given her bags of foodstuffs every few days. Her pride had been another recent casualty in her life.

"Good, then work for me," Noah challenged her. "You and your daughter can live in the house. I'll move to the bunkhouse."

Someone gasped even louder than before and Maeve heard footsteps coming closer.

When Maeve looked up, she saw the stern-faced woman, Mrs. Barker, standing there with her hands on her hips as she scolded Noah. "You can't ask this young woman to live out there with all those ranch hands of yours and no wedding ring on her finger. Shame on you, Noah Miller. You know her reputation will be in tatters if she does that."

"I don't mind," Maeve said quietly. A reputation was a luxury she could not afford to consider.

"She and her girl would be staying in my room in the house," Noah assured the other woman. "My men will vouch for me staying in that room off the bunkhouse. You don't need to worry about Maeve and her girl. I've got a comfortable bed for them. Made the frame myself."

"I can't take your bed." Maeve blushed when she said it. Sleeping in the man's bed felt intimate. She glanced around and saw that the preacher was walking toward them now, too.

"Yes, you can." Noah's voice was deep and filled with some emotion she couldn't identify. He'd turned from the other woman and was focusing on her. "It comes with the job. You'll need to rest

if you expect to get up early and fix breakfast for the men. Coffee and fried eggs will do. Can you cook them?"

"Anyone can fry an egg," Maeve said, feeling relief flow over her. He meant to keep her for now. "And, coffee, of course."

"We're set, then?" he asked.

She gave him a nod as she felt a slight roll in her stomach. It must have been the thought of frying eggs. The smell had given her problems when she was carrying Violet, too. Not that she had a choice now. She had to cook eggs.

Her friend in Boston had said that ad might not be all she hoped and it looked as if she was right. But it was winter and she had a daughter as well as a baby to consider. She needed to keep them warm and fed. Besides, if she gave Noah time to come to love Violet, she could tell him about the baby.

* * *

Noah clenched his hands into a fist. The woman looked pale. He had confused things and he didn't know how to make everything right. After she got rid of that hat, the woman had been glorious, with her pink cheeks and her copper hair tumbling down to her shoulders. She was a beauty and deserved the kind of happiness he'd heard a good marriage could bring. The very thought of working for him seemed to turn her sickly, though.

It depressed him to have to disappoint her, but he hadn't been able to keep his first wife, Allison, happy. And he'd loved her. Her list of things she wanted had been long—a proper house, a set of English china, a silk dress for every day of the week, copper pans in the kitchen, Irish linens in the bedroom, hand-painted angels on the mantel in the parlor and a maid. He would have sold every possession he had if she would have stayed with him and raised a family. Unfortunately, he hadn't had much worth selling in those days.

The irony was that, after she'd left him, his herd of cattle had increased. Slowly, he'd built up his ranch, adding the kind of proper house Allison had always said she wanted. He never expected to see her again, but he'd found himself adding all of the little luxuries she had wanted. It was more to prove to himself that he could afford them than because he had much use for them.

Maeve was silent and the preacher was standing next to her.

"I can't take advantage of her," Noah said to the reverend, feeling guilty now that Maeve had stopped being angry with him. "And that's what I would be doing. She deserves a better marriage and she'll find it if she takes some time."

"I won't be changing my mind," Maeve said.

"You can get married any day you want if that's what you decide to do," the preacher announced calmly. "Things might look different in the morning. Better to put it off until you are both happy about the decision. Your men will make good chaperones. I'll speak to them."

Noah noticed that Maeve was watching him.

"Sounds sensible to me," Noah said, ignoring that spark within him. He had begun to wonder what it would be like to forget about fairness and marry the woman. He had little doubt, though, that Maeve would find a better husband than him if she took some time to look around. The new banker was a widower. He was a few years older than Noah, but he seemed nice enough. And he played the violin. Women liked things like that.

"As long as I get paid for the cooking I do," Maeve said, her voice wavering a little as though someone had taken advantage of her in the past.

She suddenly looked even younger than her twenty-five years, and he felt his hands curl into fists. He would not mind having a word or two with the man who had given Maeve a hard time. But he couldn't say anything.

So he nodded instead. "We better start heading home, then. Jimmy should have our wagon sitting out back."

It didn't take long to say farewell to the preacher and the two women. They all promised to come back to the church in the next few days if that was what he and Maeve wanted. Noah could tell they were disappointed. He came to hear the sermons when the weather was nice enough to get into town, and he knew the women had been praying for him to find a wife. He hadn't asked them to do that, but he suspected his ranch hands were behind that, too.

The winds didn't let up when Noah helped Maeve and the girl into the wagon. He brought forward a couple of old blankets and a buffalo hide he kept in the back for when the weather was like this. He wrapped a blanket around their heads and tucked the others around their legs. He put the hide over all.

"That'll keep you warm," Noah said as he picked up the reins. When he'd gotten out the blankets, he'd checked to see that the teapot was in the back, hidden behind the cases of canned peaches.

Noah set the horses to their course and they pulled the wagon along the road.

When he drove the team over the rise that led down to his ranch, his face was raw from the force of the blowing snow and the sun was beginning to set behind the storm clouds. If it had been a nicer day, he would have taken pleasure in showing Maeve and the little one the view from the top of the rise. His land stretched out in all directions as far as the eye could see. At this time of year, only the tumbleweeds broke the whiteness on the ground, but in the spring tufts of green grass would dot the landscape.

His two-story house was nestled in a dip after the rise, making it close to the creek that ran through his property. Noah thought sometimes the land he'd chosen for his home was curved until it looked as if God was holding the house in His hands. Noah never mentioned his fanciful thinking to anyone, but he liked to walk up to the rise when he prayed in the mornings. He knew he had many blessings even if the love of a wife wasn't one of them. Some distance from the house was a tall red barn with a long, squat bunkhouse built against its side. The ranch hands never had cause to complain about their quarters. Their long room was snug and homey with a fireplace at each end and chairs scattered around for sitting on a winter evening. Beds lined the walls.

The house itself was the jewel on his property. Windows faced in every direction, each one of them gleaming despite the frost curling around the edges of the glass. He'd had to send back East for the beveled windows in the main door. A wide porch wrapped around the front part of the house and, in the summer, bright red geranium plants were scattered around in clay pots.

Suddenly, Noah frowned. What looked like a sheet was blowing from one of the upstairs windows. Then he noticed that the door to the bunkhouse had opened and a stream of ranch hands was spilling out. They stood a moment, watching the wagon as Noah guided it down the road. Dakota was in the lead, waving his hat as the men started to walk closer.

Noah didn't know whether to warn Maeve that they were being welcomed or try to figure out a hand signal that would convince the ranch hands to go back inside and pretend they hadn't noticed them coming home.

Finally, it was too late to do either.

Maeve had lifted her head out of the blankets and was looking straight ahead.

"Is someone doing the wash?" she asked, puzzled. "Isn't it too cold for anything to dry?"

"It's not laundry," he said and hesitated a few seconds before adding. "It's hung there to celebrate our wedding."

"But we didn't get married," she protested, looking over at him in surprise. "Oh, of course, your men don't know that, do they?"

He shrugged as he looked into her green eyes. The shadows made them dark, but he noticed they had some sparks to them that they hadn't before. The woman was not hiding her feelings from him as much as she had earlier.

"They mean well," he said, smiling at her. "And, if I'm not mistaken, they've already told everyone from miles around that we were getting married today. They've been waiting since I got your letter. But it doesn't matter. I'll explain it to them and they'll spread the word that it didn't happen."

Maeve looked away from him then and his throat tightened. She was upset that they had not gone through with their vows. If he didn't believe she'd feel differently in a couple of days, he would have turned the wagon around and headed back to the church.

But he couldn't live with a woman who felt trapped in a marriage to him. His wife's unhappiness had left them both miserable.

Just then, his men came up close to the wagon. They were all noisy, grinning and carrying their rifles. No doubt they intended to fire off a volley in honor of the occasion. Noah stopped the horses and held up his arm. He wouldn't be surprised if Dakota had organized all of this; that man was determined to give up his cooking duties.

The crew looked at Noah expectantly.

"We're not married yet," he explained as he surveyed the ranch hands. "I felt it was only right to give her a chance to see what she's in for before she goes through with it. In the meantime, I know you'll honor Maeve as if she were my wife."

"Maeve?" one of the men in front of him asked as he tilted his head. "Isn't that Irish?"

"You can call her Mrs. Flanagan for the time being," Noah replied. Some of the men had hard feelings against the Irish after a brawl with some soldiers from nearby Fort Keogh. "She and her daughter, Violet, are my guests. Now let me get this wagon up by the porch. You can help carry everything inside before the storm gets any worse."

He started the horses forward.

"Is she going to cook for us in the morning?" Dakota called after them. "I mean, since she didn't marry you?"

Noah reined in the horses and looked over at Maeve. She had pushed more of the blankets back so she could see what was happening. Her green eyes were sleepy. Her hair tousled. He didn't need to ask to know she was exhausted.

"Dakota can fry eggs in the morning," Noah said. "Same as usual."

That was enough to make all of the men turn to stare at him.

"But he burnt them last time," one of his men reminded Noah, although he didn't do it loudly. "I almost couldn't eat mine. And you know me. I eat anything."

"I was looking forward to a biscuit," a younger cowboy complained, as well. "How hard can that be to make?"

Dakota bristled at this and turned to the younger man. "I'd like to see you try to make some."

They hadn't had bread of any kind for months. The last batch of biscuits Dakota had made had been hard as stones. No one could eat them. Noah had finally ordered the man to stop even trying so they wouldn't keep wasting flour. He wasn't sure if Dakota was relieved or still held a grudge over the incident.

"The woman deserves a rest," Noah said. And he intended to see that she had one.

He wasn't sure what decision he and Maeve were going to make about the marriage, but he did believe she was a decent woman who had been overcome by trouble. Whether she wanted to marry him or not, he meant to see that she got a new start in life.

"I'll get up early anyway," Maeve said with a yawn and then sat up straighter on the wagon bench. "I always do."

Noah didn't answer as he pulled the horses to a halt in front of the house. For however long Maeve and her daughter were with him, he wanted them to be welcome.

"You're entitled to stay in bed in the morning," he said firmly. "You've had a long trip here. And treat my place like your home. Don't let the ranch hands convince you to get up and cook for them."

Maeve looked at him, speechless, and then smiled before turning to wake up her daughter.

"I can carry her in," Noah said as he started to climb down off his wagon. "I'll come around."

His men had walked up to the back of the wagon and were starting to unload the supplies.

Noah hurried to the other side of the wagon and held out his arms for the girl. He had moved most of his clothes out of the bedroom yesterday and put them in the room at the end of the bunkhouse. The woman and her child would be comfortable in the house. His room shared a wall with the parlor fireplace so it was the warmest place in his house, except for the kitchen.

He could hear Violet murmuring as her mother gathered her up. The girl was likely still half-asleep. Noah's hat was knocked off by the wind and it fell into the back of the wagon. He left it there since the woman was ready to set the girl in his arms. For a moment, he let her weight settle. He was surprised at the contentment he felt holding her. He'd never had a child on his ranch before, not one he could lay claim to as his own. His neighbors, the Hargroves, brought their girls over once in a while when they visited, but there was no one else.

Noah had hoped his wife would have his children, but, even if she had stayed, she had made it clear she didn't intend to be a mother. She had muttered something about little ones having sticky fingers and colic.

The girl shifted suddenly in his arms, and then stiffened as she opened her eyes. A shriek of pure terror split the early night as she screamed.

"What's wrong?" Noah looked up at Maeve in alarm. The girl was rigid in his arms.

"She's frightened." Maeve slid to the end of the wagon bench and opened her arms to take her daughter back. "She was startled when she saw you. I should have known. She hadn't fully woken up yet. I wasn't thinking."

Noah gave the now-shivering girl back to her mother. Maeve was apologizing, but Noah didn't think she was surprised. The child had been terrified.

Dakota had opened the door to the house and two other ranch hands were moving the trunk inside. They set down the burden and ran back to the wagon at the sound of the scream.

"What's wrong?" Dakota asked breathlessly. The other ranch hands crowded around.

Maeve was rubbing her daughter's back and Violet's whimpering was slowing down.

"We'll be fine," Noah answered. The girl's eyes had opened wider at the sight of the other men. She might be silent now, but she wasn't at ease.

"Give her some room to breathe," Noah advised the other men.

The men were used to animals that panicked and nodded.

"Anything she needs," Dakota whispered as the men turned their backs.

They all walked away quietly and picked up the trunk again.

Noah waited a few minutes for the girl to start breathing normally.

"Let me help you down," he finally said as he lifted his arms up to help the burdened Maeve down. He pulled her toward him and then let her slide to the ground. Carefully, he avoided touching her daughter cradled in her embrace. Something in his heart shifted as he watched Maeve protect the girl. Not all women were so fierce in defending their young. His wife never would have been.

When Maeve stood squarely on the ground, he put his arm around her and escorted her to his house. He could feel her trembling, but he didn't say anything. He sensed she was too proud to admit to being shaken up, though he found he liked having her lean on him.

He wondered how they were going to live with each other, even for the duration of the storm. He had always said that his heart had been torn out by its roots when his wife left. Now he suspected there might have been a seed left behind. He doubted it was enough for him to love someone again, but it might be enough to remind him keenly of all that he was missing. He liked being able to protect the woman and her child. He knew that when they were gone from him he'd worry.

With those despairing thoughts, he reached down and turned the knob so he could open the door to his home. He looked down and saw red strands of hair sticking out around where the blanket

was wrapped. Maeve moved farther toward him. He was relieved that it was the situation and not him that made her hesitate.

"It's a good house," he said, pausing with his hand on the doorknob. "Safe and warm. Live in it as your own while you're here."

As he swung the door wide-open so they could all enter, he wondered how long the blizzard would last.

"Your daughter will feel better once she's been here for a while," he said, adding the last bit of comfort he could, wondering what had happened to Maeve and Violet to make the girl so afraid.

## Chapter Three

Darkness continued to fall as Maeve let Noah guide her through the main door of the house, down a short hallway and into a large square room that smelled faintly of coffee. She figured he sat here sometimes and drank his morning beverage. The windows were bare and must provide a good view of his ranch as he emptied his cup. Tonight, however, the gray sky outside didn't let in much light. Despite the picture she'd painted in her mind about the man and his coffee, Maeve sensed the room was seldom used and had seen much sadness.

Or maybe it was her, she thought.

"Your home's lovely," she forced herself to say politely, clutching Violet close to her as though she needed to protect the girl. By now, she could see brocade-covered chairs in the shadows so she knew she wasn't in the kitchen. It was the parlor, maybe. She still didn't look up as she felt drops of melting snow fall from her tumble of hair, landing on the plank floor beneath her.

"I'll wipe up the spots," she said. "We're dripping everywhere."

Noah grunted, but didn't say anything.

She didn't blame him. If only Violet had been able to hide her fears, he might have come to see her daughter's delightful side. As it was, he likely thought he'd be living in a house full of screams if he married Maeve. What made her particularly unhappy was that Noah would never know that Violet sang Sunday school songs in a sweet voice and tried to catch birds because she thought they were hungry and she wanted to feed them bread crumbs.

Maeve heard Noah's footsteps as he walked across the room, sounding increasingly distant.

She felt as if her chance for a new life was slipping away.

"It was her father," Maeve blurted out without thinking. She had never meant to tell anyone this part. "He was killed in a brawl at a bar."

Noah turned around, but didn't say anything.

"On the waterfront," she added since he seemed to expect more details. "Violet was sitting in the corner and saw it all."

Noah raised an eyebrow. "Did she follow him there? To the bar?"

Maeve shook her head. This was why she hadn't wanted to tell him. "My husband was taking care of her and he took her there because he had an—ah—an appointment."

"And the bar owners let her stay?"

"They let people do anything. It wasn't the kind of place most people would go."

"And I remind her of that?"

She shrugged. "I understand many of the men in the brawl had beards. In the dark, that's probably all she saw of their faces."

"She must have been terrified." Noah's voice was tense.

Maeve was silent even though he seemed to be waiting for her to say more. She couldn't confess the rest of it. She didn't want anyone to know the shame of her husband betraying her like he had. It still made her feel ugly.

Finally, Noah walked to the fireplace.

Maeve let the blanket slip down from her head so she could look around. Four large paned windows, two on each outside wall, faced out to the night and she could see the silhouette of trees swaying as the wind blew beside the house.

She hadn't noticed earlier, but now that she searched the shadows, she saw the room was lined with exquisite furniture. Polished Georgian-style settees with rose brocade upholstery and mahogany legs carved in graceful arches. A pair of Louis XVI chairs. Matching side tables with crystal-cut lanterns on them and small silver bowls that she knew were waiting for calling cards and fresh flowers. She'd never expected to find a room like this out here in the territories.

"You must have sent back East for everything." She couldn't gesture because she still held Violet in her arms, but she nodded her head toward the furniture. Lined up straight against the walls, it rivaled what she had seen in the homes that she had cleaned in Boston.

"Steamboat to Fort Benton," Noah said as turned back from his position by the fireplace. "Then mule-drawn wagon to here."

Maeve was so surprised by everything along the walls that her eyes hadn't made their way to the half circle of furniture near where Noah stood.

"You can lie your daughter down here," Noah said with a gesture toward a wooden bench. "If she's quiet enough that she doesn't still need you to hold her."

Maeve blinked, not sure she was seeing things clearly. The more intimate grouping of furniture in front of the fireplace was crudely made. She thought her eyesight was deceiving her until Noah bent over to light a kerosene lantern and the chairs were completely visible.

She had been right. The furniture was what a frontier house would contain—various pieces of unmatched wood, forced together to make a chair or a table, with no thought to beauty or grace. The pieces were not smooth or built to last. Even the lantern looked modest when compared to the crystal globes sitting on the edges of the room.

If it wasn't obvious that the inner circle of chairs was what the man used regularly, Maeve would have been insulted to be led toward such a humble bench in the presence of the outer line of magnificence. She sat down slowly. Violet was heavy in her arms and Maeve hoped she would doze off to sleep.

There would be more time to explore this unusual house in the morning. She wondered if the other parts of the house had this same look of being held back like the occupant was waiting for something to happen before anything was used. She pondered the puzzle of it all for a moment until a realization came to her—of course, the furniture had been for his wife. He'd said she left, but maybe he was hoping she'd come back. Most people, Maeve knew, would sell such fine pieces of furniture if they weren't going to use them.

She looked up to see Noah closing the ivory lace curtains on the room and putting enough wood on the fire to make a small blaze. He then excused himself to go help the men unload the wagon. He gave Violet a sympathetic look before he left the room, but he didn't ask any questions.

The flames from the fire began to slowly warm the air, but Maeve kept the blankets wrapped around her daughter. It had been a tiring day for everyone. More questions had been asked than answered.

She wondered how she and her children were going to be able to live here with a man who had been so in love with his wife that he couldn't marry another woman. In fact, he couldn't even sit on the chairs he'd bought for that woman and likely wouldn't ever sell them since he was hoping she'd come back.

Of course, Maeve thought with a rueful smile to herself, those were only his problems.

She had troubles of her own. A dozen booted men were going back and forth to where she assumed the kitchen was. All of them had beards of some length. A few of them had scars. She expected they all carried knives and some had pistols. Violet might start screaming every time one

of these ranch hands crossed her path. The sheer number of men they would be around had not been something Maeve had considered.

She reminded herself that she'd had no other option but to come here. It was this or begging for bread on the streets of Boston. No one ever found enough to survive for long that way. And Violet would likely end up in an orphanage and Maeve in the poorhouse with the baby.

So, she told herself, it was pointless to berate herself for not making a better choice. She'd taken the only path she could.

She bent her head in exhaustion just thinking about the days she had before her, though.

*Lord, give me strength,* she managed to pray. She could not go further. Her feelings for God had suffered when it had seemed everything had lined up against her in Boston. Some people reported sensing God's care for them in hard times, but all she had felt was an overwhelming silence. It was as if God had been as disappointed in her as her husband must have been to do the things he'd done.

When she'd heard from Noah, she'd begun to think God had decided to be in her life again. And now that future was uncertain.

She had given up any hope of love, but she had believed she would find respect in a new marriage. With God's help, that would be enough for a good life.

She blushed wondering what the ranch hands must think about her now. Noah had said it all very politely, but it was clear that he had called off the wedding, hoping she would grow weary and say she no longer wanted to marry him.

She could only bless the men's hearts for their clear disappointment. They, at least, wanted her to stay. Noah might, too, she assured herself, once he saw how useful she could be.

She heard footsteps and knew Noah was coming back through the hallway. His steps were different from those of the other men. They sounded more confident. Maybe a little quicker. Heavier.

"How long have you had it like this?" Maeve asked when Noah reached the open doorway.

When he didn't answer, she continued, "The wood on these chairs needs to be polished or it will crack and ruin."

"I don't have time to be polishing the furniture."

"I can do it," Maeve offered. After her years working in Boston, there wasn't much she didn't know about caring for expensive furniture. "You want to keep it nice for—"

Her voice trailed off. She wasn't exactly sure she wanted to say the words indicating he was saving the furniture for when his wife returned, but she had no other theory to offer.

Maeve looked down. Her daughter was lying on the bench, with her head in Maeve's lap.

She could feel the man looking at her so she glanced up.

"You must like European furniture," she finished. "It's beautiful."

"Neither," Noah said with a smile. "I bought it to show myself I could."

Maeve wondered how much money the man had.

A dozen men had marched back and forth to the kitchen carrying things past the doorway. Most of the supplies were still coming, but she saw a couple of big bags carried to the back of the house. From the sounds of the steps, two men carried her trunk to the end of the hall. She suspected they had taken it to the bedroom, but the warmth from the fire was making her toes tingle and she didn't want to walk down the hall to see.

She looked around. Back East, she'd rented the smallest room she could find. It had had a bed, two chairs and a stove for heating. She'd barely been able to afford that. This parlor alone was three times the size of her room. She'd brought some of her doilies with her, the ones she'd crocheted for her first wedding. They'd faded over the years and she would be ashamed to even put them out in this house.

She watched as Noah walked out of the room.

He turned and said, “The downstairs bedroom is at the end of the hall. The men are finished unpacking. They’ll be leaving in a minute. Don’t worry about waking up early. Dakota will be cooking for the men.”

Maeve said nothing, but she vowed to be up early enough to make breakfast. She didn’t have much time to show Noah how useful she could be and she planned to make the ranch hands the best food they’d ever eaten.

He might not want another wife, she told herself, but he had never wavered on wanting a cook for his men.

* * *

The night was black as Noah braced himself against the growing wind and walked as fast as the storm permitted toward the light in the bunkhouse window, thinking about Maeve. She had pursed her lips when he even looked at her inquisitively. She had secrets she still hadn’t told him, but he didn’t want to press her. He didn’t like going to bed with these kinds of mysteries on his mind, though. If he didn’t know the problem, he couldn’t fix it.

All of the buildings on his ranch were built firm. He’d used milled wood. The planks were measured and cut to fit. That’s why there was no dip in the roof of the bunkhouse and there were no gaps in the corners of the side room he’d added to the bunkhouse.

He turned a knob and the door opened. He could see the fire burning in the rock fireplace on the far wall. He stepped inside and stomped the snow off his boots. The group of men sitting by the fire turned in unison to look at him.

He nodded in greeting, wondering how to tell them Reverend Olson might be asking them about him and his sleeping habits.

But the men looked as if they had something on their minds, too.

“Yes?” he asked.

They were silent for a minute and then, Bobby, the youngest ranch hand, let loose.

“We worked hard to get a new cook. And here you are, sending her back. She came for us, too, you know. We wrote the ad.”

“Ah,” Noah said as he took off his coat and rubbed the snow off the back of his neck. “But it’s me she came to marry.”

“Well, she says she’s willing,” Bobby said in frustration. “The rest is up to you.”

Noah walked over to the straight-back chairs gathered around a table and pulled one of them closer to where the men sat. “It doesn’t matter whether she’s my wife or my cook,” Noah said as he settled himself into the chair. “I won’t have a woman go back on her agreement with me again. So I want her to be sure she wants to stay here.”

The men sat in silence as they considered this.

“You’re thinking about that divorce, aren’t you?” Dakota finally said from where he sat by the window. “We all know that wasn’t your fault. You did everything you could for Allison.”

“Did I?” Noah asked them. “Sometimes I wonder. I brought her out here to the ranch and then I left her alone too much. Everyone within a hundred miles of here knew she was unhappy and I didn’t take her to town more than once every few months.”

“You were busy,” Bobby said.

“That’s no excuse.” Noah gave him a smile. “Someday, when you’re married, you’ll understand. Marriage is a commitment that isn’t always easy.”

“Have you been talking to Mrs. Barker?” Dakota asked as he walked over to Noah and peered at him as if he was trying to determine the state of his soul.

Noah squirmed. The older woman was the biggest gossip in the area. “She was at the church this morning, but that’s all. Why?”

The men looked at Dakota and he looked back at them.

Finally, the other man shrugged. “She told me her husband saw your Allison down in Denver last week when he was there on railroad business. She goes by Alice now, but it was her all right. Mr. Barker told her you were getting yourself a new bride. Mrs. Barker said it didn’t sound like Allison —or Alice, I guess — was too happy about that.”

“I’m sure she was only making some polite response. You know how Mrs. Barker likes to add to the truth to make the telling of something more dramatic.”

“I don’t know,” Dakota muttered. “I can still hear Allison complaining. The table was too rough. The sun was too hot. No one came to visit. The cows had flies. The flowers didn’t grow.”

“She hoped for more out of life than me,” Noah said ruefully. “She knew how much land I owned and she pictured herself entertaining governors and other important people. The only one who ever came out to see us was Mrs. Barker and I am grateful to her for that.”

“Ranch women know what to expect,” Dakota said firmly.

Noah nodded. “That’s just it. Maeve lived in Boston for most of her life, except for a few years in Ireland when she was young. She hasn’t even had a chance to think of what life here would be like.”

It was quiet again as the men considered that.

“I’d sure hate to lose her,” Bobby said.

“We don’t even know for sure that she can cook,” another ranch hand said philosophically.

“With hair like that, I’m not worried,” a different cowboy said. “Irish women are born cooking.”

“I know she can do better than Dakota,” Bobby said with a look at Dakota.

“I’d like to see you make a flapjack worth eating,” the older ranch hand retorted with no rancor in his voice.

Noah knew a lot of bickering went on in the bunkhouse and he usually turned a deaf ear to it. He’d had a long day himself and was looking forward to slipping into bed and sleeping.

“The Reverend Olson might be talking to some of you.” Noah didn’t have to look around to know he’d caught their full attention. The reverend was respected around here. “He says you’re to be my chaperones. Make sure I sleep in the room off the bunkhouse and don’t go to the house at night.”

Bobby grinned. “So the preacher is worried you might want to be more married than you think.”

Noah felt the tension shoot through his jaw. “He’s not meaning me particularly. He just knows the value of a woman’s reputation in these parts. For that matter, I should make sure none of you leave the bunkhouse for long periods of time at night, either.”

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