



Love Inspired HISTORICAL

Mail-Order
Christmas
Baby

MONTANA
COURTSHIPS

SHERRI SHACKELFORD

Sherrí Shackelford

Mail-Order Christmas Baby

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The Rancher's Special DeliveryThe "package" is addressed to him, but rancher Sterling Blackwell certainly didn't order a baby! More scandalous still, he and the town's pretty teacher are named as parents. With gossip running wild, only a marriage of convenience can protect little Gracie and their reputations until her real family is found.Heather O'Connor is content to be Valentine, Montana's spinster schoolmarm...until Gracie's arrival stirs her heart. She can't keep the adorable child without Sterling's help, though she promises not to interfere with his life. But staying aloof from her handsome husband isn't easy with a tiny matchmaker in tow. A mistake brought them together, but love might just make them a family by Christmas...Montana Courtships: Romance unfolds under the Big Sky

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Heather wasn't playing fair, ambushing Sterling like this, but she'd run out of options.

She'd been mulling the problem over for the past three days, and during that time, she'd fallen hopelessly in love with Gracie. She'd considered all her options and had come to the conclusion that Sterling was her only choice.

While all of her reasons were sound, she recognized that Sterling didn't have as much incentive for taking on the two of them. He didn't know what it felt like to be unwanted.

“I don't...” He appeared to be struggling with some sort of internal battle. “I mean to say...” He tipped his head to one side. “Are you certain?”

“Yes. I'm certain.”

Gracie needed a home.

Heather had an uneasy premonition she'd been thrown together with the one man who could break her heart, which meant extra vigilance was in order. Love was serious business, but as long as he stayed the same carefree man who made her laugh, they'd do fine together.

She'd made a solemn vow that Gracie would never feel unwanted, and she meant to keep that vow, no matter the personal cost.

[Dear Reader,](#)

When the United States Post Office began delivering packages in 1913, there were few regulations on what folks could send through the mail. The postmaster general humorously (I assume) discussed the propriety of sending infants through the post. He concluded that babies did not fall into the category of bees and bugs, the only live things allowed in the mail delivery.

Despite the postmaster's declaration, there are a few instances of children being sent through the post. These were mostly publicity stunts staged by people sending children short distances. There are, however, a few documented cases of children being sent greater distances before the post office ended the practice. The regulations were rewritten to declare that children were not “harmless live animals which do not require food and water during transit.”

I began this story with a simple premise: What if someone mailed a child through the post to an unsuspecting recipient?

I hope you enjoyed Sterling and Heather's story. I enjoyed writing about a new town in a new state. My husband spent part of his military career in the great state of Montana, and his admiration for the dauntless people who inhabit the beautiful land inspired me.

I love connecting with readers and would enjoy hearing your thoughts on this story. If you're interested in learning more about this book or others in my previous series, *Prairie Courtships*, visit my website at sherrishackelford.com, email me at sherrishackelford@gmail.com, visit me on Facebook at [Facebook.com/sherrishackelfordauthor](https://www.facebook.com/sherrishackelfordauthor) or on twitter [@smsackelford](https://twitter.com/smsackelford), or connect through my favorite mode of communication, old-fashioned snail mail, at PO Box 116, Elkhorn, NE 68022.

Thanks for reading!

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

Mail-Order Christmas Baby
Sherri Shackelford



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Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves,
but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written,
Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.
—Romans 12:19

Early in my career, I was blessed with the friendship of two amazing authors. Thank you to Cheryl St. John and Victoria Alexander. These two amazing, talented authors were willing to take precious time out of their demanding schedules to help this (clueless) fledgling writer. Thank you for sharing your humor, wisdom and unflinching honesty with selfless grace. You set a standard to which many aspire, and very few achieve.

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[Chapter One](#)

Train Depot for the Wells Fargo Delivery,
Valentine, Territory of Montana
October, 1880

“That is not my delivery,” Sterling Blackwell declared. The hat sitting low across his forehead did nothing to disguise the flush creeping up his neck. “Who put you up to this?”

Heather O'Connor pressed a hand against the hitch in her chest. Sterling usually sent one of his cattle hands into town when he had a Wells Fargo delivery, which suited her just fine. He was a reminder of a time in her life that she'd rather forget.

She'd come to Valentine, Montana, to serve as a teacher four years ago in an effort to start over someplace far away from Pittsburgh. Her living conditions had not been ideal. Following the war, she'd been sent to live with an aunt and uncle. The family was barely eking out a living in the gloomy steel town, and the moment she'd turned sixteen, she'd begun her search for an escape. At seventeen, she'd accepted the job of schoolteacher in the remote mining town of Valentine, Montana.

Sterling's older brother, Dillon, had fetched her from this very same depot on her first day in town, and she'd promptly developed an embarrassing infatuation with him. Dillon's father had not been amused. The Blackwells owned the largest cattle ranch in the area, and Mr. Blackwell's leadership had kept Valentine flourishing after the gold panned out. Dillon's father wasn't going to stand idle while his son courted a penniless, orphaned schoolteacher. With his father's encouragement, Dillon had enlisted as an officer in the cavalry.

The familiar pang of humiliation settled in her chest. Dillon hadn't even told her in person. He'd sent her a letter instead. A few terse paragraphs making his lack of feelings embarrassingly clear. She'd learned her lesson well over the years. In love and relationships affection was never equal, and she always seemed to wind up on the losing end.

The Wells Fargo employee, distinguishable from the townsfolk crowding the train platform by his round green cap trimmed with gold braid, squinted at his manifest, then lifted his chin.

“No mistake, sir.” The freckle-faced young man extended his paperwork and pointed. “The recipient for this child is listed as Mr. Sterling Blackwell of the Blackwell Ranch, Valentine, Montana. I'll need you to sign here.”

The attention of the growing crowd swiveled toward the delivery in question. A young child perched atop an enormous wooden crate. The afternoon sunlight had chased away the chill of the October day, and the child's coat was unbuttoned, revealing her frilly dress. Clad in a pink frock with a matching pink eyelet lace bonnet tied beneath her chubby chin, she merrily gummed the edges of an envelope.

Mrs. Dawson, the local purveyor of all things scandalous and salacious, gasped and pressed a handkerchief against her lips. “Has the whole world gone mad? That child is hardly weaned. What sort of person sends an infant through the post?”

Heather guessed the babe's age to be somewhere between two and three years. She hovered in that awkward phase between baby and child, babbling words that made little sense to anyone but herself.

“I'm not signing for anything.” Sterling flinched and stumbled backward, as though he'd been speared. “This is obviously a mistake or a...a prank or something.”

Heather's stomach dipped. She knew little of Sterling beyond what his brother had conveyed during their fleeting time together. Their pa had been a fierce and unyielding man, and both brothers had fought with him over the years. Mr. Blackwell's unexpected death had brought Sterling home two months earlier. He was as handsome as ever, and now that he owned half of the Blackwell Ranch, he was the most eligible bachelor in town.

Against her better judgment, her gaze swept over him once more. Given his looks, he could have been penniless and the girls would still swoon over him.

The tall rancher had dusky blond hair, blue eyes that seemed to melt into gray, and the muscular build of a lumberjack. As if that weren't enough, he possessed an intriguing cleft in his strong chin. The embarrassing twinge of relief at having worn her best dress that day meant nothing—a temporary attack of vanity. Her brief, disastrous involvement with his brother had rendered her immune to his handsome face.

And if she kept repeating that to herself, she might even believe her own lies eventually.

“What’s all the fuss?” a familiar voice drawled.

Otto Berg ambled into view, his beefy arms propped on his hips. Otto was the foreman at the Blackwell Ranch, and had been with the family for as long as anyone could remember. According to Dillon, he'd been more of a father to the boys than the late Mr. Blackwell.

Otto looped his thumbs through his suspenders and shifted his weight to one hip. “What seems to be the trouble?”

The hushed crowd leaned forward in unison.

“Him.” The Wells Fargo employee jabbed an accusing finger in Sterling’s direction. “This man won’t accept his delivery.”

“You mean the child?” Otto demanded, his expression incredulous.

“Yes!” As though posting a babe through the mail was perfectly normal, the freckle-faced employee pointed at the girl with a huff. “All he has to do is sign for her, and then I can leave.”

The foreman glanced between Sterling and the odd delivery. A frown puckered the single brow stretching over Otto’s close-set eyes.

Sterling reached heavenward with both hands. “Since when does Wells Fargo deliver children?”

Heather slanted a glance his way, but his attention remained on the babbling child. Not that he was under any obligation to acknowledge her. She was, after all, the penniless schoolteacher who'd precipitated his brother's career in the cavalry. Yet she knew from experience if she caught his gaze, he'd tip his hat and offer a few cordial words. His insistence on treating her kindly was a ubiquitous quirk of his character. He'd always been an amiable rogue with a quick wit and ready smile. But his deference meant little since he treated all the girls, young and old, with that same lazy charm.

“I just make the deliveries.” The Wells Fargo man tugged on the hem of his smart green coat. “I’ve only worked here a month, sir. This is my first mail-order baby.”

A ripple of amusement met his announcement.

Otto held up one hand. “A little respect, please.” The foreman rolled his eyes and accepted the paperwork. “Says here the child was posted in Butte.”

“Yes, sir.”

Leaning past Otto, Sterling carefully enunciated each word. “Do you happen to know who posted this child?”

“No, sir. I just do what I’m told. The baby came on board in Butte with instructions for delivery to Sterling Blackwell.” The young man grinned proudly. “I thought she was going to be real fussy, but she was fine. The lady passengers helped. As soon as they discovered there was a real, live child in the parcels, they made certain she was fed and they changed her nappies and things like that. They were real obliging.”

A grin twitched at the edges of Otto’s mouth. “That was awful nice of those ladies.”

His comment drew another wave of titters.

“I don’t care how she got here.” Sterling shook his head in bewildered confusion. “She’s got nothing to do with me.”

The child reached out, and Heather instinctively clasped the tiny hand.

Sterling caught sight of her and pinched the brim of his hat in greeting, then offered a winsome half smile. “Miss O’Connor. That’s a lovely bonnet. Is it new?”

A flush started at the roots of her hair and rushed through her entire body, down to the tips of her toes. “Uh-huh.”

“It’s quite becoming on you.”

“The price had been marked down.”

“An excellent bargain.”

Marked down? What was the matter with her? For some inexplicable and annoying reason, she lost the ability to speak in complete sentences when he turned his attention on her. He had the discomfiting habit of focusing his concentration too closely. Even with all that was happening around them, his latent charm rose to the surface.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “About your father.”

Considering the late Mr. Blackwell’s feelings about her, she’d avoided the funeral.

“Thank you.” He ducked his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Dillon’s coming back soon. He inherited half of the ranch. Thought you should know.”

Her conscience pricked at the somber subject, but at least they’d cleared the air. “I know.”

What did he expect her to do? Flee town rather than face the embarrassment? She’d tried that once. After Dillon left, she’d stayed for a few months with a friend, Helen, who’d moved to Butte after she married. When the school year started back up, Heather had returned. Valentine was her home. With Dillon absent, the gossip had died a natural death. Even Mrs. Dawson had tired of the old news by then.

The train whistle blew, and a burst of steam sent the pistons chugging.

Heather motioned toward the child. “Don’t forget about your special delivery, Sterling.”

“Gra!” the child declared.

A curtain of languid indifference descended over Sterling’s expression once more. “Someone has an awfully strange sense of humor. They’ll show their face soon enough.”

Passengers poked their noses through the half-drawn windows, eager for a glimpse of the commotion. The Wells Fargo man grasped the handrail and leaped onto the slow-moving train.

He shook his papers. “I have a schedule to keep. Since this man won’t sign for his delivery, I’m leaving the child with the unclaimed packages.”

Shocked silence descended over the spectators. Even Sterling had been stunned mute.

Heather gaped. “You’re abandoning her?”

“I’m treating her the same as any other delivery.” The young man saluted with a touch to his tidy gold-braided cap. “If she’s not claimed in three months, you can send her back.”

Anxiety quickened Heather’s pulse. This had gone beyond a simple prank. This was an actual living, breathing child.

“Somebody do something!” she demanded.

“Everyone just settle down here.” Otto waved a hand toward the departing train. “The wheels are rolling. We can’t load a child onto a moving train.”

“This is absurd!” Heather called to the Wells Fargo employee. “She’s little more than a baby. She’s not a— a packet of buttons that can sit on a shelf for three months.”

The bell clanged and the steam engine chugged.

“Don’t make me no never mind. I done my job.” The train jerked forward, and he clutched the handle. “If you send her back, don’t forget the return postage.”

His green cap disappeared inside the railcar, and the crowd exploded into shocked chatter. As the train picked up speed, the curious passengers inside lost interest. Windows slid shut and velvet curtains twitched into place to block the afternoon sun.

The postmaster snorted. “That boy don’t have a lick of sense.”

“What now?” Old Mrs. Dawson spoke, her shrill voice carrying over the prattle. “What are you going to do, Sterling?”

The spectators immediately turned their attention toward the tall man.

“Me?” Using his thumb, he eased his hat off his forehead. “I’m as baffled as the rest of you. I ordered the sheep, not the baby.”

The crowd laughed, and Heather smothered a grin. She'd forgotten all about the sheep. Since taking over the ranch, Sterling had cut back on cattle trading and had turned his attention toward sheep instead. He'd ordered four dozen from a ranch in Butte to supplement his growing herd. Mr. Carlyle at the feed lot had been vocally annoyed by their arrival. The animals kept escaping from beneath fence rails sized for cattle.

The rest of the town was almost equally divided over whether Sterling was crazy or inspired for supplementing his beef operation with wool.

"Well, someone has to do something." Mrs. Dawson harrumphed. "That poor child is all alone, and we can all agree it's your name on the manifest."

"I'll agree to one thing," Sterling drawled in his cordial, dark-timbered voice. "This is all a big mistake."

The crowd murmured and eyebrows lifted in speculation, but no one stepped forward to claim responsibility. Folks were certainly curious, but feet merely shuffled and no one quite met anyone else's eye.

The child contently chewed her envelope and drooled.

Heather held one hand against the front of the child's eyelet lace frock and cupped her fingers on the back of the bonnet. She really was a cute little thing. Her blue-green eyes were framed by thick lashes, and her plump cheeks begged for a pinching. Heather's gaze snagged on the glimpse of scarlet curls peeking out from beneath the child's bonnet. Too bad about the red hair.

Heather's aunt and uncle had dubbed her a troublemaker simply because she'd been born with a certain color hair. She'd always had to behave twice as well as other children to be thought of as half as obedient.

Mrs. Dawson waved her embroidered square, drawing Otto's attention. "Maybe there's something in that envelope. Has anyone checked?"

Two dozen heads rotated toward the baby. At the attention, the child cooed in delight and slapped one hand against her chubby thigh. Heather reached for the envelope and the child's lower lip trembled.

"Maa!" she wailed. "Maa goo."

"It's all right," Heather soothed. "Give me the envelope. I promise I'll give it right back."

The two engaged in a brief tug-of-war, which Heather easily won. The trembling lip grew more pronounced, revealing two lower teeth, and then the babe sucked in a deep breath. Tears threatened in her enormous blue-green eyes, and her face turned a brilliant shade of red. Thinking quickly, Heather yanked on her bonnet ribbons, then presented the distraction.

The child promptly crushed the brim with her damp hands while simultaneously gumming a silk rose. Heather grimaced. The bargain hat was all but ruined. At least she wouldn't be reminded of Sterling's offhand compliment and her awkward reply every time she donned it.

Sterling reached for the envelope, but Otto was closer and intercepted her grasp.

"Let's get to the bottom of this," the foreman declared. "I've got work to do this afternoon."

"Those sheep aren't going to shear themselves," the postmaster joked, much to the crowd's delight.

Something flashed in Otto's eyes, a spark of anger or embarrassment, Heather couldn't quite tell which. The foreman quickly masked the telling expression with one of his ready smiles.

"That they don't!" he tossed over his shoulder.

Sterling lifted his eyes skyward. "You'll all be thanking me this winter when you're warm and cozy by the fire in your nice wool sweaters."

"Enough about those sheep." With a slight grimace on his beefy face, Otto plucked at the soggy paper using the tips of his fingers. "We've got a mystery to solve."

Heather glanced askance and caught Sterling staring at her exposed hair. The fiery red color caught the afternoon rays, turning her head into an orange beacon.

This time his smile was tinged with pity, and she self-consciously smoothed the strands. Her infatuation with Dillon had been just that—an infatuation. Sterling’s brother had been quiet, almost brooding. There was a part of her that always wanted to fix things for people, and Dillon seemed to need her, at least for a time. She’d mistaken his gentlemanly kindness for interest. She knew better now.

“Ah-ha!” Otto declared, shaking out a wilted slip of paper. “This here is a Return of Birth.”

The crowd surged forward.

“What’s a Return of Birth?” Mr. Carlyle hollered.

“It’s the paperwork for when a baby is born,” the postmaster explained. “The Return of Birth is filed with the county seat. Since Montana is still a territory, Silver Bow is the only county I know of that requests any paperwork.”

“Stop wasting time.” Mrs. Dawson huffed. “What does it say?”

There hadn’t been any good scandals for months, and Mrs. Dawson was clearly chomping at the bit. She’d be holding court at the Sweetwater Café this afternoon with the rest of the ladies, relaying every minute of these events in exaggerated detail.

“Don’t rush me.” Otto squinted. “The lettering is real fancy. The child’s name is Grace.”

His eyes tracked the writing and paused. His jaw dropped, and his face turned a brilliant shade of scarlet.

“Well, um, uh,” he stuttered. “I don’t know what to make of that.”

“Let me see.” Mrs. Dawson snatched the Return. “You’re taking too long. I don’t have my spectacles but I can make out most of the lettering. A Christmas baby. She’ll turn two on December 25—that’s two months away. Place of birth is Butte. The child’s name is Grace. Otto got that right.”

“The parents,” the postmaster prodded. “Who are the parents?”

“The father’s name is listed as Sterling Blackwell.” Mrs. Dawson snorted.

The smile slipped from Sterling’s face, and a moment later all the color had drained away. “That can’t be.”

“Thank the stars your father isn’t around to see this scandal.”

Fighting back an unexpected tide of jealousy at the thought of Sterling fathering a child, Heather peered over the edge of the paper. She was unpardonably curious about the child’s parentage.

“What about the mother?” Another voice saved her from asking.

“No married name printed. Her maiden name is listed as—” Mrs. Dawson shrieked and clutched the paper against her chest. “Oh my.”

The platform of gawkers froze.

“Who is it?” someone called.

“Oh my word.” Mrs. Dawson took a dramatic breath. “The mother’s maiden name is listed as—” She paused to ensure she had everyone’s attention. “Heather O’Connor.”

* * *

Sterling searched for his voice, which seemed to be locked somewhere in the back of his throat. Otto covered his eyes with one hand and shook his head.

Mrs. Dawson shot Heather a withering glare with enough heat to melt the shingles off a roof. She collapsed onto a bench and threw her wrist over her forehead. “I’ve been shaken to the core.”

Mrs. Dawson was shaken, all right—she was practically vibrating with excitement. The woman thrived on gossip like a hog on slop.

Heather O’Connor.

She’d gone so pale, even her lips were leached of color.

No one was looking at him anymore; all eyes were focused on Heather and the baby—the baby with a glimpse of red curls peeking out from beneath her eyelet bonnet. Ladies leaned their ears toward one another and spoke in shocked whispers. Gloved hands hovered over rapidly moving lips. Sterling’s ears buzzed. The talk had already begun.

His gaze skittered around the platform and clashed with Heather's. She blinked rapidly, and her mouth opened and closed. Her fingers fluttered against her ashen cheek. The crowd split their attention between the postmaster's frantic fanning of Mrs. Dawson and Heather's hand cupping the back of the baby's head.

A jolt of pity spurred him into action.

He crossed the platform in two long strides and caught Heather's elbow. "I would have helped you. Why didn't you simply ask?"

"No." She gasped. "There's been a mistake."

"I'm going to strangle Dillon." Heather's arm trembled beneath his fingers, and he struggled against a white-hot wave of fury. "He'll do right by you, I promise you that."

"We didn't...she isn't...you don't understand!"

His chest tightened. The blame rested solely on his shoulders. He'd been responsible for her split from his brother, after all. His intentions were sound, though the outcome was proving calamitous. Their pa wasn't an evil man, but he'd been manipulative and controlling. As the eldest son, Dillon had suffered the most. Their ma had warned the brothers about trying to please a man who only found fault, but Dillon craved their pa's approval. Nothing he ever did was good enough, and the crushing pressure was shaping Dillon into a man Sterling didn't recognize. He'd known instinctively that if he hadn't removed his brother from their pa's oppressive influence, he'd have grown into a miserable man.

And Dillon would have stayed in Valentine for Heather. Anybody would. She was the sort of woman who made a man want to settle down and stay put. Sterling had convinced his brother to join the cavalry with only the barest hint of regret. The sweethearts were young. He'd talked himself into believing the flirtation was superficial and too new to last. Dillon's easy acquiescence and their subsequent separation had convinced him that he'd made the right choice.

Except he hadn't anticipated a child. The stark pain in Heather's eyes ripped away the last remnants of his convictions. Dillon had wronged her, but Sterling had wronged them both.

Mrs. Dawson straightened her spine and touched her gloved fingertips to her chest. "I cannot believe you'd betray your own brother this way."

Sterling's stomach clenched and he absorbed the full brunt of the accusing stares. In his shock, he'd forgotten his name was on the certificate, not Dillon's.

"The two of them must have been carrying on right under Dillon's nose," someone said behind him.

"Wait just a minute," he ordered, unsure how to defend himself without dragging Dillon and Heather down along with him.

Otto blocked his view. "Don't say anything, son. Not until we've got this sorted out. You'll only make matters worse for the both of you."

Tears pooled in Heather's eyes, and Sterling instantly longed to reach out and comfort her. For reasons he couldn't explain, he'd always been drawn to Heather. Her looks were more exotic than traditionally pretty. During his travels he'd often found himself comparing other women he met to her. Her fiery red hair drew attention, and her button nose was adorable. Soft freckles dusted her face from forehead to chin, and her pale blue eyes were surrounded by nearly transparent eyelashes. No one would ever call her beautiful, but she was definitely eye catching.

It was because he admired her that he'd kept his distance. His feelings for her had no bearing on why he'd convinced Dillon to join the cavalry, but she'd never understand. Neither of them would. He sensed if he let down his guard, she'd see past his bravado and discover the truth of his betrayal.

Mrs. Dawson slapped down the postmaster's waving arm. "It's forty degrees. Stop fanning me, you dolt." Sensing she was losing the crowd's attention, Mrs. Dawson's voice grew shrill. "We deserve an explanation for this—this travesty."

Heather started forward. "Let me see that paper. How do I know you're not lying?"

Otto held her back. “She’s not lying. I saw myself.”

Sterling’s thoughts ricocheted around his head. Dillon had never given him any indication they’d been intimate, yet everything fell into place. After Dillon left, Heather had gone to stay with a friend in Butte. The timing worked, yet questions burned in his brain. Why list him? Had she discovered his part in their breakup? Was this a chance for revenge?

“Miss O’Connor wants a piece of that ranch,” the postmaster mused loudly. “When she couldn’t snag the older brother, she set her sights on the younger one.”

Sterling grabbed the man by the scruff of his shirt and nearly lifted him from his feet. “Say that again.”

Otto wrestled the postmaster free. “Not here, Sterling.”

Heather pressed both hands against her mouth and shook her head. “This isn’t right. None of this is right.”

Fury pulsed through him. Sterling felt as though he was separating from his body. He’d trusted his brother. There were no secrets between the two of them.

The child reached out a pudgy hand and tugged on Heather’s lapel. Her chubby pink cheeks plumped into a grin, revealing her two lower teeth.

“Ma!” the child declared. “Ma!”

The breath whooshed from Sterling’s lungs. It appeared there was at least one secret between them.

Chapter Two

“This is a disgrace,” Reverend Morris declared. “A disgrace and a black mark on our community.”

The reverend, summoned by the crowd, had hustled them into the church and away from the prying eyes of the townspeople. Sterling and Otto had filed in behind Heather and taken a seat across the aisle.

She slumped in the pew, her eyes downcast. Placing a hand over her churning stomach, she stared at a scuff mark on the floor. Normally she adored the Valentine church. Stained glass windows cast colorful patterns along the polished wood floors, and the vibrant white walls of the nave kept the interior bright and cheerful.

Pressure built behind her eyes. Today was different.

The mail-order baby crawled along the length of a pew, her bare knees squeaking over the polished wood. They’d relegated the care of Grace to her, and she was doing her best to look out for the child.

“I hold myself accountable for the morality of this town.” The reverend paced before them, two fingers smoothing his thick, gray beard. “And you have grievously disappointed me.”

Reverend Morris was a fiercely principled man with a strict moral code of right and wrong, good and bad. There was no middle ground in his mind. If Heather had any complaints about his leadership, it was that his sermons tended to lean more toward righteousness and virtue, and less toward forgiveness and mercy.

“I haven’t done anything to disappoint anyone.” Heather spoke weakly, the denial sounding feeble even to her own ears. “This isn’t my child.”

For an instant she was back at her aunt and uncle’s house, taking the blame for something one of her cousins had done. Never once could she recall her aunt and uncle taking her side against their own children. She was the outsider, so she must be the guilty party, every time.

“Then who does she belong to?” Reverend Morris demanded.

“I don’t know!”

“And you, Sterling.” The reverend stretched out his arm. “Your pa just two months in his grave.”

Sterling fisted his hands on the back of the pew and avoided Heather’s gaze. But her shoulders wilted. She’d seen the doubt in his eyes. If he didn’t have faith in her, he should at least have faith in

his brother. Despite her brief infatuation with Dillon, the brothers had always been honorable. Clearly someone had entrapped them both.

Otto sprang to his feet, his hat clutched in his hands. "If these two fine folks say they don't know anything about this child, then I believe them. And you should too."

Grace pulled herself up and gummed the back of the pew.

"She's leaving teeth marks," the reverend declared. "Don't let her do that."

Feeling unaccountably guilty, Heather grasped the child and set her on her lap. Grace turned her curious attention to the lace edge of her collar.

Sterling scooted toward the aisle and leaned her way. "You don't have to bear this alone. I will make Dillon do the right thing by you. I promise."

"Oh no you won't." Her heart skittered and stopped. She couldn't think of anything more horrible than being married to Dillon. "This is not our child, and I don't care if you don't believe me. I know the truth."

She didn't want to spend the rest of her life attached to a man who'd broken up with her by leaving a note. Especially bound by a child who didn't belong to either of them.

The reverend narrowed his gaze. "Do you still have feelings for Dillon?"

"No." She huffed. "And what does that have to do with anything?"

"Well..." The reverend gave a vague gesture. "There's the child."

"For the last time, this is not my child. And if this is Dillon's child, why did he fill out his brother's name?"

Gracie grasped the ribbons of her bonnet and stuck the ends in her mouth.

"Let's all take a deep breath." Otto gave her shoulder an encouraging squeeze. "These are highly unusual and highly irregular circumstances."

"Highly irregular indeed," the reverend murmured.

"Hear me out," Otto continued. "Are we going to believe a piece of paper over two people who have been model citizens in our community?"

The reverend tugged on his beard. The fingers of his gaunt hand were swollen and gnarled with rheumatism. "Even if I believe them, there is a child involved. What do you propose we do with her?"

"Find out where she came from," Otto said. "You should at least allow these two fine people the opportunity to prove their innocence before you find them guilty."

The reverend sighed dramatically and tapped his foot. "Miss O'Connor, it's an undisputed fact that Sterling's older brother, Dillon, once courted you. Is that correct?"

"He took me for a buggy ride a few times. I'd hardly call that courting."

"And the two of you parted ways rather suddenly."

"Dillon joined the cavalry."

"Following Mr. Blackwell's departure, you left town for a period of time."

"I stayed with a friend in Butte." She didn't like the direction of his questioning one bit. The evidence was not turning in her direction. "You're welcome to speak with Helen. She can assure you that I have nothing to do with this child."

"The child did call you 'mama.'"

"She said 'ma' and then there was a pause, and then she said 'ma' again." Heather had made the same point at the train depot, though clearly no one was paying her any mind. "Her words don't make any sense. They're just sounds."

"Gra." The child spit out the ribbons. "Gra."

"My point exactly!"

If only she could stir awake from this nightmare and have a good laugh over the ridiculous turn of events. She'd done everything right. She'd followed all the rules. It wasn't her fault she'd been born with red hair. That particular trait harkened back to a grandfather she'd never met. If she had brown hair, they'd be less inclined to suspect her.

Sterling rubbed his forehead with a thumb and forefinger. “Heather, if you say that you haven’t seen this child before today, I believe you. We all believe you. But half the town heard what she said, and the other half is going to hear by suppertime.”

His placating tone made her lift her chin. “If you believe me, then stop debating the point and get down to business. The only way for us to clear our names is to find the real parents.”

“That’s all fine and good,” Sterling said quietly. Though he spoke low, everyone in the church was listening. “But where do we even start?”

Heather lost her patience. He was lying. He didn’t believe her. She clasped her trembling hands together. Even she had to admit the proof against her was incriminating. It was her word against the writing on a piece of paper. How did one refute a scrap of paper?

“Even if you think I might betray Dillon,” she said, “Sterling would never betray his brother.”

The reverend’s chin jutted out, splaying his gray whiskers like porcupine quills. “A point to be considered.”

The observation had mollified the reverend more than her denials, a demoralizing realization. Why was she the one being judged and questioned instead of the Blackwells?

Sterling turned toward her, but she kept her gaze rigidly forward.

“She’s right,” Otto declared. “I’ve known those two brothers since they were babes. They’re thick as thieves.”

The reverend rocked back on his heels. “All right, then. Everyone in this room agrees, for the moment, that Sterling and Heather are telling the truth. How do you propose we convince the rest of the town?”

“That there is a real problem.” Otto slapped his hat against his thigh. “Folks are going to expect the two of you to get hitched, and quick.”

“Out of the question,” Sterling announced.

Heather crossed her arms. “You needn’t make it sound as though it’s a hanging offense.”

As though this day wasn’t already humiliating enough.

“I didn’t mean it that way.” Sterling’s face suffused with color. “I was thinking of Dillon.”

“There is nothing between the two of us.” Heather bit her lip and collected herself. “There never was.”

“Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“Enough,” the reverend interceded. “Arguing will get us nowhere. Both of you claim that you’ve never seen the child before today. That’s where we start. Where was the child before this afternoon when she arrived at the train depot?”

The emphasis he put on claim gave Heather pause, but she pushed past the doubt. “If we can both agree that we know nothing about that child, then someone falsified that Return of Birth. Who has the ability to do something like that?”

“The question is why?” Reverend Morris interjected. “Why would someone choose the two of you? There is no rhyme or reason to the lie.”

The slant of his question implied an automatic guilt that set her teeth on edge.

“Why or who? Both questions lead to the same answer.” Heather tugged on the soggy strings of her bonnet, having been recently abandoned by the babe in favor of a bit of lace on her frock. “If we’re telling the truth, people should believe us.”

The reverend clasped the inside of his elbow and rested his chin on his opposite hand. “Heather, be reasonable. You must understand how this looks. Just over two years ago, you unexpectedly left town for several months.”

“If everyone who left town for a few months had a baby, the world would be overrun with children!”

“This looks very bad for the both of you,” the reverend forged ahead. “Which is a small sacrifice when you consider what this poor child has been through. She’s been taken from her home and put in the care of strangers. We don’t know what’s happened to her family, or if she’ll ever see them again. This is more than an inconvenience we can sweep under the rug. This is a grave responsibility beyond the three of us.”

Grace grinned, revealing two lone teeth with her silly smile. Unexpected tears threatened, and Heather blinked rapidly. She’d been so caught up in her own troubles, she hadn’t even considered the child’s circumstances. Grace had been sent through the post like an order from the Montgomery Ward catalog. The child must have been cared for at one time considering her health and the quality of her clothing. What had made someone desperate enough to place her child in the care of strangers?

“If Grace’s mother made the choice out of necessity,” Heather said, “then she’ll be missing her child terribly. Perhaps we can help.”

Grace reached for her, and Heather folded her into her arms. By the looks on the gentlemen’s faces, the gesture was further proof against her. Perhaps it was the red hair, but Heather was drawn to the child. Grace appeared to be a sweet and loving girl who only wanted to be loved in return.

Sterling extended his hand, and Grace clasped his finger. She pulled the digit toward her mouth and Sterling frowned.

“No biting,” he said, his tone firm but gentle.

Grace released his finger and reached for his hat. With an indulgent grin, Sterling ducked his head and let her grasp the brim.

“You’re as pretty as a prizewinning peach at a summer fair,” he said.

Heather’s heart softened toward the child. The poor thing was powerless and at the mercy of strangers. Despite everything she’d been through, the babe appeared remarkably good-natured. Whatever her origins, she was a resilient child.

“Wells Fargo is a good place to start,” Otto said. “A baby in the parcels is memorable, which means someone must know something. I’ll speak with Nels and see what I can discover.”

Nels served as the stationmaster, ticket agent, telegrapher, and express and freight agent at the railroad. He never made express deliveries. Never. Given the turn of items people were shipping these days, he’d made a good choice.

“I’ll travel to Butte,” Sterling said. “I’ll find the porter. He seemed extremely attached to his paperwork.”

“Is any of this wise?” Reverend Morris tipped his head toward the ceiling in thoughtful consideration. “Someone has treated this child with reckless disregard for her safety. Someone left her on a train. Alone. Even if we find her mother and father, what then? What if they don’t want her back? We have to consider the child’s interests.”

Vigorously shaking her head, Heather mentally backed away. She had sympathy for the child, but none of this was her responsibility. “I’m sure there’s a charity in Butte that will care for her.”

She flicked a glance at the smiling child. There was no reason for her to feel guilty. Someone else would look out for her.

Since gold had been discovered in Montana, the population of the territory had exploded. There was an almost balanced mix of sin and salvation. Churches had sprung up in equal numbers beside saloons. There were plenty of charities in Butte that were far more suited to look after a child. Because there would be implications in keeping the child here. Grave, life-altering implications.

Except the idea of leaving Grace with strangers caused her head to start thumping. Heather pressed her palm against the pain. Who would abandon such a sweet and innocent smile?

The reverend’s expression remained somber. “If Sterling is unable to locate the parents, leaving the baby in Butte will only make matters more difficult for both of you in Valentine. Folks are already convinced she’s your daughter. If you simply abandon her, they’ll assume the worst. If we can’t

discover the truth, you'll be branded with an unpleasant reputation. You'll have to leave Valentine, or stay and bear the talk."

Heather jerked upright. "Surely you're exaggerating."

The throbbing in her head increased. She couldn't shake an odd feeling of betrayal. The Blackwells had brought her nothing but trouble. She hadn't lied when she'd told the reverend she had no feelings for Dillon. He was an embarrassing footnote in her life. Through no fault of her own, her name was being slandered along with Sterling's. Nausea roiled in her stomach. In Valentine, all her difficulties seemed to circle back to the Blackwells.

Grace clamped her teeth on the pew once more, and Heather eased her away. The child wailed and flailed her arms.

"Gra! Gra!"

Heather instinctively rubbed her back in soothing circles and gently shushed the angry child.

"That's another thing." The reverend focused his attention on Grace with searing intensity, as though she might reveal the secret of her origins if he just looked hard enough. "Who is going to watch her for the time being?"

Sterling coughed into his fist and stared at the tips of his boots. Otto flicked a glance in her direction. The reverend discovered an intense fascination with the button on his sleeve.

Heather's pulse picked up speed. Surely they wouldn't leave the babe with her? She knew absolutely nothing about children. Not to mention that people would judge. And gossip.

"I don't think I should be seen with her." She flashed her palms. "The more people connect us, the more they'll gossip."

"It's too late already," Sterling said. "There are half a dozen curious gossips milling outside the door right now. I'm surprised there isn't a nose pressed against the window."

Heather winced. How many times in the past had she let her own curiosity get the better of her? Not even an hour ago she'd been on the other side of the rumor mill. She'd been part of the crowd. How quickly circumstances had changed.

She peered out the window and immediately jerked back. Sure enough, a half dozen people were milling about. Gracie reached for one of her earbobs, and Heather ducked out of reach. She'd done plenty of things over the years without the benefit of training. Young children were no different. Just as with her students, they didn't come with instructions. The trick was never showing fear.

If she didn't take responsibility for the child, who would?

"I'll watch her," Heather conceded.

"Thank the Lord for your kindness." The reverend clasped his hands as though in prayer. "The poor child deserves care. I'll do my best to stem the talk," he added. "But I can't make any promises."

Heather's heartbeat slowed to a normal pace. There had to be a logical reason for the turn of events. By this time next week, her life would be back to normal.

Except there were moments in life that changed a person. There were moments that changed the course of events, whether a person was ready for the upheaval or not. She had the uneasy sensation this was one of those moments.

Sterling fastened his coat. "If there's something to find, I'll find it."

Heather breathed a sigh of relief. By this time next week, this whole incident would be nothing more than a funny story the folks of Valentine whispered about over coffee in the morning. She merely had to care for the child for a few days. Her cousins had only been a year or two older, and she'd cared for them quite often. How much difference did a year or two make in the life of child?

If only there was someone she could lean on for help and advice. During her time in Valentine, she hadn't made a single close friend beyond Helen, and Helen was too far away to help.

As the schoolteacher, she was in an odd position. She'd been young enough when she arrived that she was only a few years older than her students, but much younger than their parents. Now,

women her age were busy with husbands and younger children. She had acquaintances, but no one in whom to confide.

Sterling sidled nearer. "Don't worry, I'll find the truth."

"I know you will."

A disturbing sense of intimacy left her light-headed. In the blink of an eye her painstakingly cultivated air of practicality fled. Then he turned his smile on the babe, and the moment was broken.

She set her lips in a grim line. His deference was practiced and meant nothing. She must always be on guard around Sterling Blackwell. She must always remember that she was no more special to him than the woman who typed out his telegrams.

He treated everyone with the same indolent consideration, and yet she'd always been susceptible to his charm.

She smoothed her hand over Grace's wild curls. They were both alone, but now they had each other.

At least for the time being.

* * *

A week after Grace's unexpected arrival, Sterling adjusted his collar and straightened his string tie in the mirror on the way out the door Sunday morning. He snatched his hat from the peg and loped down the front stairs.

He'd sent a terse telegram to Dillon instructing him to return home immediately. His brother hadn't been able to attend the funeral, and they'd planned a memorial ceremony upon his return. That was two months ago. From what Dillon wrote in his letters, you'd think the entire West would descend into lawless mayhem without his oversight. No man was irreplaceable. It was time for Dillon to come home and assume responsibility for his half of the ranch.

Sterling had been given a second chance to set things right. He didn't have all the answers, but he knew where to start.

Otto had the wagon hitched, and the ranch hands were already seated in the back. Five men in all, including the foreman, and they each called a greeting. Only Otto had been around during his father's time. The bunkhouse had been deserted when Sterling returned two months ago. The ranch had fallen into disrepair during his absence. They were only half staffed currently, which meant there was plenty of room in the bunkhouse for him if his brother moved into the house with his new family.

His step hitched. Could he stay and see them every day? He slammed his hat on his head and strode forward. The right thing and the easy thing were rarely the same.

Otto wore a frown on his normally placid face. "You got in late last night. What happened in Butte?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

Sterling climbed into the driver's seat and gathered the reins. "No one knows anything. The employee who gave the child to the porter is missing. To tell the truth, I don't think he even worked for Wells Fargo."

"The whole event was a hoax?"

"Appears to be."

"Sure got everyone's attention."

"I'm guessing that was the point. Someone wanted to make sure Heather and I were publicly named."

Otto scrambled in beside him. "What are you doing to do?"

"I'm going to do what I should have done from the beginning."

The late start nipped at Sterling's heels. At this rate, he'd have to speak with Heather after the services. A curious anticipation curled along his spine. He didn't know why their names had been

thrown together on that piece of paper, and it didn't matter anymore. He'd had a lot of time for thinking on the way to Butte and back, and some things had become obvious.

The ranch hands talked and laughed in their usual places in the back of the wagon. Rumors abounded in the bunkhouse, but Sterling wasn't ready to address the speculation just yet. In the absence of an explanation, hushed conversations grew silent when he passed.

The reverend's words had rung in his ears the entire time he was searching for Grace's true parents. Someone had treated the child with a reckless disregard for her safety. Anyone who did something that callous wasn't coming back anytime soon. Since no one was looking for the child, he'd ruled out any other explanation.

As the spire of the church appeared above the horizon, his stomach churned. The ride into town had seemed to take forever.

The boys clambered out of the wagon and filed by in silence. The reverend was at his usual post—shaking hands in the doorway as people filed into the church. A number of wagons were already hitched beneath the trees. Overhead, slender branches held a few sparse, clinging leaves.

One of the Forester children rang the church bell, his feet coming off the ground in his enthusiasm.

Reverend Morris clasped Sterling on the shoulder and pulled him aside. "What did you discover?"

"Nothing." Sterling glanced around to ensure they had privacy. "No one knows anything about a missing child. The porter is gone. There's no matching record for a Return of Birth on file in Silver Bow County. Nobody has reported a child missing, and I had the sheriff send telegrams as far as California." The search had cost him a pretty penny. Money he didn't have to spare. "I did everything I could."

"This is extremely troubling."

"Have you spoken with Heather?" Sterling peered around the reverend, hoping for a glimpse of her. "How is the child?"

He wanted to give her a sign, something to let her know he'd come up with a plan to put her mind at ease. His arrival the previous evening had been too late for a respectable visit, and he couldn't risk any more gossip.

"Miss O'Connor arrived with the Foresters. She and the child are inside." The reverend tugged on his collar. "People are extremely curious about the circumstances. I'm afraid your absence has only worsened the matter."

"Heather is with the Foresters?"

"Yes. Apparently Mrs. Forester has been assisting her with the care of the child."

Irene Forester was a year or two older than Sterling, and had two young children. Dillon and her husband had been friends as children, which meant they'd be an ally as they weathered the worst of the storm. Knowing the family had already offered Heather their assistance eased his mind.

Sterling doffed his hat and raked his hands through his hair. "Good. They can help."

"With what?"

"With stemming the gossip."

"Then you claim no responsibility for the child?"

"This isn't about me anymore."

"I see." The reverend yanked on his lapels. "I'm needed inside."

"Wait—"

The reverend was swallowed by the tide of people entering the church, leaving the balance of Sterling's explanation hanging in the air. He sucked in a breath and counted to ten. What did it matter whether he explained about Dillon now or after the service? Yet he'd been struck with a sense of urgency since making the decision. He was afraid if he thought about it for too long, he'd lose his nerve.

He had a choice, and he chose to consider the child as a blessing. God had given him a second chance, and second chances didn't come along too often.

As he stepped inside, the eyes of the congregation swiveled toward him. His string tie was strangling him this morning, and he stuck a finger in his collar, then slid into a seat along the back row beside Otto.

His height gave him an advantage, and he soon spotted Heather and Grace. She glanced over her shoulder and their gazes clashed. Her expression remained inscrutable, and his heart beat a rapid tattoo against his chest. He'd be seeing a lot of her in the future considering they were both going to be living on the same ranch, and he'd best get control of his feelings.

The reverend assumed his place at the lectern, distracting her, and the moment was broken.

Sterling spent the first half of the sermon rehearsing his confession to Heather. When he finally had the words just right in his head, the hairs on the back of his neck stirred.

The folks in church were unusually restless, even for one of the reverend's sermons. Several people in the congregation flicked glances over their shoulders in his direction, then quickly turned back toward the front.

Sterling's attention sharpened, and he focused on the man's words. The reverend finished reading a letter from Corinthians that seemed awfully heavy on warnings against the immoral and admonishments against those who consorted with immoral people. A bead of sweat formed on the back of Sterling's neck.

The reverend set down his Bible, braced his hands on either side of the lectern, and stared down the congregation. "I am a deeply troubled man. I believe in a God who believes in love and compassion, and I believe in a God who believes in forgiveness." He heaved a great sigh. "But I also believe in a set of moral codes. As a man of God, I find solace in a righteous path."

Several people shifted in their seats. Otto and Sterling exchanged a glance. Was it just his imagination, or had the sermon taken on a decidedly personal note?

"A child has come into our community under extraordinary circumstances."

Sterling's face burned. Nope. It wasn't his imagination.

"I have listened to the concerns of my community." The volume of the reverend's voice rose to a crescendo, reverberating directly into Sterling's ears. "And I have answered your questions to the best of my ability. After much soul-searching, I have come to the conclusion that you cannot choose to live a life of sin and also join with us in worship, Mr. Blackwell and Miss O'Connor. You are no longer welcome among our congregation."

A collective gasp erupted. Sterling shot to his feet, along with Otto. Heather propped Grace on her hip as she scooted out of the pew. The brim of her hat covered her face, preventing him from reading her expression.

As she rushed down the aisle, he caught her by the wrist before she reached the door. Her pulse beat rapidly beneath his fingertips. "Wait. We can explain. I can fix this."

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "I'm sorry."

Otto hitched his pants and threw back his shoulder. "Hold up on the fire and brimstone, Reverend. These two plan on getting hitched. Right now, if you like."

[Chapter Three](#)

Heather froze in place. A smattering of applause sounded, and the congregation descended into excited chatter.

"What are you doing, Otto?" Sterling whispered harshly.

The foreman shrugged. "Ain't that what you told me on the way over? That you two was getting hitched?"

Judging by the look on Sterling's face, that wasn't what he'd said at all. The commotion was agitating Grace, and Heather bounced the child on her hip. While events weren't exactly going to plan, at least they were moving in the right direction.

The reverend banged his hand on the lectern. “A little decorum, if you please. Is this true, Miss O’Connor, Mr. Blackwell?”

Heather turned toward Sterling and lifted her shoulder in a helpless shrug. The reverend took the vague gesture as a sign of agreement.

“Hallelujah.” Using his gnarled fingers, he pinched the loose end of his robe sleeves against his wrist and dabbed at his brow. “The wedding of Miss O’Connor and Mr. Blackwell will take place in exactly two hours.”

Appearing exhausted by the sudden turn of events, the reverend tucked his Bible beneath his arm and strode down the aisle.

He paused before Heather and Sterling. “I’ll fetch the witness book. Two hours.”

Her breath caught. Events weren’t just moving in the right direction, they were racing ahead and leaving her behind.

Confused by the abrupt end of the service, the townspeople stood and milled about, their voices droning.

Otto placed two fingers in his mouth and blew out a whistle. “Don’t just stand around. Go on home and have supper.”

His words spurred the crowd into action. People gathered their belongings, shrugging into coats, and men donned their hats.

Heather cast a surreptitious glance at Sterling to gauge his response, then quickly looked away. He wasn’t taking this well. At least she had two hours to convince him of her plan. Keeping him in her peripheral vision, she fielded murmured congratulations and perfunctory handshakes as the church emptied.

Otto was the last person to leave. He tipped his hat. “See you after supper.”

Alone with Sterling, her courage faltered. All her careful words muddled together in her head.

Seemingly in a similar place, Sterling paced the center aisle with the restless energy of a caged bear. “I telegraphed Dillon.”

Her hold on Grace slipped. “You did what?”

“I’m trying to make this right.” He flipped back the edges of his jacket and stuffed his hands in the pockets of his gray wool trousers. “It’s my fault Dillon broke things off with you.”

Her panic must have registered with Grace. The child’s lower lip trembled, and she tugged on Heather’s earbobs.

“Ma!”

“No. Not yours. Mine,” Heather corrected the child. She flashed an apologetic look at Sterling. “I think that’s what she was trying to say at the train depot. I think ma means mine. She’s very taken with shiny things.”

“You have to listen to me, Heather.” Sterling grasped her shoulder and steered her toward a pew in the last row, then knelt before her. “I’m the reason you’re not with Dillon.”

Gracie had already been forced to sit still for too long, and her patience lapsed. She flipped onto her stomach and let her feet dangle off the edge of the pew.

“Da.”

“Down.” Heather helped her the rest of the way. “Gracie is down.”

“Da,” Gracie repeated.

For the past week, Heather had felt like a professor attempting to decipher a new language. Words often coincided with actions, giving her clues as to Gracie’s intent. More often than not, they both wound up frustrated with each other.

“What do you mean?” Heather asked, her attention distracted by Gracie’s busy explorations. “I already know about your pa. You don’t have to apologize for him. I understand.”

There was no need for him to explain, and all this talk of Dillon was wasting what precious little time they had together before the reverend returned.

Sterling rubbed his eyebrows with the tips of his fingers. “Dillon left because I talked him into going.”

“Oh.” She was more curious than shocked. “I thought your pa disapproved.”

“It’s a long story.” He pressed his hands together as though in prayer. “I had this all rehearsed, but nothing is going as planned.”

She huffed out a breath. “I know the feeling.”

“I didn’t want Dillon to become like our pa.” He tilted his fingertips toward her. “I knew if Dillon stayed, he’d be just like him. I saw the changes as he got older. I talked him into leaving even though I knew he was sweet on you. I told myself the two of you weren’t serious.”

“We weren’t.”

“Don’t you see?” Sterling shook his head in disbelief. “Maybe this baby is a blessing in disguise. You two can be together.”

Gracie tugged on her skirts. “Hungie.”

Heather unwrapped the heel of bread she’d stowed in her bag for such an emergency. Gracie stuffed one end into her mouth, and Heather hoisted her onto the seat once more.

“I appreciate the apology,” she began, “but it doesn’t matter what you did or didn’t say to Dillon. He made the choice alone. By himself.”

She didn’t suppose it mattered who had spoken with Dillon or what they’d said. If he’d felt anything for her, even a sliver of affection, he’d have had some remorse in leaving. The letter stuffed in her copy of *The Return of the Native* had made his lack of regard for her glaringly clear.

“This is a second chance,” Sterling said.

“I don’t want a second chance. I didn’t even want the first chance, not really.” How did she explain something to someone else when she didn’t quite understand herself? “When I first arrived in Valentine, I didn’t know anyone. Dillon was nice to me. I mistook gratitude for something more.”

Dillon had appeared troubled and lost, feelings she understood all too well. She’d sensed in him a kindred spirit. She’d been drawn to him because his confusion had mirrored her own. She’d recently fled an untenable situation, and she’d caught Sterling’s brother in the same moment of indecision. A fundamentally flawed part of her character had sensed she was latching on to a man who was fixing to leave.

“But you have to marry someone,” Sterling said. “Didn’t you hear the reverend? Everything I discovered about this child led her straight to us. It’s as though Grace appeared out of thin air. Only you and I know the truth, and no one is interested in our opinion. As long as the three of us stay in this town, you have to marry someone, and it’s either him or me.”

“Then I choose you.”

He lost his balance and groped for the pew behind him. “What?”

“Have you ever come to a turning point in your life?” His obvious shock wasn’t encouraging, but at least he hadn’t uttered an outright refusal. “A moment when everything changes and you can’t go back to being the person you were before?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“I can never go back to the person I was before Gracie came into my life. This week has changed me. When you said she was a blessing, you were right. I’ve been praying for the answer all week. When you came into the church this morning, I knew. I could tell just by looking that you hadn’t discovered anything, and I knew. Someone abandoned her. They don’t deserve her.”

Gracie extended a fistful of soggy bread. Her pinafore was damp with drool and flecks of dough. “Da. Gra da.”

“Done. Gracie is done,” Heather translated. She caught Sterling’s expression and rushed ahead. “I realize she’s not at her best, but you’ll grow to love her too. I know you will.”

Sterling clasped her fingers in his warm grasp, his calluses rasping against the soft material of her gloves. “If you felt something for Dillon before, even something casual, maybe you can feel something for him again.”

“I don’t want to feel that way ever again, and I don’t think you do either.” His touch was distracting her from her purpose, and she gently tugged away. His grip tightened around her fingers, keeping her in his grasp. “I’d do this alone if I thought I could, but Gracie will always be fodder for gossip.”

“Now you’ve lost me,” he said.

She gathered her wits and considered her next words carefully. “You’re always flirting and carrying on with girls, but have you ever actually courted someone?”

The tips of his ears heated. “Well, um, no.”

“You’re the most eligible bachelor in town. You own the largest ranch in the county. You could have any girl.”

He released her fingers, but the warmth of his touch lingered, and she flexed her fingers.

“I wouldn’t say the most eligible,” he demurred. “Top three maybe.”

She wasn’t playing fair, ambushing the man like this, but she’d run out of options. She’d been mulling the problem over for the past three days, and during that time, she’d fallen hopelessly in love with Gracie. She’d considered all her options and had come to the conclusion that Sterling was her only choice, for exactly the reasons she’d stated.

The reverend and Otto had merely sped up events, though she hadn’t planned on springing the idea on him quite this way. While all of her reasons were sound, she recognized that Sterling didn’t have as much incentive for taking on the two of them. He didn’t know Gracie, and he’d never fully comprehend her reasoning.

He didn’t understand what it was like to go from being loved and cherished to being an irritating annoyance. He didn’t know what it felt like to be unwanted. He didn’t know what it was like to feel so lonely that a body physically ached.

“I don’t...” He appeared to be struggling with some sort of internal battle. “I mean to say...” He tipped his head to one side. “Are you certain?”

“Yes. I’m certain.”

She offered up a brief prayer for forgiveness considering she’d all but ambushed the man. He wasn’t courting anyone, so she wasn’t treading on any toes there. Gracie needed a home. And while Sterling could probably do better than her, especially considering his wealth and his looks, he could also do worse.

She felt only a twinge of guilt, which was quickly wiped away when she recalled that neither of them had asked for any of this. The whole situation felt like a blatant manipulation. She had no family connections, no money, nothing. A man with Sterling’s attributes had far better choices for motherhood than a nobody like her. She was as certain of his innocence as she was her own. They were both victims of the same bald-faced lie, and they had to design their own solution.

Gracie stood and tugged on the silk flowers of her bonnet.

Sterling offered a half grin. “She never gives up.”

“She’s extremely tenacious.” Heather sensed he was softening to the idea, and sprinted ahead. “Despite what the preacher said today, I truly believe the people in town only want the best for us.”

Irene’s support had been invaluable. Most folks were confused as well as curious. Her students had been inquisitive about Gracie’s arrival, and she’d sensed many of their questions were echoes of what had been discussed around the dinner table with their parents the previous evening. There’d been plenty of stares and whispers. There had also been moments of kindness.

Tom, whose dad owned the general store, had ordered store-bought clothing for Gracie since there wasn’t time for sewing all she needed. Mrs. Stone had sent an extra pail of milk with her daughter

to class each morning, while only charging for a single pail. Irene had watched Gracie during the school hours.

For the first few days Heather had hoped to fall asleep and wake to the uncomplicated life she'd led before the child's arrival. She'd been neither content nor discontent, but somewhere in the middle. She'd resigned herself to a life as the spinster schoolteacher. Anything was an improvement over living with her aunt and uncle in Pittsburgh. If she was going to live a lonely life, she much preferred the view of the mountains to the view of the smelting stacks.

She taught her students and read books during the summer. She'd been satisfied with her life, or so she'd thought. Gracie had changed her way of thinking in only a week. God had brought this child into her life at this time for a reason. Someone to love unreservedly and unconditionally. Someone who might even love her back. Heather had seen plenty of men and women fall out of love with each other, but she'd never seen a child fall out of love with a mother.

Sterling's back was turned, preventing her from gauging his expression. He rubbed the nape of his neck.

"I misspoke before," he declared.

A sudden uneasy feeling seized her. "About what?"

He turned.

"Top two." His grin was crooked and aching enduring. "I'm definitely in the top two most eligible bachelors."

She nearly sagged with relief. The serious side of him was gone, and he'd transformed back into the Sterling she knew and understood. He was once again the charming rogue with the ready smile.

Gracie grinned at their shared laughter, wanting in on the joke, and Heather hugged her close. She knew what it felt like to be alone. No one had ever wanted her, not really, not since her ma had passed. Her pa had left her with her aunt and uncle after the war because she was a girl. He'd told her as much when he'd packed her trunks. If you were a boy, I'd keep you, but a girl needs a woman to raise her.

Her aunt and uncle hadn't wanted her. Even Dillon hadn't wanted her. Only Gracie had embraced her love with innocent abandon.

Sterling was only grudgingly conceding because he'd been trapped by circumstance.

Her heart did a curious little flip. When he'd arrived at the church, she'd nearly tossed her plan to the wind. In his work clothing he was handsome; in his Sunday suit he was devastatingly so. She had an uneasy premonition she'd been thrown together with the one man who could break her heart, which meant extra vigilance was in order. Love was serious business, but as long as he stayed the same carefree man who made her laugh, they'd do fine together.

She'd made a solemn vow that Gracie would never feel unwanted, and she meant to keep that vow, no matter the personal cost.

"We won't disrupt your life," she vowed. "I promise."

"I don't know, Heather." His tone indicated he was teasing. "Maybe I'll disrupt yours."

"Never."

* * *

"For richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health..." The reverend droned on and the ceremony was quickly concluded. There'd been no exchange of rings, and only a few curious onlookers had returned for the service. Only Irene and the ranch hands had been there to truly support the couple.

They'd both repeated the words as though in a daze. Irene and her husband had signed the witness book and offered them coffee, which they'd politely declined. There was no moon that evening, and traveling in the dark was dangerous. Instead they'd left the ranch hands in town while they fetched Heather's belongings.

All of her worldly possessions fit neatly into the back of the wagon, with plenty of room to spare. Sterling lifted the backboard into place and secured the latch. Though there hadn't been much

to move, he'd worked up a sweat. He raised his arm above his head and swiped his forehead against his shoulder.

"That everything?" he asked.

"That's everything," she replied from the doorway. "I'll close up and be right out."

"Best be quick."

"I will."

He didn't need to check his pocket watch to know they didn't have much daylight left.

The fabric roses Mrs. Carlyle had hastily pinned to his lapel sagged, and he stuffed the decoration in his pocket. Guilt gnawed at his gut. He hadn't put up much of a fight against marrying Heather considering her past relationship with his brother, and he didn't have as many regrets as he probably ought to.

His anger sparked, the heat directed solely at his brother. If Dillon had returned for their pa's funeral instead of trying to manage the entire Western frontier with his own two hands, he'd have been here for this fiasco. There was a pretty strong possibility the Blackwell name had been attached to Gracie as a matter of convenience rather than design. Any Blackwell would do, and Heather had gotten her second choice in husbands, no matter how much she denied her feelings for Dillon.

He'd never know what might have happened if he hadn't interfered, and the unknown haunted him. A part of him feared he was living another man's future. Heather hadn't chosen him, she'd been stuck with him.

Heather appeared a moment later with Gracie perched on her hip. After securing the door, she made her way to the wagon. "I'm going to miss this place."

Sterling couldn't imagine why. The old one-room schoolhouse sat at the edge of town, a relic of Valentine's history. Though the population had surged during the gold rush, the town had never needed more than one school until a few years before. And then once the boom had busted, the town floundered. His pa had formed a town council, and they'd enticed a flour mill onto the banks of the river. A bakery had followed, along with a café and a second dry goods store. Families had soon filled the town. Despite the loss of gold, the population had surged back to over a thousand.

The wood buildings along Main Street had been replaced with brick, and a gazebo had been erected in the town square. The old schoolhouse had remained, catering mostly to the farm children whose families preferred the old way of doing things. Heather's lodgings had consisted of a single room addition with a potbellied stove for warmth and cooking.

She anchored her hat with one hand and tipped back her head, gazing somewhat wistfully at the bell housing. "Mrs. Lane has promised to finish out the school year. The students probably won't even remember me come next fall."

"Is there anyone we should notify about your move?" he asked. "Besides the postmaster?"

"No. No one."

A jolt of realization kicked him in the gut. The children and that one-room addition were everything she had in the world, and she was leaving it all behind for Gracie. She had no family in town, no family anywhere as far as he knew. She was entirely alone in the world.

The idea was sobering. He'd always had family around in one form or another. Even without his parents, he'd had Dillon. His ma had family back East, though she'd rarely gone back to visit.

"Mrs. Lane will do right by the students until another teacher is hired," he said. "I didn't think she'd ever retire in the first place. The town council was surprised when you applied. It's not as easy luring people out West like it was in the old days."

Her smile was tinged with sorrow. "You're too young to remember the old days."

"Otto talks my ear off. I feel like I lived through the war between the states twice." Her soft laughter chased away the sadness and warmed his heart. "We'd best go."

"I'm sure your men are impatient. They've been trapped in town all day."

“They aren’t complaining.” A lengthy visit to town without the promise of chores waiting was a rare treat.

Grace tugged on Heather’s bonnet. “Ga!”

“Even Grace is impatient,” Sterling said.

“We’ve gotten to know each other quite well over the past week, haven’t we, darling?”

Grace wrapped her arms around Heather’s neck and hugged her.

Their obvious affection for each other left him feeling like an unwanted interloper. The two had grown remarkably attached in a short period of time. The difference a few days had made was astonishing. Heather wasn’t nearly as nervous and skittish with the child as she’d been that first day in the church.

Though Sterling kept his own counsel, Grace’s anonymous past sat heavy on his soul, and the mystery surrounding her arrival left him uneasy. He’d never been comfortable with the unknown. Mysteries had a way of unraveling at the most inopportune moments. There was always a chance someone might come for the child. And while whoever had abandoned Grace had plenty of explaining to do, Sterling didn’t know who the law would side with if that person returned.

One thing was certain. There was no way Heather was giving up the child without a fight. In the past week, she’d embraced Grace with her whole heart, and the depth of that attachment was evident.

He climbed into the wagon and lifted Gracie up, then extended his arm. His new wife accepted his assistance, clasping his hand with her gloved fingers and releasing it almost immediately. He adjusted the blanket over the two of them and gathered the reins.

Her gaze lingered on the schoolhouse. Anxious to be on the road before dark, he paused only a moment before flicking the reins against the horse’s backs.

The sun was low on the horizon by the time they gathered the men, and Sterling kept the introductions brief in deference to the gathering dusk.

“This here is Joe, Woodley, Ben and Price. You know Otto. They live in a bunkhouse on the property. They cook for and keep to themselves.”

The men offered their congratulations and took their places in the back of the wagon. There was no room for Otto with Heather’s belonging taking up space, and the wagon tipped as he took his seat up front.

Heather scooted closer to Sterling. She attempted to leave a space between them, but the uneven roads and rusty springs soon had them bumping together. They were wedged side by side from shoulder to hip. The warmth of their bodies mingled, chasing away the worst of the chill.

Heather had gathered Gracie onto her lap. She kissed the child’s temple and smoothed the wild red curls from her face. Seeing the two of them together, a wall of emotion threatened Sterling’s composure. He was completely unprepared for the task ahead. He felt inadequate.

He’d lived a solitary life these past few years. He didn’t mind socializing, and he had plenty of acquaintances, yet he’d never spent a significant amount of time with one woman. He’d never had to progress past perfunctory conversation. Women sometimes flirted with him, but he’d never been comfortable with the attention. He’d flash a smile and make a joke, and they didn’t take him too seriously after that. He sure wasn’t ready for the responsibility of a wife and child in addition to his other difficulties.

Such as continuing to deal with the shock of losing his pa. It had dredged up many old feelings, and he was loath to sort through them just yet. He’d returned home and found a place he didn’t remember. In only two years, the ranch had become unrecognizable. The cattle herd had dwindled, the ranch hands were gone and the house was hollow and empty. Even with all the changes, returning to his deserted childhood home had exacerbated old hurts he’d long ago buried.

His ma’s death had wounded him more than he’d realized. She’d been the one bright constant in his life. She’d doted on him, a fact he hadn’t appreciated until she was gone. His pa wasn’t interested

in a weak momma's boy, and Sterling had become a man when they'd tossed the first shovel of dirt over her casket. He'd erected a sturdy barricade around his heart after that and locked the pain inside.

Otto glanced over Heather's head and gave Sterling a wink. "Fine day for a new beginning."

"Indeed."

Sterling glanced away, turning his attention toward the horizon. A house needed a woman's touch. Together with Gracie, they'd breathe life into the silent, empty rooms. The idea of tiny feet running through his childhood home once more sent an ache of longing through his chest. He might not be ready for the future he'd just signed on for, but there were benefits to be had.

His grip tightened on the reins, and the stiff leather dug into his gloved hands. He wasn't a sentimental man. He didn't know why his thoughts had drifted in that direction. A house was a house, no matter who lived inside.

He glanced at Heather's profile. "Are you warm enough?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

He noticed with satisfaction that she wasn't trying to scoot away anymore.

Darkness had fallen by the time they reached the ranch. Grace was sound asleep, her head firmly nestled against Heather's chin. She sat rigid, her head jerking upright when she lapsed into a doze.

As proof of their exhaustion, the usually rowdy men were subdued and quiet. They emptied the wagon in short order and set about the evening chores. Sterling took the child from Heather's arms. Otto assisted her before circling to the front of the wagon and grasping the horses' halters.

Heather stumbled a bit, and Sterling steadied her with his free hand. "You've had a long day."

Pressing her fingers against her lips, she stifled a yawn. "I'm sorry. I can hardly keep my eyes open."

Inside the door he lit the wick on a lantern set on the side table and motioned her up the stairs. "I have a lady from town who comes around once a month to do the cleaning. She came last week, which means the bedding has been aired. When ma was alive, we had a cook who did the housekeeping duties, but there hasn't been any need since she passed away."

Pride kept him from mentioning there'd been no money to hire another housekeeper once he'd moved back home. If Heather needed more help, he'd broach the subject later. Come next fall, he'd have the finances back in order.

"Gracie and I will look after ourselves," Heather replied sleepily.

Once upstairs, they situated Gracie first, pushing the bed against the wall and placing a dresser against the other side to keep her from falling out.

"I think there's a cradle in the storage loft in the barn," Sterling said. "I'll check tomorrow."

They passed through the washroom, and Heather did a double take. "I forgot you have running water."

"My ma insisted. She was from back East, and she'd always had a washroom. The house isn't very big, but it's got plenty of nice features."

"I've never had running water before. I'll miss a lot of things about the schoolhouse, but that isn't one of them."

Her wistful longing for the schoolhouse had his chest constricting. He'd taken for granted the comforts he'd had all his life. There were times he'd even been resentful. A man wanted to build something of his own. He was tired of being seen as an extension of his pa. He wanted men to respect him for his own abilities, not for the land he'd inherited. And the land was about the only thing he had left.

If folks in town had noticed his pa scaling back on the outfit, they assumed he was slowing with age and not because of financial necessity. If Sterling rebuilt the ranch to its former glory, he'd prove to himself that he was worthy of what his pa had started.

But Gracie and Heather were a hitch in his plans. And Dillon's continued absence exacerbated the problem. In the next few months he'd need every penny and every minute of the day to turn the failing ranch around.

His knees had nearly buckled when Otto had declared their intent to marry in church. Not to mention he'd been plum bushwhacked by Heather's rejection of Dillon.

What hadn't been in question was Heather's fierce protectiveness of Grace.

Unless she married someone quick, she risked losing the child. More than anything else, he'd agreed to the hasty marriage to keep her together with the babe. At least for the time being. The future wasn't written yet.

"My room is across the way." He jerked his thumb in the general direction. "I'll fetch your trunk and let you get some rest."

Despite the hardships that would certainly come with this arrangement, when he'd stood before the reverend, he'd felt no regret. He'd experienced a moment of doubt and a distinct twinge of fright at his ability to care for his instant family, but he definitely hadn't felt regret. He'd sabotaged Heather's chance at happiness all those years before, and now he had a chance to atone. She needed his name to provide a good life for Gracie, and that's what he'd given her.

He hoisted her worn trunk onto his shoulder and climbed the stairs. He discovered Heather perched on the tall tester bed unlacing her boots. She startled upright, her boot dangling from her toe, her feet not quite reaching the floor. She was tiny and alone and achingly vulnerable.

Warmth flooded through his chest. Her fiery hair hung in loose waves around her shoulders, and his fingers itched to know if the strands were as soft as they looked. But he held himself in check. If he'd experienced a twinge of fright at thoughts of the future, she must have experienced moments of doubt and panic. She was in a far more helpless position. To put her at ease, he'd assigned her and Gracie rooms on the other side of the house from his. They needed time to settle in and acquaint themselves with their new surroundings.

Heather's eyelids drooped and she muttered a soft thank-you.

Sterling paused in the doorway. Something was bothering him, and the sooner he brought it out into the open, the better. There was no use avoiding the obvious.

"Gracie's family may still come for her. You know that, right?"

"No." She stifled another yawn. "No one will come for her."

Her complete refusal to even contemplate the idea worried him more than anything else that had happened in the past week. "Listen, Heather. You and I got picked up by a tornado and put down in this place. And that's the thing about tornadoes—they're unpredictable. You have to accept that another storm might be on the way, and neither of us can predict what will happen then."

"No," she stubbornly insisted. "If they haven't come for her yet, they aren't going to."

"I sure hope you're right."

Losing Gracie, even after such a short time, would break her heart. The child was the only thing tying the three of them together.

He hadn't immediately understood what Heather had meant in church—about how moments in life changed a person. The past few hours had given him perspective, though. His ma's death had been one of those moments. Encouraging Dillon to enter the cavalry had been one. Setting out on his own two years ago had been yet another.

More than all of those things combined, his decision to say "I do" had changed the course of his life, and if Gracie was gone, Heather was sure to follow.

"Get some rest," he said. "It's been a long day."

There was always the chance Heather and Gracie were exactly what the ranch needed. He only had to persuade her in that direction.

If she regretted her choice when Dillon returned, he'd cross that bridge when the time came. Being her second choice was a lot easier to ignore with his brother gone.

Chapter Four

Heather woke with a start, momentarily confused by her surroundings. From beyond the door, the floorboards squeaked, and a sudden rush of fear numbed her senses. She frantically searched her surroundings, and the memory of the previous day came rushing back. The footsteps paused on the landing, and she remained stock-still, not even daring to breathe.

In the next instant she heard the tromp of footfalls going down the stairs. The front door slammed, rattling the windowpanes, and she blew out her pent-up breath. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and took in her bare feet and wrinkled dress. She'd been too exhausted to change last night. She only dimly recalled removing her shoes and stockings and crawling beneath the covers.

She checked on Gracie first and found the child sound asleep. Gracie had wedged her small body into the space between the edge of the bed and the wall. Heather rolled her toward the middle and tucked the blanket neatly around her sides. Gracie's tiny lips moved in her sleep; her eyes drifted open and she mewled a sound, then rolled to her side.

The sleepy child and Sterling's absence left Heather time for explorations. She'd only seen the Blackwell house from the outside. She and Dillon had taken a buggy ride on the road near the ranch one spring afternoon, and he'd pointed out the roofline visible above the hillcrest.

Memories from her brief flirtation came rushing back. Though Dillon and Sterling were brothers, they were vastly different in temperament. Dillon had been quiet, almost brooding. He'd kept himself rigid and always in check, and he rarely laughed or smiled. In her naïveté, she'd mistaken his silence for interest. Looking back, she realized she'd always carried the conversation, and her face burned. Her chatter must have annoyed him to no end.

At her aunt and uncle's, no one had ever asked her how she was doing or feeling. What she'd experienced with Dillon was a reflection of her first taste of freedom and of gentlemanly courtesy. Back then, she was a captive only recently freed from a cage, spreading her wings and embracing new experiences. She'd never expected, all these years later, to be standing in the Blackwell house as his brother's bride. In truth, she'd never expected to see the inside of the Blackwell house at all.

She shook off the past and studied her new surroundings. The Blackwell family home was legendary around Valentine. Though not overly large by gold rush standards, the house featured every expensive plumbing detail available. According to town lore, Mr. Blackwell's wife had come from wealth. Her family fortune had been amassed through plumbing fixtures, and she'd insisted on an indoor bathtub, running water and eventually a water closet. Folks were still suspicious of a backhouse in the bathroom, and near as Heather could tell, the Blackwells owned the only water closet in Montana.

One of her school lessons featured the mechanics of indoor plumbing. The lessons were especially fascinating for the farm children who mostly made do with water pumps powered by windmills. She'd taught from books without the benefit of a working example, so the water closet drew her attention. Since Sterling was gone, she pulled the chain. There was a clanging sound and water rushed down the brass pipe from the water tank into the porcelain bowl, filling it up, and then suddenly the water in the bowl disappeared. Enthralled, she pulled the chain again.

There was a sink with a spigot and an enormous bathtub with claw feet. The only concession to frontier life was the potbellied stove in the corner for heating. Intrigued by the luxury, she started the coal and set a pail beneath the spigot. A short time later she had the bath prepared, and Gracie was splashing in the shallow, warm water.

By the time they descended the kitchen stairs, they were both as clean and shiny as new pennies. To her delight, the kitchen was extravagantly appointed with wall lamps, a kitchen range, a wall-mounted coffee mill, a box churn with a crank and cast aluminum pots and pans. There were other gadgets whose purposes were a mystery.

Her aunt and uncle had never splurged on anything deemed unnecessary, and their kitchen had been stocked with only the bare minimum. Heather stifled a giggle. Her aunt would be appalled by the apparatus upstairs. A water closet was most definitely a luxury.

The only thing lacking was a full pantry. The shelves were bare save for a bag of coffee beans and a few assorted cans. Sterling obviously didn't eat in the house.

As though drawn by her thoughts, his shadow appeared before the window set in the back door. He knocked and she pulled on the handle. He held a pail of milk in each hand, which he set inside the door.

"You'll want to cover those with a damp cloth." He crossed the kitchen toward the sink. "I'll fetch some ice for the icebox this afternoon."

Heather hadn't even noticed the sturdy piece of furniture. It was an oak cabinet icebox with fancy brass hardware and latches. Sterling opened the door, revealing the zinc lined interior.

He pointed. "The ice block goes there. We cut blocks from the pond in the winter, and keep it stored in hay in a cutout on the side of the hill. I haven't kept anything in the icebox since I've been back. Now that you're here, I'll make certain you have a fresh block whenever you need one."

"Thank you."

"If I'm not here, fetch one of the boys to help. Don't try to carry them alone," he admonished. "They're too heavy."

She figured she was plenty strong enough to carry a block of ice, but she dutifully replied, "I won't."

"If you give me a list, I'll fetch what you need from the bunkhouse. That's where we keep most of the stores these days. The rest can be purchased from town."

Her stomach rumbled. "All right."

Gracie tugged on Sterling's pant leg. "Up. Up."

He scooped her into his arms and she squealed in delight. "How is she doing this morning?"

"Settling in nicely," Heather said proudly. "She slept well and had a bath. I was searching for some breakfast when you arrived."

"I'll have Woodley send up fixings with the supplies." He set Gracie on her feet once more. "Is there anything else you need?"

She tapped her chin with one finger and considered their circumstances. "Not right now."

This was far better than trying to maneuver around in her tiny room attached to the schoolhouse. She'd had to cook dinner on the potbellied stove while nudging Gracie away from the heat with her foot. The Blackwell house was a wonder.

A memory from her childhood home flashed like a picture in her brain: an oriental rug with red and navy knotting. The rest of her memories were from Pittsburgh. That home had been three stories high and narrow. Having an icebox and a stove with more than two burners was a luxury beyond her wildest imaginings.

Sterling snapped his fingers. "The crib. Let me check the hayloft in the barn. That's where most of the old furniture winds up."

His tantalizing masculine scent teased her senses. A shock of awareness coursed through her. She recognized the store-bought soap she'd used this morning, but there was something else, as well. There was hay and barn and a decidedly male musk.

She backed toward the stove. "Does Woodley do the cooking?"

"Yes. Such as it is."

He winked, and a shiver went down her spine. He left her feeling reckless and out of breath. Steeling her wayward emotions, she glanced away. He flashed that same impish wink when he asked for extra potatoes at the café. Whenever she felt herself weaken at his flirtatious behavior, she'd remember that she was getting the same treatment he gave the waitress when he wanted a second helping of a side dish.

This wasn't exactly a promising beginning to her vow of indifference. She had to work harder at keeping a separation between them, at being cordial—but distant.

"I could take over the job of cooking," she said. "If you want."

"That's Woodley's job." Sterling's mouth quirked up at the corner in a half smile. "He's been hired to do the cooking. Though I don't suppose the boys would be opposed to a pie or a loaf of bread now and again to break up the monotony."

"Then that's what I'll do."

Standing this close to him, she felt something akin to fear. Years ago she'd climbed a tree and slipped from one of the taller limbs. She recalled the feeling of falling, of being out of control and crashing to the ground. The air had whooshed from her lungs as she lay there stunned. She loathed that feeling—the feeling of tumbling out of control. When she gazed at Sterling, she felt as though she was climbing that tree again, inching across a branch that was bound to break at any moment.

Her decision had seemed so simple when she was sitting alone in the schoolhouse. Everything had been neat and orderly in her mind. Logical. And then when he was near, all thoughts of logic and order fled. She didn't appreciate the confusing jumble of thoughts and feelings, because she hadn't planned for them.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"You looked worried."

He was gazing at her with an intensity that left her knees shaky. She must remember that he was only asking those things to be polite. Like complimenting her on her bonnet or lacing his fingers around hers for a step when she took a seat in the wagon. Those were polite, impersonal gestures, meant only for show. He treated the waitress at the café the same as he treated the mayor's wife. She wasn't special.

Heather forced a smile. "I was thinking about what a beautiful house you have."

"My ma designed the house," he said, his voice quiet. "And my pa supervised the construction. I can't take any credit."

He wasn't gazing at her with those mischievous, blue eyes anymore. They were back on neutral ground. She was learning to read him already.

"Why did you agree?" she blurted suddenly.

"What?"

"Why did you agree to the marriage?" She gathered her courage. If she knew the answer, she'd know how to proceed. "You didn't have to. With your family's name and reputation, you could have walked away, but you didn't."

"We're friends, right?"

"I guess." Her hip bumped the stove. "I've never thought about us that way."

"I don't know why we were thrown together. We may never know. I suspect my name was chosen because of my family's wealth. If someone is going to abandon a child, why not choose a rich family? If I'm right, then this was a chance for a Blackwell to do right by you, for once. I saw how much you cared for Gracie. I had a chance to help, and I took that chance. My family has treated you poorly over the years, and I figured we owe you, one way or another."

His words rang true, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

He felt sorry for her. The realization was lowering, though not entirely unexpected.

"You don't have to thank me. I knew what I was doing, Heather." He tipped his hat. "I'd best get back to work. I'll have supper with the boys."

There was a hesitation in his voice, as though he considered the whole arrangement temporary. As though someone might come for Gracie at any moment. But he was wrong. Folks didn't come back for girls. He'd discover the truth soon enough.

"Thank you," she said. "For the milk."

“If there’s anything else you need, let me know.”

He left, and the light in the room seemed to dim. He looked so tall, so strongly built, with a brilliant force of leashed energy running powerfully through him. When he left, he took that compelling energy with him.

Gracie reached above her head for a glass set near the edge of the table, and Heather rushed to her side, averting the disaster. “No. No.”

The child flopped onto her bottom, her lower lip thrust out in a pout. “Gra!”

“You’re not doing a very good job of convincing your new pa he made the right choice.”

“Gra!”

Yet she knew she’d made the right decision. Now all she had to do was convince Sterling he’d done the same. Duty was a poor substitution for affection, but at least that was a place to start.

* * *

The first thing Sterling noticed were the blue chintz curtains on the parlor windows. The second was that he’d rapidly become a stranger in his own home.

The blanket assessment wasn’t entirely fair, he amended. He’d become a stranger in exactly half of his home. The floor plan was comfortable without being ostentatious, and lent itself well to the separation. His ma had favored quality over quantity, and his father had provided her with a home that reflected her tastes. The front entry included an ornate carved banister and checkerboard tiled floor. The parlor sported wainscoting three-quarters of the way up the walls, topped by a picture ledge and peacock-strewn silk wallpaper.

Following his mother’s death, his father had ceased entertaining, and the dining room had been transformed into a study with books and ledgers piled on the center table, and a sitting area with overstuffed leather chairs arranged before the fireplace.

Near as Sterling could tell, Heather had not ventured up the main staircase since the brief tour he’d provided the day after their hasty marriage. Instead, she gained access to the second floor exclusively by the kitchen stairs.

The two crossover points were the kitchen and the second-story washroom. They were forced to share the spaces, which meant awkward encounters that he suspected neither of them relished. No matter how he tried, they never seemed to get past the superficial. Their conversations were polite, generic and brief—a fact he found oddly frustrating.

She’d vowed not to disrupt his life, and she was doing her best to honor that. If he found her solution vaguely annoying, he had no one to blame but himself for not encouraging her to be more a part of things.

He splashed water on his face, then stilled and listened for the sounds of Heather and Gracie in the kitchen. Pots and pans clattered, noises he hadn’t heard from that area in years. With only men on the ranch since his ma’s passing, they ate in the bunkhouse.

A band of emotion squeezed around his heart. Even a decade after her death, he was acutely aware of the loss of his ma.

His parents had met and married because the social structures had shifted following the war. His pa had married above his station, and his ma’s money had funded the fledgling ranch. They were cordial to each other but never affectionate. Not that he’d paid much attention to that sort of thing as a child.

All in all he had no complaints about his upbringing. They’d had the nicest house in the territory, the largest barn and the best piece of land in Montana. His father had been a hard and unyielding man, but as the second son, Sterling had escaped the worst of his temper. Dillon, on the other hand, was being groomed for his place at the helm of the Blackwell family legacy, and there was no time for cossetting.

The scent of brewing coffee wafted from the kitchen, and Sterling wiped the last flecks of shaving lotion from his face.

Gracie perched on two Montgomery Ward catalogs with a towel secured around her middle and tied to the rungs of the chair. Her concentration intense, she pinched an edge of toast and aimed for her mouth. After a few misses, she managed to devour the bite.

The child was miniature perfection with tiny hands, long-lashed eyes and a perfect little button of a nose. Because of the separate spaces in the house, their interactions had been limited, but the child struck him as smart and amiable.

Heather turned from the stove and his heart did an odd little flip. Tendrils of damp hair clung to her forehead, and her cheeks were flushed from the heat. She wore a gingham dress in blue with a floral embroidered apron wrapped around her waist.

She'd made it clear the marriage arrangement was strictly for the child, and he'd accepted the terms. A part of him held back too, sensing their union was temporary. The circumstances surrounding Grace's arrival haunted him. Last evening he'd stared at the Return of Birth, examining the handwriting for any clues to the origins.

The practical side of him wanted to solve the mystery and learn the truth. But another part of him feared that if he discovered the truth, he'd wind up hurting Heather. She'd convinced him the child was better off not knowing who had abandoned her, and he agreed. Mostly. There was an underlying tension in the house they both felt. He kept waiting for a change in the wind, a darkening of the clouds that portended another tornado.

"You look lovely this morning," he said, hiding his discomfort behind a layer of amiable pleasantries.

"Would you like flapjacks?"

With an offhand smile in his direction, she wrapped a scorched flour sack around the handle of a pan on the stove, then lifted the skillet.

She hadn't even acknowledged the compliment. Perhaps it was too early in the morning for charm.

"Please," he said.

He took a seat across from Gracie. With brisk efficiency, Heather served him a plate of flapjacks and a side of bacon. Next she poured coffee, taking care to place the cup well out of Gracie's reach. As a finishing touch, she added syrup and a jar of applesauce to the table.

He might as well have been a stranger dining in a café. He braced his wrists on the edge of the table. If they were going to spend the rest of their lives together, or even just the rest of the month, he wanted to at least feel like a member of the family and not a boarder in his own home. They might have been rushed into the situation, but there was no reason to act like strangers.

She cocked her head toward the door. "Someone sounds angry."

Sterling tuned into the sound of a dog barking. "That's Rocky, the new sheepdog."

He left the details vague, inviting her to make a comment about the dog. Instead she took the seat beside Gracie and held out a spoonful of applesauce toward the child. Gracie gummed the offering, revealing her two lower teeth.

Sterling gestured with his fork. "When does she start feeding herself?"

"I don't know." Heather's shoulders stiffened. "I suppose when she can hold a spoon."

"I didn't mean anything by the question," he said, sensing her uptight manner. If he spoke out against the child at this stage, he feared he'd start an argument. "Just asking."

Heather was fiercely protective of the child. Even considering the little contact between the three of them, he'd discerned that much. If he didn't know better, he'd question her attachment. But he did know better. While in Butte, he'd visited the family she'd stayed with during her time in town. They'd been adamant that Heather wasn't pregnant during her visit. Their shock at the mere idea had bordered on comical. Living in close quarters with Heather and Gracie this past week had reinforced his conclusion.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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