

Love Inspired HISTORICAL

Montana Groom
of Convenience

LINDA
FORD

Big Sky Country

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Montana Groom Of Convenience

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Their Marriage Bargain Carly Morrison's father issues an ultimatum: get married or lose her ranch. But while she can rope and ride as well as any man, leading one to the altar is another matter—until newcomer Sawyer Gallagher suggests a marriage of convenience. Their arrangement might be a sensible solution to her predicament but Carly's growing feelings are a genuine complication. Desperate to provide a home for his orphaned sister, Sawyer takes a chance on lassoing himself to headstrong cowgirl Carly. He's convinced he's too hardened by life to love anyone...until their union is threatened. Is it too late to turn this practical partnership into a real Big Sky family?

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"Poor Jill. I can't imagine losing both parents."

"Even worse, she acted so badly that no one would keep her."

"She was hurt and fighting her pain. That little girl is a fighter," Carly said.

"I can never hope to replace the home she's lost."

Carly tried to not let it bother her that Sawyer spoke as if he was alone in this. She gently corrected him. "No, we can't. But we can give her something else. A new beginning. A chance to learn that love is still an option."

They had stopped walking and faced each other. He searched her gaze so intently that her eyes stung. She didn't look away. Didn't want to end this moment and prayed he would see that she included him in her hope of a happy future.

A smile began in his eyes and spread to his mouth. "Love is an option. That sounds very hopeful."

She sensed an unasked question. Did he wonder if love was available to him? She'd married a stranger. Their agreement was to remain businesslike. But did he sometimes want more?

LINDA FORD lives on a ranch in Alberta, Canada, near enough to the Rocky Mountains that she can enjoy them on a daily basis. She and her husband raised fourteen children—four homemade, ten adopted. She currently shares her home and life with her husband, a grown son, a live-in paraplegic client and a continual (and welcome) stream of kids, kids-in-law, grandkids and assorted friends and relatives.

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Thy word is a lamp unto my feet,
and a light unto my path.

—Psalms 119:105

Dedicated to mothers who teach their children to find answers in the Bible, who help them commit verses to memory so that the Word guides their footsteps. My mother was such a woman and this book is especially dedicated to her memory.

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[Chapter One](#)

Bella Creek, Montana, 1891

They were dead! His plan had been to deliver his eight-year-old half sister, Jill, to her mother's cousin and her husband in Bella Creek. The local sheriff's explanation that the couple had passed away several months ago had brought a stop to that idea.

Twenty-three-year-old Sawyer Gallagher stared at Jill as she devoured her breakfast. He didn't know the first thing about little girls, nor what they needed. He didn't even have a home. For years, he had wandered from place to place. Now what was he supposed to do with his little sister? He couldn't take her with him on a cattle drive or even if he got a job as a ranch hand. That sort of life wasn't suitable for a young girl.

As he pondered his problem and how to solve it, the words of the conversation at a nearby table reached him.

"He's going to sell the ranch."

Sawyer angled his head to study the woman who spoke with such feeling. He couldn't say if she expressed anger or pain. His position gave him a view of the woman's profile. She leaned toward her friend, strands of straw blond hair drifting about her face. The rest was in a loose braid hanging down her back. She wore a dark blue print dress.

His gaze went downward and he grinned at the sight of a sturdy pair of cowboy boots peeking out from under her skirts. Both the boots and hem of her dress were caked with mud.

He returned his attention to the pair at the table. Her companion was also blonde though much darker. And much neater.

"No! You can't reason with him?"

"You do realize we're talking about my father—the most stubborn Scotsman I've ever encountered."

Her friend chuckled. "I dare say he's the only one you've ever encountered."

The girl shuddered. "Don't care to meet another." She leaned closer to her companion. "Do you know what he told me? That I need a man to run the ranch now that he's been injured. Doc says his leg won't mend properly. Says he will never be able to use it like he used to. He can't ride anymore. Can't walk behind the plow. Can't drive Big Harry." With each item on the list, the gal's voice grew more sorrowful and her shoulders sank.

"I'm sorry to hear that. But, Carly, he's never allowed you to work with the Clydesdale."

She sat up straight. "I could." Her shoulders sank again. "But he forbids me to do so. Says it takes a man."

Amusement sparkled from the second woman. "So you're out to find a man?"

Carly, as her friend called her, jerked forward. Her jaw jutted out. "That's exactly what I'm going to do. I said I would hire someone but Father says only marriage will ensure stability so I need to find someone to marry." Her gaze circled the room, momentarily rested on Sawyer, lowered to Jill across from him and returned to her companion.

Sawyer's breath whooshed out. He had the feeling he'd just escaped disaster.

"You'd marry to save the ranch?"

Sawyer shared the speaker's astonishment.

"Indeed, I would. Too bad your brothers are already married. You don't happen to have some male, unmarried cousins I haven't heard of?"

"I can't believe you're asking."

"It's not like I'm expecting love and romance. I only want a man to sign a piece of paper and pretend to be my husband."

"Carly Morrison! Dismiss this notion at once. It's folly. Better to pray God changes your father's mind."

"Might as well ask for the mountains to disappear." Miss Morrison sank back.

"There's always Billy Cameron." The woman laughed.

Carly shuddered. "Please, I'm not that desperate. You can smell the man coming a mile away. I've been with Father to visit him. The man never washes his dishes. Just lets his dog lick them clean. Yuck."

"Glad to hear you aren't that desperate." Her companion rose. "I must go. I'm going to ask Hugh to pray for you."

"So long as you both pray I'll find a husband." She scowled. "Father has given me two weeks to do so."

"That doesn't even give you time to find a mail-order husband." The friend pulled on her gloves. "I'm sorry but it doesn't sound very hopeful, does it?"

"There must be someone." Miss Morrison brightened. "I just have to find him."

Her friend left, shaking her head.

Sawyer shifted so he could see the woman still sitting at the table. Youngish, maybe twenty though that was but a guess. He wasn't able to judge a woman's age. She was pretty enough from what he could see. He'd been mildly surprised to see her brown eyes...unusual in someone with such fair hair. She was a little on the small size. He supposed, like most places in the west, there were a dozen men to every woman. So why wasn't she already married? Instead, she was desperately looking for a husband.

He was desperately seeking a home for Jill.

His mind clicked like a tightly wound watch.

Jill burped loudly and he made up his mind.

"Jill, stay here while I speak to that lady." Taking her compliance for granted, though compliance and cooperation had been sadly lacking from the beginning of this journey, he pushed his chair back and rose to his feet.

* * *

Carly planted her elbows on the table and buried her face in her palms. Father could be so unreasonable. Two weeks to find a husband! That was impossible. Besides, she didn't want a husband. But she did want the ranch. She'd been mostly running it for several years now, though Father had steadfastly refused to let her handle Big Harry, insisting the plow horse was too much animal for a bitty thing like her.

The chair across the table scraped on the floor and someone sat down. Carly jerked up, expecting Annie had returned, perhaps having recalled an unmarried cousin. Instead she stared at a stranger.

Wasn't this the man who had been seated at the next table? She darted a glance out of the corner of her eyes. Yes, the little girl sat alone, watching Carly and the man.

"Excuse me," Carly said, returning her attention to the stranger. "This is my table."

He didn't pay any heed to her hint that he should leave. Didn't even address her comment. "I couldn't help but overhear part of your conversation."

How dare he listen to her painful discussion with Annie? "Didn't your mother teach you it was rude to eavesdrop?"

He lifted one shoulder dismissively. "She might have if she hadn't died when I was seven."

"I spoke out of turn. I'm sorry." Wasn't Father always telling her she was far too free with her comments? Given that he wasn't opposed to speaking his mind, he could hardly expect otherwise.

The man across from her dipped his head in acknowledgment. "It would seem you have a problem."

She gave no indication that she understood what he meant, her insides burning to think someone had overheard her conversation with Annie.

"I also have a problem." His gaze went to the little girl.

Carly's eyes went the same direction.

The untidy little girl scowled at them, then turned away, swiped her plate with her dirty fingers and sucked the bacon fat from them. She gave them a look of pure challenge that brought a fleeting smile to Carly's mouth. It was a look she herself had honed over the years. For all the good it did her in the end. Father told her he didn't care how much fire she shot from her eyes, there were certain things he would not let a daughter of his do. Remembering that brought her thoughts back to her quandary.

Carly could see the child might be a problem but didn't see how it involved her. She didn't have time to deal with a child. She had to find a husband.

"That's my little sister, Jill. She's eight and her parents are dead."

"Poor little girl." Carly studied the child more closely. She had light brown hair that hadn't seen a brush in days. Brown eyes that challenged everyone and everything they encountered. A trail-dusty brown dress. Scuffed shoes that were swinging back and forth. Her heart went to the child. She must feel very alone. At least she had a brother.

How often Carly wished she had a sibling, preferably a brother or two or more.

The man continued, "I thought to turn her over to her second cousin but I just learned the cousin and her husband died last summer."

"Poor child." She revised her earlier assumption. It sounded very much like the little girl had no one who cared about her despite the brother sitting across from Carly. Jill, he'd said, shifted her gaze to Carly's and Carly glimpsed the child's pain and fear before the little one turned away and began dragging the fork over the tabletop, scratching the worn surface.

Dorie, sister to the owner of Miss Daisy's Eatery, hustled over and gathered up the used dishes and cutlery, taking the fork and leaving only a glass of water in front of Jill.

Carly realized the man opposite her waited her attention.

"I find myself needing a home for Jill."

Carly wished him well with his search but she didn't have time to discuss the matter. Nor anyone she cared to suggest who might offer the child a home. She had to find a man willing to marry her.

Though she had her doubts that she'd meet with any man's approval. She had the ranch to offer as enticement even though she hated to use it that way. Hadn't she long ago promised herself that in order for a man to marry her, he'd have to care for her...not the ranch?

Bart Connelly had made her see how important that was. He courted her ardently. She'd admired his interest in everything to do with the ranch operation. Her admiration had cooled considerably after he let her see his real reason for the courtship. He told her he intended to have his own ranch some day and he didn't mean to wait until he'd saved up enough from his wages. That would take far too long. Nope. There was more than one way to get started.

Didn't take Carly long to realize she was his shortcut. She might have been agreeable to a partnership but then he started to tell her how to do things. Started telling her to run along and get prettied up for him. She finally told him he should run along and get himself prettied up.

After that, she refused his company. Let him find someone else to marry in order to get his ranch.

Seems most men expected she'd change for them, get prettied up and let them order her about. She soon stopped bothering with them. But now, here she was needing to marry someone. Bart was long gone, which was a mercy. She shuddered at the thought of giving in to his demands.

She pushed her chair back. She didn't have time to listen to the man's woes. She had to save the ranch. "I'm sorry about your plight but I don't know what I can do to help."

"You can marry me."

She sat down with a thud and opened her mouth but not a word came out. She stared. Blinked. Blinked again. Closed her eyes and told herself she was in a bad dream but when she opened her eyes, the man still sat there, watching, waiting.

She found her voice, though it sounded a bit rusty. "Marry you? You're a stranger. I don't even know your name. I don't know anything about you."

“Name’s Sawyer Gallagher. I’m twenty-three. Been on my own since I was fourteen. Been working on ranches or riding herd on a trail ride. That’s about it.”

That was it? Who was he? What sort of life did he plan to live?

She studied him with narrowed eyes. Dirty blond hair. Blue-green eyes. Three days’ growth of dusty beard. A trail-soiled faded blue shirt. A look that shouted don’t mess with me. A man used to being in charge.

She almost shivered. No. She could not see herself married to this man.

Except to save the ranch?

He leaned forward, his eyes challenging and fierce enough to make her want to sit back and put more distance between them. “You need a husband so you can keep your ranch. I need a home for Jill.” He looked down as he continued, not allowing her to read his expression. “I know what it’s like to grow up homeless and drifting. It’s how me and my pa were until he married Judith and they had little Jill.” He paused.

When he resumed speaking, his voice had deepened and his words came slowly as if he found them difficult to say them. “I learned not to care about people or places ’cause I knew they weren’t going to last. It killed something inside me so that I don’t feel things anymore.” He lifted his head and she sat back at the way his eyes blazed. “I don’t want Jill to end up like me.” The fire in his gaze died and she could have been looking into a bottomless pit for all she saw.

She swallowed hard. Not often a man made her feel small and vulnerable but something about this man did. He wasn’t big. Annie’s brothers were far bigger. But his soulless eyes unnerved her.

He went on, not hurrying, yet she felt his intensity. “I want nothing but a permanent home for my sister. No emotional ties. No expectations except for me to do the ranch work and you to teach Jill how to feel safe.”

Their glances went to the child. She picked her nose and wiped it on her already soiled dress. “I don’t suppose learning a few manners would hurt either.”

“No strings attached?” Why was she even considering this? One reason and one only...to keep the ranch. She looked again at the little girl. Maybe two reasons. The second, to give a child a home where she would be safe and secure.

“No strings.” His voice was flat but firm.

“You’d have your own bedroom?” Her cheeks burned at the question but she had to be sure they were clear on this matter. She did not want to be controlled by a man indoors or out.

“Either that or I’ll sleep in the barn.”

“No need for that.” There was a small room next to Father’s that was used mostly for storage. It would be adequate.

Except this wasn’t going to happen. She wasn’t seriously considering his suggestion. No. She wasn’t that desperate.

“I heard you say your father gave you two weeks.”

She stared at the wall behind him. Could she find someone else to marry in two weeks? As Annie said, it didn’t allow time to advertise for a husband, and even if it did, there would not be enough time to get to know and evaluate any man who responded. No one from around here would marry her knowing how she conducted herself. Every man she’d ever met wanted her to go to the house and pretty herself up. The few single men in the area who might be desperate enough to marry her had already been dismissed as old, ugly, mean or simpering. Old Billy Cameron was but a sample of what she had to choose from.

She simply didn’t have the luxury of picking and choosing.

She squirmed in her chair. But to marry a complete stranger!

Jill got down from her chair and kicked at the table legs.

“Jill,” Sawyer said. “Don’t do that.”

The child kicked harder, causing the table to hop away. Then she gave Sawyer a look full of disdain, challenge and—

Despair.

Carly saw it. She felt it and her heart went out to the orphaned child who didn't know where she belonged. She couldn't imagine the pain of not having a home, no place to call one's own.

If Carly didn't marry and present her father with a man to help run the ranch, she was about to lose the place she called home, the place she considered her own.

"Okay. Let's do it." She would marry the man, ensure her own home and give Jill one at the same time.

* * *

Sawyer didn't move a muscle. Didn't blink. Didn't so much as allow his eyelids to flicker, even though the woman's ready agreement left him feeling like he teetered at the brink of a bottomless ravine. Shouldn't she have asked a lot of questions about him and his character?

"I'm an honest, honorable man." The words fell out of his mouth. "I'll treat you right."

Carly gave him narrow-eyed study with those dark brown eyes. He had to concentrate not to shift his gaze away. "Mr. Gallagher, you might hit me once, but you'll never hit me twice. I'll see to that. I'll not tolerate a man who rules with his fists."

He didn't know if he should laugh at the idea of this little gal getting all feisty or congratulate her on her stand. "Warning duly noted." He wondered if she heard the humor in his voice, then remembered she wouldn't. He'd kept his responses cooled for so long that he seldom felt them and even less often did others recognize them. "But completely unnecessary. I'd never hit a woman or child."

Her lips pursed. "I won't abide rough treatment of my animals, either."

He nodded. "You and I see eye to eye on that matter."

She studied him so hard he felt something inside shudder.

To avoid her gaze, he turned to Jill. "Her parents died right after Christmas." It was the last time he'd been home and he'd stayed only two days, anxious to be on the move. Mostly from not wanting to feel like an outsider to the happy family of his pa, Judith and Jill, although Judith did everything she could to include him. He'd seen the pain in her eyes and Pa's when he rode out.

The neighbor said they had taken sick shortly after he left and the fever had claimed their lives. "I was away and when I came home, I found Jill living with an elderly woman who provided nothing but a roof over her head and some meals. From what I could see, Jill took care of herself, which meant she ran wild. She'd been shuffled from home to home. No one wanted to keep her."

He studied his little sister. Already he saw the evidence of her reaction to losing her parents and having a home where no discipline or affection was given. "She accepts no affection. Rebuffs attempts of people to befriend her." He gave a sound that was half snort, half amusement. "Course I'm hardly one to judge what a normal reaction is." He subdued a sigh. "Like I said, I don't want her to end up like me."

"I expect she's just wanting someone who will accept her as she is and be there for her every day."

Those words ricocheted back and forth inside Sawyer's heart. Every day? He'd long ago learned there was no such thing as counting on someone every day. He'd discovered the best way to keep from being hurt was to not allow himself to feel anything, not to trust anyone to always be there.

He'd gotten really good at it. So good that women considered him cold and distant. He'd tried to change when he met Gladys Berry. She talked of home and family...things he thought he wanted. He soon learned he couldn't become what she wanted and she'd stopped letting him call on her. Accused him of having no feelings—something he could not deny. Said he was a loner and would always be so.

He'd been better off than Jill. He'd had his pa. Sort of. Pa was there in body but absent in every other way until he had met and married Judith.

By marrying Carly, Sawyer could hope to give Jill what Pa had found. He wasn't sure what to call it but figured security best described it.

"How soon you want to get married?" he asked.

"Today suit you?"

Long years of hiding emotions enabled him to sit perfectly still, revealing none of his surprise. "Today is fine by me." There seemed nothing to be gained by waiting except to allow her time to change her mind. "You know someone who will marry us on such short notice?"

She rumbled her lips. "Now that might pose a problem."

"How much of a problem?"

"I don't know if I can find anyone to agree to our plan."

He should have known this wouldn't work out. With studied indifference, he got to his feet. "In that case, I'll be moving along. Nice talking to you." He grabbed his worn and battered cowboy hat from where it hung on the back of the chair and reached for Jill's hand. "Come on." Jill raced ahead and was out the door before he'd made three steps.

Knowing she could get into all kinds of trouble in less time than it took to say her name, he rushed after her.

"Mr. Gallagher, wait just one minute."

He ignored Carly Morrison's imperative call and hurried out the door just in time to see Jill dash into the middle of the street, right into the path of an oncoming wagon. He rushed after her, praying he'd get there in time to prevent a tragedy.

Chapter Two

Carly stood with her hands on her hips, staring after Sawyer as the door slapped shut behind him. What had caused him to up and disappear like that? All she'd said was...

She groaned as she recalled her words. Did he think the problem she mentioned was unsurmountable? Her only concern was that the preacher, Hugh, who was also Annie's husband, might decide to object. She sniffed. Not that he had any right to. Hadn't he and Annie planned to marry solely to provide a home for his little son? Of course, they had soon fallen in love.

Not that Carly had any intention of doing that. She wanted nothing but to keep her ranch. Certainly didn't want a man thinking he had the right to tell her how to act or dress.

Either Sawyer thought she meant there was no one to marry them or else Sawyer had changed his mind. But would it hurt for him to come right out and say so instead of leaving her standing in the middle of Miss Daisy's Eatery, trying to gather her thoughts together?

Annie had paid for their tea so she chased after the man with every intention of making him explain himself.

Before she reached the door, she heard people shouting and a woman screaming. She hurried outside to see what the fuss was all about.

Her breath stalled in her chest at the sight before her. Sawyer held the head of two struggling horses that tossed their heads and reared. A man in the wagon the horses were harnessed to stood on his feet and reared back on the reins, trying to get control of the frightened animals. And then she saw Jill and her heart slammed into her chest.

The child lay in the street. Carly knew in a flash what had happened. Jill had run into the street without checking to see it was safe. It happened far too often. She remembered when Annie's niece, Mattie, had almost been run over last summer. Mattie's father had ridden up and swept her to safety. Jill had not been as fortunate.

She was annoyed at how her skirts hindered her—she'd only worn a dress to town because of some foolish hope it would make a man consider her as marriage material. Now they were a hazard to her. Carly grabbed the hem and lifted the fabric to free her to run as she dashed into the street.

Ignoring the flashing hooves of the rearing horses, she scooped up the girl and carried her to safety in front of Marshall's Mercantile. Paying no attention to the questions from the spectators, she

laid Jill gently on the step and bent over to wipe the tangled brown hair from the child's face. Her eyelids fluttered, then brown eyes went wide with shock.

"Are you hurt?" Carly checked each limb. A lump bulged on Jill's forehead.

"I'm okay."

It was the first time Carly had heard her speak, so she couldn't judge if the huskiness was from her fright or if that was the child's normal voice. She looked around, hoping Dr. Baker or his daughter were among those hovering nearby.

"Kate." Relief flooded her at the sight of the doctor's daughter pushing through the crowd. Kate had light brown hair that she often wore in a careless bun. So typical of the woman. Caring for others mattered far more than looks. Her brown eyes filled with kindness.

"Is she hurt?" Unmindful of the dusty wooden sidewalk that would soil her dark skirt, Kate knelt beside Carly and deftly ran her hands over Jill's legs and arms, then pulled down each bottom eyelid to look into Jill's eyes. "Take her over to the doctor's office. I'll examine her more closely there."

Carly shoved aside the offers of help to carry Jill and lifted her against her chest. Jill crossed her arms and stiffened. Poor child to be in the arms of a stranger. Something warm and protective blossomed in Carly's heart. This motherless child deserved to be sheltered and cherished. "I'll take care of you," she murmured to Jill.

It was a promise she meant to keep. Somehow she would persuade Sawyer there was no need to retract his offer of marriage...an agreement between them was in the best interests of all three of them. No. Only two of them. She didn't know what Sawyer needed, nor did it matter so long as Jill got her home and Carly got her ranch.

She reached the doctor's house and glanced back to see Sawyer looking about. His gaze found her and when he saw she held Jill, he handed the calming horses to another man and trotted in Carly's direction. She didn't wait for him but carried Jill inside to the examining room.

Kate brought a basin of warm water. "I need to see what's under the dirt."

"I'll do it." Carly took the wet cloth and gently washed Jill's face. All the while, Jill watched her solemnly. Carly smiled. "Tell me if I hurt you."

"It don't."

Kate stood beside Carly.

"Kate, this is Jill. She's eight years old." She smiled at the child. She was quite lovely with all the dirt removed. "Jill, this is Mrs. Marshall." Kate had married Conner Marshall, one of the three sons of the Marshall family who had built the town. "She's a nurse. She'll see if you're hurt."

Carly stepped back to allow Kate more space.

The door banged open and Sawyer strode through, jerking off his worn hat but not slowing until he was at his sister's side. "That was a foolish thing to do. You could have been killed."

Jill's eyes went from hungry to angry. "I'm not even hurt."

"I was about to see if that is so or not," Kate said.

Carly introduced Kate to Sawyer.

Kate waited for Sawyer to realize he needed to step back. "Can you tell me what happened?" She examined Jill as she talked.

Sawyer answered though Carly wondered if Kate had directed the question at Jill. "She ran full speed into the street without looking to see if it was safe. The horses saw her and reared in fright. If she hadn't tripped and fallen, she would have been kicked." He spoke in a flat tone.

Carly wondered if he was as unfeeling about seeing his sister in such dire straits as he sounded.

Kate stepped aside. "Apart from the goose egg on her forehead, she seems unhurt. I suggest you keep her awake for the next eight or twelve hours to make certain she's okay."

Now was the time for Carly to speak her mind. "Kate, can you watch her for a minute?"

Kate nodded, her brows raised in curiosity.

Carly turned to Sawyer. “May I speak to you in private?” Not waiting for him to agree or otherwise, she headed for the door that led to the doctor’s living quarters. With Sawyer on her heels, she crossed the front room and entered the kitchen, sparing a quick glance around.

Last spring, Kate, her friend Isabelle and Sadie, the teacher, had all arrived in town, along with Dr. Baker. The doctor and teacher were to replace those who had left after the devastating fire that had leveled a block of buildings in Bella Creek. Now the three female newcomers were married—all to Marshall men. And Annie Marshall, Carly’s best friend, had recently married Preacher Hugh Arness. Carly had never thought to be joining them in wedlock but her father had left her little choice.

She reached the outer door, was about to grab the handle and head outside, then changed her mind. It would be much harder for him to escape her demands with her back pressed to the closest exit. “Did you offer to marry me only to mock my need?”

He sank back on his heels. “Did you not say there would be a problem in getting married?”

“Nope. Sure didn’t. Said it might be a problem getting the preacher to agree to marry us.”

His eyebrows lifted marginally. Barely enough for her to guess that he wondered what she meant.

“That woman you saw me with earlier is my best friend, Annie. She’s one of the Marshalls. Of course that means little to you at this point but you’ll soon learn that the Marshall family is pretty much in charge of Bella Creek.”

His eyebrows remained arched in question.

“Grandfather Marshall started the town so people would have a safe place to live. Until then, Wolf Hollow was the only town in the vicinity and it’s a rough mining town.”

He nodded, though she wondered if anything she said was making sense to him.

She continued, “Annie married the preacher. Preacher Hugh Arness. Likely they’ll have an opinion about my decision to marry a stranger.” She considered the alternatives and could come up with nothing but asking Hugh to marry them. There was no other preacher nearby and the judge wouldn’t be around until who knew when.

Of course, it might not be a problem if Sawyer had changed his mind. “That is if you were serious about marrying me.” Life had come to a pretty pass when she had to beg a complete stranger to agree to a marriage...or rather, a pretend marriage.

“I’m serious about getting a home for Jill.”

They studied each other.

Carly wasn’t sure what she expected from him but after a moment of silent study, one of the other, she realized he’d said all he meant to say on the matter. “Then we are agreed?”

“I’d say so.”

“Then let’s get Jill and go find the preacher.” She pretended she didn’t feel an uncomfortable tremor in the pit of her stomach. This marriage would change nothing except to have a man in the little bedroom and a child chasing after butterflies.

They returned to the examining room where Kate waited with Jill who now sat cross-legged on the gurney. They both watched Carly and Sawyer step back into the room; both wore curiosity-filled expressions. Carly knew that Kate must wonder what Carly needed to say in private to a stranger, and Jill likely wondered how their conversation would affect her.

“She’s fit to go,” Kate said. “Bring her to Father if you have any concerns.”

“How much?” Sawyer asked.

Kate named a sum and Sawyer pulled the coins from his pocket and gave them to her.

Carly watched Jill. What they planned to do was partly on behalf of this child. Didn’t she need to be informed?

“Let’s go,” Sawyer said.

Jill jumped down and headed for the outer door.

Sawyer caught her arm. “No more running into the street.”

They exited into the empty waiting room.

“Wait,” Carly said.

Sawyer stopped and gave her a hard look. “You’re changing your mind again?”

“I never changed my mind before and I don’t plan to now. But I think we should tell Jill our plans.”

His gaze went to his sister. “Why?”

Annoyance colored her voice. “Because it concerns her.”

Sawyer and Jill both looked at her, one as silently demanding as the other. Carly sucked in air. Fine. She’d be the one to tell the news.

She sat on the bench so she’d be face-level with Jill. “I’m very sorry about your mama and papa. You must miss them very much.”

Jill blinked twice and then grew impassive.

Carly glanced at Sawyer. His expression matched Jill’s. The child had already learned to hide her feelings, had learned it well from someone who admitted to being very good at it.

“Sawyer—” She stumbled a bit at using his name so freely, but seeing as they were to be married... “Well, he wants you to have a home where you’ll always belong.”

Jill’s eyes darted toward her brother. “He’s gonna leave me here, isn’t he?”

“No, sweetie. That isn’t what he has in mind at all. You see I have a very nice home that needs a—” She couldn’t bring herself to say a man. “A family. You need a home. I need a family. So your brother and I are going to get married and we all get what we need.”

Jill stared, her brown eyes intense but Carly couldn’t tell if she approved of the idea or found it loathsome. “Is that okay with you?”

“What kind of home you got?”

“I live on a ranch with my father. We have horses and cows—”

“Puppies and kitties?”

“Not at the moment.” Carly promised herself she’d get one of each as soon as possible. “We had a dog but he died during the winter. He was old.” Carly missed him and hadn’t considering replacing him yet. It was time to think about one now. Every child needed pets.

“I’d have to work?”

“You’d have chores. We all would. It’s how families operate.”

Jill nodded. “That’s what Mama said, too.” She nodded. “Okay.”

Sawyer cleared his throat. “Seems we’re all agreed.”

“Then let’s go find the preacher.” Carly led the way out of the doctor’s house. She turned left, marched past the schoolhouse where Jill would soon be attending, past the town square with trees budding and flowers pushing up through the sod. They turned by the church and went to the manse where Hugh had his office. The three of them stood at the doorway. It felt strange to be coming to this entrance. Carly always went to the door that opened to the kitchen. She knocked.

Hugh opened the door, a smile driving deep dimples into his cheeks. “Carly, go round to the kitchen. Annie’s there.”

“I’ve come to see you.” Remembering the other two, she corrected herself. “We’ve come to see you.”

Hugh’s mobile face sobered and a hard look replaced his smile. He surely must wonder why Carly had brought a man and a child to his office.

“Then by all means come right in.” He waved them toward the pair of chairs facing the desk, realized he needed another chair and snagged one from against the wall.

They sat. Carly to the right, Sawyer to the left and Jill in the middle. Hugh took his place across the desk from them.

Carly had always liked Hugh. He was darkly handsome with a quick smile and those lovely deep dimples in his cheeks. And single-minded. He’d come to town to find his missing son, Evan,

and hadn't given up until he'd rescued the boy. Not unlike Sawyer's situation. Surely he'd see the similarities and it would make him eager to help.

Hugh directed his gaze toward Sawyer. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"Hugh, this is Sawyer Gallagher and his sister, Jill."

The men shook hands, Hugh unmistakably curious. Then he offered his hand to Jill and she solemnly took it.

Hugh returned to a seated position. "Now what is it I can do for you?"

Carly and Sawyer glanced at each other, turned back to Hugh and spoke at the same time.

"Marry us."

Hugh sat back, shock and surprise making his mouth fall open. He sucked in air. "Marry you? To each other?"

Carly nodded.

"How do you know each other?"

"We don't. First time I saw him was this morning after I had tea with Annie."

"I see." He tented his fingers and tapped the ends of them together. His gaze was serious and not exactly affable. "Then may I suggest that this is rather sudden? Perhaps you should wait and get to know each other better."

"Why?" Carly and Sawyer asked at the same time.

Sawyer continued, "We know what we're doing."

Hugh shook his head. "You know nothing about each other."

Carly made a derisive sound. "This from a man who advertised for a mail-order bride."

Hugh had the grace to look embarrassed. "I would have wanted a few details before I actually tied the knot."

"I know all I need to know," Sawyer said, his voice calm. "Like she said to Jill, we need a home and she needs a family."

"She does?" Hugh didn't have to sound like this was unexpected news to him. Even if she'd never before mentioned this need. The truth was she'd never considered such a thing before, but thanks to Father's ultimatum, it had become imperative.

"Does Annie know of your plans?"

"Not yet." Carly hadn't had time to inform anyone.

"Do you mind if I ask her to join us?"

Annie knew why Carly had to do this. She would support Carly's decision. "It's all right by me if it's all right by Sawyer."

"I've no objection." He sat still and patient. As if it didn't matter that he was about to marry a stranger.

Carly eased back until she pressed to the wooden chair. She slowed her breathing and did her best to appear as unconcerned as Sawyer.

Hugh hurried from the room. They heard his murmured conversation with Annie though they could not make out the words. Heard her surprised response, then the pair returned, Hugh carrying a chair for Annie. He put it beside his own.

"You want to get married?" Annie asked, her voice and expression full of shocked surprise.

"I told you I would."

"Yes, but I didn't think..." She shook her head. "I didn't think it was possible."

Carly chuckled, seeing the humor in this situation. "I told you to pray I'd find a husband."

"Yes, but—"

"Is there a problem?" Sawyer asked.

"We know nothing about you," Hugh said.

"There's not much to know."

Carly needed to prove that she had found out the essentials. “He’s twenty-three. Been working on ranches or cattle drives since he was fourteen. Guess that qualifies him to work on the Morrison Ranch. His parents are dead. Jill is his half sister and her mother is dead, too. He came to Bella Creek hoping to find a cousin and her husband but they’ve passed on.” She sat back, feeling quite triumphant.

“Cousin?” Hugh said. “And who might that be?”

His tone carried just enough doubt for Carly to know he wondered if Sawyer made up the information. She had never thought to ask and she really should have.

“Ida and Henry Brown. They had a young son, Hank.”

“The Browns. They passed last spring. Their chimney blocked and they died of fumes.”

Hugh continued to press for more information. “What was your plan when you found them?”

“I thought they would give Jill the sort of home she deserves.”

“And you’d do what?”

“Look for a job. Maybe head to Texas and get on another cattle drive.”

Carly sat up tall and straight. She would not let anyone guess at how this information troubled her. She could live with a man who cared nothing about feelings. Suited her just fine. But a wandering one? How would that meet Father’s requirements? She had no wish to be saddled with an absent husband and a father who believed an able-bodied man was necessary in order for her to keep the ranch.

She knew Annie watched her and guessed at her worry. Again, she smoothed her expression, wanting to hide her feelings from her friends. Soon she’d be as good as Sawyer at revealing nothing.

Perhaps Hugh understood the situation as well for he asked another question. “Once you marry and Carly takes on Jill’s care, what’s to stop you from heading for Texas and leaving her to carry the load on her own?”

“I won’t. I give my word. I keep my word.” A beat of heavy silence met his answer.

Carly knew Annie and Hugh were thinking the same as she. How were they to know if they could trust him?

“A man is only as good as his word.” Sawyer’s voice rang clear.

Carly was convinced. Or perhaps, she admitted, she wanted to believe him so they could proceed with their plan.

Hugh continued. “I can’t marry the two of you without knowing what your religious beliefs are.”

Carly looked at Sawyer. Another question she should have asked.

Not a muscle twitched anywhere on him. Nothing about his expression changed. He was very good at hiding his feelings. If, indeed, he had any. She couldn’t be sure he did at this point.

“I believe in God,” he said when he realized Hugh would not go on without an answer.

Hugh gave a mirthless laugh. “Perhaps you could tell me what you believe about God. Who is He to you?”

* * *

The preacher’s question snaked through Sawyer. He had long ago stopped thinking about God. He couldn’t say when it had happened. “My mama taught me that God loves me.” A rush of long-forgotten memories swept over him. Mama reading the Bible and praying. She’d loved God and yet God had let her and Johnny perish in the fire. How could he trust a God like that?

“How would you describe your relationship to God?” the preacher asked.

Sawyer understood the man on the other side of the desk was reluctant to marry Carly Morrison to a stranger and would leap on any reason to refuse. This would be the reason if Sawyer let it be.

He couldn’t lie, not even to gain the preacher’s approval. As he said, a man was only as good as his word and once that was gone, so was honor and self-respect. It was about all he had left that mattered to him. And now the responsibility of his little sister.

“I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day, he rose again.” The words rolled off his tongue as he

said them from memory. But when had they been committed to his memory? Who had taught him those words? The answer was simple. His mama had taught them to him long ago and they had lain dormant in his brain until he needed to recall them. Thank you, Mama.

“Are you a believer?” the preacher asked.

The preacher hadn’t been specific about what Sawyer believed in. He believed in lots of things. Doing a job to the best of his ability. Never quitting until the task was done. Being kind to children, women and animals. Keeping one’s word. And of course, a God who ruled the world. “Yes.”

Preacher Arness dropped his hand to the desktop. “I’m still not convinced this is the right thing to do.” He pondered in silence a moment, then brightened. “Sawyer, perhaps there are things you want to know about Carly before you commit yourself to spending the rest of your life with her.”

He knew marriage was forever but to hear it in those terms—the rest of your life—gave him pause. Between them, Jill swung her legs. Her hands moved restlessly. He knew the signs. His little sister had about reached the end of sitting still and that could lead to all sorts of unwanted events.

Just then, the door leading to the living quarters creaked open and a small boy peeked through the opening. “Mama, I finished the picture.” The lad looked about the room. “Hi, Auntie Carly.”

“Hi, Evan.” Carly turned her gaze to Sawyer. “This is Annie and Hugh’s son. Why not let Jill play with him while we finish up here?” She had no idea what she suggested. She couldn’t begin to know what disasters Jill was capable of.

But Jill had already gotten to her feet and pushed past Sawyer. He caught her arm and stopped her. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Jill favored him with a scowl fit to curdle his stomach.

“Evan would like that, wouldn’t you?” Mrs. Arness said. “We can leave the door open so we can see them.”

Jill squirmed from Sawyer’s grasp and followed the woman into the other room.

The two children sat in plain view with an assortment of toy animals between them. A small dog flopped down beside them and Jill began to pet it. The preacher’s wife returned to sit by her husband.

Sawyer tried to relax but it was impossible. Every muscle in his body tensed, ready to react to whatever might occur.

“Now back to the business at hand,” the preacher said. “You were wondering about Carly.”

He wasn’t but Sawyer let the assumption go unchallenged.

“I don’t know what she’s told you so I’ll provide a few details. Carly is nineteen years old.”

Sawyer nodded. He would have guessed her older than that but her age made no difference to him. At least she wasn’t forty.

The preacher went on, “She’s a believer. She lives on a small ranch four miles southeast of town along with her father. Mr. Morrison was injured in a wagon accident a few weeks ago. Doc says his leg will never mend properly. Carly’s been doing most of the work around the place since even before her father’s accident but he has never let her handle their big Clydesdale.”

“He’s too much for a wee lassie like you.”

Sawyer knew by the strong brogue with which Carly said the words that she quoted her father.

Preacher Hugh leaned back. “There’s lots more to know about her. And I know there’s lots more to know about you. Why not spend some time learning about each other and come back in a few months to get married?”

“I don’t have a few months. I don’t need to know more.” Carly’s opinion was clear.

“I see no reason to delay.” The sooner Sawyer got Jill settled into a permanent home, the better he’d like it.

Carly planted her fists on her knees. “Nor do I.”

“You’ll need your father’s permission.”

Sawyer knew the preacher was stalling.

Carly bolted to her feet. “He can’t ride but I’ll go ask him.”

The preacher and his wife exchanged looks and grinned. Hugh got to his feet. "I think I better be the one to talk to him." He grabbed his hat and headed for the door. "Annie will serve you tea."

"Wait," Carly said. "At least let me write him a note." She grabbed paper and pencil and hurriedly wrote down some words. She folded the paper and handed it to Hugh.

Sawyer didn't fancy the idea of spending the afternoon in the company of two women. "Can't you just marry us and be done with it?" He congratulated himself at keeping any annoyance from his voice. No need for any of them to guess that he was finding this all rather unsettling.

"An hour for some serious second thought won't hurt." And with that, the door closed behind the preacher.

Carly huffed. "I don't need any serious second thought." She grinned at Sawyer. "Father will agree once he's read my note."

Sawyer couldn't imagine what she'd written that made her so certain. The women left the room. He had little choice but to follow them, though he did so reluctantly. He paused by the two children. Jill ignored him and ran to the kitchen after Evan who followed his mama.

Every carefully honed instinct told Sawyer he should turn left, exit through the door and not look back until he was fifty miles down the road.

"Would you children like some cookies and milk?" Mrs. Arness asked.

"Yes, please," her little boy said.

"Me, too." Jill's tone was almost demanding.

When he last saw his little sister, she was well mannered and full of laughter. He wanted to see that child return to replace the demanding, unruly one she'd become. He recognized all the signs of someone turning her back to the world, to kindness and love. He would do everything he could to reverse that process.

But as he turned right and joined the others in the kitchen, he couldn't decide whether or not he wished Mr. Morrison would refuse to grant permission for a marriage between Sawyer and Carly.

Chapter Three

Carly and Annie normally had no difficulty carrying on a conversation but with Sawyer at the same table, suddenly Carly could think of nothing to say. She felt Annie's glance on her and looked up.

Annie tipped her head toward Sawyer. Talk to him, she mouthed.

Carly understood she had to do so if only to prove to her friend...and herself...that it would not be uncomfortable sharing her table with a stranger. Of course, Father would be there. But he could be dour at times.

She'd be sharing her table. Her house. Her ranch. Her life.

Her throat tightened so she couldn't speak. Thankfully, Annie set a cup of tea before each of them just then and Carly sucked back a mouthful of the hot liquid.

Annie took pity on her and spoke to Sawyer. "Where are you and Jill from?"

"We've come from Libby, Kansas."

"My, that is a long ride for a little girl."

"I suppose so." Sawyer's tone communicated nothing.

Carly couldn't tell if he was surprised at the idea or if he had already considered it or if, indeed, it mattered not at all to him. If she had to guess, she'd go with the last thought simply because he revealed no emotion.

Annie turned to Jill. "Did you enjoy the trip?"

Jill bumped her glass of milk and the contents splashed across the table.

Carly jumped up. "I'll get it." She grabbed the dishrag and mopped up the liquid.

"It's okay. Accidents happen," Annie said.

Carly studied Jill. Surely she was mistaken in thinking the accident had been deliberate.

Jill kept her face downturned. Her shoulders hunched forward.

Carly's heart went out to the orphaned little girl. Perhaps the bump on her head had put her aim off.

By the time Carly had cleaned up the spilled milk, the children had finished their cookies.

"Mama, can we go outside?" Evan asked.

"Yes, of course. Stay in the backyard. And take Happy with you."

The pup ran for the door and barked. The children let him out and followed. Their voices, raised in play, reached those around the table.

"I apologize for the spilled milk," Sawyer said.

"No need. She's just a child."

Something flicked through his eyes before that bottomless empty pit opened up again and swallowed every hint of feeling but it was enough to make Carly wonder if he had a secret concerning Jill.

Now she was getting fanciful. Jill was an eight-year-old. But she did not look at Annie for fear her friend would see a hint of Carly's worries. This time for serious second thought allowed for far too much second-guessing. The reasons for marrying Sawyer were just as valid now as they had been an hour earlier.

She took a cookie from the plate in the middle of the table and passed the plate to Sawyer. He also took a cookie and bit into it.

"These are good." He turned to Carly. "You can cook, can't you?"

Carly caught Annie's eyes, silently signaling her not to reveal anything, then she turned to Sawyer and gave him her best innocent look. "Why? Can't you?"

He held her gaze, allowing her to see nothing. She did her best to do the same.

"What I do best is open a can of beans with my pocketknife. Peaches, too. I can stir up a batch of biscuits if I have to but I'll be the first to admit they aren't very good."

"Might be as good as anything I make." For all you know.

He continued to look at her and she kept her expression bland.

Annie chuckled. "I can assure you, you won't starve to death."

"I could say the same about my own cooking."

Carly laughed at the wry note in his voice. Good to know he could express some feeling, though food might be the only reason he did so. "What more can you ask?"

He swirled the contents of his tea cup round and round, stared at them and gave a little sigh. "I guess it's too much to hope for crispy fried chicken, sweet berry pie and melt-in-your-mouth biscuits."

Carly decided she'd let him wonder about her cooking ability until he got a chance to see for himself. "I don't recall cooking being part of our agreement. You going to start adding in things now?"

"No." One shoulder rose ever so slightly. She wouldn't have noticed had she not been paying close attention. And likely closer attention than one normally would as she tried to figure out what sort of man she was about to marry. Hopefully he wouldn't turn out to be the demanding type that wanted meals served by a gal who had prettied herself up.

Annie shook her head and Carly knew she would abide no more teasing.

Carly shrugged, grinning and feeling rather pleased with herself. It had been fun to try to get some sort of reaction from Sawyer.

A cry from outside jolted all three of them to their feet and they rushed for the door.

Annie was the first into the yard and yelled, "Evan!"

Evan stood in the middle of the yard, pointing toward the tree in the back corner.

Three pairs of eyes followed the direction he indicated.

Jill perched in a branch a goodly distance from the ground, holding Happy, who shivered and whined.

Annie rushed to Evan to console him. "Don't worry. We'll get him down." She turned to Sawyer, her meaning plain. She expected him to settle this problem.

Already Sawyer had crossed to the bottom of the tree. “Jill, come down immediately.”

She shook her head.

“Right this instance.”

“Can’t.” She sounded quite certain.

“You must.”

“Can’t,” she yelled.

“Can’t or won’t?”

Carly went to Sawyer’s side. “Can you go up there and get her to hand you the dog?”

“I don’t think the branch will take the weight of both of us.”

He was right. Only one thing to do. She pulled the back of her skirt up and fixed it at her waist forming a pair of loose trousers. Not for the first time and certainly not for the last, she wondered at the impracticality of women’s wear. Thus girded up, she quickly climbed the tree until she came alongside Jill and reached for the dog. “Let me hand him down before he falls.” She managed to pluck the animal from her arms and shinnied down far enough to hand Happy to Sawyer.

“Are you coming?” she called up to Jill.

“No.”

“Do you want us to leave you here?”

“You can’t leave her,” Annie protested. “It isn’t safe.”

“I’ve climbed lots of tree. Never got hurt. Besides, she got up there. She can get down.” She jumped to the ground, freed her skirts and shook out the wrinkles as best she could. Then she faced Sawyer. If seeing her like this was going to shock him to the core, best they all find out now.

“Thanks for getting the dog.” He put Happy in Evan’s arms.

Carly headed for the house. When she realized no one followed, she turned. “Anyone coming?”

The two adults remained rooted to the spot, watching Jill.

“I can’t leave her,” Sawyer said. “What if she falls?”

Carly slowly retraced her steps. “I don’t think someone who climbed a tree with a pup in her arms will have any trouble getting down with her arms empty.”

Sawyer gave a low sound of disagreement that could be best described as a grunt. “I have no desire to stand by and do nothing and then see harm come to her.”

“Me, either. But I simply don’t think Jill needs help.” Was the child playing games with them? Perhaps testing them to see if she could make them jump to her tune? Like Carly had done when she was younger. Before she learned it was easier to do what needed to be done without waiting for or expecting approval.

“Then why isn’t she coming down?” Sawyer moved closer to the tree and looked up through the branches and spoke to his sister. “You can get down easily. Just lower your foot to the branch below you.”

Jill kept her gaze locked on the distance.

Carly studied the child. There was something about her expression that made Carly change her opinion. Jill’s knuckles were white where she clung to the branch. Her lips were pressed into a narrow line. Perhaps the bump on her head had affected her balance. Whatever the cause, Carly knew the child feared to climb down and she nudged Sawyer aside. “I’ll help her down.”

“I should be the one.”

“As you already pointed out, the branches aren’t strong enough to take your weight.” Already she had her skirts tucked out of the way and began to climb. Again she came alongside Jill. “Can you let go of the branch?”

“Not going to.”

Even though Jill tried to sound tough, Carly caught the thread of fear in her voice. “Okay then, let’s try something else.” She edged closer to Jill, pushed herself to her tiptoes. “Climb on my back and I’ll give you a ride down.” If she made it sound like fun, maybe Jill would forget her fear.

“Don’t want to.”

So she wasn’t going to let go of that branch. Praying the branch would hold the weight of both of them, she hoisted herself up beside Jill. “Will you let me carry you down? It will be fun. Just like when I carried you off the street.” She pried open the fingers of one hand as she talked, hoping her conversation distracted Jill. She freed the hand and pulled one arm about her neck. Then talking softly to Jill, as she would with a frightened colt, she pulled the other arm about her neck. “Hang on.” She needn’t have told Jill to do so. The child’s arms about her neck almost choked her.

Carly began to inch toward the trunk.

The branch upon which she sat, creaked, cracked and bent.

* * *

Sawyer held his breath when he saw the branch under Jill and Carly bow. He would not stand here and be a spectator. He couldn’t live with that sort of memory to add to another he could not erase. He reached the trunk of the tree in seconds and pulled himself upward from branch to branch, ignoring the way they creaked under his weight. He drew even with Carly’s foot and clamped his hand around her ankle. He would stop her from falling no matter what.

“I have you,” he called.

“I’m on my way down.”

They hadn’t fallen. His lung released a gust of spent air.

“You’ll have to get out of the way.” Her voice sounded a little thin but then he had no way of judging whether that was normal or otherwise.

“I’m easing down.” He moved one branch at a time, staying close enough he could catch the pair if they fell. He didn’t jump from the last branch until Carly and Jill were safely on the ground and then he stood face to face with Carly, Jill still clinging to her. He touched the back of Jill’s head. Felt her twitch. Dropped his hand. Did his sister find his touches objectionable? He wouldn’t let himself care about anyone else but this little girl. It pained him to think she resisted his affection. Though he knew he wasn’t good at showing it.

“Everyone is safe and sound.” His voice seemed calm and steady. That was good.

Carly eased Jill to the ground. “Go with Mrs. Arness.”

Jill hesitated, then sauntered toward the woman.

Mrs. Arness took each child by the hand and led them inside.

Carly shook out her skirts, then stood straight as a post, her arms crossed. “I’m trying to decide if I should thank you or be angry at you.”

“Angry? Why?”

“For treating me like I couldn’t manage on my own.”

A shudder snaked through his insides but he remained impassive and unemotional on the outside. “Didn’t you feel the branch give under you?”

“I did and knew I had to grab the tree trunk. Which I did.” She tipped her head from side to side. “I didn’t need help.”

“I didn’t know that. All I could think was I wasn’t about to stand by and do nothing. I know how awful that feels.”

Her interest sharpened. “Perhaps you’d care to explain.”

“Not really.”

“Then let’s be clear that I need no mollycoddling.” She leaned closer. “I can manage fine on my own. I don’t need a man. That’s Father’s idea.”

Something about her anger lit his own and he stuck out his chin. “I watched our house burn down with my brother and mother inside. I didn’t do anything to help. I was afraid to move. To this day, I live with regret over that and I’ve vowed I will never stand by and do nothing when I think someone is in danger.”

She continued her solemn study of him. Something soft flickered through her eyes. “I’m sorry you experienced that and I accept your explanation as apology.”

He choked back a sputter. “It wasn’t meant as apology. Or even explanation.” He reached for his hat, then realized he’d left it in the house and had to settle for scrubbing his hair back. “And you can forget I said anything about the fire. I don’t want to talk about it ever again.”

She smiled ever so slightly but it was enough for her brown eyes to darken to molten chocolate and make him wonder if he was about to step into a vat of the warm, sweet liquid.

He scrubbed his hair again and wished he had his hat so he could slap it on his head. He needed something physical to release the tightness in his chest as he stared at Carly.

“Then why did you mention it?” she persisted.

He stepped back and shifted to look toward the house. Anywhere but at her warm expression. “So you’d realize that my actions had nothing to do with you. I only reacted because of my vow.” He turned back to scowl at her. “And because you made me angry.”

Her smile grew. “There goes your certainty that you feel nothing.”

He rumbled his lips. “Won’t happen again.”

The preacher rode into the yard and dismounted. He approached them. “Carly, your father gave his go-ahead. Don’t know what you put in that note but he chuckled when he read it and said, ‘Let the lassie marry that man. It might prove interesting.’”

The preacher glanced from Carly to Sawyer. “Have I interrupted an argument?”

Neither of them answered.

“Perhaps you’ve changed your minds about this marriage?”

Sawyer’s heart bounced against the walls of his chest. He should have been more careful of how he spoke. Not that it was something he usually had to concern himself with. But now, having seen a glimpse of his soul, Carly would have cause to refuse this marriage.

But to his surprise, she took his arm and marched him toward the house. “Nothing’s changed. We both have reason for this and I think we understand each other well enough.”

Sawyer firmly dismissed any doubt he had. As far as he could see, he didn’t have much choice. Besides, how hard could it be to have a pretend marriage, a job on a ranch and a home for Jill all with the same agreement?

Chapter Four

Carly had it all figured out in her head. Marry the man. Go home and life would go on as it had since she’d started working the ranch when she was fifteen. Against her father’s wishes, although she had done plenty to help before that. His protesting noise meant nothing as he clearly needed the help. He didn’t like riding the range, didn’t like pushing cows out of coulees or roping an ornery steer to tend a hoof. She did like it and she did it well, so they had settled unto a comfortable routine. He farmed the few acres he had plowed to raise feed and wheat for their flour. She did the cow stuff.

The roles were perfectly clear.

Sawyer would help her maintain those roles. He could take Father’s place in the way the ranch was run.

But if he thought she’d agreed to marry him because she needed him—

Well, she hoped she’d set him straight on that matter.

She resisted an urge to bend down and rub her ankle where he’d grabbed her. Indignation rose within her. Even if he’d promised himself to not stand by when he saw someone in danger, it didn’t give him the right to be so indiscreet.

But marriage would.

She shook her head to dismiss the idea. They’d agreed on the terms of their marriage and it did not include any privileges.

At least Father had given his permission. She ducked her head to hide her smile as she thought of the note she’d written to him.

You said we needed a man at the ranch. I found one. He's strong. Has a little sister. They need a home. So we're going to get married. I think you'll like Sawyer. He appears to be a lot like you—stubborn, a man of his word and when he speaks, he means what he says. Though I doubt he is as stubborn as a Scotsman. I've made up my mind and intend to do this but I would appreciate your blessing.

She hadn't added that Hugh might refuse to marry them without Father's approval.

Her thoughts returned to the present when Hugh asked Annie to be witness to the exchanging of vows. "I'll call Augie East to be the other witness." Hugh left to go ask the blacksmith who also served as undertaker to join them.

When the door closed behind him, Annie broke into tears, trying to wipe them from her face before the children noticed.

"You two go play with Evan's toys on the hearth," Carly said and waited for the children to settle down in front of the cold fireplace to play before she pulled Annie aside. "What's wrong?"

Annie sobbed her reply. "I always dreamed of you walking down the aisle in a lovely white gown as I stood up front to share your wedding day with you."

Carly glanced over to Sawyer, saw that he watched them but he might have been deaf for all she could read of his expression.

She turned back to Annie. "We could get married in the church if it means that much to you." Though she preferred not to take vows before the pulpit. Not that she didn't mean to keep the vows but not in the sense of marriage as God had instituted.

"It's not the same." Annie wiped her tears on the corner of a kitchen towel. "But I know you won't change your mind." She looked past Carly to Sawyer. "She's stubborn like that."

"Hush, Annie, do you want him to change his mind?" Some men saw stubbornness as contentious.

"Better now than to have regrets later."

"I'm not about to change my mind," Sawyer said. "I've given my word and I stand by it."

Annie sniffed. "You're as stubborn as she."

"Not stubborn, ma'am. Just going to do what has to be done."

Hugh returned with Mr. East. He looked from Carly to Sawyer and back again. "I can't say as I like this but it seems you've both made up your minds. Do you want to get married in the church or—"

"Can we just do it in the front room?" Carly knew it didn't make any difference in God's sight where they spoke their vows but she did not want to do it in the church.

"That will be fine." They went into the next room. Hugh stood with his back to the fireplace.

Feeling as awkward as a newborn foal trying to find her legs for the first time, Carly faced Hugh, with Sawyer on one side of her, Annie on the other and Mr. East at Sawyer's far side. She'd never envisioned herself as getting married and if she had, it would not have been like this. But as Sawyer said, they were only doing what had to be done.

Hugh opened his black book of ceremonies. "I will ask yet again, are you sure of this?"

Carly nodded as did Sawyer. The children sat on the hearth, watching. Somehow, seeing Jill in her soiled dress with her hair tangled about her head made Carly straighten her spine. This was the right thing to do.

"Very well," Hugh said. "Even though the circumstances of this marriage are unusual, the vows are the same. You are about to enter into a union which is most sacred and most serious. It is most sacred, because it is established by God himself. You are swearing before God to uphold the tenants of this holy institution." He paused long enough to give them a chance to withdraw their request.

Neither did.

"Very well. If you would face each other." He waited while they slowly turned. "Take each other's hands."

Neither Carly nor Sawyer moved.

Hugh sighed a little. “How do you expect to be joined in marriage if you can’t even hold hands?” He half closed the book. “I don’t know if I can go through with this.”

Carly and Sawyer reached for each other. She was not surprised to learn his hands were work worn and his grasp firm. She tightened her fingers and gave him an equally firm hold.

“Good. Now let’s proceed. Sawyer, repeat after me.” Hugh spoke the wedding vows and Sawyer repeated them, his voice strong and sure.

And then it was Carly’s turn. She met Sawyer’s gaze without flinching and echoed Hugh’s words. Every word a promise to be forever united to this man.

“You have exchanged vows before God and these witnesses. Those whom God hath joined together, let no one put asunder. You may now kiss the bride.”

Carly couldn’t say if Sawyer dropped her hands or if she dropped his but they faced each other with their hands at their sides. She was not going to kiss him. For one thing, he was a stranger. And more important, they had agreed this was purely a contractual union for mutual benefit. Not for romance or any such thing.

Sawyer moved back. “That’s not necessary.”

She also took a step back. “I agree.”

Hugh sighed. “Why am I not surprised? Everyone needs to sign the register.” Hugh led them into his office where the necessary paperwork was completed.

Annie wrung her hands. “I feel bad. You should have a special wedding meal. But I’d be pleased if you’d join us for dinner, plain as it is.”

“Fine. Thank you,” Sawyer and Carly said in unison.

Carly followed Annie back to the kitchen and stood in the middle of the room. She’d been here any number of times and yet nothing looked familiar. Her brain seemed stuck back at the fireplace, saying the words she would now live by.

“I have enough roast pork to make sandwiches if you’d like to help make them.”

“Of course.” But she couldn’t think what to do.

Annie gave a little laugh and pushed her toward the cupboard, handed her a knife and put a loaf of bread on the cutting board. “Slice the loaf and butter it while I slice the meat.”

Carly did as she was instructed. All the while, Annie talked and yet her words echoed inside Carly’s head, making as much sense as the clanging of harness bells.

Annie nudged her aside and laid the meat on the prepared bread. “Would you set out six plates?”

She did so, though she miscounted the plates and had to return one to the cupboard.

Somehow the others appeared and they all sat at the table, Jill at Sawyer’s side, Sawyer straight across from Carly. Carly stared at the man. Her husband. In name only. But it still felt unreal. “Hard to believe I left home this morning, worried Father was about to sell the ranch and now I’m going home with a husband to save the ranch.” Her voice sounded hollow to her and she hoped the others wouldn’t notice anything amiss.

“The Lord works in mysterious ways.” Hugh’s ironic tone was impossible to miss.

Carly laughed a little. “He should have made me a boy so Father would have a son. Then this marriage wouldn’t be necessary.” Her words fell into a pool of silence. She jerked herself to attention. She’d never mentioned such a thing before. Not even to Annie. Such thoughts had been buried long enough for her to think they were dead. Why had they suddenly resurrected? “These are good sandwiches, Annie. Thank you.”

“Like I said, if I’d known you were to be married today, I would have at least baked a cake.”

Carly shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.” She pushed back from the table. “I’ll help you clean up, then we best get home.”

Annie waved her away. “That’s not necessary. You go on ahead. You’ll have lots to do when you get home.” She hugged Carly. “This should really be your honeymoon.”

Carly almost choked. Surely Annie didn’t think—

She didn't dare look at Sawyer, afraid he had overheard the comment.

"You're right. There will be much to do at home." Not the least of which was introduce her husband to her father. That might prove interesting. To put it mildly.

* * *

Jill clung to Sawyer's back as they rode south of town toward the Morrison Ranch.

"You're married to her?" Jill asked.

"Yup. You saw us."

"So she's my aunt now?"

He hadn't thought of it. "No. She's your sister-in-law."

"Maybe I don't like her." She kept her voice flat as if she didn't care but he knew better. Knew his little half sister had endured too many sorrows and disappointments and had begun to tell herself she didn't care about anything. He didn't want her to believe it as completely as he did. It didn't happen immediately and he couldn't say when he'd gotten so good at it that it was now his very nature.

"We'll have a home."

"That don't matter to me." He couldn't see her but knew she lifted her shoulders and let them sag.

"I think it will be nice. Your mama and papa would care."

"Well, I don't."

He tried to think how to make Jill care. Make her realize they were going to stay here. But how could he give her reassurances when he had married a woman he'd met only a few hours ago? He clung to his only hope—she needed him as much as he needed her. That was enough to keep them committed to their vows.

They rode on in silence even though he longed to make Jill believe things would be different now but he couldn't find words. He was too long out of practice at thinking about such vague things.

He glanced about himself. He'd been to Montana before and had liked what he saw. Now he looked at the rolling hills to his left covered with lush spring grass and the trees to his right...some leafed out. Beyond the trees would be the mountains and he promised himself he would go camping in the mountains the first chance he got. Alone.

Now that Jill had a home, he could make such plans.

Carly rode a little ahead of them. She made no attempt at conversation, which suited him fine. Though he might have liked to ask a few questions about the ranch.

She reined in. "Our land starts here. The buildings are there." She pointed to the left.

A cluster of buildings by some trees—pine and cedar perhaps. Plus deciduous trees. Probably aspen. He'd seen a variety of trees in his travels through Montana.

He made out a small weathered house with a rock chimney, a low barn, also weathered, surrounded by corrals and several other outbuildings.

They turned off the road and started down the trail leading to the homesite. As they drew closer, he could see that everything was neat and well maintained. He drew in a satisfying breath for the first time since they had left town.

As newlyweds.

No doubt Preacher Hugh expected the marriage would be real enough even if rushed. If he'd known the exact details of the agreement between Sawyer and Carly, he might have refused to marry them.

But what did it matter to others if the arrangement suited them?

And it did. If he had any doubts, he wasn't about to admit it. Not even to himself. Especially not to himself. He had given his word and would fulfill his vows to the best of his ability and within the boundaries they had agreed upon.

They reached the yard and turned toward the barn. She swung off her horse, less hampered by her skirts than most women he'd seen. And he'd seen a few who rode astride. Didn't have much of an opinion about it except to think riding sidesaddle looked mighty uncomfortable.

He drew to a halt next to her horse but before he could reach back to let Jill down, she slid off, holding to his leg until her feet hit the ground. She put a distance between herself and Sawyer. Perhaps Carly, too, and stood with her arms crossed and a look of pure challenge on her face.

Carly began to lead her horse to the barn, then turned to Sawyer. "There's room for your horse and feed and—" She broke off as she saw Jill. She gave the girl a moment's study, then brought her gaze back to Sawyer, silently asking for an explanation.

He shrugged and led his horse after her. Not until they entered the barn and were far enough away that Jill couldn't hear did he answer. "Too many changes. She's getting so she resents them."

"Then it's up to us to make sure she knows this is permanent."

"It will take time for her to believe it."

She pointed him toward a stall and indicated where to get the feed and find a currycomb. She led her horse into the adjoining stall. As she brushed the horse, she murmured to it.

He tipped his head trying to catch her words but he only made out a few.

"Good boy...changes...surprise..."

He grinned. That about summarized it. Changes and good surprises. At least he hoped they would be good. Only time would tell but he meant to do what he could to ensure things went well. He glanced back to where Jill still stood. Her hands were now at her sides and she looked about, taking in their new surroundings.

Carly put away the grooming tools and straightened. The cowboy hat she'd worn while riding home hung down her back. She smoothed her tousled hair back. He decided he liked the straw color of it. She glanced at her skirts, gave them a shake and then looked at Sawyer.

"You ready to meet my father?"

The thing he'd been ignoring could no longer be ignored. "Ready as I'll ever be." He removed his own hat and smoothed his hair. "If I'd known I was getting married, I would have gotten a haircut and a new shirt."

She eyed him long enough that he ached to turn from her. He didn't. It was far more important to let her see that he was unaffected by her sharp study.

"Too late for that." Her words were flat as if it didn't matter one way or the other to her.

He glanced at his boots. Wouldn't hurt to clean them up a mite but already Carly headed for the door and, seeing how Jill resumed her former stance, he hurried after her, knowing Jill wouldn't move if he didn't.

Jill looked from one adult to the other. Her eyes darted away.

Sawyer guessed at her intention and before she could run, he caught her hand. She tried to jerk away but he had a good hold and they followed Carly toward the house.

He studied it carefully as if it might reveal what sort of life was lived within its walls. A low, log structure. The roof sloped down to cover an open veranda. Matching windows stood on either side of the door. An attached woodshed with its own door. They reached the veranda and climbed the steps.

"It's small," Carly said. "But I think it will be adequate."

For all of us, he added for her. "It looks warm and dry. That's what matters the most." Jill dragged her feet so that he was forced to haul her along. He would tell her everything would be okay but she had no reason to believe him given he didn't have any basis for such an opinion.

Carly straightened her shoulders, making him realize this was equally awkward for her.

She turned the knob and pushed the door open, stepped inside and beckoned them to follow.

Jill skidding at his heels, Sawyer entered a kitchen. He barely had time to register his surroundings before his gaze came to a man sitting at the table, his right leg stretched out, immobile in a splint.

Sawyer's gaze darted from the leg to the man's face. Full white whiskers, snapping brown eyes, a full head of white hair. A big man. How did he sire a woman as small as Carly?

"Dinnae stand with the door open. Come in and show your face."

At the man's robust voice, Jill stopped tugging at Sawyer's hand and pressed to his back.

"Ack, now, no need for the lassie to be afeared of me. I dinnae bite."

Carly snorted. "But you growl a lot. Father, this is Sawyer Gallagher and his sister, Jill."

"Aye. Yer husband I presume." He struggled to his feet and held out a ham-sized hand to shake with Sawyer.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Sawyer managed as his hand was swallowed up.

"Well, now that remains to be seen. Aye?"

Aye, indeed, Sawyer thought as Mr. Morrison leaned over to look at Jill.

"There, there, little lassie. You and I will soon enough be friends." With a groan, the man sank back to his chair and faced Carly. "And you, Carly Morrison—no, wait. It's now Carly Gallagher—I suppose yer well pleased with yerself that you found a husband so quickly. Could be you've jumped from the frying pan into the fire." He laughed heartily.

"Sorry about your accident," Sawyer said, taking in the strain about the man's eyes despite his laughter. "What happened?"

"Ack. What can I say? A foolish old man trying to be a hero."

Sawyer looked at Carly for explanation. "He tried to stop a runaway wagon and slipped on a patch of ice. The wagon ran over his leg."

"Aye and it would not have happened if some fool had not blasted his gun beside the horses." He eased himself to a more comfortable position, then leaned forward. "Now let's have a look at the wee lassie."

Sawyer peeled Jill off the back of his legs and pulled her forward. "Say hello to Mr. Morrison."

She didn't respond. Her jaw jutted out and he knew she wouldn't.

He couldn't force her to. Instead of trying, he glanced about the house. A big kitchen with the table in the middle of the room, the stove and cupboards to one side. A wide doorway opened to the living room. From where he stood, he saw a couple of comfortable looking armchairs, one with a table beside it and a scattering of newspapers and books. A footstool to one side of the chair. He wondered if that's where Mr. Morrison spent some of his day.

Across the kitchen was a closed door. To one end of the kitchen, another closed door. No doubt the bedrooms. He eased slightly to his left and saw another door off the kitchen. The house was small, as Carly said, but more than adequate. He'd shared crowded quarters with a dozen men and slept in the open under the stars. This would do fine for a home for himself and Jill.

No doubt he would soon learn where he and Jill were to sleep and which rooms were used by Carly and her father.

Mr. Morrison took the initiative with Jill. "Hello, little Jill. So yer going to be living with us now." Mr. Morrison eyed the child without saying another word. The silence grew heavy and uncomfortable.

Jill lifted her head and looked at the older man.

Mr. Morrison smiled. "That's better." He nodded. "You have beautiful eyes. You should let people see them more often. 'Tis my guess you have a beautiful smile, too. I can't wait to see it."

Sawyer could have warned the man it might be a long time before he did.

Mr. Morrison sat back and Jill shuffled to Sawyer's side. She didn't touch him. She wouldn't. Sawyer understood. But perhaps living here and being settled would help her remember a time when it was okay to feel something besides caution.

"Well, if you're satisfied," Carly said. "I need to get some beds ready for these people."

Mr. Morrison chuckled. A pleasing sound that spread a little honey to Sawyer's insides. "You mean your husband and his little sister?"

“Uh-huh. I’m going to clean out the little storeroom.”

“Aye. It will be a nice bedroom for the wee lassie.”

“Or for the big brother.”

Mr. Morrison sat upright so suddenly he groaned with pain. He quickly recovered. “Are you telling me your husband is going to sleep there? What kind of nonsense is this?” His voice rose.

Carly dipped water from the bucket on the cupboard and had a long drink. “You said I needed a husband to keep the ranch. I got one. The ranch is safe. But I have no need of a man for any other reason.” She refilled the dipper and offered it to Sawyer.

He drank, more to distance himself from this situation than because of thirst. “Thanks.” He returned the dipper to her and she again refilled it and offered it to Jill, who likewise drank rather desperately. She might try to distance herself from people but she couldn’t help but feel the tension in the room.

“Are ye telling me this marriage is a mockery?”

Carly seemed unaffected by the man’s loud voice. “Nope. Just a contract between two adults.”

Mr. Morrison’s eyes came to Sawyer. Hard, challenging.

Sawyer met the gaze without flinching.

“Yer agreeable to this?”

Sawyer nodded. He was getting tired of explaining it. “We need a family. She needed a man.”

“That so? Seems to me a married man would be wanting to share his wife’s bed.” “Father! Enough. We agreed the marriage was for mutual benefit and that wasn’t one of them. We know what we’re doing.”

Her father sat back. “Aye. So you say.” He grinned and stroked his beard, as content as a cat full of warm milk. “This will be interesting.” He rolled the r.

Carly stared at her father, turned to look at Sawyer and he saw something that made his nerves twitch. A look of surprise, a flicker of fear and then she shrugged.

“I expect it will.”

A little tremor twisted Sawyer’s neck muscles. Had he bitten off more than he could chew?

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