

Love Inspired® HISTORICAL

KAREN KIRST

The Horseman's Frontier Family



*Divided by a
land dispute,
united by love*

BRIDEGROOM  BROTHERS

Mills & Boon Love Inspired Historical

Karen Kirst

The Horseman's Frontier Family

«HarperCollins»

Kirst K.

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The Cowboy Meets His Match Everything Gideon Thornton has worked for is in jeopardy, all because of one stubborn woman. Evelyn Montgomery insists that Gideon's new claim from the Oklahoma Land Rush legally belongs to her. Both refuse to budge—even when the law says that until their dispute is settled, they must share the land. Their family feud has taught Evelyn that Thorntons can't be trusted. Yet day by day Gideon's thoughtfulness to Evelyn, and especially to her young son, shows the real truth. A truth that may mean the end of her claim...and the start of a future big enough to encompass both their dreams. Bridegroom Brothers: True love awaits three siblings in the Oklahoma Land Rush

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Bridegroom Brothers: True love awaits three siblings in the Oklahoma Land Rush

"Until the case goes to court, this is my land," Gideon said slowly. "I don't want you making any changes without my approval. Understand?"

Scrambling up, Evelyn matched his stance. "You've conveniently forgotten whose name is on the stake, Mr. Thornton. Just because you've been living here longer and have made improvements doesn't make it yours. I can do whatever I want. Understand?"

"My stake was in the ground when I left to get help for your husband. Someone switched it. Drake was the only one here."

"He was dying!"

"Your brothers came around to collect his body. In the chaos, my brothers and I weren't watching the stake...."

"What exactly are you insinuating?" she pushed out through clenched teeth.

"Think hard. I'm sure you'll figure it out. Unless you're incapable of thinking for yourself, that is."

How dare he! The outrage churning inside bubbled up. That was the second and last time he insinuated she was a brainless female. Seizing the pail of water she'd brought with her, she dumped it over his head.

* * *

KAREN KIRST

was born and raised in East Tennessee near the Great Smoky Mountains. A lifelong lover of books, it wasn't until after college that she had the grand idea to write one herself. Now she divides her time between being a wife, homeschooling mom and romance writer. Her favorite pastimes are reading, visiting tearooms and watching romantic comedies.

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Karen Kirst



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In his heart a man plans his course,
but the Lord determines his steps.

—Proverbs 16:9

To my “sons of thunder” Austin and Daniel.

My wish for you is that you would grow into godly men of integrity and character with the boldness to always stand up for what’s right. I love you both, my sweet boys.

To the other authors in this continuity, Laurie Kingery and Allie Pleiter. It has been a wild ride, hasn’t it, ladies? Thank you both for your encouragement and wisdom and patience when I needed to vent. Hope to do it again someday.

To my editor on this project, Elizabeth Mazer. Thank you for this opportunity! It has been a pleasure working with you.

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, without whom this book would not be possible.

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Chapter One

Brave Rock, Oklahoma

May 1889

Gideon couldn't have heard right. His ears must be clogged. Or he was dehydrated, which would explain why he'd misunderstood the cavalry officer. Extreme thirst and heat could do that to a man.

Glaring at the fortyish man who'd introduced himself as Private Jesse Wellington, he demanded he repeat his previous statement.

The polished buttons marching down the middle of Wellington's navy blue uniform rose and fell with his long-suffering sigh. Tall and distinguished, the officer had streaks of silver at his temples that lent him a sage air. "I'm here to inform you that your claim to this land has been challenged."

Challenged? "You're joking, right?" After all, he'd planted his stake deep into the earth with his own two hands.

On April 22, the day of the land rush, thousands of settlers had raced to claim a piece of this Oklahoma prairie for themselves. Thanks to President Cleveland and his decision to make the Unassigned Lands available to settlers, scores of people from all parts of the country had seized the opportunity to start over, to build new and better lives for themselves and their families, he and his brothers included.

The private smirked. "The United States Army isn't in the habit of joking about such matters, Mr. Thornton. Mrs. Evelyn Chaucer Montgomery, along with her brothers, Theodore, Brett and Reid Chaucer, are disputing your claim."

His gut knotted up below his sternum. Chaucer. A name embedded in his consciousness, going as far back as his toddler years to the time of the war between the states, a name associated with trouble and turmoil, hatred and discord. The Chaucers—Southern sympathizers to the core—despised his family for their loyalty to the North and its cause. That they had turned up here, in this start-up community of Brave Rock, struck him as downright suspicious.

Beyond Wellington's left shoulder, three men stood shoulder to shoulder, their olive skin and European features marking them as Chaucers. Because they were familiar to him and uninteresting, he skipped right over them to focus on the slender female dressed in head-to-toe black. Her head was bent so that her bonnet's brim hid the top half of her face.

Gauging from her gold-kissed skin and the black-brown hair whispering against her nape, Chaucer blood ran through her veins. The vague recollection of a twin sister drifted through his memory. Before he could pin it down, however, he noticed another member of their party. A small child. A boy with disheveled black hair and huge brown eyes in a face that hadn't yet lost the fullness of toddlerhood. A boy around the same age as his Maggie....

Shying away from the life-sucking grief, Gideon slammed the gateway to the past shut. Wrested his gaze away from the small figure clinging to his ma's skirts and planted it firmly onto the soldier.

"I've been here eight days, Private. Why are they just now disputing the claim?"

"Because we had a funeral to arrange, you—" Theo leaned forward. Brett put up an arm to block him.

"You've wasted your time. These people have misled you."

Wellington didn't so much as blink. "They contend that Mrs. Montgomery's late husband, Drake, staked this plot and that it rightfully belongs to her and her son, Walter."

Montgomery. The inexperienced rider who'd foolishly followed him the day of the land rush? His gaze flew to the widow's face, now fully visible beneath the curved brim, delving into eyes the

color of thick, sticky molasses. The exotic beauty countered his scrutiny with open challenge, her dainty chin uplifted and her high forehead lined with determination. Slashing black brows arched above flashing, thick-lashed eyes, and rounded cheekbones were balanced by a lush pink mouth. Disdain radiated from her bristling stance.

"I'm sorry for your loss, ma'am," he said directly to her, with effort not allowing his gaze to lower to the boy at her side, "but you're mistaken. Before the land rush, I studied the maps carefully and chose this plot because of its distance from town and proximity to this offshoot stream. I discovered a shortcut, a path hazardous for anyone who isn't a strong rider."

He recalled the exact moment he'd realized someone was trailing him. The surprise. The urgency, the drive to reach the land first. He had waited too long for this opportunity, hadn't been about to let it slip through his fingers. "I planted my stake. When I looked back, I saw Montgomery's horse stumble and pitch sideways. He was crushed."

A quiet gasp drew his attention once more to the female. A small hand pressed against her son's back tucked him closer to her, as if her touch alone were enough to spare him life's harsh realities.

Eager to be done with this unpleasant scene, Gideon pushed out the rest of the story. "I checked on him. Saw that he was alive and in desperate need of medical help, so I sought out my brother's fiancée, Alice Hawthorne. She's a skilled nurse. I thought—" He scraped a hand along his unshaven jaw, the bloody images coming into focus. "We were too late to save him. By the time we returned, Mr. Montgomery had already passed."

"You're lying." Her voice was huskier, deeper than he'd expected.

His spine stiffened. "Be very careful, madam. That's a serious accusation to levy at a complete stranger."

Rather than cower at the current of steely warning in his voice, she took a step forward. "I want to see the stake."

"As do I." Theodore glared at Gideon, the heat of old rivalries stirring to life in his dark eyes, punctuated by the once-straight nose that was now slightly offset.

Ignoring him, Gideon looked at Wellington, who nodded in agreement. "In order to sort this out, we need to see it. Shall we walk or ride?"

He weighed his options. Refusal didn't appear to be one of them. Besides, the sooner he proved his case, the sooner he'd be rid of the Chaucers. "It's about fifteen acres south of here. We'll ride."

Spinning on his heel, he strode over to the corral and, ducking between the rails, signaled Star. The two-year-old palomino lifted his head and met him at the gate. After a brief touch on his muzzle, Gideon swung up onto his broad, bare back.

A light breeze carrying the scents of sunbaked earth, hardy grass and sweet hyacinths gave him a brief respite from the overhead sun's scorching heat. The near-constant breeze was one of the first things he'd noticed about his new home in central Oklahoma. Whether it was due to his proximity to the Cimarron River slicing through the grasslands or the absence of substantial hills in this area, he didn't know and didn't care. In his opinion, he and his brothers couldn't have picked a better place to start fresh. Ruggedly beautiful countryside, fertile land and, best of all, remote. With 160 acres to call his own, he didn't have to see another living soul until he wanted to.

Unless folks chose to drop in on him unannounced. A scowl created deep lines around his mouth as he waited for the group to pile into their wagon.

He led them south, away from the Cimarron, through verdant pastures thick with yellow and orange flowers, along the stream bank dotted with sweeping cottonwood trees to the place where he'd staked his claim. Very near to where Mrs. Evelyn Chaucer Montgomery's husband had perished.

For a brief moment he allowed himself to feel compassion for the young widow. He knew all too well how it felt to lose a spouse with absolutely no warning. No preparation. She must be in shock still.

Then he shoved it aside. She'd labeled him a liar. He should expect no less from a Chaucer.

Sliding smoothly to the ground, he waited for the rest to catch up, anticipating their reaction to the proof. The officer perused his surroundings with keen interest. He wondered what misdeeds the man might've committed to have robbed him of his rightful rank; a man of his age and experience was not a mere army private for no reason.

The Chaucer brothers' hungry gazes gobbled up his land, Theodore in particular wearing a too-confident expression. Taller and leaner than the other two, he had sandy hair that set him apart from his siblings. The second eldest, Brett, was shorter, broader and less aggressive, but still a pain. Reid was Gideon's least favorite. Cocky. Short fused. Unpredictable.

Once out of the wagon, Mrs. Montgomery handed the boy off to Reid and strode for the wooden stake sticking out of the ground beneath a hackberry tree. The sweep of her full black skirts through the tall grass frightened a pair of cottontails that scurried in the opposite direction. She was oblivious, however, to all else save that stake.

Too bad she was in for a disappointment.

But when she yanked it out of the ground and read the name, the satisfaction and relief flashing across her expressive face did not indicate disappointment at all. Confused, Gideon walked toward her as if in a dream, his feet reluctant to carry him where he wanted to go.

"It's Drake's," she said in a triumphant whoosh, holding it up above her head like a torch.

"I knew it." White teeth flashed in Brett's face as he looped an arm about her waist and whirled her in a circle.

Pulse sluggish, thoughts muddled, Gideon extended a flat palm. "Let me see that."

Laughter fading, Brett lowered her but didn't release her. Her big brown eyes locked on to him, and the brief moment of rejoicing leached from her countenance. She extended the stake without a word.

He took it. Studied the scrawled letters.

Montgomery, Drake Sutton.

"This can't be right." Stunned, Gideon stared at the hole in the ground. Cast about the surrounding ground for answers. Where was his stake?

Wellington asked to see it.

"I don't understand." Gideon numbly passed it to the officer.

Wandering to the steep bank where his opponent had lost control of his horse, he rehashed the events of that day. There'd been only the two of them. Land rush rules stated that once a man's stake of possession was planted in the 160-acre tract of his choice, he had to hold that claim and defend it against other settlers. Leaving to fetch help meant Gideon had risked losing his plot. He hadn't been able to ignore a dying man's need, however. He hadn't hesitated to make the right choice.

His brothers, Elijah and Clint, had accompanied Alice. Clint had gone to alert the authorities, and hours later Theodore and Brett had arrived to confirm the deceased man's identity and take the body for burial.

Returning to the group, he addressed Wellington. "My stake was here when I left. Montgomery must've somehow removed it and replaced it with his own before he died."

"That's preposterous!" The widow pushed out of her brother's arms. "You honestly expect us to believe a dying man cared one way or another who got this land? Drake would've conserved his energy. He would've waited for help to come. He certainly wouldn't have risked aggravating his injuries."

Staring down at her, he pulled in a bracing breath. "I understand you're hurting right now—"

"Don't patronize me, Mr. Thornton." She faced off against him. "I know all about you and your family, how you cheat and scheme your way through life, not caring who you trample on your way to the top. I know exactly what happened here the day my husband died." Lifting her chin, she condemned him without a trace of evidence. "You saw an opportunity to steal the land and you took

it. In your arrogance, you didn't even bother to change out Drake's stake with your own. You didn't expect us to challenge you, did you?"

Gideon opened his mouth to speak. No words came out. First she'd called him a liar. Now she was accusing him of being a thief? Outrage churned in his gut. The independence he'd dreamed of for so long, worked so hard for, was suddenly in jeopardy.

All because of this woman.

* * *

Evelyn wasn't about to let this mountain of a man intimidate her. "This land belongs to me and my son. It's Walt's rightful inheritance. I won't let you take that away from him."

Bringing his face near hers, the man bared his teeth. Glacial gray eyes impaled her. "This is my land." He jammed a thumb to his broad chest. "I'm not simply going to hand it over to you."

Gideon Thornton spoke slowly and with great deliberation. But beneath the facade of control, she detected the smoldering anger in him, a river of molten lava scrambling to be unleashed. Taller than her by a good three inches, he had a powerful body that looked as though it had been carved from stone and hands that could no doubt easily hoist her into the air and carry her to parts unknown. He was one impressive male.

All right. Maybe she was a smidge intimidated. She'd never let it show, though. Had learned her lessons early. Growing up with three brothers had toughened her, forced her to fight tooth and nail for everything she'd ever wanted. Though she'd sometimes bemoaned her lot—was one sister too much to ask?—there were times her experience came in handy.

This was one of those times. One of the most important. This land meant independence. A future for her and Walt. No way was a Thornton going to rip it from her grasp.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd cease with the name slinging." With his face this close as he spoke, she couldn't ignore the overall impression of wolfish magnificence. The chiseled cheekbones, strong nose, firm mouth. Eloquent brown brows—the only refined feature in his wild appearance—framed cold, glittering eyes the color of rainy skies. From the dark scruff along his hard jaws and chin, it was clear he'd misplaced his straight razor. "I'm neither a liar nor a thief," he said through clenched teeth. "Your parents and brothers have fed you a pack of lies about us."

"My parents were God-fearing, decent people." Unlike your traitor of a father.

As if he'd read her mind, his brows slammed together. Whatever stinging retort he'd had planned was cut off by Theo.

"Private Wellington, you've seen the proof. Kick this trespasser off my sister's property."

Wellington held up a hand. "I can't do that."

"Why not? We have the stake. Surely—"

"I don't have the authority to settle your dispute. At this point it is my responsibility to suggest you work together to reach a compromise."

"Compromise? You have no idea what you're asking." Theo shook his head. "I wouldn't give a Thornton the satisfaction."

"Then your dispute will have to be taken up in court. Unfortunately, there's a backlog of cases. There's no way of knowing how long it will be before your case can be heard. It would be best for all of you to vacate the land until the dispute is settled."

"Out of the question." Gideon looked as unmovable as a mountain.

"I have no intention of leaving," Evelyn shot back.

"If you both insist on staying, you'll have to share it while you wait for the judge to hear your case."

"That's not acceptable," Brett clipped out, his hand slicing through the air. "You've seen the stake. Thornton is clearly taking advantage of the situation."

As her brothers argued with the older officer, Evelyn and Gideon glared at each other, locked in a silent battle of wills. No way was she sharing Walt's inheritance with this man. For his part, her nemesis appeared equally appalled at the prospect.

When the arguments grew heated, Wellington held up both hands. "Enough." His sharp command rendered the group silent, his cool blue eyes touching on each person. "However much you all dislike the situation, there's no other alternative. I suggest you make the best of it."

Reid came to stand beside her, Walt still held securely in his arms. "I'm not leaving my sister here alone with Gideon Thornton."

Of all her brothers, her twin was the most protective. Maybe it was the age thing or the special bond they shared. Still, it rankled. Why couldn't he accept that she was a capable adult?

Resting a hand in the crook of his elbow, she said, "I can take care of myself."

"Other cavalry officers will periodically stop by to ensure they are sharing the land peacefully." Wellington sized up Gideon. "Besides, if anything were to happen to Mrs. Montgomery or her son, everyone in Brave Rock would know whom to suspect."

Theo scowled. "You're forgetting the nearest claims are held by Gideon's brothers, as well as town members who've been tricked into thinking the Thorntons are decent and honorable men. If Gideon turned against her, these people wouldn't rush to her aid. They'd support Gideon. They've gone so far as to entrust their spiritual well-being to Elijah and their safety to Clint, whom they've named sheriff."

Gideon visibly bristled. "No need to worry. I have absolutely no reason to go near this woman."

Spinning about, he skirted the group and, greeting his beautiful palomino with a gentle touch, mounted with a grace and ease that belied his brawny build. And without a saddle, too. Moving as one, horse and rider traversed the fields until they faded from view.

Of all the insolent, rude—

"Our business here is concluded, gentlemen. Time to get a move on." Wellington's long legs ate up the distance to the wagon.

With a troubled light in his coffee-colored eyes, Reid sidled closer to his twin sister. "I'll stay here with you."

"We can take turns." Nodding, Brett looked to his oldest brother for confirmation.

"Out of the question." Evelyn planted her hands on her hips. "You have your own claims to tend to."

Theo shouldered closer, his hair falling in his eyes. "The Thorntons—"

"Are not murderers, Theo. I'm in no danger here. You heard the officer. Gideon Thornton would be an idiot to try anything." All three men's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Not that he would," she rushed to say. "You saw the way he acted. I doubt we'll exchange so much as a single word."

"I don't like this."

"I'm not a little girl anymore, Reid," she reminded him quietly, determined not to be railroaded.

For the first time in five years, since her wedding to Drake, she felt free. It was a liberating feeling, buoyant and carefree, but not without a measure of guilt. Her husband was dead, after all. Shouldn't she be mourning his absence? Her lack of reaction confounded her brothers. All three had been watching her since the funeral, expecting her to dissolve in a heap of tears. She'd even heard Theo mention the word shock.

How can I mourn a man who found fault with my every move?

Her five-year-old son watched them with wide, solemn eyes, unnaturally silent. Reaching out, she caressed his silken cheek. When was the last time he'd smiled? Or uttered a word? Always a quiet child, he'd stopped speaking altogether the day of Drake's death.

How can Walt miss a father who'd basically ignored him?

Determination pulsed through her veins, washing away the doubts, the fears.

She would move heaven and earth to help her precious child. Her hope was that a new home, a change in routine and surroundings, would draw him out. While her brothers meant well, they didn't know what was best for her son. They would not be allowed to sabotage Walt's chance at a normal life.

When she held out her hands, he lurched forward into her arms. Soon he would be too heavy for her. Settling his familiar, reassuring weight against her hip, she half turned so that all three could see her face, see she meant business. "It's my decision to make, and I choose to stay here and wait it out. Alone."

The memory of Gideon Thornton's ice-cold eyes sent a shiver of foreboding down her spine. May she not come to regret this decision.

Chapter Two

Temper boiling over, Gideon kicked an empty pail and sent it sailing through the air to bounce across the yard. Beneath the anger and resentment churned very real concern. What if the judge ruled in her favor?

A lifetime of living at the mercy of other men's whims had sparked within his soul a desperate craving for independence. For control. The chance to shape his own destiny. And now, thanks to the Chaucers, his dream of running his own ranch was being threatened.

His gaze touched on the corral and the partially-built stable, the trees he'd felled and readied for use. All this effort—the planning, the sweat and toil and time—would've been for nothing.

His hunger forgotten, repressed energy making him jittery, he stalked around back and lugged another log closer to the rear wall. While he worked, he pondered the stakes. If Drake had indeed summoned the strength to switch them, where had Gideon's disappeared to? Just didn't make any sense.

He'd tried to help a dying man and his repayment was this—a problem he couldn't readily fix, one he couldn't have foreseen. Yet another tangle with the troublesome Chaucers. A year and a half ago, he would've gotten on his knees and sought God's direction. Not now.

He was itching to inform his brothers of this new trouble. True to form, Lije would suggest he pray about the situation. Not happening. Lawman Clint would be more inclined to action, but what could be done? As much as he needed to mull this over with them, he didn't feel right leaving his claim just yet, not when the Chaucers were sure to return with the widow and her son.

Wedging another log into place, he caught his thumb in the indented corner. With a muttered oath, he tugged the glove off and sucked on the throbbing finger. Should he abandon the project? After all, there was a very real chance he was actually building this shelter not for himself but for a hateful family who did nothing but point their fingers at him and his brothers, unfairly blaming them for their own misfortune.

But he'd never been a quitter. Call it determination or plain old stubbornness—he wouldn't give up, wouldn't stop fighting for his dream until the judge gave his ruling.

Two hours later he was downing a quick lunch of buffalo jerky and two-day-old biscuits he'd snagged from Alice's table when Mrs. Evelyn Montgomery returned with a mountain of belongings. Trunks and barrels and carpet bags were piled into the wagon driven by her twin, Reid. Where did she think she was gonna stow all that?

Perched on an upended crate near his tent's opening, the towering cottonwoods high, crooked branches providing welcome shade, he did not go out to welcome them. His dogs, Lion, a golden-haired beauty with a wise face, and Shadow, a shaggy black mutt with a playful spirit, lifted their heads from their outstretched paws. Bringing them to Oklahoma had been the right decision. The dogs were good companions, loyal to a fault.

Reid stopped the wagon in front of the stable and, after assisting his sister and nephew down, began to unload her stuff.

"Where will you sleep?" Reid's question carried on the breeze.

She glanced Gideon's way and, catching him staring, arched a provoking eyebrow. "Mr. Thornton and I will sort that out."

Seeing the direction of her gaze, her brother tossed him a scowl. "I wish you'd let me help you get settled at least."

She turned her back and her response was lost. Burrowed into her skirt, the raven-haired boy twisted his head to stare at Gideon. The absence of animation on his face was unnerving. He was what? Four? Five? For certain he was missing his pa but the watchful stillness wasn't typical of a child that age. Especially a boy.

Gideon found he couldn't look away. Memories burst into his mind. A little girl's giggles as he twirled her up in the air. The sweet scent that clung to her blond curls and skin as she nestled in his lap for a bedtime story.

Surging to his feet, he discarded the now-cold coffee behind the tree and rinsed his mug in the stream, deliberately blanking his mind. He'd spent little time around children in the past year or so. Only natural that the boy's presence would resurrect the past.

Best thing to do is keep your distance. Let the two of them tend to their own business while you focus on yours. It's not like you have extra time on your hands anyway.

"Mr. Thornton?"

He stiffened, turned to see mother and son standing by his stone-encircled fire pit. Beyond them the wagon ambled in the direction of the hastily-constructed town, which so far consisted of a single bank, mercantile, café and jail.

So. This was it. They were well and truly stuck with each other.

"I see you haven't built a cabin." She indicated the undulating fields around her with a sweep of her arm. "Where do you suggest we sleep?"

At odds with her military-like posture and assertive manner, she kept a tight hold on the boy, the white in her knuckles betraying her unease.

"Got a tent somewhere in all that baggage?"

Studying his tent with distaste, she reluctantly admitted, "I'm certain I do."

"You don't know for sure?"

"You don't think I packed every single container myself, do you?"

Noting the sun's lowered position in the sky, he picked up his Stetson and, brushing dust from the black felt, dropped it on his head. "I suggest you start searching, then, Mrs. Montgomery. Only a few more hours left before sunset. Wouldn't want to be caught outdoors overnight without shelter. Coyotes pass through these parts on their way to the Cimarron."

The boy's jaw dropped and his fingers bunched in her black skirts.

"It's all right, Walt," she soothed, all the while shooting daggers at him over the child's head that screamed, How dare you? Her silent reproach hit its mark with accuracy.

He'd spoken without a thought to Walt's feelings. That was the first and last time.

He cleared his throat. "But they stay away from the tents because of Lion and Shadow." Pointing to the dogs, he looked Walt in the eye, man-to-man style. "They're my guardians. Now that you're here, they'll watch out for you, too."

Walt tilted his head back and stared at Evelyn. A tender smile curved her lips, the intense love and affection shining in her eyes knocking Gideon back a step. He'd witnessed that look before, the shared unbreakable bond between a mother and her child. He felt the absence of it keenly. An image of two graves side by side with twin handmade crosses tormented him.

As desperately as he craved space, there was something he had to do first.

He bent a knee to the ground. "Lion. Shadow." Immediately the dogs came to stand on either side. Resting his hands on their backs, he addressed the boy. "Would you like to come and meet them?"

Cautious interest bloomed in Walt's dark eyes. Again he looked to his mother but remained silent.

Lightly squeezing his shoulder, she nodded. "It's okay."

Walt slowly approached, his focus on the animals sitting on their haunches and waiting patiently to be introduced.

"Walt, this here is Lion," he said, indicating the yellow-haired one. "He's intelligent and extremely loyal. Shadow is younger and a bit more playful." He patted the shaggy black head. "Hold out your hand and let them smell you first. Then you can pet them all you want."

He did as he was told, gingerly at first. When Shadow licked his fingers, a tiny smile flickered. Gideon's gaze shot to Evelyn. Concern tugged her thick brows together, and she'd pressed her hands together, covering her mouth and nose.

What was going on here? He sensed something deeper than grief had affected Walt Montgomery. Mind your own business. Don't get involved. Remain detached. His formula for avoiding any more pain.

Easing to his feet, he said, "Boys, you stay here with Walt. I've got work to do." Inclining his head a fraction as he passed her, he said, "Mrs. Montgomery."

Striding away, he felt the weight of her scrutiny sizzling the exposed strip of skin above his collar. He wouldn't have a bit of trouble maintaining his distance from the woman. All he had to do was remind himself of her reason for being here. The boy, he feared, was another matter altogether.

* * *

"How hard can erecting one tent be?" Evelyn muttered, the pads of her fingers sore from trying to force the too-large buttons through the hand-worked holes along the peak. Hot, sweaty and thirsty, she regretted not accepting Reid's offer of assistance.

Pushing errant strands behind her ears, she observed her son for a moment. Perched on a flat rock beside the stream, he sat between the dogs, his arms slung about their necks. He'd taken off his shoes and socks, rolled his charcoal pants up to his knees and submerged his feet and ankles in the meandering water.

A smile surfaced. If there was one good thing to come out of this dreadful arrangement, this was it—companions for Walt.

When the obtuse Gideon Thornton had goaded her about the coyotes, she'd been livid. The last thing she needed was for her son to entertain nightmares of rabid beasts ripping through their tent and carrying him off into the night. But then the unexpected had happened. He'd realized his blunder and remedied it.

Not that one kind gesture could soften her opinion of him. Land robber.

Sighing, longing for the days of honest-to-goodness baths—luxurious soaks in full-length tin basins—she took hold of the nearest stick and maneuvered herself underneath the thick white canvas. Holding the rear of the tent with a hand above her head, she attempted to lodge the makeshift pole into the hard ground. It refused to cooperate. She really needed both hands and perhaps a trowel, but she couldn't do that without the canvas collapsing in on her.

Oppressive heat quickly filled the space. Her itchy bonnet had been discarded an hour ago while rifling through the trunks searching for the tent. Her heavy hair strained the pins holding it in place, which occasionally poked her scalp.

Deciding to let the canvas rest on her shoulders, she curled her fingers around the thick stick and tried jamming it as hard as she could. Unladylike grunts slipped out as she repeated the action. At last it was deep enough. When she successfully angled the pole up to support the top, she sat back with a satisfied sigh.

When it tipped over and the whole thing collapsed in on her, she let out a frustrated yelp. She swatted the material engulfing her.

Suddenly, steel-like vises gripped her shoulders through the canvas. "Hold still."

“Get your hands off me!” Embarrassment flooding her cheeks, she tried to twist out of his grip.

“It’d be a whole lot easier to get off if you’d stop fighting me.”

The suffocating feeling intensifying, she stilled, and within seconds the white canvas was pulled away. Welcome sunlight and fresh air washed over her.

“If you’ll step over to the side—” Gideon’s controlled voice snapped her eyes open “—I’ll have this set up in a jiffy.”

Crouched a scant yard away, he was on eye level with her, his cool gray eyes sober. Watchful. The fact that he wasn’t laughing at her predicament came as a surprise. Her brothers would’ve laughed and teased her mercilessly. Drake would’ve lectured, pointing out her lack of forethought and overall incompetence.

A curl tumbled over her forehead and tickled her nose. Lifting a hand to her hair, she belatedly wondered what a tangle with the tent had done to her appearance. Her focus shifted to the left, to the half-built stable and her belongings now strewn about the grass. Her hand mirror was there. Somewhere.

Not that she cared one whit what a Thornton thought about her.

Dislodging the irritating curl, she rose to her feet as gracefully as she could and, shaking out her skirts, stepped over the wadded-up canvas. Her stiff boots chafed her heels. She wished she could join Walt at the stream but there was too much work yet to do.

With her out of the way, Gideon went to work. Beneath faded cotton the same hue as the sky above, his back and shoulder muscles rippled and tensed as he plunged the poles deep into the soil. Every move was calculated. Deliberate. No wasted energy here. Despite his size, he was very much in control of his body.

He intrigued her when she had no business being intrigued. Enemy, remember?

With a flick of his wrists, the canvas billowed out and settled over the poles. He then straightened the sides and tied up the door flaps.

He stepped back and surveyed his work. “All finished.”

“Thank you.” It wasn’t easy expressing gratitude to this man.

He looked at her. “Point me to your necessities and I’ll bring them over first.”

“I don’t need any further assistance from you, Mr. Thornton.”

Squinting, he studied the horizon, where the sun was dipping closer to the distant plains. “It’d be a shame if you and the boy had to bed down in the grass. Not easy to sleep on an empty stomach, either.”

Pursing her lips, she ran a finger beneath her scratchy collar. There was much left to do before nightfall. What was more important in this instance? Heeding her brothers’ warnings or seeing to Walt’s needs?

Easy choice. “I’ll accept your help, Mr. Thornton. This time.”

She’d gone five steps when she noticed he wasn’t following her. Halting, she twisted around. He hadn’t moved. Spine straight, shoulders set and hands at his sides, he watched her with his unnerving gaze.

She quirked a questioning brow.

“It’s Gideon.”

“Fine. Gideon.” She pressed a hand to her bodice, the intricate beadwork digging into her palm. “Evelyn.”

His gaze openly roamed her features, probing, as if attempting to unearth answers to puzzling questions. The intense focus made her skin prickle. While she was accustomed to men’s appraisals of her appearance, this went deeper. To her mind, her very soul. It made her feel exposed.

Turning her back on him, she marched across the field and, with a scant glance at the handsome horses grazing in the expansive corral, began searching for the trunk containing their bedding. He joined her but did not jump in and start rifling through her things. Instead, he hung back, awaiting

her direction. Gideon touched only those things she pointed out to him, and she felt a grudging appreciation for the respect he showed her.

The transfer of personal items, as well as cooking essentials and preserved foods, took half an hour. He did the majority of the work. Evelyn tried her best not to be awed by his effortless strength. Tried and failed.

After checking on Walt, who was now knee-deep in the stream searching for bugs, she shoved her hair out of her eyes and, planting her hands on her hips, confronted Gideon.

“Why are you helping me? What’s it to you whether or not we eat? Where we sleep?”

Lowering her portable iron stove to the ground between a small barrel of eggs packed in sawdust and a trunk filled with clothes, he straightened and mirrored her stance, large hands gripping his denim-clad waist. A muscle ticked in his granite jaw.

“What exactly has your family told you about me?”

Refuse to be intimidated. Lifting her chin, she met his smoldering gaze head-on. “I know that right before the war, your father took you and your brothers and, like a coward, fled north in the middle of the night. You betrayed your neighbors, your friends and your state. Indeed, the entire Southern way of life. And yet you prospered, were rewarded for your traitorous actions, while we, despite our loyalty to our traditions, had our home sold out from beneath us by your beloved North.”

His nostrils flared. “You keep saying ‘you.’ You’re forgetting I was a child when the war between the states began and so were you.”

He was right. She didn’t remember wearing expensive frocks or attending parties. Nor did she recall the grand plantation home where she’d been born. All she’d ever known was the reality of living in crowded quarters with other unfortunate relatives, of sitting down to humble meals and wearing cast-off clothing. Oh, but her parents had regaled her and her brothers with stories of their former life, showing them the single remaining photograph of Rose Hill, describing the plantation in such minute detail that it came alive for her.

Her mother’s words echoed through her mind and she spoke them. “The North robbed us. Because of people like you and your father, we lost everything.”

“I’m not to blame for your family’s misfortune,” he bit out.

“You come from a family of traitors.” She found herself repeating Theo’s often-spouted remarks about the hateful Thorntons. “You’re not to be trusted.”

“Hogwash.”

“I know you’re a brawler. I know you broke Theo’s nose.”

Clouds passed over his face. “I will accept the blame for that.”

The minute the Thornton brothers had returned to their defeated Virginia town after the war, the threat of trouble lurked in the shadows, infected conversations and dogged everyone’s thoughts. The once-beloved Thorntons had become hated for their escape of the war’s repercussions while local families loyal to the South had lost everything. They had betrayed the South and had been handsomely rewarded for it, their ancestral home having been restored to them by the Reconstructionist government. The townsfolk had made it plain they weren’t welcome. Two months after their arrival, a brawl had erupted between them and her brothers. While Evelyn hadn’t been told the details of the fight, the Thorntons’ abrupt departure afterward had told her everything she’d needed to know. As had Theodore’s broken nose. They were at fault.

He lifted his chin. “I had trouble controlling my temper when I was younger.”

“And you’re in total control of it now?”

“No.” His face became pinched. “Not entirely.”

He was admitting to a fault? “I—”

Walt ran up and tugged on her skirt. Smoothing his ruffled raven locks, she summoned a smile. “What is it, sweetheart?”

He cupped his throat, a signal he'd devised to express thirst. Oh, how she missed hearing his sweet voice. When would he speak again? What if he never— No. She couldn't entertain such a horrific thought.

"You want some water?"

Frowning, he shook his head.

"Milk?"

At his firm nod, she shot Gideon a quick glance. He was observing them with a studied frown, confusion wrinkling his brow.

Self-conscious, she knelt to Walt's level and tried to explain about the milk cow. "We had to leave Mirabelle at Uncle Reid's, remember?"

His frown turned into a scowl. Of course he would miss having milk on hand. Evelyn hadn't had time to think through all the ramifications of this move. Now she worried his health might suffer if their case didn't come to trial in a timely manner. Please, Lord, don't allow this situation to stretch on interminably. I can't abide this man. Not after what he did to Drake and what he's trying to do to us.

Gideon's measured voice broke the silence. "There are wild strawberries on the other side of the stream. Maybe he'd like to pick some."

Irrationally perturbed at his intrusion and that the solution was a good one, she watched Walt's somber expression change to one of eager anticipation.

"I'll get you a container to put them in." Straightening, she sent Gideon a "good riddance" look. "Thank you again for your help. I can take it from here."

"Of course." Touching the brim of his hat, he gave her a stiff nod and strode off, leaving her to her work. She breathed easier after he'd gone.

Chapter Three

"They accused you of what?" Above the pewter mug suspended halfway to his mouth, the gold flecks in Clint's brown eyes shimmered with disbelief.

Cradling his mug of steaming coffee, Elijah leaned back in his chair and sighed. "This shouldn't come as a surprise. We're all aware of the Chaucers' opinion of us." He looked across the table at Gideon. "I'm just sorry that coming to a man's aid has placed you in this position."

Gideon traced lazy circles on the coarse tabletop. Even if he could've foreseen the outcome, he wouldn't have left Montgomery to die. His brothers knew that. Still, the situation he found himself in rankled.

Despite his fatigue, he'd passed a restless night, his mind on the occupants of the tent a quarter acre upstream. Visible yet far enough away he couldn't hear their conversations. They don't have conversations, though, do they? Not for the first time, he pondered the boy's continuing silence.

"We don't know much about Evelyn Montgomery. Is she as disagreeable as her brothers?" Clint asked.

His brother's appointment as sheriff of Brave Rock had become more than just a job. It had become a calling, an honorable mission to maintain the peace of this Oklahoma town birthed from dreams of independence and the grit and determination to see them into reality. With a keen, observant mind and commitment to upholding the law, he was the best man for it.

"Evelyn—" her given name sounded odd on his lips "—can be difficult."

"Which is another word for stubborn, like some people I know." A knowing grin hovered about Lije's mouth.

"Contrary is a better word," Gideon shot back, thinking of her resistance to his every attempt to make life easier for her. Why he even tried he hadn't a clue. "She's good with her son, though. Protective." The immense love she possessed for him was evident in every look, every touch.

Seated across the table in Lije's cabin, his brothers exchanged a quick, telling glance. He knew by Clint's cautious expression and the sympathy in Lije's hazel eyes they were thinking of Susannah and Maggie.

“You have my constant prayers, brother. In time, God will sort this out the way He sees fit.”

Gideon pressed his lips together, cutting off the stinging retort. As a preacher, Lije centered his whole life around the things of God. Comforting folks, praying for them and encouraging them in difficult times came as second nature to the eldest Thornton brother. Gideon wanted no part of it. Not anymore. The grief stemming from the loss of his wife and daughter had transformed into resentment and anger at the all-powerful God he'd once served.

He could've spared them and yet chose not to. Every time he felt the urge to pray or dust off his Bible, he reminded himself of that fact.

Pushing to his feet, he set his cup in the dry sink behind him and crossed to the door, retrieving his hat from the row of hooks. “I've gotta go. Got errands in town to tend to.”

Lije stood, as well. “And I have to meet the work crew. We're framing the chapel windows this morning.”

Work on the official Brave Rock church—which would also be used as a meeting house—had commenced a couple days ago on the western edge of Lije's claim closest to town. Residents were working in shifts so that everyone shared the load and families weren't taken from their planting and the building of their own cabins for very long.

“I can spare a few hours this afternoon,” Gideon told Elijah.

The preacher's jaw dropped. “You're offering to work on the church?”

Aware of Gideon's aversion to spiritual matters, his brother hadn't asked him to pitch in. But Lije worked his fingers to the bone seeing to the needs of this town. Swinging a hammer for a few hours was the least Gideon could do. Besides, it would gain him a reprieve from the feisty widow Montgomery.

“I am. Unless you don't need me.”

Clint watched the exchange with interest.

Lije picked up his jaw. “Oh, we need you, little brother.” Clapping a hand on Gideon's shoulder, he grinned big. “What time should we expect you?”

“Around one o'clock. How's that?”

“Perfect. The men will be returning from lunch then.”

Gideon opened the door.

“Hold up a second.”

Clint shoved his chair back. The gold star pinned to his vest winked in the morning sunlight streaming through the curtainless window. The last shingle of Lije's one-room cabin had been nailed into place last week, and it lacked those little touches that made a dwelling into a home. Wouldn't be this way for long, however. He'd seen Alice hemming blue-and-white-checked curtains in preparation for her and Lije's upcoming nuptials. If the bouquet of daffodils gracing the table—the only spot of color in the room—was any indication, the sweet-natured redhead would have these sparse quarters looking more like a home in no time.

“You should know we've had more trouble,” Clint said. “The Ramseys' barn burned down last night. It was a total loss.”

Lije's expression turned grave. “There weren't any fatalities, thank the good Lord.”

Gideon shook his head in disgust. “Did they get all the animals out?”

“All but a milk cow,” Clint supplied. “They were fortunate.”

“Any idea how it started?”

“Not yet. Lars and I are looking into it.” His younger brother's features hardened. “If it turns out it wasn't an accident, we'll find out who the perpetrators are and go after them.”

“These incidents are stirring up suspicion amongst the townsfolk, which is the last thing we need.” Sighing, Lije wearily massaged his neck. If Gideon knew his brother, he'd probably stayed up half the night tending to the Ramsey family's needs. “Without unity and a sense of brotherhood, what kind of town will Brave Rock be?”

Not a place any decent folk would want to live, Gideon answered silently. If he were still a praying man, he'd ask God for assistance. Since he wasn't, he'd just have to trust Clint's prediction. The troublemakers would make a mistake eventually, which would lead to their arrest and, ultimately, peace for Brave Rock's residents. Hopefully sooner rather than later, before someone got hurt or outright killed.

* * *

"Hold him steady. I'm almost done." Evelyn's pencil scraped across the page in light strokes. "I think this one is some type of earless lizard. We'll look it up tonight before bed."

Fortunately, she knew exactly which trunk contained their books. Drake had argued against bringing them out here, saying she wouldn't have time for such unnecessary luxuries, but she'd been adamant. Walt enjoyed studying the pictures in the encyclopedia and almanac. And she wouldn't dream of leaving her journals behind. They contained drawings and descriptions of all sorts of things—Rose Hill, their church in Virginia, flowers, butterflies and birds she'd encountered—a pictorial history of her life. Of course, Drake hadn't seen any value in them.

"Done." She snapped the book closed.

Walt raised the bluish-gray-and-black lizard closer to his face, ran a finger along its spindly spine and gingerly set it on the sloping bank, watching intently as it scurried behind the rocks. Shrugging, he turned to her. Red ringed his mouth, evidence of the berries he'd eaten for dessert. She picked up the basin of dirty dishes and carried it to the stream. Crouching beside him, she dipped a rag in the cool water. "Let's clean your face, sweetheart. It's a wonder you didn't get a tummy ache from all those strawberries."

Wearing a long-suffering expression, he stood still and let her work. Affection bubbled up in her. He was so beautiful, her little boy. His olive skin, dark, expressive eyes and distinctive features had been handed down from his Russian grandmother, Nancy Petrov Chaucer, just as they had been to Evelyn and her brothers. There wasn't a single sign of his Montgomery heritage. Was that the reason Drake hadn't bonded with him?

Sighing, she kissed his cheek, which he rewarded with a tight hug. When he stiffened against her, she leaned back. His eyes were huge. "What's wrong?"

Twisting, balancing her weight with a splayed hand in the grass, she spotted Gideon's wagon slowly approaching. There, trailing behind it, was a Guernsey cow much like the one they'd left at Reid's. That wasn't Mirabelle, however.

Taking Walt's hand, she stood and watched as the aloof cowboy eased his team to a stop in front of the stable. After setting the brake, he climbed down and, striding to the cow, untethered her and led her across the field in their direction. What in the world?

The brim of his black Stetson cast his eyes in shadow; his stubble-covered jaw and chin were set in grim lines. As if she exuded a foul stench, he stopped a ways out, his mouth unsmiling. Gloved hands gripping the lines, he extended them to her.

"This is Petra."

"That's a Russian name."

A sigh lifted his vest-clad chest. "Bought her from a Russian family."

"There are Russians here?" During their stay in Boomer Town, the tent city that had sprung up along the border of Unassigned Lands in the weeks preceding the land rush, she'd encountered Poles and Czechs but no Russians. "My mother came to America when she was a little girl. She taught me the language. What are their names?"

"Kozlov."

"Where is their claim? Can you take me?" Excitement shimmered through her. Her brothers hadn't cared to learn the language. She'd enjoy conversing with native speakers again.

He gave her a long measuring look. "I reckon I could do that."

“Forget I asked.” What’s gotten into you, Evelyn? To willingly accompany this man anywhere would be unthinkable. “I’ll locate them on my own.”

Jerking a thumb over his shoulder, he said, “I’ve got supplies to unload. Can you take her now?” Again he lifted the leads.

“What do you expect me to do with her?”

“Take care of her. She’s your milk cow, after all.”

“Mine?” Her gaze volleyed between the cowboy and the russet-hued beast. “I don’t understand. Did my brothers—”

“They have nothing to do with this.” He shoved up his brim, revealing those piercing wolf’s eyes, a turbulent, stormy gray. “Your son needs milk.”

As if that were enough justification for a gesture such as this. “You can’t mean to tell me that you purchased Petra for us?”

Gideon’s gaze flickered to Walt, and his face altered. Pain-ravaged was the best word to describe him. Tormented. Jaw working, he dragged his attention back to her.

“For Walt.”

Dazed by what she’d seen, Evelyn took halting steps forward. He veered back, maintaining distance as he transferred the leads to her. Then he left.

Evelyn stared after him. A thousand bewildered questions skated through her mind with no clear-cut answers.

Petra shifted, straining to reach the grass. A milk cow. Gideon Thornton had brought them a milk cow. He’d become aware of their need and met it, no questions asked, no payment demanded.

Something was very wrong here.

* * *

“Can’t you see what he’s doing?” Reid paced a trail in the grass, his gestures stiff and jerky, while she scrubbed her single black dress in the wash basin. “He’s obviously trying to make you think he’s one of the good guys, someone to be trusted.”

Evelyn paused, soap bar resting against the ridged washboard, and gazed at Petra grazing contently in the field, then at Gideon heaving another log into place. Even from this distance, the man’s impressive strength was on display. His biceps had to be as large as small tree trunks! “Why would he care what I think?”

Her brother shot her a dubious look. “Please tell me you’re not really that naive. What do you have that he wants?”

The name on the stake. “Rightful ownership of this claim.”

“Exactly.” He snapped his fingers.

“Let me get this straight. You think he bought the cow not as an act of kindness but as a bribe. He’s going to try and convince me not to contest the claim.”

“That’s right.”

Resuming her task, she mopped her forehead with her sleeve. “Doesn’t sound like something he’d do.”

“Oh, what, now that you’ve spent a whole day in his company you know what kind of person he is?”

“No, of course not. It just doesn’t seem like he’d put forth that kind of energy on a plan that isn’t foolproof. He’s rather busy, if you can’t tell.”

Glancing toward the stable, Reid smirked. “Yeah, well, his single-mindedness will only benefit us. When all is said and done, that will be your stable, sis. Yours and Walt’s. It’ll save us from having to build it later.”

Her gaze once again drawn to the taciturn middle Thornton brother, she experienced a pinprick of disquiet. How would she feel if she’d worked that hard on something only to have to leave it behind?

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Her twin was suddenly squatting in front of her, his coffee-colored eyes boring into hers. His ivory felt hat sat at a rakish angle on his head. “Don’t feel sorry for the guy. He doesn’t deserve your compassion, Evelyn. Remember, he’s trying to steal Walt’s inheritance. He’s taking advantage of a widow and her fatherless child.”

She disliked it when Reid read her mind like that. Some things a girl preferred to keep private. Lifting her chin, she met him stare for stare. “I could never forget that.”

Studying her with narrowed eyes, he finally nodded, then frowned again at her navy blue skirt and white scoop-necked blouse. No doubt he disapproved of her not wearing proper mourning clothes.

“Before you say it, I own only one appropriate outfit.” She lifted the long-sleeved, too-elegant-for-everyday-use black blouse out of the sudsy water. Aware of Evelyn’s scant wardrobe, her mother-in-law had made her several outfits to wear to church services. Not a fan of black, she’d rarely worn this particular one. “I have to wash it sometime. Besides, it shouldn’t matter what I wear out here when there’s no one around to see.”

Again, a long, slow perusal. “Evelyn, I—” Frowning, he stared at the ground beneath his dusty boots. “I’ve wanted to ask you about Drake ever since...” Cautious eyes met hers. “Look, the accident shocked us all. I know you have a huge burden to shoulder. Walt’s silence adds to that, I’m sure, but I’m worried about you. We all are.”

Laying the soap aside, she rinsed the material and wrung out the excess water. “There’s no need to worry. I assure you I’m fine.”

For her brothers’ sakes, she’d tried her best to hide her unhappy marital state. After all, Theo had introduced her to Drake Montgomery, and all three brothers had encouraged her to accept his proposal. If they’d discovered the true state of affairs between her and her husband, they would’ve blamed themselves. And perhaps intervened, which could have ended in violence. So she’d playacted.

Reid followed her to the rope she’d strung up between two oaks. “That’s the problem. A woman who’s just lost her husband should not be fine.”

“Everyone grieves differently.” Hooking the clothespins in place, she checked to see that Walt was still cavorting with Lion and Shadow along the stream bank. “Besides, I’ve a lot to keep me busy these days. There isn’t time to dwell on our loss.”

“You were inconsolable after Ma and Pa died,” he pointed out, following her back to the pile of laundry awaiting her attention.

“That was different.”

“Evelyn—”

“Reid.” Holding up a hand, she shot him a quelling look. “No more. Please.”

He opened his mouth to speak, shook his head and snapped it shut again. As she bent to her task, relief speared through her. Her brother could be relentless. Somehow she doubted this was the last time she’d hear of this.

“I’d better go.”

“Thanks for the rabbits. I’ll make a nice stew for supper.”

“That’s nice.”

Hearing the note of distraction in his voice, she looked up and caught him staring in Gideon’s direction, a troublesome glint in his eyes.

Popping up, she slipped her arm through his. “I’ll walk you to your horse.”

Unfortunately, they had to walk past the stable to where Rusty was tethered to the corral fence. Just as they came abreast of the door opening, Gideon emerged and bumped into Reid.

“Sorry,” Gideon muttered.

Shaking free of her hold, Reid sidestepped to block his exit. “Why don’t you watch where you’re going, Thornton?”

“It was an accident,” he clipped out, holding himself erect. Aloof. “No need to make more of it than it is.”

Although about the same height, Gideon had at least forty pounds of solid muscle on her brother. The outcome of an altercation between the two men wasn’t difficult to envision.

Reid poked a finger in Gideon’s chest. “Nice try with the milk cow. But I’m wise to your schemes, and so is Evelyn. Don’t think you can charm your way into keeping what doesn’t belong to you.”

Gideon’s head reared back. His icy gaze slammed into her, silently accusing. “My motivation had nothing to do with the dispute.”

Was he speaking the truth? Or was he just a clever actor?

Aware of the ratcheting tension, Evelyn tugged on her brother’s forearm. “Reid, please. Let it go.”

“Steer clear of my sister and nephew, you filthy cur.”

Color climbed up Gideon’s neck. His massive hands curling into fists, he stuck his face close to Reid’s. “Or what?”

Oh, no. Gideon’s legendary temper was about to be unleashed.

“Oh, you’ll find out what,” Reid sneered.

“I don’t cotton to threats, especially from a man who’s trespassing on my land.”

“Why, you—”

“Don’t do this.” Evelyn hauled on Reid’s arm with all her might but couldn’t budge him. “Think of Walt.”

Beneath her fingertips, she felt his thick muscle quiver, and she thought Reid would shake her off again. He surprised her, however. With a parting promise that this conversation wasn’t finished, he guided her to the corral. A sigh gusted from her lungs. Crisis averted.

This time. What will happen the next time your brothers come to check on you? What if she couldn’t talk them down? Theo, Brett and Reid loathed the Thornton brothers. Now that Gideon stood in the way of her inheritance, the state of affairs would only deteriorate.

Someone was likely to get hurt, which would only serve to traumatize Walt further.

No matter what, she couldn’t let that happen.

Chapter Four

“I want a word with you.”

Gideon gritted his teeth as he walked along the stream. Why couldn’t the Montgomery woman leave him alone? Didn’t she have the common sense to know not to provoke a riled beast? The rage coursing through his body made him feel more beast than human. This lightning-quick temper was a curse that had originated in childhood, about the time his father dumped him and his brothers at Cousin Obadiah’s, went off to fight for the North and never returned. With God’s help he’d learned to control it. There’d been exceptions, of course, like the time he broke Theo Chaucer’s nose.

Lately, that control was slipping more often. Despite his antipathy toward the Lord, he recognized he wasn’t strong enough to master it by relying on his own strength.

He glided his hat along the surface of the water, scooping a fair amount into the crown. Then he upturned it over his head, the cool liquid shocking the anger out of his system. Slowly rising, he turned and climbed the gently sloping bank to where she stood waiting beneath the cottonwood branches, her black boot tapping out an impatient rhythm. Her molten-molasses gaze accused him of all sorts of ills. May as well get this over with.

“I’m listening.”

“You almost lost it just now, didn’t you? I could tell you wanted to plant your fist in my brother’s face. Well, I’m warning you right now I won’t stand for violence. Not in front of my son.”

Shame flooded him. Not once had he lost his temper in front of a woman. Not even his wife. Whenever he and Susannah had quarreled, he'd gone off alone to sort through his feelings. He wouldn't dream of doing so in front of a child.

"I won't do anything to worry Walt. You have my word."

One thick brow arched in disbelief. "According to my brothers, that's not worth much."

The nerve of her. Spine rigid, Gideon turned his back on her as his ire stirred anew. He'd taken quite enough from this mouthy female. She'd questioned his honor at every turn.

Like a dog worrying a bone, she darted around him, forcing him to hear her out. "Until our case goes to court, my brothers will be coming out here regularly to check on us. How can I trust you won't resort to violence?"

"Maybe you should revisit what just happened here. It's your brother you should be lecturing, not me."

She batted at a stray curl that had escaped the pins holding her shiny locks in place. She wasn't wearing mourning black, he noted. The pure white blouse lit her skin with a healthy glow, accentuating her waist where it tucked into her billowing navy skirt.

"Look, I know you don't give a fig about me or my family. I know that we're on opposite sides of a feud that began many, many years ago, and when it comes to this land, we both want it for ourselves. But I'm begging you—" her husky voice wavered as she flung a hand toward the field where her son played "—have compassion on that little boy out there. He's been through a lot in his short lifetime, more than any child should have to endure. All I want is for him to be happy and free of worry."

The sheen of tears in her expressive eyes startled him. This was the first sign of vulnerable emotion he'd glimpsed in the fierce widow. Walt had recently lost his father. To what else was she referring?

He opened his mouth to question her, recalling in the nick of time that it wasn't his concern. Their past was their business, not his. Soon they would be out of his hair. An unfortunate reminder of a troublesome time.

Anxiety pinched her features.

As a father, he had no trouble identifying with what she was feeling. Good parents desired the best for their children, instinctively strove to protect and nurture.

Attempting to soothe her unease, he spoke quietly and surely, injected confidence in his stance. "The boy has nothing to do with our troubles. I won't do anything to traumatize him."

Lips compressing, she studied him, gauging his sincerity. Finally, she nodded.

"I will warn you, however. I won't stand idly by if provoked beyond reason. I will defend myself. I suggest you make sure your brothers understand that."

Spinning on his heel, he left her there with her mouth hanging open. He mentally shrugged. Wasn't his fault if she caught a fly.

* * *

Gideon stirred awake to the sound of the stream trickling past on its course to the Cimarron River. The tent stretching above him was washed in orangey-pink, evidence of dawn's arrival. Woodpeckers scouted for breakfast in the elms stationed midway between his tent and the stable, and a frog chirruped a throaty greeting.

Easing to a sitting position, he leaned forward and parted the tent flaps to soak in the prairie's serene beauty. Buttery light gilded each individual blade of grass, every wildflower tilting its face eastward, every glossy leaf dangling from the trees, so that it seemed to him a vista of pure golden goodness. He'd grown accustomed to this. The thought of leaving it—and the dreams it nursed like a greedy infant—made his insides seize up something terrible.

There was nothing else to do but continue his work and, when the time came, present his case and attempt to convince the judge of his rightful ownership.

Dressing quickly in denims and a blue-and-white-striped shirt, he straightened his pallet and pillow and retrieved the bulging laundry sack from the corner. These were his last pair of clean trousers, which meant he couldn't put off a trip into town any longer. He tried to space them out as much as possible. In general, people drained the life out of him. Their nosiness and frivolous chatter gave him a headache. He was an oddity, he knew. A lone wolf who craved solitude and space to think. Does not get along with others, his teacher had once observed to his ward, Cousin Obadiah. Possesses a superior attitude. Gideon grimaced. That had earned him twenty lashes and a week of bread and water for supper.

Elijah and Clint were the only ones who really understood him. They accepted him. Didn't try to change him like Susannah—

Shoving to his feet, he strode to the stream and splashed his face and neck and wet his collar-length hair. Tying on a neckerchief, his fingers brushed the scruff on the underside of his chin. Time for a shave and haircut.

As he stirred the fire and set the scuffed tin pot to boil, he kept a watchful eye on the other tent, hoping she'd prove to be a late riser. Conversation anytime was a stretch. Before breakfast bordered on criminal. What was more, he couldn't fudge his way through. Evelyn Montgomery required all the focus and concentration he could muster.

Low on provisions, he made due with corn mush that was about as tasteless as tree bark but filled his belly. He carried his coffee with him to the stable, stopping to greet Star and Snowball, a three-year-old gray he'd bought shortly after his arrival in Boomer Town. Their friendly greetings never failed to soothe him. Horses didn't judge him or push him to be something he wasn't. He understood animals better than he did most people. Actually preferred their company, if truth be told.

Star nudged his shoulder.

"Searching for treats, huh?" he ran a hand through her mane. "You're outta luck. But I'll see if I can't scrounge up a carrot or two in town. How about that?"

She dipped her head, seeming to agree with him. A fleeting smile lifted his lips.

"Gotta go." He pushed away from the fence. "The faster I get this stable up, the sooner you'll have a roof over your heads."

Inside the structure, he surveyed his progress. The walls reached his waist. Since he couldn't physically lift the logs any higher without help, he'd have to rig a pulley system.

The sound of feet shuffling in the dirt behind him had him spinning about, hot coffee sloshing over the mug's rim. His heart settled back into a somewhat normal rhythm when he spied his pint-size visitor.

"Walt."

The boy hovered just inside the opening, his hands twisting behind his back, large, dark eyes surveying the interior with interest. His shirt buttons were off-center, the wrinkled hems uneven, and his wavy hair hadn't yet seen a comb this day.

Gideon searched the field beyond the opening, suddenly desperate for Evelyn's presence. He did not want to be here alone with a walking reminder of his dead child.

"Where's your ma?" he croaked, throat muddy with trepidation.

Pointless question. He hadn't heard Walt Montgomery emit a squeak, let alone an intelligible response. Not that the child was slow-witted. Far from it. Intelligence shone in those Chaucer eyes.

He pointed a chubby finger in the tent's direction.

"Is she making breakfast?"

Walt shook his head, folded his hands and pressed them against his cheek.

"She's still asleep?"

When he nodded and wandered over to the neat piles of tack—saddles, blankets, bridles and more—Gideon tamped down panic. "Uh, maybe you should go back to your tent. Your ma will worry if she wakes and finds you gone."

The little boy ignored his suggestion, touching a hesitant finger to this item and that, bending at the knees, peering closer. Inquisitive as well as intelligent.

And without a father. Just as Gideon had been at that age.

Drake Montgomery's image resurfaced in his mind. Gideon could clearly recall the expression of hatred, of reckless resolve that drove him to push himself and his mount beyond their limits. He could still hear the frantic pleas for help as he lay writhing in pain. What kind of man had he been? What kind of husband? Father?

Taking another swallow of the bitter coffee, Gideon dislodged the misplaced curiosity. Not his business, remember?

Still standing in the same spot, he watched as Walt drifted over to the corner where the building tools were stacked. He picked up a hammer, tentatively testing its weight. When the boy lifted a beseeching gaze to him, Gideon was hurtled backward in time, to before the war that divided the nation and ripped his father from him, to a time when things were simple and good. His father had taught him how to pound nails into wood. How proud Gideon had been to be his helper.

Spurred by poignant memories, he set the mug on the ground and, retrieving a discarded wood round, located the box of nails. He could spare a few minutes for a lonely little boy, even if it meant resurrecting pain that would devour him from the inside out if he let it.

* * *

Evelyn woke with the distinct feeling that something was off. But what? She lay motionless for a long moment, not breathing, trying to pinpoint the source of her unease. Breathing. Walt's soft breathing wasn't filling the tent's cramped interior. The absence of it aroused all sorts of dire imaginings.

Bolting upright, she called his name, lifting the blue-and-yellow-swirled quilt even though it was obvious he wasn't here.

She shoved her arms into the thin cotton housecoat, tugged on her boots without bothering to lace them. Stumbling outside, she searched both sides of the stream. The fields were empty. Tethered to the nearest tree, Petra turned her head and let out a welcoming bawl.

"Walt?"

Where could he be? Surely not with Gideon. To a shy kid like him, the man must seem like a giant. A big, brawny, intimidating giant. Clutching her housecoat lapels, she strode across the field, dewdrops wiping away yesterday's dust from her boots.

The steel-swathed-in-velvet voice slowed her steps. Patience marked Gideon's words as he explained the safest way to wield a hammer. Amazing how soothing and, yes, even pleasant, he could sound when he wasn't defensive or tense or angry as he was around her.

Edging to the doorway, she caught sight of man and boy crouched close together. Walt had a tight grip on the handle, a look of intense concentration on his face, lower lip tucked in tight. The cowboy's capable-looking hands gently covered his, mimicking the movements.

Oh, Walt. Evelyn's throat constricted. Anyone could see he was soaking up the attention.

She must've made a sound, because Gideon's head whipped up, the force of his gray gaze slamming into her. While his voice and expression were easy, his eyes told a different story. Misery was reflected there. Desolation. Whatever had happened to this man had come close to destroying him, had robbed him of hope and life and trust.

Blinking, he severed eye contact, then dipped his head. "Look who's here."

Walt's blinding grin sidetracked her train of thought. How long had it been since he'd been this animated? Silently animated, she amended, drawn farther into the sunny space. This time when Gideon looked at her, his eyes were clear of turmoil as they did a slow inspection of her hair, her clothing and her unlaced boots.

Heat traveled to her cheeks. They were practically strangers, and here she was in her nightclothes, her hair arranged in a haphazard, sleep-tousled braid.

Tightly bunching the material at her neck, she held out her hand to her son. “Let’s leave Mr. Thornton to his work, sweetheart.”

This suggestion did not sit well with Walt, who jutted his chin at a stubborn angle.

“I don’t mind if he stays a little longer,” Gideon said, surprising her. “We’re not quite finished with our lesson.”

Finished or not, Evelyn had to stamp out the adoration taking root in Walt’s eyes. He could not be allowed to become attached to her family’s sworn enemy.

“You’ll have to finish it later.”

Pushing to his feet, Gideon approached, a defensive slope to his broad shoulders. “What’s the problem, Evelyn?” He spoke quietly. “Surely you don’t believe a few minutes in my company will sully your son?”

She fought the urge to take a step back. He was too close, his manly scent—a combination of campfire and leather—luring her closer. The wide, solid planes of his chest looked like the perfect place of refuge, a place to rest her head and, for a brief moment, give up control. Lean on someone else’s strength. The sweetness of that prospect had her swaying toward him.

His sleek brows furrowed in response.

“I—” She scrambled for something sensible to say, stunned at herself. Gideon Thornton was the last person on earth she should be seeking support from.

Liar. Thief. Adversary.

Gentle. Patient. Kind.

Before she could unravel her thoughts, he clamped his jaw. “No need to say anything else. Your opinion of me is quite clear.” He motioned for Walt. “Breakfast time, kiddo. Go help your ma.”

The joy leached from Walt’s face. Small shoulders drooping, he trudged across the dirt floor. Indecision knotted her insides. Was she wrong to interrupt? Of course she didn’t actually think Gideon posed a threat to her son, but a lifetime of warnings could not easily be brushed aside.

Hunkering down to Walt’s level, she took his hand and caressed a thumb over his soft skin. “How would you like to help me make flapjacks?”

He kicked up a shoulder. Dug the rounded toe of his boot in the reddish dirt.

“I found our crock of maple syrup. That would taste good on top, don’t you think?”

He nodded, but no smile appeared. He didn’t want to leave Gideon. Swallowing a sigh, she shot the cowboy a parting look, which he missed because he’d already turned away to tidy up the space. Judging from his ruler-straight spine and careful movements, he wasn’t any happier than Walt was.

On the walk back to the campsite, one disconcerting question drummed through her mind. How could someone so distasteful, so despicable—according to her brothers—treat her son better than his own father had?

Even if her husband were around to defend himself, he wouldn’t see the need to answer to her or anyone else. Drake had been the center of his own universe. His goals and his comforts were all that had mattered. Whenever she’d asked him to pay more attention to their son, he’d shrugged her off. A toddler isn’t worth my time. When he’s old enough to understand grown-up stuff, then I’ll take him under my wing. Infuriating, foolish man. He died not knowing the treasure he’d rejected.

Sitting on a low stool at Petra’s side, she situated Walt between her knees and showed him how to direct the milk into the pail at their feet. His initial hesitation gradually faded, and when the cow’s tail swished against his ear, he giggled. The carefree laughter, like a bubbling spring, made her yearn for more. To hear him say “Mama” and “I love you.” To hear him sing again in his pure, lighter-than-air voice.

Theo had warned her not to push him, and she’d taken his advice. It hadn’t been easy. Living with this unnatural silence, wondering if he’d ever speak again, had filled her with troubling anger. This was Drake’s fault. She wanted to rant and rave and vent her frustration at a dead man. What did that say about her as a person?

“All done,” she said, masking the unpleasantness boiling inside. “Good job, sweetie. Now let’s go make flapjacks. I’m hungry as a bear, aren’t you?”

By the time the fluffy cakes were stacked in trenchers with a hefty slathering of syrup, Walt’s earlier unhappiness was forgotten. He dug into the meal with gusto. With logs for seats and no table to speak of, they ate with the trenchers in their laps, the great outdoors their dining room. Couldn’t ask for a nicer view. The birds whistling overhead and the rush of water were nice touches. However, she could do without the pesky flies.

Her gaze drifted to the stable, where Gideon had his head bent to an unknown task. He hadn’t worked on the walls so far this morning, despite the fact there was a pile of logs behind the structure ready for use. Unusual that he’d chosen to erect the animals’ shelter before his own. If his cabin had already been built, would he have given up his living quarters for them? Not for her, but for Walt? The question was an unnecessary one but interesting. If not for his purchase of Petra, she would’ve said outright that Gideon Thornton giving up his home for the likes of her was about as likely as a wolf giving up his prey. Now she wasn’t so sure.

Chapter Five

Gideon was in the middle of assembling the pulley system when an unexpected sound mingled with the birdsong, swelling above the horses’ nickers and the breeze rippling through the high grass. Evelyn. Singing. Her smoky voice belted out a lively tune, one he didn’t recognize, in a language he didn’t understand. Her playful tone told him this was a happy song, maybe even a silly one.

Unable to resist a peek, he set aside the rope coil and wheel and, standing, went to lean against the half wall. At the stream cleaning their breakfast dishes, she serenaded the boy in an attempt to draw him out. And although Walt smiled and bobbed his head, he didn’t join in.

Yearning for what he could never have captured him in its torturous grip, and he wished them far from there. Resentment curdled his stomach. Why did they have to intrude upon his much-needed solitude?

“I see you have company,” an accented voice said from the doorway.

Gideon half turned, not surprised his friend had managed to approach without his realizing it. Lars Brinkerhoff might have been Danish by birth, but his years with the Cheyenne had molded him into an adept hunter and trapper, able to blend in with his surroundings.

“You spoke to Elijah and Clint, I take it.”

“Ja, that I did.” The big Dane nodded, cornflower-blue eyes bright with concern in his tanned face. “I am sorry to hear about this complication.”

Lars joined him at the wall, his arms poised along the roughened edge. He tipped his head in Evelyn’s direction. “Beautiful song.”

Gideon didn’t comment.

“Is the widow Russian?”

“Her ancestors are.” He dragged his gaze from her animated form to the man at his side. “Do you understand what she’s saying?”

“She is singing about a cat and mouse who, though natural enemies, have become the best of friends.”

Enemies who became friends. He’d been right. It was a ridiculous song.

“Any news on the cause of the Ramsey fire?” He sought to get his mind off the intriguing widow and onto more neutral matters.

Lars frowned deeply. “Clint and I sifted through the debris and found a kerosene container. Someone set that fire, no doubt about that.”

It was beginning to look as if the recent string of accidents weren’t accidents at all. They must be connected somehow. “Who would do this and why?”

His friend's beefy hand settled heavily on his shoulder. "We are going to get to the bottom of this mystery. In the meantime, be on your guard. We have not been able to establish a pattern, which means any one of us is a potential target."

Gideon ground his back teeth together. His future was already being threatened by Mrs. Evelyn Montgomery. Now he had an unknown menace to worry about?

"There is nothing to be done in this moment, but there is plenty we can do about your animals' shelter. Winona is not expecting me for her language lesson until midafternoon. I will help you, but first, why not introduce me to your land mate?"

Land mate? While Lars's English was very good, he had a funny way of phrasing things.

"Let's get this over with," he muttered, leading the way to her tent site.

The dishes already cleaned and put away, she was now reciting the alphabet. As they drew closer, he saw that Walt was tracing letters in the dirt with a stick.

Evelyn lifted her head, her eyes going wide at the sight of his companion. He recalled his first impression of Lars, who, with his shoulder-length blond hair, fringed buckskin clothing and moccasin-style boots, looked like no one he'd ever seen.

Swiftly rising, she stepped in front of her son, blocking him from view. The protective lioness guarding her cub.

"Evelyn, this is Lars Brinkerhoff, a good friend of mine." His only friend in Brave Rock, as Gideon wasn't one to seek out relationships. From their first meeting shortly after their arrival in this unsettled slice of Oklahoma territory, Lars had gone out of his way to strike up a friendship. "Lars, meet Mrs. Evelyn Chaucer Montgomery."

He wasn't sure why he'd inserted her maiden name. His brothers would've told Lars about her connection to the Chaucer men, who'd made it their mission to poison the townsfolk's minds against them.

The Dane extended his hand. Evelyn reluctantly allowed hers to be swallowed by his oversize grip, apprehension snaking across her features. Of course she would be uncertain. She was a woman alone with her enemy and his friend.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Montgomery."

Her dark eyes shot to Gideon. The flash of vulnerability made him want to reassure her that she had nothing to fear. A pointless exercise, since she insisted on suspecting him of nefarious motives.

"Lars and his sister, Katrine, came over from Denmark ten years ago. They attend Elijah's church."

"Tis true." The blond smiled broadly and, still clasping her hand, patted it reassuringly. "We would be honored if you and your little one would join us for services."

"I—I appreciate the invitation." Evelyn tugged her hand free. "I'll give it some thought."

Lars addressed him. "Gideon, you must promise to accompany Mrs. Montgomery if she wishes to attend."

He scowled. The Dane knew perfectly well Gideon hadn't once stepped foot in Lije's tent chapel. How could he, when doing so would only prod to life the latent rage inside him? God could've spared his daughter. That He hadn't still hurt so deeply Gideon couldn't even begin to process it. Instead, he boxed up his feelings and locked them up tight, hidden from the daylight, left to fester and spoil in the black caverns of his soul.

A suspicion wormed its way into his thoughts. Evelyn Montgomery was a beautiful woman, an exotic orchid among commonplace daisies. And she was available. Could Lars be interested in her?

So what if he is? A marriage between the two would solve your problem. She wouldn't be after his land anymore.

But what about Winona Eaglefeather? When the Cheyenne woman came to Brave Rock in search of her runaway nephew, Dakota, Lars was able to communicate with her and help her locate the boy. And now that she and Dakota had decided to stay, he was teaching her English. To anyone

watching the two adults interact, it was clear they'd grown close. Gideon got the impression his friend possessed deep feelings for the Native American beauty, but their differences held him back.

"Gideon?" Lars prompted, expression expectant.

Do the right thing.

"I suppose I could. If she makes up her mind to attend."

While Lars smiled with satisfaction and Evelyn stared as if he'd suggested something scandalous, Gideon wanted to call the words back. What in the world had possessed him to agree? He absolutely could not go. If Evelyn surprised him by agreeing to Lars's invitation, he'd deliver her to the church and wait outside to escort her home.

He knew his continued absence bothered Elijah, and he hated to cause him grief. But he couldn't go for his brother. And he certainly wouldn't go for her.

* * *

Evelyn handed the frog back to Walt with a distracted smile. She'd joined him in the stream while the rabbit stew she'd prepared for lunch simmered over hot coals. The cool water washing over her feet and ankles felt delicious in this sweltering heat. Modesty wasn't an issue since Gideon and his unusual friend were engrossed in their work half a field away. Besides, she didn't care what they thought about her.

Glancing over her shoulder, she caught sight of Mr. Brinkerhoff mounting his horse and lifting a hand in wordless goodbye. They'd accomplished a lot in a short amount of time. The stable walls now reached Gideon's shoulders.

Leaving the water, she quickly pulled on her stockings and boots, worked the large knot in her skirt free, and waited until the cotton cascaded to the ground to go and check the stew. When she lifted the lid, the thick broth's succulent aroma teased her nose. Again her gaze drifted to the stable where Gideon was still hard at work. The man had no time to prepare a decent meal. And she hadn't properly thanked him for Petra....

Acting before she could talk herself out of it, she procured a pewter bowl from her kitchenware trunk and ladled a large portion of the stew into it. "Walt." She waited for him to look over at her. "I'm going to speak with Mr. Thornton. Don't wander off, okay?"

Nodding, he returned his attention to the frog cradled in his palm.

The closer she got to her destination, the harder her heart worked to keep up with the blood tumbling through her veins. Calming and refreshing were not words she associated with their interactions. Gideon Thornton possessed the singular ability to irritate her with a mere look. Was it too much to hope this visit would proceed differently than their previous ones?

When she entered the rectangular structure through the double-wide opening, he was in the midst of hoisting a log onto the eastern side wall. Biceps bulging, forearms stiff with tension, he tugged a thick rope toward the floor, thereby lifting the log up into the air. His walnut-colored hair stuck to his temples and nape. Sweat trickled down the side of his neck and disappeared beneath the navy blue shirt collar. Scuffed boots planted far apart in the dirt, his muscled thighs strained the worn-in denim.

Evelyn stood mesmerized by this extraordinary display of strength. Breath locked in her lungs. She remained motionless, afraid to break his concentration lest the log come crashing down on him. It took about five minutes to complete the task. In between testing both ends to check the sturdiness, he flicked her a hooded glance, and she realized he'd been aware of her presence from the second she arrived.

The pewter warm against her palms, she raised her hands to draw attention to her offering. "I brought lunch. Do you like rabbit stew?"

Stepping down from the low stool on which he stood, he whipped off the deerskin gloves and stuffed them in his pocket. His gaze zeroed in on the bowl, then rose to her face. "I'm not a picky eater."

When he made no move toward her, she chose to go to him. Up close, his gray eyes contained a startling wariness. What had he to fear from her? “I assure you, it’s perfectly safe to eat. I don’t make it a habit of slipping poison in my food.”

Those refined eyebrows lifted in surprise. “How about we test that theory?” Taking the bowl and spoon, he scooped up meat, onion and broth and brought it to her lips.

Stunned, her lips parted automatically, which he no doubt took as a sign of compliance.

Not a single part of him touched her, yet disturbing awareness danced along her nerve endings, resurrecting a longing for connection, for companionship and, yes, that dirty word, romance. One would’ve thought living with three brothers and, later, a husband who despised her would’ve put such naive notions to death. But there it was. Deep down where she guarded her most vulnerable secrets, she yearned to be wooed and courted, dreamed of being that one special person in a man’s life. She wanted to be loved. Truly loved for the person she was inside.

Drake had admired her physical appearance, but the attraction had faded soon after the reality of married life set in.

She swallowed with difficulty.

Gideon’s gaze was locked on her mouth, uneasiness marring his brow. Taking the spoon and bowl with him, he executed a swift turn and crossed to the corner, where he lowered himself on the stool and concentrated on the stew.

Sucking in a balancing breath, Evelyn moved in the opposite direction, knowing it was unwise to linger. The logical thing to do would be to return to her tent and leave the taciturn cowboy to his own company. But while he didn’t seem to mind solitude—indeed, seemed to prefer it—she missed teasing and debating with her brothers. Talking to herself wasn’t entertaining in the slightest.

Surveying the neatly stacked walls, she touched a hand to the wood, careful not to get a splinter. A rather long structure, the stable would be big enough for six or seven stalls. Four horses currently occupied the corral.

“You aren’t planning a typical homestead here, are you? Most settlers get seeds in the ground before starting on shelters, yet I’ve seen no sign of turned earth.” She pivoted toward him.

Head bent, he said between bites, “My plans are for a horse ranch. Ranching is all I know.”

“How do you plan to feed yourself? Don’t you like vegetables?”

He raised his head at that, and his cool gray eyes were flat. “I don’t have a family to worry about. It’s just me. I could care less what I eat, as long as it’s filling.”

Evelyn was suddenly curious why he didn’t have a wife. Why there weren’t smaller versions of Gideon Thornton running around. She knew better than to ask such a personal question. Even if she hadn’t glimpsed pain in him, she recognized his desire for privacy.

“I will say,” he continued as his spoon scraped the bowl, “this is one fine stew. You’re a good cook.”

Despite the fact he’d already established his low standards where food was concerned, Evelyn couldn’t ignore the pleasure his simple praise evoked. Such compliments were rare. Sure, her brothers grunted their thanks as they dug into the meals she prepared, but actual words of affirmation were few and far between.

Smoothing damp palms along her skirt front, she lowered her gaze to the reddish dirt at her feet. “Thank you.”

“No, thank you for sharing with me.”

He rose and walked toward her, every step a warning striking her brain. Danger. Keep away. Any kind word at this point in her life was a heady thing. Coming from this man, it had the power to generate traitorous thoughts. His rugged appeal, the restrained energy rippling along his muscles, the scent of leather and campfire clinging to his skin and hair drew her.

Gideon Thornton is off-limits.

As he transferred the empty bowl to her hands, his warm, calloused fingers skimmed her knuckles. Sizzling heat penetrated bone and flesh. When she imagined what those hands would feel like cradling her face, she knew she had to act fast.

“You’ve done a remarkable job here. It’s good to know my animals will have a solid shelter once you’re gone.”

Breath hissed between his teeth. His jaw hardened to stone.

Bull’s-eye. She was safe.

“I’m not the one who’ll be leaving,” he said, his eyes narrowing to slits. “This is my land. I’ll do whatever it takes to hold on to it.”

“Whatever it takes? Even if that means circumventing the law?”

His hands fisted at his sides, he closed his eyes. His lips moved silently, as if he were ordering himself to be calm. Then his eyes bored into her. “You and your brothers can spread all the poisonous lies you want about me, but I know I’m no liar. I’m not a thief. And I don’t have to prove myself to you or anyone else in this town. The judge’s opinion is the only one that matters.”

Evelyn attempted to absorb his words. Passion rang in his voice. Sincerity blazed in his eyes. He was either an adept actor...or he was telling the truth. And if he wasn’t lying, then someone else was.

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