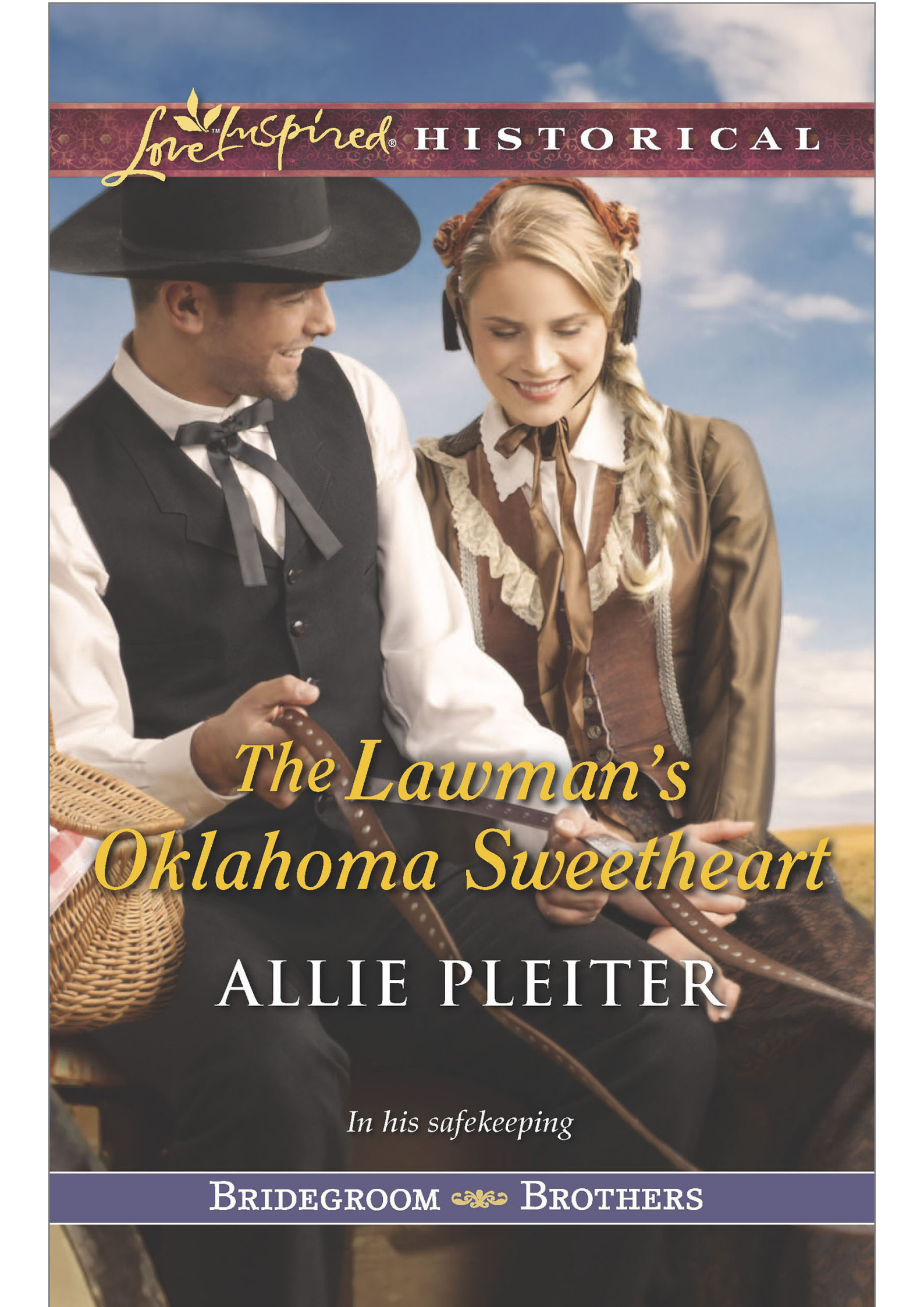




Love Inspired

HISTORICAL

*The Lawman's
Oklahoma Sweetheart*

ALLIE PLEITER

In his safekeeping

BRIDEGROOM  BROTHERS

Mills & Boon Love Inspired Historical

Allie Pleiter

The Lawman's Oklahoma Sweetheart

«HarperCollins»

Pleiter A.

The Lawman's Oklahoma Sweetheart / A. Pleiter — «HarperCollins»,
— (Mills & Boon Love Inspired Historical)

Bound by a Secret When Katrine Brinkerhoff's cabin is attacked, only sheriff Clint Thornton's heroism saves her. She owes Clint her life—and her help catching the men responsible. All she has to do is trust in Clint's plan to protect her family. But she can't let herself care too deeply, not when her past carries secrets that would drive him away. Infiltrating the murderous gang is a dirty job, yet Clint is determined to see it through. The brigands will face justice—and they will never harm Katrine again. Clint would give his life to keep the beautiful settler safe...but will he be willing to risk his heart? 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

"You can tell me one of your stories while I lay the corner timbers."

"You want to hear one of my stories?"

Snapping the reins, Clint set the horse to a gentle trot toward the spot a bit outside of town where Katrine and her brother had staked their claim. "I like your stories."

She laughed. "Lars thinks you find them silly."

"They are." Clint laughed right along. "Some of 'em, at least. But there's a place for silly. We've got all the serious we need, and then some."

She eyed him, head cocked to one side. "Sheriff Thornton, you surprise me."

"I think we can dispense with the 'Sheriff Thornton,' don't you? You can call me Clint."

"Well, then, I suppose you may call me Katrine."

She offered a shy smile. The breeze sent strands of her hair playing across her cheeks. It looked like spun sunshine to him—not that he'd ever say such a thing to her face. Clint swallowed hard and turned his eyes to the path. "Thank you kindly, Katrine," he said. "I'll do that."

* * *

ALLIE PLEITER

Enthusiastic but slightly untidy mother of two, RITA® Award finalist Allie Pleiter writes both fiction and nonfiction. An avid knitter and unreformed chocoholic, she spends her days writing books, drinking coffee and finding new ways to avoid housework. Allie grew up in Connecticut, holds a B.S. in speech from Northwestern University and spent fifteen years in the field of professional fundraising. She lives with her husband, children and a Havanese dog named Bella in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois.

The Lawman's Oklahoma Sweetheart

Allie Pleiter



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Be strong, and let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God. The Lord will do what is good in His sight.

—2 Samuel 10:12

In memory of my dear mother-in-law, Clarice

Special thanks and acknowledgment are given to Allie Pleiter for her contribution to the Bridegroom Brothers miniseries.

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Chapter One

Brave Rock, Oklahoma Territory

June 1889

Fast wasn't fast enough.

Clint Thornton ignored the knot of iron tightening in his gut. He told his fear to go away, to stop growing colder and heavier with each minute, each uncrossed acre, each dangerous stretch of land between himself and the Brinkerhoff homestead. Oklahoma was hot and dry in June. A fire could turn deadly in a split second. And the fastest fire of all was one that had been set to kill.

He bent over his horse, boots digging into the animal's flanks. Faster. Clint's breath tightened to short, hard gasps. If he failed, Katrine would soon be gasping as well, lungs frantic for air, throat singed by the heat, chest bound by the dread of a cabin burning around her. The men threatening the homestead were once soldiers, after all, men trained in the taking of lives. A renegade soldier was a dangerous man indeed. Clint had learned they were seeking to burn a cabin to the ground tonight, but only when he'd followed a gut instinct to check on the Brinkerhoff place had he learned the blood-chilling truth.

Snapping his reins against the horse's sweating flesh, Clint pressed on toward the four torchlights circling the tiny, nearly finished dwelling in the middle-of-the-night darkness just over the hill.

Katrine had nothing to do with any of this, but that wouldn't stop the cavalrymen or the flames they were about to set. They were looking to kill her brother, Lars, the witness to their crimes, and if she happened to die as well it would be of no consequence to them.

Clint yelled out to the men, hoping to distract them and buy Katrine more time, but he was still too far away for them to hear. The knot in his gut seemed to constrict around his whole body as he watched the leader of those men. In a cruel trick of moonlight, Clint saw Samuel McGraw casually, almost amusingly, touch his torch to the roof of a shed next to the cabin. Air fled Clint's lungs in a helpless whoosh that seemed to say "too late."

No. It could not be too late. Clint yelled, "McGraw!" once, then louder, jabbing the horse with frantic boot heels. "McGraw!" Some survival instinct took over from there, turning his voice to one of conspiratorial indifference even as his insides were going off like cannons at the thought of Katrine trapped in the smoke. Even as he watched embers float lazily from the shed to settle and ignite on the homestead roof. "McGraw, it's Thornton. Hold on there!"

Finally he was close enough to see McGraw's face as he handed his torch to another man and peered in Clint's direction. "Thornton?"

Clint kept at full gallop the last few feet into the homestead yard, even as the fire began lapping up the structure's roof. "There's men behind me," he panted, hoping his breathlessness would come off as strain, not fear. "Just up over the ridge. Go." He pulled on the reins as his horse made uneasy circles, spooked by the growing fire. "Get yourselves gone. I'll cover. I'll say the place was burning when I came up on it."

He needed them to believe he was on their side if his plan to infiltrate the Black Four gang would ever work. But he also needed them to leave so he could save Katrine. McGraw, evidently one to see a job done, didn't seem too eager to be gone. Clint's heartbeat pounded ice against the heat now flushing his face. The ice threatened to swallow him altogether when he heard the sound of a bang from inside. It did swallow him when he saw the plank the soldiers had nailed across the homestead door.

"Get on out of here," he insisted as hard as he dared. "I've reason to be here, you don't. I'll cover for you but it won't do one lick of good in five minutes if you're not gone."

"He's right," Bryson Reeves, another of McGraw's cronies, said as he tossed his torch into the little set of rosebushes Katrine had optimistically planted along the east wall. Clint felt them burning as if the flames nipped at his own throat. "Let's get gone, Sam."

Clint flung himself down off his horse with what he hoped looked like indifference. Every inch between him and that barred front door yawned long and dead. He gestured over the ridge he'd just rushed down. "Land sakes, McGraw, are you waitin' for an invitation? Go!"

McGraw considered for an excruciating moment, Clint's throat turning to knots as he heard yet another sound from within. The Brinkerhoff homestead held no windows, no way out but the door barred behind him. He thought he heard a cough and imagined Katrine sinking to the floor, her pale hands claspings at her throat. He felt the heat of the flames prickles the back of his neck. The urge to rush over there and physically push McGraw off toward the river nearly overpowered him. He heard a small, insistent thud from the side of the house away from the men and for a terrible moment imagined he was hearing Katrine's body hit the wall.

Then he remembered the logs. The loose two logs on the far side of the house, the ones Katrine was always complaining let the wind in to chill the room. He heard more thuds and realized she was trying to kick them out. Kick, he pleaded to her silently as his hands fisted in frustration. Keep kicking.

"I'm handin' you a gift here, McGraw. Are you too dumb to take it? You've got four minutes, maybe five afore those men behind me catch up and see you standin' here with torches while this shack burns."

"Fine!" McGraw pronounced after what felt like a year, turning his horse and waving his henchmen to ride off.

Clint forced himself to stand and watch, shoving his weight back on one hip as if the burning house was just another prairie brushfire. The kicking behind him had slowed and stopped, halting his blood right along with it. Just twenty more feet. That's all he needed.

Because God have mercy on him if he had to watch one more person die...

* * *

It was as if the walls of the tiny cabin had come alive, creeping toward her like prowling animals. Katrine's eyes stung, far more from the smoke over her head than from the tears wetting her cheeks. The smoke made it impossible to shout, so she'd tried the door, but it would not open. She'd heard voices—there were men outside, but they did not open the door. They were not here to save her. The Black Four had struck again, had come to burn down the house to push her off her land. Her brother, Lars, had worried the terrible gang might someday stoop to killing, but she never imagined they would begin with her. I'm not ready for Heaven, she begged God, even though she knew He would welcome her. I'm not brave enough to die. Not like this, not trapped. Not alone.

Not yet. Turning in frantic circles, Katrine scanned the four stalking walls, searching for any help. It was so hard to see, so awful to breathe. My Lord, my protector, save me. She pulled in another scorching breath, seeing the edges of her vision curl in and grow dark. How could even the Black Four bear to stand out there and watch a soul burn to death?

Stumbling to the table more by feel than by sight, Katrine found a dishcloth, then the Mason jar that still held black-eyed Susans from the supper table she'd set. The supper Lars had not come home to eat. She pulled the flowers from the jar and stuffed the dishcloth inside, the water feeling cool against the growing heat of the room.

For a stunned moment Katrine wondered why she could suddenly see, why the room glowed orange. Then, pressing the blissfully cool cloth over her nose and mouth, she peered up just in time to see a flaming chunk of the roof fall with a hollow whoosh and settle on Lars's bed.

Had they found Lars first? Was he already dead? Katrine's heart froze at the thought that her brother, who'd saved her from how many dangers since they'd come to America, might no longer be alive to save her now. No, he must be alive, she declared silently. He must live and make a future for himself in this new town, maybe a family... Her thoughts were coming in tangles now and her eyes stung so badly. Where was Lars? He'd know what to do. He'd built this cabin for the two of them; he'd know how to keep it from being their tomb. Think, Katrine, try to think.

The beams overhead gave a dreadful groan and Katrine backed away from the noise, grabbing the jar of water as she did. She stuffed the dishcloth into the water again, but its paltry contents didn't

help much against the smoke and heat now filling the room. Why, why hadn't she fought harder with Lars to make windows? He said they would only let in the cold, but the drafty corner did that already.

The drafty corner. The pair of loose logs on the corner of the house. Oh, how she'd cursed those cracks, how they seemed to welcome the flies and dust into the room. Lars had not yet fixed them; they still wiggled when a boot kicked them hard enough. Katrine crouched down and crawled over to the corner, not caring how the split-log floor snagged on her nightshift or scraped against her knees. Behind her, gold light burst out into the room, and Katrine turned to see Lars's coverlet consumed in flames. It gave her just enough light to find the logs and shift around to start kicking.

Her shifting knocked over a chair, but she merely pushed it aside and continued to slam her bare feet against the loose wood. It shifted, but not enough. "Flytte!" she yelled, commanding the logs to give way in her native Danish as she kicked them again. Behind her the fire's crackle and growl seemed to come closer. Katrine moved up and began kicking with both feet, not caring about the growing pain on her heels—what would that matter in a few minutes as she lay gasping? The air seemed to race away from her, stealing the breath she needed to keep kicking. She could feel her efforts growing weaker, feel how the smoke robbed her strength.

Keep kicking. Her leg wobbled as she forced it against the log, and somewhere through the thickness of her mind she heard a voice. She thought she heard crumbling, imagined the log was pulling itself from the cabin, coming to life to save hers.

"Katrine!"

She couldn't actually say whether the voice was real or imagined. Everything was spinning into a black hole in her mind, like water draining through the bottom of a barrel.

The rush of night air hit her face like a slap, clear and startling. She heard a man's growl of effort as another log shuddered loose and fell onto the floor beside her. Air. "Here! Through here!" the voice called. Without thinking, Katrine turned and reached through the ragged opening, clinging to the hands that grabbed her outstretched fingers.

The change in air was astounding. Yellow sparks swirled against a dark violet sky as she felt herself pulled from the menacing heat. Katrine sucked down a huge draught of air, only to curl over in a cough that seemed to tear her throat into pieces. Before she could catch her breath, the hands dragged her across the cool prairie grass as the most dreadful, most unearthly sound filled her ears. A wind-filled echo, an evil rush of air such as she'd never heard before. Katrine looked up to see her home, her cabin, sprout flames from every corner and tumble in on itself, spouting in a volcano of smoke and sparks.

The fire burned hot and bright in all directions, throwing sharp light and flickering long shadows into the night. She coughed again, tasting coal and acid, and felt a hand on her back. Turning to look, she saw the face of Clint Thornton. She was safe in the grip of the town sheriff, thank goodness.

Fear widened his dark brown eyes, sweat glistened on his cheek even as it plastered the front of his dark hair against his forehead. "Are you all right, Katrine? Are you hurt?" His voice was tight and dark with worry.

Was she? She wasn't sure she even knew. Too parched to speak, Katrine managed a weak nod, giving over to the shivers that suddenly took her. She hugged herself and drew up her knees, appalled to remember she was in nothing more than a summer nightshift.

Sheriff Thornton knelt in front of her, shucking off his coat to wrap it around her shoulders. He took each of her hands and arms in turn, checking them for cuts and bruises. His touch was quick and reassuring. Her feet throbbed and felt as if they were covered in scratches, but she could move them. She started to say, "I'm fine," but the words only became another cough. When he went to stand up, Katrine grabbed his hand, stopping him until he looked at her.

"Thank you," she managed in a thin whisper that hurt with each word. She squeezed his arm again. Sheriff Thornton was Lars's good friend. Surely he would know about her brother. "Lars? Is Lars alive?"

“Yes...and no.”

Katrine felt her fear surge back up. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Lars is safe, but only if no one knows.”

She blinked up at him, confused.

His dark brows furrowed. “I have a plan, Katrine, but you may not like what it is.”

Chapter Two

Katrine began to come undone by the time Clint managed to get her to his brother Elijah’s house. She looked up at him one more time as he brought her down off his saddle.

“You’re sure there is no other way?” He hated that she was near to tears again.

It felt cruel to ask something so big of her just now, but there simply wasn’t another way to keep her and Lars safe. Not that he could see. “Yes, I’m sure. This will work, and it will get me in with the Black Four so I can put them away for good. I’ll convince them you were gone tonight—say you had an argument with Lars or some such thing—and that they got Lars in the fire.”

“Why would they believe you?”

“Folks are always ready to believe what they want to hear.” Life had taught him that, over and over. Even here in Brave Rock, people were too ready to believe the broken fences and other “accidents” that had happened in the past month weren’t anything more than hard times.

This time he would make blind assumptions like that work in his favor. “They already think I’m on their side since I told them I’d cover their tracks. I’ve needed this chance—I can put it to good use—and it might not come again. The best way to bring the Black Four down is from the inside.” He caught her elbow and felt her shiver even under his coat. “I know it’s hard, but Lars would agree, I’m sure of it,” he pressed, even though this was far beyond the plan he and Lars had crafted mere hours before.

“I don’t like lying. Not about this.” She shook her head more firmly. “How can I tell everyone he is dead?”

Clint stared hard into those big blue eyes now rimmed in red and soot. He did hate putting such a load on her like this. After what she’d just been through, it didn’t seem fair. He’d seen enough of her spirit to know she was strong enough to handle it, even if she couldn’t quite see it now. “You like to tell stories, you’re good at it. This is a story to save Lars. To save yourself. Can you be brave, Katrine?” He dared to use her first name as he took both her shoulders. “Can you trust me in this?”

She softened a bit under his hands. “You promise me Lars is well?” Katrine sniffed, and he could feel her clutching at his arms even through the sleeves of his coat that hung down well below her hands. “That you need this story, and only for a short while?” She looked frail, as if she’d sway any moment.

A trickle of panic skittered down Clint’s spine. He knew how to protect, but precious little about how to comfort. Lije was good with people, Clint’s other brother, Gideon, was good with animals, but Clint had neither of those gifts. He was the sheriff here, and despite his fondness for many of the folk in Brave Rock, that meant he kept a certain distance. By personal choice and by profession. All that neighborly comfort business? That was his pastor brother’s corner.

Still, as much as Katrine needed Godly comfort, he couldn’t let her into Lije’s house until he’d gotten her to agree to his plan. That meant that for now, he’d have to venture into those emotional waters and try to tell Katrine what she needed to hear. Looking into those impossibly blue eyes, it wasn’t hard to find a soft spot from which to pull the words. Tall as she was, she felt tiny and frail under his hands, and the urge to keep her safe needed little encouragement. Those eyes could drive any man to feats of heroism, especially when framed with wet lashes and looking up from within the confines of his own coat. “I promise Lars is safe. And will be.” He meant every word, gruff and hoarse as they came from his sooty throat.

She blinked back more tears, and something unknotted inside Clint. He couldn’t leave all the comforting to Lije; after all, he’d placed Katrine in this spot and it was up to him to help her endure

it. The compulsion to tighten his grasp on her shoulders became irresistible. He wanted to hold her up, to lend her some of his strength despite how out of his depth this all felt. “Give me a little while,” he said, amazed at the unfamiliar tone of his voice. “Give me some time, and all will be well.”

He saw the light come on in Lije’s window. Hang it, he didn’t have time. The lawman side of him knew what had to happen now, kind or not. If he didn’t get an agreement from her right this minute, all would be lost. “But this piece cannot wait. Say yes.” He forced the command back into his voice, hating the flinch he felt in her shoulders. “Now, Katrine. You must say yes to this now.”

Her eyes fluttered shut for a moment, as if the weight of her agreement pressed down on her spirit. Of course it did—he’d pressed it there himself—but he couldn’t think about that now.

“Yes.” It was a whisper. A frail whisper with an edge of fear he felt right down to his gut. Still, it was an agreement, and that’s what he needed right now. “I understand,” she went on, nodding, her voice gaining a tiny sliver of strength. “We will do this. For Lars.”

“Clint?” Lije’s voice came from the door as he pushed it open. “I saw flames. What is...” His expression changed as the light from the window illuminated Clint’s and Katrine’s soot-smeared faces. “Land sakes! Are either of you hurt? Where’s Lars?”

Katrine looked back to Clint with wide, panicked eyes. For the delightful storyteller Katrine was, this tale seemed beyond her right now. Could she really do as he asked? He looked at her hard, his stare saying “Lars needs you to do this,” but she blinked and wobbled a bit as if she’d just had the breath knocked out of her. He spared her any further answer by turning toward his brother and slowly shaking his head.

Clint watched as the realization spread over his brother’s face. Losing Lars would be a huge blow to this community—it was precisely why he had to be “lost” now so that his life could be saved. “God have mercy. No. Not Lars.”

Clint nodded even as Katrine seemed to wilt. He held her upright by the shoulders, sending her strength through his grip. This was asking a lot of her, but he knew her. She was stronger than she knew, even if she couldn’t have been prepared for tonight’s shock. The fire’s trauma still pounded through his own blood, for that matter. How could it not still hold her in its grip? “The house went up like a matchstick,” Clint said, focusing his thoughts with the facts he could safely relate. “It’s a wonder I could get Katrine out through the back wall.”

“You saved her life, Clint. Thank God for that.”

Lije’s brand-new wife, Alice—they’d just been married the first of the month—came out from behind her husband, wrapping a shawl around her nightshift. “It’s dreadful, dreadful news. Bring her in here, Clint. The two of you look awful.” She pulled Katrine from Clint’s grip, brushing aside the blond locks that had frayed out of Katrine’s long braid. “You’re sure you’re not hurt?”

“Ja,” Katrine said meekly, lapsing for a moment into her native tongue. “I am not hurt. Not much.” She coughed, hiding her face in her hands.

“No need to talk about it further. Come inside and let’s get you cleaned up. Clint, you, too. I want to look at that hand.” She nodded to the bloody gash on Clint’s left hand inflicted by the splintered logs as he had pulled Katrine to safety.

“Give me a moment with Clint,” Lije said, grabbing Clint’s elbow. “I’ll be inside in a minute.”

“I’m fine, Alice,” Clint insisted when Alice gave her husband a questioning look. “A bit worse for wear but nothing serious.”

Alice held up a pair of fingers. “Two minutes. Then I want you inside to get some antiseptic on that arm.”

Clint turned to his brother as the door shut behind the women. “Before you ask, no, it wasn’t an accident. It was the Black Four.”

“Lars was murdered? By the Black Four?”

Life took harsh turns out here in the territories, but Clint had learned that the four men who had come to be called the Black Four were helping things along by ensuring certain weaker settlers

met with more bad luck than others. Worst of all, Clint now knew that Samuel McGraw and the other members of the local “Security Patrol” were the men behind the name. As the Black Four, these cavalymen had done exactly what they were out here charged to prevent: cut fences, set fires, let livestock loose and a whole host of other crimes. Acts designed to intimidate folks out of their land. As a result, scared settlers had sold their stakes at cheap prices—right to a convenient buyer Clint was pretty sure was in McGraw’s back pocket. Greed was alive and well in Brave Rock, Oklahoma, but all Clint had right now to prove McGraw was behind the Black Four was Lars’s eyewitness testimony. The witness that the Black Four had thought they killed tonight.

Clint ran his hand down his face, still feeling the gritty soot he’d tried to wipe off several times already. The image of that private’s lackadaisical stance made his stomach churn. Evil was alive and well—and in the last place most people would think to look. “Keep this between us for now, Lije, but they nailed the door shut with her inside. McGraw set his torch to the place as easily as if he were lighting a cigar.”

Lije placed his hand on Clint’s shoulder. “Lord protect us.” Clint saw grave worry darken his brother’s eyes. “These men have people fooled and must be stopped. Clint, you have got to prove McGraw is behind everything. Any way you can.”

He’d begun to do just that, hadn’t he? “I intend to. Men like that will kill again if it suits them, and more easily as they go. They’re going after the easy claims now, but it won’t stop there. Pretty soon no one will be safe. I know how much I need to bring them to justice.” After a pause, he added, “I owe that much to Lars. To his memory.” He didn’t like keeping Lije in the dark this way, but there was nothing for it—the fewer people who knew Lars lived, the more chances the Dane had of staying alive.

As if she’d heard his thoughts of her brother, Katrine’s quiet sob came though the cabin window.

Lije’s hand tightened on Clint’s shoulder. “Not all was lost. You saved her life.”

The skitter of panic returned and Clint pushed away the black thought of what might have happened if he’d been even five minutes later. “Barely.”

“In these parts, barely’s enough. Come inside and let Alice tend to you. The fire’s out, and there’s nothing to be done until daylight.”

It must be near two in the morning, but even though every bone in his body ached, Clint was sure no sleep would come to him tonight. He couldn’t leave Katrine right now. Not only wasn’t it wise until he knew she could maintain the deception, but a part of him felt responsible for her now. He’d saved her life. He’d inserted himself into a crime and had thrust this simple, gentle woman into a dangerous game. He’d tangled with the cavalymen by choice, in order to see justice done. Katrine? She’d only been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He pushed through the door to find her slumped and still shaking at Lije’s table. He’d always thought her quietly strong, but she looked to be made of glass right now.

“Are you hurt?” Clint asked as gently as he could. He didn’t think she was, but Are you all right? wasn’t even a question worth asking.

“Her feet are badly bruised from kicking,” Alice offered, gathering up the ash-blackened cloths that sat beside the wash bowl. Katrine’s hands fared no better, for red scrapes marred the too-pink skin of her scrubbed hands. “It’s awful.” Alice’s voice broke. “Poor, dear Lars.”

Clint caught Katrine’s eyes and silently told her to hold on just awhile. “I’ll bring Lars’s killers to justice,” he declared to her more than anyone else. “So help me I will.”

* * *

Even though daylight came through Elijah and Alice’s windows, Katrine felt as if she were still surrounded by darkness. Sunshine did nothing to bring her peace. She wondered how she would get through another hour—much less an entire day—of telling people Lars was dead. Already she had watched them mourn her brother and offer her comfort. Much as she trusted Sheriff Thornton’s

judgment and wanted to keep Lars safe, these few hours had fed Katrine's doubts that this plan would work.

Breakfast was barely finished before Alice resumed dabbing more disinfectant onto one of the deep scratches. The woman who served as Brave Rock's nurse offered a sympathetic smile. "Nasty stuff, isn't it? Trust me, an infection would be a lot nastier. And hurt more." Alice peered at the wound on Katrine's arm once more, then began to wrap it in a bandage. "God was watching over you last night. I know you've lost much, but you haven't lost your life."

Katrine looked at the cabin's table. Already it had begun to fill with food and other gifts of comfort from the good people of Brave Rock. "I have lost Lars," she whispered. It wasn't as hard to say as she feared. After all, it was true, at least for now, wasn't it? She didn't even know where he was, only that Sheriff Thornton had promised he was safe. She had prayed all night that it was true.

Alice sat down opposite Katrine and took her good hand. "I'm so sorry, Katrine. We all are."

"Thank you." Katrine didn't know what else to say. She wanted people to leave her alone, but she didn't want to be alone, either. Fears and worries tumbled around her head, muddling her thoughts when they needed to be clear.

"Lars would be glad you were spared though, wouldn't he?" Alice was trying hard to make her feel better, only no one really could accomplish that. She and Sheriff Thornton were alone in bearing the truth of what had really happened. "He'd be glad Clint was able to save your life," Alice went on when Katrine failed to reply. "Maybe in time you will be able to let that give you comfort."

The only thing that gave her comfort right now was that Sheriff Thornton had told her he was going to see Lars. Soon Lars would know all that had happened; soon he'd know to remain wherever he was and stay safe. When this was all over, Lars would be safe. Sheriff Thornton had told her to hang on to that thought, and she desperately needed to do so.

"I think it comforted Clint to be able to save your life. He's lost his good friend as much as you've lost a brother. The whole town will feel the loss, but you two most especially." Alice packed up her medical kit, nodding toward the kettle on the stove in a silent invitation to have more tea.

"Yes," Katrine agreed, but for different reasons than Alice meant.

"Our good sheriff," Alice said, a sigh in her voice. She brought two cups to the table and returned to her seat opposite Katrine. "Clint is a fine man. Oh, he can be a bit surly, and not a little bit lost, but he's as loyal as the day is long." Alice raised an eyebrow. "And not so bad to look at, hmm?" Katrine saw Alice's thumb run across the shiny gold band of her new wedding ring. "It's good to have a loyal man in your life. Especially one who saved your life."

"I'm grateful to him. Really I am." Katrine would have to be blind to miss the glow in Alice's eyes. The new bride was so happy.

"Just grateful? Nothing else?"

Sheriff Thornton was a fine man to look at, but he seemed hard and dark and some days he seemed far beyond the ten years older she knew him to be. Every once in a while, at town gatherings or the many meals he had shared with Lars and her, she would catch a glimpse of something warm behind his eyes. A long look, a detail noticed, a fragment of something beyond friendship. Even Lars had said something once, but with such an air of dismissal Katrine could easily guess Lars would never approve should the sheriff display open interest of that sort.

No, Sheriff Thornton's regard for her seemed far closer to bafflement than anything more familiar. In truth, Katrine felt as if Sheriff Thornton had a long list of ideas of how the world should be and couldn't decide where she fit on that list. More than once, the tenor of his regard had made her wonder if he'd somehow learned her secret. That wasn't possible, of course, but he was a lawman, and maybe they had ways of finding things out she didn't understand.

It was true—Katrine was lots of things besides grateful, but none of those could be put into words. Certainly not this morning. Today words felt like her enemy—at least every word that wasn't

from Sheriff Thornton about Lars. Katrine was grateful a knock on the front door kept her from having to continue this conversation.

Alice raised an eyebrow, silently asking if Katrine was ready to accept visitors. She hadn't faced a single one yet.

"No." Katrine shook her head, left the tea in its cup and fled to the bedroom. It was easy to convince Alice that she was too upset to receive condolence calls. Father God, help me. I don't know how I'll lie to all these good, grieving people. The whole thing tangled her stomach up in such knots that it wasn't much of a fib to say she was feeling poorly.

As she heard Alice talk with someone about what a fine fellow Lars was, Katrine sat on the bed and remembered what it felt like to be pulled from death's smoky clutches. Her throat seemed to tighten at the mere memory of that awful, acrid smell. She'd bathed again this morning and still felt as if she couldn't wash the scent from her skin. I will choose to be thankful. For my life. For Lars's life. For Sheriff Thornton's bravery and for trust in his wisdom. You have made this way, have given us a chance to protect Lars's life, and I will do it. But You must know how hard this is for me.

"I agree," she heard Alice say. "He was a hero indeed. I am glad he is sheriff, too. These are perfect and much needed, thank you." And then, in a lighter tone of voice, "Why yes, we're very happy. Thank you for your good wishes. I'll be sure to let her know you came by."

Katrine could barely rise up off the bed when Alice opened the door. "Everyone has such kind words for you, and such fond memories of Lars." She lifted up one skirt from the armful she held. "Deborah Kincaid is much closer to your size. These will fit you so much better than my clothes until we can get new ones."

So much generosity and compassion. Brave Rock was going to be a wonderful place to call home.

But home was gone now, wasn't it? No, she would try not to think of it like that. Just the cabin was gone. The cabin with those blessed, blessed loose logs she'd complained about so often.

"Alice, I'm not sure I can go."

"Where?"

"This afternoon. Sheriff Thornton said he'd bring me back to the cabin to see what was left, but I don't think I am ready." She used her good hand to wipe away the tears, which seemed to come so easily. "We only had a few things from Mama and Papa to remember them by, and they will be gone."

Alice put a gentle hand over Katrine's. "They may, but they may not. Wouldn't it be better to know?"

"I don't want to see our home in ashes." Katrine felt the words burn her throat all over again. "I don't want to see what those men did to Lars. To me."

"Elijah and I will go with you and Clint, if you'd like. You'll have to go over there sometime. Perhaps it's best to get it over with right away."

Katrine shook her head. If Elijah and Alice were with her, Thornton could not talk of Lars. Nor could they talk freely here. No, if she wanted to hear of Lars, she had to go see the cabin. What a gruesome bargain that was. "If twelve people were to come with me it will not help. I must find a way to be brave, ja?"

Alice straightened her shoulders and took Katrine's hands. "You are brave. And strong. And God is braver and stronger still. Hold on to that. Can you do that?"

Without Lars beside her? It seemed impossible. "Alone? I don't know."

"That's just the thing, Katrine, you're not alone. Not even close."

Chapter Three

"Well now, look what the wind dragged over the prairie!" Sam McGraw scraped a match across the bottom of his boot and lit the thin cigarette that hung from his lips. Most frontier men rolled their own tobacco, but somehow McGraw and his partners in the Security Patrol always managed to have fine store-bought cigarettes. Clint had wondered more than once how men of a lowly private rank

came by such luxuries, but he'd seen enough of how government worked to know sometimes hard jobs came with special privileges. And Clint was no stranger to just how hard it was to keep folks in line before and during the Land Rush.

The fact that he felt McGraw had done a mighty poor job of it, well, he'd just have to keep that to himself a while longer. A uniform didn't automatically earn a man respect in Clint's view, but it was clear that's how McGraw saw the world.

The private tipped his navy blue cavalry hat farther back on his head and squinted up at Clint in the late-morning sunshine. "I was laying odds we wouldn't see you again."

"Funny," Clint said as he swung down from his saddle. "I had the same notion about you." He slapped the dust off his hat. The ride down the riverbank from Brave Rock wasn't that far, but it had been hot and dry. "I couldn't rightly say I wouldn't have just kept on riding after that fire. Or worse yet, if you were simply going to circle back around and shoot me where I stood. Loose ends are bad for business."

McGraw laughed. "Well, some loose ends do indeed require a snip." He raised an eyebrow at Clint. "Others are useful enough to leave hanging."

"Hanging? Or swinging from a gallows?" McGraw looked to Clint like the kind of man who wouldn't think twice if a lynching served his purpose.

McGraw waved the match out and flung it to the ground. "You are a funny one, Thornton. Sending men to the gallows is your job, not mine."

Actually, law and order decreed it was the county judge who condemned men to hang, but Clint didn't really feel like arguing the point with the likes of this man. Clint had seen enough in life that very few things repulsed him, but everything about Samuel McGraw set Clint's gut to churning. McGraw gave him that slanted smile of his, and all Clint could see was the loathsome grin the private had given him as he rode off last night. As if the whole world tilted around the Black Four and his every whim. Every second Clint spent in these men's company felt ten seconds too long.

Get on with it, Thornton. Finish the job you and Lars started. "Thought you ought to know, he's dead."

McGraw took a long pull on the cigarette. "The foreigner?" He spat the word out like an insult, in the tone Clint's childhood guardian, Cousin Obadiah, had used for varmints and beggars.

"Brinkerhoff's dead and gone." Clint didn't like putting such a casual air into his voice when discussing murder. "The cabin went up like straw and him in it. No body to bury, even." He pulled a canteen from his saddlebag and took a long drink, then sat down on the rock beside McGraw. He kept his eyes on his boots as he stretched his long legs out. It was easier to fool a man when you weren't looking him in the eye. "Nothin' left to save by the time anyone could have gotten there to try. No one'd seen you, neither. I asked around just to be sure."

McGraw settled his hat back down and made a self-important show of inspecting his cigarette. "Bein' all friendly-like with the sheriff does have its benefits."

"I done you four a mighty big favor." Clint leaned back, the heat of the rock feeling much better than the cool, oily sensation talking to Sam McGraw always gave him.

"A fact which does not escape my notice, Thornton." McGraw inhaled with a dramatic flourish. "Go on."

"And where I come from—where we both come from—debts get paid. Alliances can be highly useful. A man of your position can appreciate the value of a well-placed partnership." Clint made sure to give McGraw's position an air of admiration he didn't truly feel.

"Indeed." McGraw blew a series of complicated smoke rings that hung in the hot air like targets.

Clint leaned in. "Let's not beat around the bush, McGraw. I've a notion of what you're up to. Seems to me certain claims are falling into certain hands in a very convenient fashion. Might just be poor luck on the part of folks who aren't suited for life out here, or it could very well be something

a bit more...deliberate. Four black somethings—or someones—to be exact. Makes me think it could serve a man well to be on your side of things.”

“Deliberate? What exactly are you implying?” There was no defensiveness in McGraw’s tone. In fact, he sounded more like he was playing a game of cat and mouse that he very much enjoyed.

“I’ve found it pays not to put any stake in coincidence in my line of work.” Clint then offered a short list of the properties that had met with Black Four “mishaps” to scare their original owners into defaulting or selling. “It don’t take much to see where things are headed. Stakes go for cheap when the owners get scared. Stakes that might not go for that low price if things had gone well for those same owners. You might say a man of opportunity could turn a tidy profit by being the right buyer comin’ along at the right time.”

“You might say that.” McGraw looked out over the horizon, blowing out a long thin stream of smoke.

“I’ve seen enough to know that you might be that man. That, and I just got a whiff of how you treat your enemies.”

McGraw laughed out loud at that. “Well now, we don’t charbroil everyone who stands in our way. Some of ’em just up and get shot.” He gave Clint a sideways glance that belonged on a rattlesnake, not a government soldier. “Fences fall. Animals die. Wells sour.”

“Accidents happen.”

“Yes indeedy. It’s a cryin’ shame how accidents do happen.”

“That’s how folks view what happened to Brinkerhoff. A stray ember on a dusty night—it ain’t too hard to explain away. You’re the peacekeepers here, after all. But folks aren’t all that dumb. Unless you’re careful, someone might catch on. See something. Best to have someone pointing suspicions away from you. Someone folks are ready to believe.”

“And that’d be you now, wouldn’t it? The good sheriff at our disposal.”

“The well-paid sheriff as your inside man,” Clint corrected.

McGraw pinched the edge of his considerable mustache. He played to character with such a sense of drama that Clint couldn’t help but wonder at how much McGraw relished it all. Power did that to some men. Clint had seen it dozens of times in the war. It turned men cruel, brought out the predatory animal hiding under civilized uniforms. “What sort of arrangement do you have in mind, Sheriff?”

“Nothing you can’t afford—if my suspicions are correct. And I’m hardly ever wrong.”

McGraw gave a dark chuckle and stubbed out the last of his cigarette on the rock between them. “I like your confidence. Okay, Thornton, you’re in. By the way, what about the other one? The foreigner’s pretty little sister—Katie-something, isn’t it? She go down with her brother?”

Clint now tasted the bile rising in his throat, and fisted the hand McGraw couldn’t see. “What do you care what happened to Katrine?”

“I found her rather fetchin’, that’s all. Be a shame if the world lost a pretty face just because it was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I’d be sort of sorry.”

He’d be nothing close to sorry. “She wasn’t there. She and Lars had a falling out the other week and she was up in Brave Rock staying with a friend for a few days.”

“How fortunate for her.” McGraw drew the word fortunate out in a way that made Clint’s stomach churn. “I’d hate to have her meet with any kind of accident on account of her knowing...unfortunate facts.”

A protective resolve settled around Clint’s spine, cold and hard and straight as north. He would draw his last breath keeping this snake away from Katrine Brinkerhoff. “She’s of no consequence, McGraw. She doesn’t know what Lars saw and she’ll be no trouble to you.” While it bothered him to do so, he added, “She’s not too bright and her English is worse than Lars’s was anyways.”

“Land sakes,” McGraw snickered, bumping his shoulder to Clint’s like they were barroom buddies. “It weren’t conversation I was looking for anyhow.”

* * *

It smelled like death.

There wasn't another way to put it. To Katrine, campfires had always smelled of home and cooking and good people gathered against the night. Today the wind blew sour, acrid scents against Katrine's face as she stood looking at what remained of the home she'd shared with Lars. "Tak Gud," she whispered, forcing herself to remember no one had died here.

"Pardon?" Sheriff Thornton stood squinting into the wind, his jaw set with a kind of anger she knew he reserved for criminals. Lars had often said, "I'd never want to be an enemy of Sheriff Thornton's," and today she could see why. He would stop at nothing to see justice done. She prayed such determination would be enough to keep Lars safe.

Katrine felt her cheeks flush. "I was thanking God for our lives." As she said the words, they struck her anew. Clint Thornton had reason to be thankful for his life today, too. He had risked his life to save hers. She believed that to be an enormous thing even if he didn't seem to recognize it. "For all our lives." That truth—coupled with the secret they now shared—seemed to bind her to the sheriff in unsettling ways.

She walked a mournful circle around the pile of rubble, feeling as though coming here solved nothing. Half of her wanted to run, to look away and never remember the home that had stood here. Another half, equally strong, wanted to claw through the wet, black timbers to find something—anything—worth saving. A wave of fear washed over her as she came across what was left of their front door. Their barred front door.

She gave a small, whispered yelp at the sight, and in seconds Sheriff Thornton dashed over to stand next to her. She heard him swallow hard. "Don't think about it."

How was that possible? Threats of harm were an old, evil menace for her, a tie back to a time in her life she tried hard to forget. It seemed unfair that in one single night all the peace she'd fought so hard for had been taken away.

The sheriff reached down and lifted up a curved piece of metal. Katrine recognized it as the decorative iron latch that had been on their door—one of the things Lars had brought from home. It was covered in soot, wet and bent out of shape.

He'd meant it as a hopeful gesture, but it made Katrine recall the terrible moment when she'd realized the door wouldn't open. The remembered feel of the door refusing to give way sent ice down her spine even now.

He saw her response. "Okay, then talk about it. Don't swallow it. It won't help."

Katrine didn't want to talk about it, but when he took a bandana out of his pocket, wiped down the latch and handed it to her, it was as if the words burst out. "There is an old Danish superstition that you must leave a window open when someone dies. To give the soul a chance to fly to Heaven. I know faith is stronger than such things, but I thought about it when I knew they had nailed the door shut. I thought, how will my soul fly to Heaven? We had no windows." The tears, never far from the surface all day, brimmed her eyes again.

"No one died."

"I keep telling myself that but it is not working."

"Then keep repeating it. Out loud when you can, in your head when you can't." He nodded at her, cueing her words.

"No one is dead." Her words were wobbly and insufficient.

"No one is dead," he repeated for her. Katrine found herself stunned by the compassion in his eyes. There were wounds behind those eyes. She could see their shadows before he broke the gaze and turned away.

There was a moment of raw silence until he caught sight of something and walked toward it. "Try thinking of last night this way—you made your own window."

She wiped her wet lashes to watch him turn over a log with his boot, the recognition hitting her as fierce as the wind: the corner log. He must have tossed it far enough from the cabin when he pulled it out of the wall, for it hadn't fully burned. When he bent to another, she knew that both logs of her "drafty corner" had somehow survived the fire.

Sheriff Thornton squatted down and inspected the logs. "You should save these," he said, turning to her as she walked closer. "Build them into your new home."

Katrine recoiled at the thought. "Why?"

"Lije says the strongest people make peace with their scars. You were brave to fight your way out last night, and you're being mighty brave to do this now. It'd be good to remember."

Remember. Was it worth it to remember when all the ashen pieces of home were blowing away in the wind? A black flake of charred wood settled on her hand and she flinched as if it still burned. "I think I might rather forget. Or not. I just do not know." The tears threatened again.

To her surprise, the sheriff rose and carefully settled the logs on one end, like an odd little row of order in all the destruction. He extended a hand. "Maybe you don't have to know yet. Lars would want you to see what else can be saved. Maybe it's more than you think."

She let him pull her closer to the blackened pile, still smoking in some places. With a tenuous smile, he pulled a pair of gloves from his pocket and began picking through the debris. She watched him for a moment, then began walking around the collapsed house, trying to feel Lars's encouragement but failing miserably. She spied half a blackened bowl and swallowed hard. The two new bowls brought by neighbors couldn't really replace it. New wasn't always better, was it?

"Well now, look here!" Katrine raised her gaze to see Sheriff Thornton holding Lars's favorite tin coffee mug, the blue enamel still visible under spots of black soot and a considerable dent. He used his glove to wipe away some of the soot. "He'll want this back, I reckon."

He said it like a secret. He'd said over and over that this deception was necessary, that it was the best way to keep Lars safe, and Katrine wanted to believe him. Neither Lars nor the sheriff truly knew why this was so hard for her, but that had to stay a secret, as well. She lifted her chin to the sheriff. "I want to see him."

Thornton came down off the pile and stood in front of her. "You know I can't do that."

Katrine felt the urge to stamp her foot in a childish fit. All the pain and loss was boiling up inside of her, and he'd told her not to swallow it, hadn't he? "You could find a way. Do you know what it is like to sit in your brother's house and hear people talk of Lars dead? They bring me food and clothes and they cry over my loss. It is awful. I want to run away, but..." She flung out her arms at the mound of ashes in front of her. "I have nowhere to go now, do I?"

"You could build a mansion out here and it'd be no good if men like McGraw are free to take it from you!"

She spun on him. "So it was McGraw!" The shouts from outside the cabin that horrible night clicked in her memory. Lars had hinted that he knew something about the men, but wouldn't say outright, claiming she was safer not knowing. That hadn't proved true, had it?

The sheriff kicked a fallen beam. "Hang it, I wasn't supposed to say." He pointed at her. "You forget you heard that. You're in enough of a spot as it is."

She had to agree with that. "I don't like the way he looks at me."

"Well, I don't either," he said quickly, then ran his hands down his face as if he hadn't wanted to admit that. "It's gonna be fine. I'll get him. I'm already in with the load of 'em. We just need to get through this part until I have enough proof to put the Black Four away for good."

"I need to see Lars." She knew it was pointless, but she couldn't help saying it. Without hearing Lars's voice, without looking into the strength of his eyes, she wasn't sure she could keep up this dangerous game. She waited for Thornton's temper to rise at her childish insistence.

He sighed instead, walking over to hand her the battered mug. It wasn't much of a peace offering, but he was trying, she could see that. "How about I take him a message? Write him a note, and I'll bring you back his reply. Will that help?"

It wasn't like seeing Lars, but it would have to do. "Yes. Yes, it would help very much."

Chapter Four

An hour after returning Katrine to Lije's house, Clint rode out of town toward the Cheyenne reservation. He wandered through the open prairie, following the hunting trails Lars used, deep into the wilderness where only those most familiar with the countryside would venture out. He watched the stones along the path until he began to see piles of three stones—carefully laid so that they looked natural and would not catch the eye of anyone not looking for such clues. When Clint saw three piles close together, he stopped his horse along the series of rocks Lars had marked and gave a long, low whistle. He waited, watching a hawk loop overhead, then gave the same whistle again.

A minute later, a long low whistle floated down from the rocks to his left. Lars was here, and Lars was safe. He'd known that, of course, but he was still relieved to see his friend's face peering out. All the talk of death and mourning he'd left back in Brave Rock made it a double joy to pull the pack of supplies off his saddle and climb up to shake Lars's outstretched hand.

"It is good to see you, Thornton!" The man looked strained and tired as he accepted the pack from Clint. "How does our plan go?"

Their original plan had been for Lars to "lie low," to be out hunting for a while just to ensure McGraw and his men didn't try anything rash. They hadn't been sure McGraw knew Lars had witnessed them planning to go so far as to burn down a home.

Up until last night, there was still a chance Clint and Lars were wrong. That chance had burned with Lars's home. Clint considered it a blessing Lars was far enough out of town not to see the flames or smoke. For all Lars knew, Brave Rock had spent a quiet night.

"Not well. Not well at all." Clint took a swig from his own canteen he'd brought up with Lars's supplies.

Lars froze, his hand stilled inside the pack. "What has happened?"

No sense beating around the bush—there was no good way to deliver the news he bore. "I'm in with McGraw's men."

"That is good, ja?"

"Not the way it happened. Lars, you need to know that Katrine's safe, but I've had to tell folks you're dead."

"What? Why?"

"Sit down, this is gonna take a bit of explaining."

Lars motioned them into the small cave he'd often used while hunting, lifting the leather flap that served as both door and disguise. The shelter within was cool and comfortable, fitted with a makeshift pallet, rock table and stacks of supplies. "I do not understand," Lars said, gesturing for Clint to sit on the pallet while he sat on another rock. "Why should I worry about Katrine and why are you telling people I am dead? This was not our plan and I am very sure I am alive."

"You were right—McGraw was planning to burn a home down. Your home."

"Our cabin?"

"Burned to the ground last night. Meant to burn you down with it, near as I can tell. That tells us for sure he knows what you know. Somehow, he's found out you saw enough to link him to the Black Four. That means you're not safe until they're behind bars, so I thought it best to let him think he'd succeeded in killing you."

Alarm widened Brinkerhoff's bright blue eyes. "And Katrine?"

"I got her out in time." The remark felt like putting that terrible night in too simple terms, but Clint would rather avoid the details. It would do Lars no good to know how cruel McGraw had been. The Dane did not need to hear of bloody feet or choking gasps or how the door was nailed shut. If

Lars pressed him for details, he'd simply couch it in terms of Katrine's desperate, brave escape. "But all of it burned. Katrine is staying with Lije and Alice. She's fine enough, and she knows you are alive, but...well, I'm sorry." Again, those two words didn't seem near enough for what had happened, but Clint didn't think this was a good place for particulars.

Lars muttered something in Danish. "I had expected trouble, but not this. Dangerous. These men are more dangerous than we thought. This is not a fence or a well. These were lives. To seek to kill like that." He looked up at Clint. "To kill me."

"That's just it. If they thought you were still alive, they'd try again. Surely you can see that. You've got to know that you and Katrine are safer this way."

Lars's furrowed brow—altogether too much like his sister's—told Clint his friend wasn't quick to agree. "This was not our plan. I don't know."

"It's not a perfect plan, and it's hard on Katrine, but..."

"And Winona—she does not..."

In all his planning, Clint hadn't thought to consider Winona Eaglefeather. The Cheyenne woman and Lars had been growing close during her many English lessons with Lije. Lars spoke the Cheyenne tongue fluently, and while Clint had always put their closeness down to the language, it was clear now that feelings between them ran deeper than mere translation. This plan was getting more complicated every minute. "Look, Lars," he reasoned, "it can't be helped. She can't know." He started to say, "We're playing with fire as it is, but stopped himself to simply utter, "The more people know you're alive, the more dangerous this gets."

"Winona cannot think I am gone," Lars argued. Then, as if his feelings for her weren't reason enough, he added, "And she can help."

She could, in more than just practical ways, but it was still a bad idea. "Not yet. Not until we know what we're dealing with." When Lars only offered another frown, Clint added, "We'll get you back to life as soon as possible, but for now you'd best stay dead. For your own sake as well as Katrine's. And maybe even Winona's."

Lars blew out a frustrated breath. Clint waited until the Dane came around to his line of thinking. Finally, Lars turned and asked, "They believed you? Truly?"

"I made it in their best interest to believe me. After you and I talked about them likely burning down someone's home, I got a bad feeling."

"You and your hunches." Lars was forever kidding Clint about his gut instincts where crime was concerned, and how funny he found the American term for it.

"If McGraw had any inkling you were on to him..." Clint shrugged off a chill despite the hot day. "I couldn't shake that hunch, so I rode by your cabin on the way back to town just to be sure." He looked away from Lars, not wanting his good friend to be able to read any of last night's dread in his eyes. "That's when I saw the torches. They were setting your shed on fire by the time I got there. They weren't even trying to make this look like an accident. McGraw's gotten so cocky he wasn't even wearing a black bandana." The use of dark clothes and black bandanas had earned the mysterious gang its name. Clint forced the sound of the crackling rosebushes as well as the sickening thump of Katrine's kicking from his memory. "It came to me in a flash, but I had to act right then and there. I had the perfect chance to show I'd be loyal to them, to get in close enough to be ready for whatever the Black Four planned next. I took it."

"It was a big chance to take." Lars shook his head.

"Katrine is safe with Elijah and Alice. Lije, Alice, Gideon—they all think you're dead. They're taking it pretty hard, actually. Folks have brought Katrine food and supplies and all kinds of comfort."

"Of course they would. Brave Rock is a good place with good people."

"Well, tomorrow morning, you're Brave Rock's first funeral."

Lars gave a shiver. What man wouldn't at hearing talk of his own funeral? "It is not an honor I enjoy."

"I don't like it any more than you do, but a chance like this to get in with McGraw may not come again. This is the safest place for you to be. You just need to keep your head down until I've got enough proof to expose McGraw and his men as the Black Four. It's our original plan, and it still holds. It's just a mite more...complicated now."

"And Katrine? You are sure she is not in danger?"

He wanted to give Lars an outright no, but found he couldn't. "I hope not. I've convinced McGraw she doesn't know anything important." She surely knew enough to be in danger now, but he left that out. He also left out the near-lecherous tone the private had used when discussing her. Lars was protective of Katrine, but Clint was about to double those efforts. That louse would never get within a mile of her. "He's got better things to do right now, anyways." Clint leaned in and held Lars's gaze. "He's plotting more 'accidents,' and I aim to know what they are so we can catch all four in the act."

Lars's eyes narrowed. "Brave Rock will be no place to call home until they are gone."

Clint suddenly remembered the most valuable provision he'd brought. "Here. It's a message from Katrine. I told her I'd bring one back from you. She'll be just fine if she can hear from you." Clint handed over the folded note, envying the eagerness with which Lars snatched it from his hands. Family meant everything out here.

Ducking out of the cave to give Lars some privacy, Clint surveyed the landscape. If a man had to carve out a future somewhere on this earth, Oklahoma Territory was a fine place to do it. The rolling green plains begged for homesteads, the clear air gave a man space to think. Plagued with growing pains as it was, there was a brand of fierce hope out here that Clint had never found anywhere else. The kind of hope that made a man feel capable, almost unstoppable. It egged a man on to grabbing his slice of the future with both hands.

Clint's two brothers, Elijah and Gideon, had surely grabbed their futures with both hands. Not only had they settled lands, but settled their hearts, as well. The iron-clad trio of the Thornton brothers was still there, but it had widened to include two women—wives, now, actually. Lije and Gideon had wives. Within Clint, marvel battled with a hefty dose of envy. He'd never quite forgiven God for making him want a big family—a whole noisy passel of sons and daughters—and then taking away his ability to do so. Back when Cousin Obadiah told him that disease "cursed" him to never be a father, he'd been too young to understand what a curse it truly was. Now he was old enough to feel its weight every single day.

Lars's groan behind him pulled him from such thoughts. "She is not telling me everything, Clint. She is very upset and picking words with care. Watch over her for me, will you?"

"Just a while, Lars. She's strong enough to hang on that long."

Lars came and stood next to him, handing him a reply to bring back to Katrine. "I want your word, Clint, that you will protect her."

That was easy to give. "You have my word, Lars. On my life, she'll be safe."

The oath took a bit of the strain out of Brinkerhoff's face, but not all of it. "I will hold you to that, friend."

Clint grasped his friend's arm. "One thing I'll ask in return."

"Of course."

"When you build your new home, give it windows. Two."

The Dane's brows shot up. "Windows? Why?"

Clint allowed himself a slip of a smile. "It's a long story for another time."

* * *

The next day Katrine looked up from taking in a skirt that had been given to her—thankfully long enough for her tall stature but big enough to fit her and Lars inside, it seemed—to see Clint riding up to the house. The sight was a mixed blessing; she knew Clint would bring news of Lars, but it stung to know Clint could visit him while she could not.

"I've found something over at the homestead you ought to come see," he said, more for Elijah and Alice, who were bent over a box of new medical supplies Alice had received. The way he caught Katrine's eye, she knew that remark to be a ruse in order to bring news of her brother.

"Of course I'll come," Katrine said, then winced at the thought of how falsely cheerful she sounded. She was truly delighted to hear how Lars fared, but her words sounded unnatural.

"Take the wagon," Alice suggested. "And while you're at it, take some of that ham Mrs. Gilbert sent over. There's enough food in this house for a dozen church picnics. In fact, take a whole picnic and go sit by the river before you go." Alice cocked her head to one side and eyed Clint. "You're too thin. When's the last time you ate a good meal that wasn't at our table?"

"Alice, leave him be," Elijah chided with an affectionate smile. "Thornton boys have survived life long before wives fussed over us."

Clint looked as if he didn't care for the scrutiny. "I'm survivin' just fine, Alice. Don't you worry none."

"Still, a picnic sounds nice." Katrine put down her sewing. If she was careful, she could pack several extra things that Clint could take to Lars. "I could use a pleasant task."

Knowing looks shot between Alice and Elijah. The hour before, Katrine had sat with the couple and set the order for Lars's memorial service. The task was far from pleasant and made Katrine's heart feel sour and heavy.

The minute the wagon pulled out of earshot, Katrine let out the frustrated sigh that had been building all day. "How much longer?"

Clint needed no further words to know the subject of her question. "Can't truly say. Longer than you'd like, I know."

Katrine looked at the sheriff. "How am I to get through the service tomorrow? All those mourning people? What will they think of us when they learn their sadness did not have to be?"

Clint pulled the horses up and turned to face Katrine. "They'll be glad you did what was needed to keep Lars safe. They'll be worried for you and wanting to help you get back on your feet—which you'll need to do no matter what. You can't stay with Lije and Alice forever."

"Certainly not." Katrine shut her eyes at the thought. Elijah and Alice were wonderful—compassionate and helpful—but their affection and closeness had only served to make Katrine more lonely for her brother. More lonely in all sorts of ways.

Clint looked surprised. "Everything been all right? Lije and Alice treating you well?"

How could she talk of such loneliness with Sheriff Thornton? "No, no, they are wonderful. It is just..." There weren't even Danish words for the tangle of her thoughts.

"They're hard to be around sometimes," Clint offered. "All that happiness wears on a person."

"Yes!" Katrine let her relief whoosh out in the single word. She could almost laugh at the pained way Clint made a face.

She did laugh at the oh-so-accurate imitation Sheriff Thornton did of his pastor brother's besotted smile. "All that 'dear' this and 'darling' that." He joined in her laughter, and Katrine felt the weight of grief slide off her shoulders. She had not laughed since the fire, and it felt wonderful to remember there was still joy to be had in the world. "Still, I'm glad to see him so happy. He's a good man and they're good for each other, I think. Not everyone's suited to be on their own."

"Yes," Katrine agreed, more quietly this time. "That is true."

"He's fine, Lars is." Clint turned the cart down the path that led to where her home used to stand. "Worried about you. Worried about Winona."

"Winona." Katrine had not seen the Cheyenne woman since the fire. Word was she had stayed on the reservation since that night. "Lars cares for her, I think."

"I think so, too. He asked me to tell her, especially since she can travel easily between the reservation and the...where he's hiding out." Katrine could tell Sheriff Thornton was taking care not

to offer clues to Lars's location. She liked that some part of him considered her strong and brave enough to venture out looking for her brother.

"Someone else who can see Lars while I cannot." She failed to keep the frustration out of her voice.

The sheriff looked down at her. "I told him no." There weren't many people in Brave Rock who could tower above her like that, but it was more than his height that gave Clint Thornton his air of command. "Lars is going to have to do this alone. Don't be thinking this isn't as hard on him as it is on you. He wants to come home, too." As he said those last words, the wagon pulled next to the ashes. "Well, when home is..."

Suddenly Katrine did not feel at all like picking through the remains of her house. "I think we should have that picnic now."

The sheriff looked puzzled. "You do? I figured that was just a way to scuttle off some food for Lars."

So he had come to the same plan as she. "Well, yes, but..." She stared at the pile of charred timbers, then pulled the napkin off the basket in her lap. "I would rather eat ten muffins than deal with that today."

An amused smirk filled the lawman's often-serious features. "Ten, huh? How many did you bring?"

"Too many. I made too many. I needed something to do."

"Lars told me you bake when you worry." He bit into a muffin. "They are fine indeed. But I'm fond of that bread you make, too."

"Kartoffelbrod?"

"That's it. Tasty, in a different sort of way."

Katrine smiled. "It is Lars's favorite."

"Well, I'll be sure to go on about it when we get back to Lije's. That way you can make me two loaves and I'll be sure to pass one on to Lars."

It would feel good to be able to send bread along with her next message to Lars. "I'd like that."

"See?" the sheriff said as he swung down off the wagon. "This ain't as hard as you think. Just requires a bit of thought and patience, that's all. Think of it like making up one of your stories."

This was nothing at all like making up charming stories to entertain. This was life-and-death and dark secrets that could get Lars killed.

Chapter Five

Friday morning, Clint stared at the back of the building that would become the church of Brave Rock and watched the shadows of the people who had just filed out of Lars's memorial service. He'd known Lars would be mourned, even prepared himself for it, but was not ready for how the sorrow would cut him to the quick. People were downcast, buckling under what seemed a gruesome tragedy, yet still clinging to their faith. It was the first time he felt as if the weight of this plan might be too hard to bear.

"He was good to many, but an especially good friend to you." Lije's voice was as close as the hand Clint felt on his shoulder. "I know you would have saved him if there was any way. We all do. I'm so sorry."

He'd kept the truth from Lije for an essential reason, but still he felt the wedge it placed between them. There always seemed to be a gap between Clint and his brothers, but today it yawned wider still. His life was forever destined to be different from theirs, solitary even if it was full of purpose.

Sitting next to Katrine hadn't helped. It was both soothing and unnerving to be near her since the fire. The truth they alone knew made him feel close to her—and yet that closeness managed to open up a black hole of lonesomeness at the same time. The sad service had shown him how much Katrine would need to lean on him while this plan played out. Only, Clint wasn't the sort of man who could offer that kind of support. She would need someone else—some person other than him to turn

to for comfort. It'd be easy—but wrong, and dangerous—to pull in Lije. Clint needed someone who could ride out of town often without raising any eyebrows.

Lars was right; he needed Winona's help. She'd spent a good deal of time with Lars, didn't interact much with most of the Brave Rock folk, and rode back and forth between town and the reservation many times each week.

Lije seemed to follow his gaze to the Cheyenne woman as she stood with her nephew Dakota. "I'm glad Winona felt welcome to come. You were good to invite her. I want her to see how faith takes away the sting of death for those of us who believe."

Leave it to Lije to paint Clint's actions with the brush of faith. He'd extended the invitation because Clint knew Lars was fond of the young woman. Lars also confessed to a soft spot for Dakota, the half-white boy who had been abandoned by his white father. Lars had talked in admiring terms of how Winona had stepped up to take the boy in, how it took courage to do so.

Well, it would take courage to step into this dangerous circle he'd drawn around himself, Lars and Katrine. Clint nodded at his brother. "I was thinking she'd be good company for Katrine. She's started to attend services regularly, and Katrine will need someone to sit with her with Lars gone."

"There is no doubt I see her drawn to our faith, and she's taken to English like lightning—even though I have to say I credit Lars for that much more than myself." Lije eyed his brother with one eyebrow raised. "Still, I can't help saying how much I think you are good company for Katrine."

Clint frowned. "I think not."

"Why?"

"You know why." Lije never did understand Clint's reluctance to take a wife, forever pushing him in the direction of relationships that weren't to be. Despite his endless compassion, Lije seemed blind to how the subject felt to Clint like God's cruelest burden. Lije could start a family whenever he wanted, had even been engaged once, but had lately insisted on being single until Alice stole his heart back in Boomer Town. In contrast, Clint wanted nothing more than a big, noisy houseful of young'uns but could never sire children. The childhood disease hadn't taken Clint's life—he knew he should be grateful for that when so many in Pennsylvania died that winter—but it had taken almost more than Clint could bear. Lije couldn't see how a wife but no children could never be enough for Clint, how it was less painful never to marry at all.

"She needs a friend," Lije replied. "That's all I'm saying."

Clint could not be a friend to Katrine. The tiny part of him that had come to think of her in ways that went beyond friendship had taken firm root the night he pulled her from the burning cabin. His mind strayed to the beautiful statuesque blonde too much lately.

"Which is exactly why I brought up the subject of Winona."

Lije shot him an older brother "you're not fooling me" look and began stacking hymnals as if they were discussing something ordinary rather than the long-painful subject it was. The church was nearly complete, with some walls up all the way and others still sporting bits of tent tarping to keep out the blazing June sunshine. The fact that Lije had enough hymnals to stack was a minor wonder in itself. "Katrine looks at you the same way you look at her—when you aren't looking of course, or when you think I don't see. But I saw it. Alice did, too."

Clint began stacking hymnals just to give his hands something to do. "So you and Alice are in on this together, are you?" Sometimes Lije could be too much the elder brother, all full of "sage" advice when Clint would prefer he kept to his own on some matters.

Lije offered him one of those "I know better than you" smiles just then. "Actually, Alice brought it up first. Once I was looking for it, it wasn't that hard to see." Thumping the last stack down on the church's back bench—still without a laid floor, the church sported rows of benches where pews would one day sit—Lije planted his hands on his hips. "You mind telling me what's so awful about the prospect of you and Katrine Brinkerhoff?"

He was going to make him say it, wasn't he? "Stop."

Lije's sigh was long and weary. "Not every woman pines for a family, Clint."

As if he didn't know that. As if he hadn't considered the foolish notion that somewhere out there might be a woman who would welcome a man with his particular set of shortcomings. The war had filled the world with pretty young widows, already-made families in need of fathers, but he wasn't the sort of man who could take that on.

"This one does. I've heard Lars speak of it, and her, too. Besides, a body can't hardly make it out here without a big family, even you know that." He let out a sigh ten times wearier than his brother's. "It ain't to be, Lije. Leave it alone."

"God crafts families in many ways."

He'd heard that line before, too. He'd heard every single platitude on that subject. "I said leave it, Lije." He walked out of the church, needing to put some wide open space between himself and his brother's meddling.

Of course, Lije followed him. "Well, then, let's talk about Katrine. She's alone now, and missing a heap of provisions besides. You just said how hard it is to make do out here with a few hands, let alone all by herself. So how do we help her? If what you say about how her place burned down is true, how do we keep her safe?"

Hadn't he done nothing but worry about that very thing for days now? "You do your job, I'll do mine. Seems you got half of Brave Rock corralled to get her settled with provisions. I'll get the homestead built back up as fast as I can while I see to her safety." It would be so much easier to tell Lije this was just a temporary solitude for Katrine, but that wasn't smart. Not until he knew more. Maybe he could keep her in safe company until this was all over. "Can't you keep putting her up in the back of the clinic for a while yet?" Alice ran the Healing Hearts medical clinic right next door.

"Of course we can. But even if you do get her cabin built back up, I'm not much for the thought of her living there all alone."

He'd thought of that. He'd spent too much time thinking on that, actually. He gave Lije the same argument he gave himself: "She spent plenty of time on her own while Lars was out tracking or on the reservation. She's made of stern enough stuff. She'll do all right once the grief clears a bit. But that might be where Winona can help, too."

In that moment, he caught a glimpse of Katrine standing off to the side of all the folks gathered remembering Lars. She stood tall and strong in the sunlight, the hem of her borrowed Sunday best dress whipping in the wind, the band of black fabric standing out like a gash against the sky-blue of her sleeve. Even her bonnet couldn't hide the strained and lonesome look he could see in her eyes.

"Winona might be good company for her, but you need to watch out for Katrine, as well."

Clint was never the kind of man to shirk his duties—most especially in a matter like this—but Lije didn't realize what he was asking.

His reluctance must have shown on his face, for Lije put a pastorlike arm on Clint's shoulder and said, "It's the least you can do for Lars. He'd have wanted you to take care of her, don't you think?"

Was the whole world conspiring to keep Katrine Brinkerhoff at his side? "You know I'll protect her. She'll come to no harm, I promise." He cast his eye back to the woman. She was wiping one eye with a handkerchief—one he knew to be one of the pale blue ones Lars always carried. Around her neck, on a black ribbon, she wore the pocket watch they'd found yesterday amongst the homestead ashes. Even now, her hand came up to finger the old timepiece—their father's, she'd told Clint—as she gazed off in the direction of the reservation.

Did she guess that Lars was hidden out over that ridge? Could she feel him the way Clint could sometimes sense the presence of his brothers? Families were strong like that—it's what held the world together out here where there was so much to overcome. He stared at the set of her chin and told himself again that she'd come through this okay. She'd push on through to build a fine homestead, find some good man with as much faith as Lije, and raise up a passel of children to listen to the harrowing tale of "when Uncle Lars had to disappear for a while."

He'd stay close enough to see her through. He'd bring Winona in on this dangerous game because that was the only safe thing to do. Then, when Lars could come home, he'd return to his place in the background of her life—doing a disappearing act of his own.

* * *

Katrine sat down on the rocking chair outside Elijah and Alice's home after all the congregation had gone, weary inside and out. She stared off into the horizon, wondering where Lars was and if somehow he could hear all the lovely things that had been said about him today.

"I wished I had a jar."

She looked up to see Gideon's wife, Evelyn, sitting next to her. She hadn't even noticed that the woman had sat down in the adjacent rocking chair. "Pardon?"

Evelyn offered a sad, knowing smile. "When my grandpappy died, I wished I had a special jar that I could catch all the fine things said about him at his funeral. I was so tired and sad I was sure I'd forget most of it. The stories, the compliments, that sort of thing."

"Lars was a fine man." Oh, how she hated using *was*. Her mind would shout "He still is!" every time she had to refer to Lars as if he were truly gone. Today seemed stuffed full of "*was*."

"Of course, I had no such jar," Evelyn continued. "But I didn't forget them, you know. Oh, maybe one or two—and there were a few stories grandmammy would have groaned to hear—but I remember all the fine words as if it were yesterday."

Katrine let her head fall against the tall back of the rocking chair. It was so soothing, to sit here and rock. I will want one of these in my new house, she thought, bemused to remember she had no such house at the moment, much less a chair or a porch on which to rock. "I am glad to know. I feel too weary to remember my own name right now."

"Grief is tiresome business. It wears on a soul to lose ones we love. And you've lost much more than that." She placed a brown paper package on the arm of Katrine's rocking chair. "I wanted to give you a little bit back."

"Me?" Evelyn was becoming one of her closest friends here in Brave Rock. She loved to look at Evelyn's talented sketches, and Katrine had often enjoyed telling stories to Walt, Evelyn's charming young son.

"Walt is fond of you. Now that he talks again, he has tried several times to tell me stories like Miss B's." Back when Katrine first met Walt, the trauma of his father's death had rendered him mute. Now, finding a new father in Clint's brother Gideon, Walt was an endless stream of chatter and generous affection. He loved Katrine's stories, but they'd had to resort to Miss B when Walt couldn't possibly get his five-year-old mouth around Brinkerhoff.

"I am fond of Walt." She fingered the twine on the package. It was too soft to be a book, too small to be yet another must-be-altered item of clothing. She undid the knot to pull a beautiful linen pillowcase from the wrapping. Delicate and soft as a cloud, it was embroidered along the side with familiar yellow flowers with six long thin petals. "Star of Bethlehem!" she exclaimed.

"I asked around town to see if someone had a book that would show me a flower that comes from Denmark. I thought you needed an extra touch of home. Did I get it right?"

Katrine brushed away a new wave of tears. "It is perfect." She had never felt so welcomed, so part of a community in all her years in America. If she had ever had doubts that Brave Rock was her new home, today had erased them. "Thank you so much."

"I thought you might like something that is all yours. A soft pillow is one of life's great luxuries. And a good night's sleep makes everything better." Her eyes took on a shadow of memory that spoke of experience. Evelyn had lost her first husband on the day they staked their claim here in the territories, and the land been at the center of a long argument between herself, her three contentious brothers and Gideon Thornton. The worst fights sprung from contested claims out here, where two settlers claimed rights to the same land. It had been a heated battle—one which became as much about the decades-old feud between the Thornton and Chaucer families as it was about good land.

Katrine only knew the bits and pieces Evelyn chose to reveal—something about land and the war—and what her brothers and those who listened to them muttered or whispered. Despite Evelyn's loving relationship with Gideon, that rift had yet to heal. So, when Evelyn spoke of needing softness at the end of a trying day, Katrine could believe she spoke from experience.

How many sleepless nights would pass before Lars could come home? "I miss him terribly," she admitted, running her hands across the sweet yellow flowers. It had become the safest thing to say; she did truly miss him.

Evelyn only nodded. While it was clear to everyone who saw them together how much she loved Gideon, something in Evelyn's eyes told Katrine her first husband had not won her affections so deeply. When she married, Katrine wanted to miss her husband desperately whenever he was gone, even hunting. Lars was fine company, but a brother was not a husband. And a sister was not a wife. They had come to the Oklahoma territories to build whole new lives for themselves, not just to acquire land. For Katrine, that new life had always meant a happy family.

"I think you will tell your children wonderful stories about their uncle Lars one day. He was a good man, and you are a wonderful storyteller. Until then, you may tell Walt as many stories of Lars as makes you happy." She leaned toward Katrine. "In fact, I will be grateful if you steal his attention now and then. Five-year-old boys can be such a handful."

Katrine felt just enough of a laugh bubble up to let her know the day's tensions were indeed slipping from her shoulders. "I will tell him endless tales of how Lars Brinkerhoff always minded his mama." That made Evelyn laugh, as well. "I'm afraid not all of them will be true, however," Katrine went on, "for I must say Lars was not at all good about minding his mama."

"So I've heard." The deep voice startled Katrine, bursting the small bubble of happiness she'd formed with Evelyn. "Lars was fond of boasting how he was no end of trouble as a child," Clint added.

"It is true," Katrine said. "He was..." it took her a minute to choose the right English word "...precocious as a boy. What you would call a rascal, I believe."

"Now now, Katrine." Evelyn's voice was warm even though her words were chiding. "Let us not speak ill of the dead."

Evelyn's words stole the smile from Katrine's face. This was how it went every day; for seconds—when Clint was around, especially—she could allow herself to remember that Lars lived and would return. Then, like a splash of cold water, someone or something would remind her Lars needed to appear dead. The contrast was difficult to endure, exhausting at times. It made her crave time alone with Clint where she could talk about her brother in terms of life, of safety and of his return. To think just seconds ago she was giving thanks for what a supportive home Brave Rock had become. Just this moment, she would have given anything to ride out of town and hide with Lars wherever he was, away from all the compassionate, suffocating mourners.

Clint picked up on her distress and turned to Evelyn. "Could you give us a moment? I have some delicate matters to discuss with Miss Brinkerhoff. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course." She turned to Katrine. "Please forgive my earlier remark. I wasn't thinking. Lars was a rascal, I'm sure, and knowing what I know of young boys, I can hardly count it speaking ill in any case." She laid a hand on Katrine's arm. "Anything. Anything at all, you call on me. I want to help."

"I know," Katrine said, holding the soft, beautiful pillowcase tight against her chest. "I know."

The second Evelyn left, Katrine slumped back into the rocker, feeling twice as weary as she had before. She propped her elbow on the chair arm and let her forehead fall into her upturned hand. "This is too hard."

Clint sat on the porch at her feet, looking up at her with an expression of regret that caused a lump in Katrine's throat. "I know." She kept forgetting that this necessary charade was as difficult for him as it was for her. Still, he seemed so strong, so in control, where she felt like a weed tumbling across the prairie in hapless gusts of wind. "You need someone to help you."

She couldn't help it. "I need Lars." She tried not to whine the words, but the weariness had stolen all her good behavior. Evelyn was right, she hadn't slept well since the fire. She looked straight at Clint until he looked right back into her eyes and then she whispered, "Tell me he lives. I need to hear the words out loud."

"Katrine." His eyes darted around them, careful for nearby ears. "We'll go out to the cabin again tomorrow."

"I can't wait until tomorrow." She stood up, pacing the porch. She needed to hear someone else speak the words, to know she was not so fogged up in thought and pretended mourning that it was still true. To know she could call her dear brother a rascal and not be speaking ill of the dead. She turned and simply demanded it of Clint. "I cannot."

He took one look around, and for that moment she resented his role as protector. She did not want his cautionary nature. Then, to her surprise, he walked toward her. He took one of her hands and pulled her close to him. One strong hand wrapped around her shoulder, the other held her elbow. Not the full, protective embrace he'd offered her after the fire, although she could feel his desire to do so, but a careful, much-as-could-be-allowed gesture. His face hovered just above her head, close and startlingly tender. "He is alive." His words were as filled with emotion as any she'd ever heard from the sheriff. "Lars will come home."

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