

After the hasty wedding...

Neil pulled the buggy to a stop in front of the house and helped Sarah out. "It's been a long day." He held her hands, not wishing to break contact but knowing it was inevitable. Her skin was warm and soft. The moonlight made her blond hair shine as it tumbled over her shoulders. Her eyes met his and he saw something in them he hadn't seen in any other woman's. It was a promise. A promise of hope, of happiness, and most importantly, of love.

Taking a deep breath, he said, "I am glad we're married."

She smiled and whispered, "I am too."

He leaned forward, ready to kiss her, recalling how sweet their kiss had been when they said their vows, and suddenly, the front door opened. Startled, he jerked back and released her hands. He tipped his hat over his eyes so that his mother wouldn't detect his embarrassment.

"Are you married?" the woman asked as she bounded down the steps with Luke in her arms.

"Yes, we are," he replied. "I should put the horse and buggy away." Turning to Sarah, he said, "No one will try to take Luke from you anymore."

His Redeeming Bride

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Ruth Ann Nordin

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Springfield, Nebraska

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described herein are imagery and are not intended to refer to specific places or living persons. The opinions expressed in this manuscript are solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the publisher.

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Dedicated to Janet Syas Nitsick and Valerie Roberts who make the WOW group a fun experience. Thanks for all your help with this book, and I enjoy our friendships!

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Chapter One

Omaha, Nebraska
June 1882

Neil Craftsman handed his wife the divorce papers, glad to be rid of the mockery they called a marriage.

Cassie grabbed the crisp white papers and turned to her lover and smugly smiled. "I told you he would sign them."

The fifty-year-old man with graying blond hair and a neatly trimmed mustache nodded, placing his arm through hers. "Good."

Though Neil was thirty-seven, the man who succeeded in taking his wife from him made him feel as if he were still a child whenever he peered down at him. Refusing to let John McCarthy note his apprehension, he shrugged. Turning his attention Cassie, he asked, "Will you say good-bye to Emily before you go to St. Louis?"

She twirled her wavy raven locks around her fingers, glancing demurely at John. "When are we due to leave?"

Neil gritted his teeth. True, he silently thanked the miserable woman for leaving her daughter with him, but Emily would be devastated if she left without explaining that she had

to leave. Not that he wished to tell Emily the real reason for Cassie's departure. The poor girl suffered enough with the lack of motherly affection she received for the past seven years of her life. He gulped the lump in his throat, his heart aching for the innocent child. *Say yes, Cassie. For once, think of someone other than yourself.*

"It would mean the world to Emily if you saw her one more time," Neil insisted when John bent down to whisper something in her ear that made her giggle.

John frowned at him and straightened his back. "I'm afraid we must board the next train as soon as we finalize this divorce. I wish to get home as soon as possible with my bride." He turned to grin at her.

She blushed and glanced down at her pink dress trimmed in white lace. It was more expensive than anything Neil could afford.

"Cassie," Neil said, his tone firm. "Emily is a person. She deserves to be told you're leaving."

"Oh, Neil." She sighed and shook her head, her shiny waves bouncing under her fancy hat. "I simply don't have time. Besides, it would be awkward and I don't wish to put her through that. You can do it for me. Tell her I had to visit a sick relative. She'll believe you."

His face grew red, his fists clenched at his sides. "You can't expect me to lie to her!"

"Well...no. I suppose you're right. Then I will send her a letter and explain things."

John cleared his throat and narrowed his eyes at Neil, his 6'3" frame seeming to tower over Neil's 5'7" lean build. "This has gone on long enough. Good day, Mr. Craftsman." He tipped his hat and led Cassie to the judge to make the divorce final.

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She offered him a helpless shrug as she obediently followed John.

More likely, she followed his money. Neil shook his head in disgust and stormed out of the courthouse, glad to be rid of her once and for all. Since the day he found out that he wasn't Emily's father, he learned that Cassie bent the truth to suit her interests. Emily. Just the thought of his daughter caused his stomach to tie up in knots. What was he going to tell her?

He untied his gelding's reins from the post and jumped on the saddle. As he trotted out of town, a group of people clapped. Turning his attention to the source of the happy noise, he witnessed a newly married couple departing from a church. The groom gave his bride a kiss on the cheek, and she laughed. Then they turned their attention to the people in attendance and shook their hands and exchanged hugs.

He scoffed, recalling how hopeful he had been the day he married Cassie. It had been almost eight years ago. He thought he was the luckiest man in the world. Beauty was highly overrated. It blinded a man to the things that mattered. Honesty, generosity, kindness, and love. Those were the traits that made a woman truly beautiful. *What a fool I was. Never again. I'll never fall in love with another pretty face.*

Sarah Donner clasped her hands together, anxious to greet her husband as he came through the front door of their house. She set his hat on the hatrack. She was so happy that she thought she might burst.

"Good afternoon, Jim. How was your day?"

He grunted and shut the door.

Taking a deep breath, she said, "I have good news. I'm expecting a child!"

He stood there for a moment, staring at her. Then he nodded. "Oh. That is good." He patted her on the cheek. "Well done, dear."

Forcing down the sting of disappointment, she followed him to the parlor. "The doctor said we can expect the baby's arrival in February."

He removed the newspaper tucked under his arm. Propping his feet up on the ottoman, he leaned back in his chair. The pages of the newspaper rustled as he opened it to the second page. "Good, good." He glanced at her. "When will supper be ready?"

She stood in the middle of the room, not sure if he *really* heard her or not. He was interested in his child, wasn't he?

"Supper?" he asked.

She blinked and shook her head. "Um...It should almost be done."

"I'm starving." He turned his eyes to the newspaper. "It was a long day at the factory."

Shifting from one foot to the other, she asked, "You did hear me?"

He didn't even look up from the paper when he said, "Yes. You're with child. Due in February." His gaze traveled to her. "I said it was good. Was I supposed to say something else?"

Her countenance fell and her shoulders drooped. That was it. He wasn't excited. He wasn't even happy. He just accepted it. Since he had already turned his attention back to the paper, she exited the parlor without bothering to answer his question. She lumbered to the kitchen, her steps mechanical and heart hollow. She had hoped...no, she had prayed that this would be the thing to bring them close. She thought for sure

he'd be delighted in her if she finally conceived. After all, they had been married for ten years without any success.

She closed her eyes so her tears wouldn't fall on the pot roast on the table in front of her. She took a deep cleansing breath, focusing on the sound of the birds chirping outside the open window. A breeze drifted through the room and caressed her hot cheeks that stung with the pain of another rejection. She should be used to it by now.

A round of applause caught her attention. Pushing aside the yellow curtain, she peered across the street at the church as a bride and groom hopped on a wagon and waved to the group of well-wishers. It was a beautiful scene. One filled with hope and joy. An expectation of the future. Such a wonderful moment.

She blinked back more tears and turned her attention to a lone horse rider. By his attire, she guessed he was a farmer. He wore dusty boots, a blue cotton shirt with a brown vest, denim pants and a Stetson hat. He had also paused for a moment to stare at the bride and groom, so she got a good look at him. Dark brown hair, tanned skin, strong jaw, proud chin, and broad shoulders. Yes, he had the look of a man who worked long hours with his hands in a field or with animals. Upon closer inspection, she realized it was Neil Craftsman. She shuddered, as if looking at him would cause her soul to burn in hell. Everyone knew about his scandalous past.

She returned her gaze to the happy couple, briefly recalling her own wedding. She was nineteen and Jim was twenty-six. He had been engaged to her older sister who ran off with another man. Jim didn't want to marry Sarah but her parents felt obligated to offer her to him. They increased the dowry amount, and so he agreed. Sarah loved him and hoped that, given time, he'd return her love. She had been the blissful bride and he had been the dutiful groom.

Gulping the bitter lump in her throat, she set the curtain back in place and returned to her pot roast which had finished cooling off. The aroma of fresh bread and cooked meat did little to ease her burden. Her life didn't turn out the way she'd hoped.

But she did have a child on the way. The thought brightened her mood. She would concentrate on the baby. While she cut up the roast and put a hearty portion on Jim's china plate, she considered different names that would suit a girl or a boy.

During the meal, Jim sat across from her at their small round table and read his paper as he chewed on a potato.

She cleared her throat.

He looked up at her. "What is it?"

Absentmindedly cutting into the little that was left of her roast, she said, "I was wondering what you might like to name the baby."

Shrugging, he poked a cut up carrot with his fork and put it into his mouth. "You decide. It's your child."

"It's your child too. You're the father. Perhaps you would like to name him after you, if it's a boy."

"It doesn't matter. I don't need a namesake."

She hid her disappointment. "All right."

He nodded and returned to the paper.

Sighing, she picked up their plates to put in the empty sink before she gathered their dessert. Placing his slice of pie in front of him, she watched him. He wasn't a bad looking man, but he wasn't handsome either. What exactly was it that made her fall in love with him all those years ago? It must have been his sense of responsibility, for she had never encountered a more honorable man.

He folded his paper. "Rhubarb pie? Excellent choice, Sarah."

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She returned his formal smile before sitting at her place to eat her slice. Though it was tasty, she didn't notice its flavor.

Afterwards, she cleaned the dishes and put them away. She did light dusting and made sure his clothes were laid out for the next day. He spent his time working on the household budget and reading a book. She knitted a blanket. Though they sat in the parlor together, they didn't speak.

When it came time to go to sleep, she settled into bed next to him. To her surprise, he turned to face her. Her heart leapt. Maybe he would be affectionate tonight.

"Sarah, I was thinking." His voice was low. "When the baby is born, I should take the other bedroom so you can be here when he needs you."

She hadn't expected this. "What?"

"The baby will need you to nurse him and change him. It will be easier on you if you are in the same room with him. Then you won't have to get up in the middle of the night and walk down the hall to care for him."

She gripped the linen sheet in her hands. "Jim, are you happy about this baby?"

She sensed him smiling in the dark. "Of course, I am. What kind of man would I be if I wasn't?"

When he leaned over to kiss her, she thought he might initiate lovemaking. She wanted to be close to him, so she snuggled up to him and got ready for him to deepen the kiss.

But he didn't proceed. Instead, he patted her hand and rolled back onto his side, facing away from her. "Now get some sleep. You need to rest."

Thinking of the baby so she wouldn't cry, she turned onto her side. The mattress squeaked in protest, echoing the cry of her heart. She faced away from him and closed her eyes. No tears. Not tonight. She refused to spend the rest of her life hoping for a love that wouldn't happen. She needed to focus

on something else. Something with meaning. Her child. Yes. The baby would give her something to think about, something to anticipate. Of course. She would focus on the child. She took a deep breath and released it. The ache in her heart subsided. After what seemed like hours, she finally fell asleep.

November

Neil woke up with a start. The sheets fell off his body as he jumped out of bed. He shrugged into his robe and ran to Emily's bedroom. "What is it? Are you hurt?"

Emily sobbed, clutching her blanket up to her neck. "Pa?"

He stumbled over a toy in the room as he searched her small dresser for the kerosene lamp. Finding it, he lit the wick. He adjusted the knob so the light cast a pleasant yellow hue across the small room. He hurried across the room and sat next to her. "Did you have another nightmare?"

She nodded and wrapped her arms around his neck. "You won't leave me, will you?"

Sighing, he hugged her. "No, I won't."

"I had a dream you left, like Ma did."

"It was just a dream."

"When will she come back?"

This question never got easier to answer. He closed his eyes. "Honey, she's not coming back. Do you remember what I told you? When she left, she had to go so far that she can't return."

"Because her aunt got sick?"

This lie didn't get easier either. "Yes."

"Can we visit her?"

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“No, honey. We can’t.”

She looked up at him with her big green eyes. “Why?”

He couldn’t tell her the truth. He didn’t know if he’d ever have the courage to tell her. “Emily, we have a busy day tomorrow, so you have to go back to sleep. Do you have your doll?”

She let go of his neck and lifted the blanket to search for the toy his mother had given her three years ago. Pulling it out, she held it up to him. “It’s here, Pa. I didn’t lose Cass.”

If he could change one thing, it would be the name of the doll, but Emily wanted to name it after her mother. She thought her mother would be pleased, but Cassie didn’t care. Pushing aside the bitter memory, he smiled and brushed the dark curls back from her face so he could kiss her cheek. She looked so much like her mother. “Cass will help you sleep. Just hold her tight.”

“Will you keep the light on?”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me a story?”

If it would take her mind off of her mother, he would gladly do whatever she wished. Nodding, he tucked her into bed. “What story would you like to hear?”

“The one about the little girl who found a magical world in the forest.”

He chuckled. She often picked that one, and he guessed it was because she saw herself as the inquisitive child. He got halfway through the story when she fell asleep. He sat beside her for a few minutes, thinking of how much she brightened his life. His marriage to Cassie might have ended in disaster, but Emily was the greatest gift anyone ever gave him. It was the one thing he could thank Cassie for.

Careful not to wake his daughter, he stood up and tiptoed out of the room. The cool floorboards creaked under

the pressure of his weight, but he hardly noticed the echoing noise. He slipped into his cold bed, shivering as he willed the layers of sheets and blankets to warm him up. The heavy curtains hid the moonlight, creating a calm around him that he usually enjoyed. Closing his eyes, he waited for sleep to come.

But it didn't. He hated nights when he couldn't sleep. When the activity of the day died down, nothing distracted him from the onslaught of loneliness that assaulted him. How he longed to have a woman in his bed, someone he loved who loved him back. There were just some things work, money, and a child couldn't provide. He rolled over and pulled the blankets over his head, willing the morning to come so he could find ways to occupy his mind.

Chapter Two

January 1883

Sarah struggled to get comfortable in the wagon as it bounced over the bumpy terrain of the farmland on the outskirts of Omaha. The biting chill stung her fingers as she held onto the quilt around her shoulders. The cloudy day threatened snow, which would be a godsend since it would force Jim to turn back and take her home. The baby in her womb kicked at her, increasing the discomfort in her ribs. She straightened up but another bump made her gasp and lean over to hold onto her wooden seat.

Next to her, Jim held the reins to the two geldings, his gaze turned forward as they made their way north.

She took a deep breath, steadying her body and her nerves. “Are you sure I should stay with your mother for six months?”

He didn’t bother to look in her direction. “My mother will be a big help to you as you adjust to motherhood.”

“Must you leave me alone with her?”

“Do we have to go through this again?”

“But I don’t want to go.”

His mouth formed a tight line. "Sarah, I'm tired of hearing this. My mother has her heart set on spending time with her grandchild. You'll do whatever it takes to make her happy. I'm your husband, and I've made my decision."

She clenched the quilt, her hand trembling. "You don't even want to be there for the birth?"

"I have a lot to do at the factory."

She wanted to jump out and run back home, but she knew he would pick her up and drag her back onto the wagon. Her mother-in-law didn't care for her, though she managed to be civil toward her. She dreaded the thought of being with the woman for six long months. She couldn't seem to do anything to please the woman. It was always, cook this again, you missed a spot on that dish, this is how you make a bed...The list was endless. No matter what she did, Beatrice Donner found a reason to criticize her.

The right front wheel ran over a large rock. She jostled to the side and accidentally nudged him. He jerked from her, as if the physical contact bothered him. Apologizing, she quickly straightened. He chose this route along the edge of the farmland to avoid traffic, but she preferred a smooth, well-used road. However, it hadn't been her decision. She turned her gaze to the back of the wagon. Her large wooden trunk carried her clothes and the baby's clothes, cloth diapers, and blankets. Daring a glance in her husband's direction, she wondered if he'd be glad to have her gone, even if it was for a short time.

The cold air around her was nothing compared to the bitter frost cased around her heart. The indifference that had developed over her eight months of pregnancy served to protect her from the pain of rejection, and now it settled into the core of her being. She rubbed her belly. Her love for her child flowed freely through her, and for a moment, she mourned that fact that it felt as if the child only had one parent.

No. That wasn't true. Jim would be an honorable father. After all, he did what was necessary to make the home run smoothly. But would he love his son or daughter?

A gunshot startled her. The horses bucked back, upsetting the wagon and causing her to lose her balance. She tumbled onto the hard ground, her arms instinctively protecting her large belly, and she rolled to her side, barely noting the sharp pain of a rock that probed her hip. The quilt had fallen halfway off her body, tangling around her limbs. She struggled to free her legs so she could stand, but her belly made the task next to impossible. She was floundering around on the ground when two dirty men rode over to them on their stallions.

The dark, lanky one pointed a .45 at Jim. "Give us your money." His voice came out low and gruff.

Jim didn't even glance in her direction. "She has it."

The men turned their attention to her but didn't make a move toward her.

Jim's voice shook. "She's pretending to be with child. She's carrying our valuables under her dress."

The beating of her heart seemed to stop in that instant. How could Jim do this to her? When the men urged their horses in her direction, she scrambled back, the quilt preventing her from being able to run. She noted that Jim quietly slid out of the wagon and began unhitching one of the geldings. Before she could reason what was happening to her, one of the men jumped off his horse and hastened over to her.

He tilted his hat and knelt by her, his eyes traveling the length of her body. "Is that true? Or are you really in the family way?"

Her lower lip quivered. She wrapped her arms protectively over her stomach. "Please don't hurt my baby."

He shook his head at his partner. "I thought as much."

His partner pointed the gun in her direction. "Maybe you should check, just to be sure."

As he reached his grimy hand to her, she tightened the quilt around her, her body shaking with fear. He wouldn't. He couldn't!

A male voice shouted out at them. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

The three of them lifted their heads at the rider who rode his horse in their direction.

She choked back a cry of relief.

The thief on the horse hissed through his teeth. "Damn! He's getting away." He nodded at Jim who was riding a gelding toward Omaha.

Without another word, the man next to her bolted up and jumped on his horse, joining his partner in pursuit of her husband.

The man who scared the robbers off yelled over his shoulder at two other men who followed him on their horses. "Get them!"

Her nerves were set on edge and her hands shook so badly she couldn't even wipe her eyes.

He eased down from the horse and approached her in slow, easy steps, as if he was afraid he'd startle her. "It's all right, ma'am. I won't hurt you."

Three shots echoed through the still air, and she had to see what happened. The sight of her husband falling from his horse brought a strangled cry from her throat. The robbers rode past him. The two men who trailed them were gaining fast.

"Those men who attacked you and your husband won't get away," the man next to her assured her.

Still twisted in the quilt, she struggled to stand up.

"Here. Let me help."

She allowed him to take her by the elbow and pull her up. The weight in her belly made her stumble against him, but he steadied her.

“We’ll get you to the house. The boss will see to your needs, and I’ll come back for your things. Cal and Ben will make sure your husband is all right. Don’t worry about any of that over there.”

She finally got the quilt off of her, glad to be relieved of it. Straightening her long wool coat, she cleared her throat so her voice wouldn’t tremble. “Thank you.”

“Ma’am, are you all right? Is the baby all right?”

“I’m a little sore in the hip but I feel fine.” She rubbed her belly, noting the flurry of activity. “The baby’s kicking up a storm, so he must be good too.”

He nodded. “Let’s get you to the house. You get on the horse and I’ll walk. I don’t want to risk the health of that child, so if you need to stop and rest, let me know.”

“I will.”

After he helped her into the saddle and settled the quilt over her legs to preserve her modesty, she chanced another look in her husband’s direction. Cal and Ben managed to apprehend the two thieves. They had their guns pointed at the thieves but seemed to be focused on her husband who hadn’t moved from where he had fallen to the ground. Her heart constricted. What if he was dead? Surely, it wasn’t a good sign that he remained motionless.

The man who rescued her clucked his tongue and led the horse by the reins. “Come along.” His kind brown eyes met hers. “My name is Jacob McGuire, by the way.”

“I’m Sarah Donner.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am. Sorry about that over there though.” He peered at her husband. His brows furrowed but

he didn't comment. Instead, he asked, "Do you have a name picked out for the child?"

Realizing he wished to take her mind off the probable bad news of Jim's death, she decided to answer. "Luke if he's a boy and Margaret if she's a girl."

"Fine names. Both of them."

Though he continued to make small talk on their journey to the house, her mind kept drifting back to her husband and what his death might mean for her and her baby.

Neil rubbed his hands together, his fingers practically numb from the cold despite the gloves he wore. Stepping away from the horse he finished shoeing, he led her into the stall. He made his way to the barn door where two of his farmhands were talking in excited tones.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Jacob said there's trouble on the northeast corner of your property. He took Cal and Ben to investigate and we heard gunshots."

He tensed. "Did he say what he saw?"

"A wagon and two men on horseback."

"Derek, get me Freedom."

"No need, boss. There's Jacob."

Neil tipped his hat up and saw Jacob bringing someone on his horse. It looked like a woman, but from the distance it was hard to tell for sure. Buttoning his coat, he shoved his hands into his pockets and strode past the cattle pen to his head farmhand. As he got closer to them, he realized that the person on the horse was, in fact, a woman.

"We had a couple of thieves on your land," Jacob said once Neil reached them. "Cal and Ben caught them. Now, they're tending to her husband. One of the thieves shot at him and he fell off his horse. They'll bring all of them here."

By the hesitant tone in Jacob's voice, it occurred to Neil that the woman's husband didn't fare as well as she did. Neil glanced her way, noting her pale face and trembling hands. It was natural that the ordeal scared her, and now she might be a widow. Clearing his throat, he told Jacob, "Get the doctor."

Jacob helped her down, and Neil blinked when he saw that she was expecting. Jacob tipped his hat to her before he hopped up on the painted stallion and departed.

Neil's heart went out to her. Praying that her husband survived the attack, he said, "You must be cold. Come. I'll take you to the house. You can warm up and get something to eat and drink." He took a couple of steps when he realized that she didn't follow him. "Is something wrong?"

She tightened her coat around her body. "You're Neil Craftsman."

He nodded. "That's right. You and your husband were traveling on my land. It's all right. I'll take care of both of you until you're ready to go home." He began to walk but she didn't move. He frowned. "What is it?"

Staring at the ground, she seemed fascinated with kicking a small rock around.

"Well?"

"I appreciate the offer, Mr. Craftsman, but I'd rather stay out here, if you don't mind."

"Of course, I mind. You're my responsibility as long as you're on my land. I can't have you getting ill and risking your baby's life. I'll see to it that you can warm yourself up by the fireplace, and I'll get you something to eat and drink. You don't have to worry about anything. I'll take good care of you and your husband." He attempted to walk to the house but noticed that she didn't budge. He frowned at her. "Why won't you come into my house?"

She glanced over her shoulder at two of his farmhands who brought a cow to the large barn. Finally, she replied, "I know of your reputation. I cannot be alone with you."

Careful to hide his sudden flare of anger, he sauntered over to her, only to get more annoyed when she backed up, looking as if she was a mouse caught by a cat. He forced his voice to remain calm and even as he said, "You heard of my reputation. Then you know I am a hardworking man whose wife left him and his daughter. So it is my divorce that has you upset?"

Her pale face and the way she refused to make eye contact with him said more than her silence did.

His mouth formed a tight line. Lowering his voice so his farmhands wouldn't overhear, he continued, "However, there is more to my history, isn't there?"

She met his gaze then, her brown eyes wide.

Crossing his arms, he purposely swept his blue eyes up and down her frame. Dark blond hair neatly tucked under her white bonnet. Fair skin, high cheekbones, and delicate pink lips. The coat and her pregnancy did little to hide her curvy figure. She was just as beautiful as his ex-wife. And just as uppity too.

She took another step back.

"Don't be shy," he whispered, leaning toward her and giving her a knowing smile. "You'd be surprised at how well I can handle a woman when she's in my bed. The soiled doves in the saloon can teach men all kinds of interesting tricks."

Gasping, she tightened her hold on her coat.

He straightened up and snapped, "I haven't visited a whorehouse in eight years. Give me more credit than that."

She shot him a piercing look. "That's not true. There was that night five years ago."

He stiffened. He had forgotten that particular night. “Oh good. You keep up with the rumor mill. Then you’ll recall that I also visited the pastor and have been faithfully attending church ever since. But it’s funny how no one seems to mention that.”

“You did engage in that foul behavior for many years. I find it hard to believe you changed.”

“Enough! Whether you like it or not, I’ll be taking you to the house, even if I have to carry you.”

“Then I’ll scream for help.”

He shrugged. “Go ahead. My men know what kind of man I really am. They won’t stop me.”

She stomped her foot on the ground. “You’re worse than people said.”

He moved toward her. He grabbed her arm when she turned to flee. Picking her up, he ignored her while she slapped his face and shouted for someone to save her from the beast. A beast indeed! She was the one attacking him when all he wanted to do was help her and her husband. Despite her protests and wiggling, he managed to bring her into his house. He grunted as he pulled the leg of the chair from under the kitchen table.

“Unhand me you horrible, horrible man!”

Then she let out an ear piercing scream in his ear. That was the final straw. He dropped her in the chair. She bolted from the chair but he pushed her back in and pressed his nose up to hers.

“Now listen to me,” he growled. “If you get out of this chair before your husband comes to take you home, I’ll find some rope and tie you in place. Do I make myself clear?”

She gasped, her hand fluttering to her neck. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I?” He stared at her then, long and hard. His gaze intensely held hers until she looked away. Satisfied, he nodded and stood up. “All right. I’ll go find out what happened to your husband and bring him here. In the meantime, help yourself to some water I got from the well earlier today.”

She sniffed.

“Look, it’s just a suggestion. You do have your child to think about after all.”

“No, it’s not that. My husband might be coming here but your men will be carrying him.”

He shrugged. “He might be injured but Jacob went to fetch the doctor who’ll tend to him.”

“No. A doctor won’t help him.” She put her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. “He’s dead.”

Uncertain, he stared at her. He was used to handling Emily’s feelings but not a woman’s. Cassie hadn’t displayed any form of sincerity. Her tears were faked. But he sensed that this woman wasn’t faking in order to get his sympathy. This caused a tightening to form in his gut as he debated what to do to assure her that her husband was still alive. As he opened his mouth to speak that assurance, he stopped. Could he honestly tell her that? What if she was right? What if her husband didn’t survive?

“We don’t know that for sure,” he finally ventured.

She shook her head and continued to sob.

Shuffling his feet, he glanced around at the large work table and cupboards until he found a hand towel. He snatched it from the shelf and held it out to her, as if getting close to her would burn him. “Here. Use this.”

Glancing up, she accepted the yellow cloth and wiped her face.

He nearly shouted with relief when Cal knocked on the door which was slightly ajar. Turning to his farmhand he motioned him in. "What is it? Did you bring her husband?"

Cal removed his hat when he entered the kitchen, his expression solemn. Shifting his gaze from Neil to the woman and back to Neil, he said, "I'm afraid I got bad news."

She cried even louder.

Sensing how much Cal didn't want to be the one to say it, Neil spoke up. "We'll make arrangements to take him to the funeral parlor in town."

"Boss, Ben and I tried to catch up to the robber before he shot him. We got both men apprehended and will take them to the sheriff. Justice will be served." He looked at her. "We saw the whole thing and we'll testify to it."

She didn't acknowledge his statement.

The poor thing must be overwhelmed with grief. Neil sighed. Though he didn't care much for her, he did feel sorry for her. After he gave Cal instructions on which funeral director to find, he asked her, "Who should we notify on your behalf?" When she didn't respond, he tapped her shoulder, "Ma'am?"

She shied away from him. "Please, stop touching me!"

He held his hands up, baffled that she should care when she just received news regarding her husband's death. "There's no need to get hostile. I asked you who we need to send for you."

Her brown eyes widened and she shot him a frantic glance.

"Don't you have a relative to go to?"

Her lower lip trembled and she shook her head. "No. My parents and sister are dead and I had no brothers or aunts or uncles."

Placing his hands at his sides, he softly asked, "What about his family?"

She cringed for a moment. "No. They live too far away. I cannot go to them. My home is in Omaha."

"Then you have enough to sustain you and your child. That's a relief." He turned to Cal. "Go ahead and take her husband to the funeral home." He dared to ask her another question. "What was your husband's name?"

Taking a deep breath, she replied, "Jim Donner."

"All right. Cal will arrange the funeral for you. Since you don't trust me, will you let Ben take you home?"

"I don't know if I can." Her voice sounded so low he could barely hear it.

"Look. No one here is going to harm you, all right? We're just trying to help."

"I don't know if I have a home to go to. That's my problem." She wrung the towel in her hands. "Jim didn't own it outright. He rented it."

"He had some assets though, right?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Neil hated to pry into her personal life but saw little choice. "He must have left you some money in his will. Surely, that will be enough to see you through this until..." He shrugged. "Until the money runs out."

"Can I go now, boss?" Cal interrupted.

Nodding, he gave his final instructions to Cal who looked relieved to leave. Neil closed the door and pulled out the chair across from her, hoping she wouldn't panic. "Did your husband have any money?"

"I don't know. He never discussed it with me."

He sighed. "Do you have friends in town?"

"Yes."

“They will be the ones to go to for help. I want you to go home and go to them. Are you part of a church?”

“Of course. I am an honorable woman.”

The way she said those words made his skin crawl, for he understood her tone to insinuate that she was too good to hang around the likes of him. Forcing aside his irritation, he eased out of the chair, suddenly needing to get away from her. Wishing to remain polite since she was his guest, albeit a rude one, he said, “Then you will have support to see you through this tragedy. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll see what’s keeping Cal and Ben.” *I’m sure you want to get away from me as much as I want to get away from you, you judgmental brat.* Offering a stiff smile, he added, “Don’t forget to drink some water. The trip to town will take an hour and I’m sure you’re thirsty.”

He didn’t wait for her reply. He stomped out of the house and slammed the door behind him. *Calm down. Take deep breaths. Don’t listen to people like her. I’m not the same man I was back then.*

Chapter Three

Sarah blinked in surprise as the banging of the door echoed through the quiet house. What got him in such a fit? Truth be told, she was relieved to be alone. Who knew what Neil Craftsman was capable of doing to a newly widowed woman? If he had his way with her, which would be by force for she would never allow him to touch her, then he would be off free and clear. After all, she was already with child. There'd be no proof that he raped her. She shivered and pulled her coat protectively around her shoulders. Never before had she felt so vulnerable. First, the thieves nearly attacked her. Then her husband abandoned her. And to top it all off, Neil dragged her into his lair.

She gasped and stood up. Rushing to the door, she turned the knob, relieved when the door opened. He hadn't locked her in. Thank goodness. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Of all people to end up needing assistance from, it would have to be Neil Craftsman. She spied Neil talking to Ben and Cal as they laid the body of her dead husband into the back of her wagon.

Tears sprang to her eyes. Who would take care of her? It wasn't just her who needed help. Rubbing her belly, she

stared at the cloudy sky, wondering how she was supposed to support herself and a baby when she had no skills. Who would hire her?

She wiped her eyes with the towel and debated what to do. One thing was for sure: she wouldn't go to Jim's mother. Without him around to drag her there, she didn't have to associate with that dreadful woman ever again. Breathing a sigh of relief, she placed the towel on the wood table and glanced around the small beige kitchen. She rubbed her lower back. It had been bothering her since she and Jim left home.

Jim. The reminder of her husband made her wonder why the news of his death failed to evoke any emotion in her. It should have. She should care. She should be sad. The tears she shed weren't caused by losing him but by losing his financial support. She had lied to Neil. She didn't know who was going to take care of her and the baby. The friends she had couldn't afford another mouth to feed, and though she regularly attended church with Jim, she didn't feel comfortable asking for help. He had wanted people to think he was well off but the truth was, they were one paycheck away from poverty, and now that he was no longer able to work, she didn't have a penny to her name.

She couldn't go back to that church and tell everyone the truth. Not with the way Jim bragged about his wealth. It would be too humiliating. She had been the one to scrimp for every cent to help one of their friends who needed food. They couldn't help her, even if she confessed everything to them. She knew they would sympathize with her, but sympathy couldn't put food on the table. For the first time since she met him, she cursed him for spending everything he had on things they didn't need in order to gain others' approval. What good did all the material possessions do her now?

Perhaps they would do her some good. She didn't need to keep them. She didn't need them now that Jim wasn't around. If she sold them, then she could get by for awhile. If she managed to get a job and enlist the help of one of her friends to watch the baby while she worked, then she might make it. Feeling like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, she gathered her composure and left the house.

By the time she reached Neil, Ben, and Cal, she spotted the two thieves who had their hands tied behind their backs in the wagon. They sat as far from Jim's body as they could.

Neil looked at her with those dark brows furrowed, which gave her the creeps. The man was a monster. It was no wonder his wife insisted on divorcing him. He probably treated her with great cruelty. Why, just look at the way he forced unsuspecting, innocent women into his home! Thankfully, his farmhand had interrupted him before he did whatever it was he planned to do to her, and if he thought that she was going to idly sit in that kitchen and wait for him to make his move, he had another thing coming. She was getting back home where she could figure out exactly what to sell and what to keep.

"I assume you're ready to go home," Neil said.

"Yes. The sooner I get back, the better." *Though that's too bad for you, I suppose.*

"Do you need anything? I could give you something." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a bill. "Considering you just lost your husband, it seems that this would be appropriate. Here you go. It's a gift for the baby."

She backed away from the dollar bill, feeling tainted just by looking at it. He used to offer money to prostitutes for goodness' sakes! Struggling to keep the shock out of her voice, she replied, "No, thank you, Mr. Craftsman. The trip to town will be more than enough."

He frowned for a moment before he stuffed the bill back into his pocket. "I meant no disrespect. An expectant widow isn't exactly self-sufficient."

"Well, I don't need your help," she snapped without meaning to.

"Fine. Then you won't be getting it. Ben, Cal, get away from the wagon. Let her take it back."

To her surprise, Ben and Cal obeyed, despite the fact that they looked like they wanted to protest. She couldn't believe that a scoundrel like Neil could attract such loyal employees.

Neil spread his arm to the wagon and motioned to the front seat. "There you go, your majesty. Your carriage awaits." He crossed his arms and watched her.

Oh, the audacity of the man, to act as if she thought more highly of herself than she ought! The simple fact of the matter was that she was too good for him. After all, his type of woman spent most of her time on her back collecting money from customers in exchange for meeting their needs. No wonder his wife left him. He must have demanded that she try all sorts of perversions in the bedroom with him. The soiled doves at the saloon in town knew some clever tricks, or so she heard, and judging by his comment about knowing how to please a woman, she didn't doubt that assumption any longer.

"I can do it," she finally said, sounding more confident than she felt.

Neil raised his brows, as if challenging her.

She straightened her coat and thrust her chin forward. She marched up to the wagon.

"Here. Let me help you in," Ben called to her.

She waited for him, grateful for his assistance, and as she reached for his hand, she gasped.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Neil said. “You can’t find him repulsive too!”

Glancing uneasily at the three men, she couldn’t move. She felt strange. Before she could figure out what bothered her, water gushed down between her legs.

“Oh...shoot,” Ben replied, scrambling to get away from her.

“Boss,” Cal began, “I think she’s going to foal.”

“That’s for mares, not women,” Neil gruffly said. He shot her a dirty look. “You couldn’t wait until you got back?”

She blinked and shook her head. “It’s not like I can control this sort of thing.”

“Well, I don’t want you here, nor do I want you giving birth in my house.” He glanced to his left. “Oh good. The doctor’s here. You can go with him.”

The sticky water continued to trickle down her legs. She cringed, feeling more disgusting than she had in her entire life.

Doctor Adams hopped off his horse and approached her. “I take it you’re ready to give birth.”

“Not on my property, she’s not.” Neil glared at her. “I’ve had enough of her.”

“Her water just broke. Birth is imminent,” the older man replied.

“She’s too good for the likes of me and my house. She can give birth in her wagon.”

“Next to her dead husband and two thieves?” Cal asked.

“Is that wise, Boss?” Ben added.

The doctor shook his head. “That baby needs a warm place. We’ll go into the house. Come along, Mrs. Donner.” He gently took her by the elbow.

She stood her ground. The biting wind ruffled her bonnet. “Can’t I make it home?”

He gave her a kind smile. "I don't feel like delivering a baby out in the elements."

Neil groaned. "All right. Bring her in. She can give birth in the spare bedroom."

"I'm not even in pain," she insisted, rubbing her belly as the baby kicked. "My home isn't far."

Doctor Adams wrapped his arm around her shoulders and looked at her. "These babies can come quicker than you'd expect. Why, your water broke two weeks early."

"But...I mean..." Neil Craftsman's residence was the last place she wanted to deliver her child in. She wasn't superstitious by nature but being born in the house of an immoral man couldn't be a good beginning for her child. Ignoring Neil's accusing stare, she whispered in the doctor's ear. "People might talk. What if they assume I acted inappropriately in his house?"

The doctor chuckled. He kept his voice low. "Mrs. Donner, you must give people and Mr. Craftsman more credit than that. Neither will ruin your reputation. You are here to give birth and that's that." In a louder voice, he continued, "Now, come along."

She glanced at Cal and Ben to see if they would offer to help but they kept their attention on the wagon's wheels. Jacob, who had remained silent, took the doctor's horse to the barn.

"Good," the doctor said. "It's settled. Ben and Cal, why don't you take care of Mr. Donner and those two." He pointed to the thieves.

Ben and Cal scuffled to get into the wagon as if they couldn't get away fast enough. As Ben clicked the reins to get the geldings moving, she sighed, envying their ability to leave. A sudden wave of pain shot from her back and up her abdomen. She yelped and grabbed her belly.

Neil threw his hands up in the air. "Well, don't just stand there. Get her into the house!" He muttered something under his breath as he stomped to the front door and waved them to him.

After the pain ceased, she exhaled. Realizing she didn't have a choice, she allowed the doctor to lead her into the kitchen, up the wooden steps and into a sparse bedroom. The mattress and finely carved headboard looked expensive. The bare oak dresser which stood next to the large oak wardrobe would have made Jim drool from their fine craftsmanship. Neil either had a lot of money or a lot of debt.

Another contraction caught her off guard and she closed her eyes, silently counting as she always did when in pain. Once she could concentrate on her surroundings, she saw Neil hand the doctor a stack of old newspapers. The doctor spread them across the mattress and motioned for her to lie down.

"I want to see how far along you are," he said, taking off his coat and rolling up the sleeves of his crisp, blue shirt.

She darted a glance in Neil's direction as he brought in a pile of clean towels and set them on the dresser. Her cheeks flushed. Turning to the doctor, she asked, "He's not going see me, is he?" Sensing Neil's aggravation, she ignored him while she waited for the doctor's answer.

"Neil, will you please get me some fresh water?"

Neil stiffly nodded. "I'll bring up wood and matches for the box stove too. Then you can get a fire started."

Funny. In all the excitement, she hadn't noticed the cold room.

When Neil left, the doctor smiled at her. "I assure you that despite Mr. Craftsman's past, he is a good man."

She raised a brow, unwilling to be comforted.

The sound of rushing footsteps followed by shouts from a girl and a woman took her attention off their

conversation. She watched as a pretty girl with a long black braid bouncing against her back ran into the room, her cheeks and nose red from being outside. "It's true then. You're going to have a baby? Can I watch?"

Sarah's jaw dropped. The girl couldn't be serious! Matters of birthing weren't appropriate for children.

A woman, probably in her fifties, entered the room, out of breath. "Forgive her. Emily gets excited when it comes to babies."

"Yes, I always wanted a baby brother or sister." Emily frowned, her full pink lips turned into a pout. "They would be more fun to play with than a doll."

"That's what she thinks." The woman smiled. "Come along, Emily. The doctor has to tend to Mrs...I'm sorry. What is your name?"

"Sarah Donner." She felt a now familiar tightening around her abdomen and braced for the next round of pain.

"Why does she look like she tasted something icky?" Emily asked.

Neil placed a bowl with a pitcher of water in it on the dresser. Sarah tried to move out of his way but couldn't with her legs feeling like a formidable wall of steel. It was all she could do to remain standing. Without glancing in Sarah's direction, Neil placed wood into the gray cast iron box stove and started a fire. Then he lifted Emily into his arms. "We need to leave Mrs. Donner and the doctor alone."

"Actually," Doctor Adams began, "another pair of helping hands would be appreciated. Mrs. Craftsman, do you mind?"

The woman stepped forward. "Oh, no. I'd be glad to help."

"Grandma, I want to stay and help too," Emily protested, reaching for the older woman.

“This isn’t for children, sweetheart,” Neil said.

Despite Emily’s complaints, he took her out of the room. Sarah nearly cried with relief since Neil wouldn’t be nearby. It was bad enough being in his house. She took off her coat and got ready to give birth.

At 10:30 that evening, Neil woke up to the sound of a baby crying. He jerked up from the couch in the parlor, surprised he had been able to fall asleep with Mrs. Donner’s groaning and screaming. He glanced at the chair where Emily slept with a blanket wrapped around her tiny body.

He went to the kitchen where his mother was pouring a cup of coffee.

She turned to him. “Oh Neil, I feel so blessed to have witnessed a baby’s birth. I regret not seeing Emily born. I would have liked to have been there to help Cassie.” She took a sip from the blue cup. “I hope it’s all right if I stay through the night to assist Sarah so you can sleep. I know you have a hard day ahead of you and the doctor’s getting ready to leave.”

Considering Sarah Donner’s aversion to him, she would probably be relieved if his mother stayed to help her. “That might be best.”

She motioned to the coffee pot. “Would you like something to drink before you go to bed?”

“No. I’m fine. Just focus on my...our...” What exactly was Sarah anyway? He couldn’t say she was his annoyance. Sighing, he finished, “Focus on the guest.”

And that is what Mrs. Donner had become, at least for a couple of days while she recovered. It was going to be a long two or three days. He considered taking Emily to her bed but decided against it. Once Emily woke up, she didn’t go back to

sleep and he didn't feel up to telling her bedtime stories. He simply thanked his mother and climbed the steps.

The doctor emerged from Cassie's old bedroom and shut the door quietly behind him. Though he looked ragged, he grinned from ear to ear. "She did just fine," he told Neil as Neil reached the top step. "I think the baby may be the thing she needs to get through her husband's death."

Despite his better judgment, for he did not wish to get involved in her life, he asked, "Did she have a boy or a girl?"

"A boy."

He glanced over his shoulder at the sound of footsteps on the creaking stairs. His mother came up with another cup. There was no denying the wistful expression on her face. She had wished for more grandchildren and all he had been able to give her was Emily. And Emily wasn't her real grandchild. His heart tightened at the reminder that Cassie had been with child when they married. Of course, he hadn't known until later. He had the sudden inclination to run off and hide in a small town further out west where he could start a new life and forget everything. Except for Emily. He would take her with him.

"Thank you for all your help, Doctor Adams," his mother whispered.

The house seemed oddly quiet after all the commotion from the past five hours. Neil figured that Sarah and the baby must be all right if the doctor wasn't concerned. "Doctor, I'll pay the bill for this birth."

His mother rested a hand on his arm. "Oh Neil, are you sure?"

"Mrs. Donner lost her husband today. It's the least I can do to ease her burden." The last thing a widow needed was more bills to pay. He looked at the doctor. "I'll pay for your services."

The doctor nodded. "All right."

“And if she asks, don’t tell her I was the one who paid it.” Something told Neil that she wouldn’t appreciate the gift. “You hear that, Mother?”

“I’ll be good, son. I promise. I know I tend to brag on you.”

“Are you sure you won’t stay here until daylight?” Neil asked the older man.

“No. I need to get back home.” He tipped his hat to them. “Good night.”

“Night.”

As the doctor made his way down the steps, Neil watched his mother knock on the bedroom door. “Sarah? I brought some water.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Craftsman,” came the tired voice from inside the room.

So she could be nice when she wanted to be. Neil bit his tongue and made his way across the hall to his room. While his mother opened the door, he snuck a peek into Cassie’s old room. In the darkness of the hall, Sarah Donner wouldn’t notice him. A kerosene lamp lit the bedroom, casting a warm glow over her and the sleeping child she held to her bosom. She sat up in the bed, a thick pink blanket covering her legs and waist. She wore a nightgown that his mother had retrieved from the trunk in her wagon. Her face glowed with pleasure as she smiled at her son. She looked like an angel.

“The poor thing is worn out,” his mother softly told her.

“He’s had a busy day, that’s for sure,” Sarah replied. “I didn’t think I could be this happy.”

“Do you have a name for him?”

“Luke.”

His mother patted her arm. “That’s a lovely name.”

His Redeeming Bride

The scene playing in front of him almost seemed as if it came from a dream. His heart ached at the loveliness of witnessing a mother's joy over her child. How many times did he beg Cassie to show an interest in Emily?

Swallowing the bitter lump in his throat, he stepped into his bedroom and shut the door, feeling more alone and empty than he had since the day he found Cassie sleeping with another man. Shoving the memory aside, he slid into bed, not even bothering to take off his clothes. Weary, he shut his eyes and prayed for Sarah to take her son and leave as soon as possible.

Chapter Four

Two days later, Sarah breathed a sigh of relief when Ben offered to take her and Neil's mother, Gwendolyn, to their homes. She did like Gwendolyn, who insisted on being called Gwen. Gwen made it possible for Sarah to be in Neil's house without compromising her good name. Now she could return to her life and put this horrible ordeal behind her.

The cloudy sky threatened snow, and she pulled Luke closer to her bosom, wrapping her coat around him to protect him from the cold. She sat between Ben and Gwen as he drove her wagon into town. Her geldings moved at a steady pace, and since Ben took the dirt road, the journey was smoother than the one she endured with Jim, which was good because she was still sore from giving birth.

Even though Sarah stared at the gentle yellow hills in the distance, Gwen chatted nonstop. The chatting didn't bother her. In fact, it was a relief because it meant she didn't have to come up with things to talk about.

"Of course, you'll wish to send your mother-in-law a letter," Gwen rambled on. "She will be delighted to have a grandchild. Why, I'm still grateful to Cassie that she gave me Emily."

Sarah looked down at her sleeping son. He had her blond hair, though not as much of it, and her forehead, nose and cheeks, but he also had Jim's chin and thin lips. She dreaded the thought of sending Jim's mother a letter but knew it had to be done. At least she wouldn't have to live with the woman.

She smiled at Gwen. "I appreciate your help with Luke. It was nice having another woman around."

"Just wait until your mother-in-law hears that she has a grandson. She'll be eager to visit and help. Where did you say she lives?"

Sarah hadn't said, nor did she care to, but to be nice to Gwen, she lied. "Oh, she's far away. I'm not sure she'll be able to make the trip."

"What a shame."

Ben, who had been silent the entire time, halted the geldings as they approached town. Looking at Sarah, he asked, "Do you mind if I take Mrs. Craftsman to her house first?"

"No," Sarah replied. She looked at Gwen. "I'm sure you're tired."

"No more than you are, but I'll be glad to get home, Ben."

He nodded and took her home. Afterwards, Ben took Sarah to her home. He helped her down from the wagon, and she was careful not to disturb her son.

Sarah turned her head to the sound of her front door opening and cried in alarm when her landlord motioned for two men to carry her couch out of the house. Running up to the balding man, she asked, "Mr. Murphy, what's going on?"

Her landlord slipped his pocket watch into his black suit and rubbed his protruding belly. "What's going on? I'll tell you what's going on. Your husband neglected to pay February's rent before he died. It's February first."

“But...” She paused as one of the tall men bumped into her. Muttering an apology, she moved aside. “Mr. Murphy, Jim got shot and died on the day I went into labor. I wasn’t able to get back until today. See?” She showed him Luke. “So, I wasn’t here to pay you.”

He cocked his head to the side. “You say you got money?”

She faltered. “Oh. I don’t have any on me.”

“Keep it coming, men!” He motioned to two more men who were taking her belongings out of the house. “I’m running a business here, Mrs. Donner, and it doesn’t do me any good when a tenant can’t pay the rent.”

“Wait!” She frantically tried to stop the men who were taking her chairs out of the house but they brushed past her. She hurried back to Mr. Murphy. “I’m going to sell my things. When I do, I can get the money to pay you. Please! I’ll make up for this month’s rent and next month’s too. I’m sure the china we own will be worth that much.”

“Aren’t you aware of your husband’s debts?”

Luke squirmed against her bosom, moving his head in an attempt that told her he was hungry. She pushed aside his grunting so she could focus on the landlord. “Jim had debts?”

The man shook his head and ran a pudgy hand over his face. “I am truly sorry. This isn’t the way a woman should find out. He did some betting and lost money.”

Three men returned to the house while another one finished loading a chair into a large wagon. The sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach grew larger. Everything was happening too fast. If only the men would stop taking her things out of her house, she might be able to concentrate!

“Mrs. Donner?”

“I’m afraid you’re wrong, Mr. Murphy. Jim never gambled a day in his life.”

“I wish that was true.”

Another man came up to them with a crate containing her things from her bedroom, including her jewelry box. “Who does this go to, Murphy?”

Her landlord examined the contents of the box. “I believe Ethan Thompson will want those.”

She gasped. Ethan Thompson! He was a regular at the gaming tables at the saloon. “No! Jim never went to the saloon. I know because he slept in bed with me every night.”

The man holding the crate looked sympathetic. “He didn’t play cards, ma’am. He bet on horses. They have horse races outside of town and Ethan placed bets for him. He didn’t have to be there to win or lose.”

No! Please God no! It has to be a mistake. Jim would never gamble. It’s wrong!

The man motioned to the box. “Is there anything in here you’d like to keep?”

Blinking back her tears, she peered into the crate and saw the locket her parents had given her when she was a girl. It was the only thing that contained any real value to her. The rest of the jewelry was given to her by Jim in order to impress other people. “Can I have the gold oval-shaped locket?”

He shifted his weight. He pulled it out of the jewelry box and handed it to her.

She took it and backed away, watching as he carried the crate to the wagon.

Luke’s impatient wiggles caught her attention. She bounced him in her arms, hoping to distract him so she could think of what to do next.

Ben, who had stayed by her wagon the whole time, came over to her. “Ma’am, do you have somewhere to go?”

Realizing she didn't have a choice, she left Mr. Murphy and turned back to the street. "I have a couple of friends I might be able to stay with."

He nodded and went with her to every friend she had. Her friend Caroline Jones agreed to take her and Luke into her home, but as soon as Sarah realized her children and husband were sick, she refrained since she didn't want to expose Luke to an illness. Her friend Rachel Ludwig couldn't take her and Luke in because her house was too full with her six kids, her parents, and her husband's father. The rest of the people she went to said no. They were nice about it, but she thought they could help if they wanted to. Even the boarding house was full, and despite her offer to sleep in the parlor, the owner said no.

After two hours of going through town, she stood in front of the preacher's door as he softly shut the door on her face. She broke down and cried. Luke, probably sensing her anguish, wailed too.

Ben slipped her quilt over her shoulders and turned her to the wagon. "Come back to Mr. Craftsman's place. He has plenty of room, and he could use a woman to help with Emily and the house."

She shook her head. "I can't." Her voice broke.

"Then where will you go?"

The question stung, for who would take her in? She exhausted all options but one. Jim's mother. But Beatrice would take Luke and toss her out. And she wasn't about to part from her son. She'd rather risk being in Neil's home. At least he had the other farmhands and his daughter there to keep him honest. Yes, for the sake of her son, she'd stay with him. If he'd even let her after the way she treated him.

"Will Mr. Craftsman be willing to let me stay?" she ventured, suddenly afraid of his refusal. "I wasn't very nice to him."

His Redeeming Bride

“He’s a compassionate man. He wouldn’t want to see a mother and child without a home. Come. I’ll help you back into the wagon.”

Her sobs subsiding, she could only pray he was right about Neil as she got onto the wagon seat. Shivering and cradling the sleeping child in her arms, she wondered if she was making a big mistake. Perhaps Luke would be better off with Beatrice. No. Beatrice would never let her stay too. Sarah would rather be with Neil. At least he might take them both in. She looked at Luke, her love flowing out to him. No one was going to separate them. She’d make sure of that.

Neil stared at Ben for a good minute before he said, “No. She’s not staying here.” Taking his eyes off the wagon where Sarah and her son sat out of hearing distance, he spun on his heel. He made it three full strides to the barn when Jacob jumped in front of him. “Get out of my way,” he snapped.

Jacob sighed. “Look, under any other circumstance, I wouldn’t bother you.”

“Great. Then pretend this is ‘any other circumstance’.”

Ben stepped to the side to block Neil as he moved around Jacob. “We can’t just leave a new mother out in the cold. She has nowhere to go.”

“Then put her up in the bunkhouse.”

“Oh, we can’t have her in there with all the hands,” Ben argued.

“What about your house?”

Jacob shook his head. “My wife and I have a one room cabin. We aren’t setup for company.”

Neil shook his head. "This is ridiculous! I am not getting involved with a judgmental woman who thinks her halo outshines the sun. I have a right to respect in my own home."

"Granted, she was harsh with you," Jacob began, "but we know you're not the man she thinks you are. Given time, I'm sure she'll see that too."

"I don't care what she thinks of me as long as I don't have to deal with her."

The baby's cries resonated through the calm air. Neil grimaced. How fitting it was that the child cried at that moment.

"If for no other reason, couldn't you let her stay so the baby can be safe?"

Damn! If she hadn't been with a child, he could have refused without a trace of guilt. He eyed his hired hand who defended the prissy widow. "Fine. I'll let her stay in Cassie's old bedroom."

Jacob and Ben grinned like idiots. Neil grunted. They were much too happy to have her stay. Whatever his farmhands saw in her to like, he didn't get it. Bracing himself for another unpleasant encounter, he straightened his coat and marched over to her. She glanced his way but wouldn't make eye contact with him. He gritted his teeth. She was no better than Cassie. Fooling everyone else into believing she was nice. And only he knew the truth.

Stopping in front of the wagon, ignoring the baby's cries and her rocking him, he stiffly said, "I hear you have no place to stay."

She winced and looked his way. "You heard right."

He could barely hear her over her son's insistent demands. The poor kid had been stuck outside for at least four hours. He had to be cold and hungry. Sarah's worried look told Neil that she loved her son. And that love just might be

her sole redeeming quality. Neil's anger faded. "What happened to your home?"

She focused on swaddling her son as she answered. "My husband didn't pay the rent."

"What about his money?"

Her cheeks seemed to grow redder than they already were from the cold. "Apparently, he gambled."

Great. The more he learned, the more he felt sorry for her. "And your friends?"

"They don't have room for me."

"And your preacher?" The minute he saw her tears, he regretted pressing her for information. He sighed. "Come on down and get into the house. Both of you need to sit by the fireplace."

He fully expected her to find some reason to argue, or at least insist that Jacob help her down from the wagon, but she held her hand out to him, careful to hold the baby close to her with her free arm. Once her feet reached the ground, she lifted her eyes to meet his. "Believe me, Mr. Craftsman, if I had anywhere else to go, I wouldn't be here."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "I don't think you're in a position to be flaunting your high morals on me."

"I'm not." Her voice wavered. "I just meant that I know you don't like me. I have been rude to you. I was scared of you." She wiped her wet cheeks. "To be honest, I still am. But I have nothing and I can't afford to lose my son. I'll do whatever you ask. Ben said you could use someone to clean the house and cook meals for you and Emily."

"I have a farmhand who cooks, and my mother cleans and does laundry for me and Emily."

"I can sew. I can teach Emily how to read and write and do math."

"I have money to buy clothes and Emily goes to school. In fact, I'm due to pick her up soon."

The breeze ruffled her bonnet. "Mr. Craftsman, there must be something I can do to earn my keep."

He had gotten used to not having a woman around, besides his mother. He wasn't sure what chore to offer her so she could feel useful. He decided that she might as well assume the responsibilities of running a house. Surely, she would cook better meals than his hired hand. If she sewed, it would save him money, and cleaning was hard on his mother's back. "All right," he finally said. "I can think of stuff for you to do. Let's get to the house."

She bit her lower lip and watched him.

He closed his eyes, willing himself to remain calm. "Didn't you just ask if you could stay here?" When she didn't respond, he opened his eyes. "Well?"

She shifted from one foot to the other. "You don't expect me to...I mean, I'll do anything at all, but I can't do one certain thing."

Her meaning dawned on him. He blinked, feeling as if she slapped him. "Is that really what you think of me? I have a daughter, for goodness' sakes. If I wouldn't want someone treating Emily like that, why would I treat you that way?"

She opened her mouth to speak.

He held his hand up to her. "Don't even bring up my past. My past is just that. *The past*. You can't condemn a man for what he's done. You have to look at what he's doing. Everyone deserves a second chance, Mrs. Donner. And I assure you, if I were to look for a woman to bed, she wouldn't be a stuck up prude such as yourself." He pointed to his home. "I expect you to do what you said you are qualified to do. You will cook, clean, do laundry, and sew. You will also be a mother to Emily, and I better see you treating her like she's important

because she is. She will continue to go to school so she can play with other children. Now, are you going to get into that house and warm your screaming child or are you going to stay out here and let him freeze to death?"

She paled. "Forgive me, Mr. Craftsman. I'll do what you ask."

He received a small amount of satisfaction in having taken her down a notch, but it bothered him to no end that she would even assume that he'd demand she warm his bed in exchange for offering her and her son a place to sleep and eat. Five years. He spent the last five years living a squeaky clean life and what was there to show for it? People still assumed the worst about him.

Chapter Five

Sarah followed Neil to the house, her nerves already set on edge from having dealt with a crying baby for the past hour. Luke wasn't hungry. He wasn't wet. He wasn't even tired. He was cold. Neil was right. She wasn't doing her child any good by staying outside arguing with him. Something deep in her heart told her that she could trust him, that he wouldn't take advantage of the situation. She saw the care in his eyes when he glanced at her son. She noted the pride in his voice when he said Emily's name. A man who valued children as much as he did couldn't be a monster.

The sudden insight caused her cheeks to warm in embarrassment. That she jumped to conclusions may have been understandable, considering all the horror stories she heard of his decadent lifestyle, but he had acted honorably toward her. Sure he got upset and snapped at her, but she had to admit she deserved it.

To her surprise, he opened the back door for her. "Go ahead and sit in front of the fireplace in the parlor. I'm going to take your things up to Cassie's old bedroom."

"Cassie's bedroom? Didn't you sleep in the same room?"

He closed his eyes and groaned. "Forget I mentioned it, all right? It's the room you gave birth in. That's all you need to know."

Not wishing to further annoy him, she nodded and went to the chair and sat in front of the fire. She breathed a sigh of relief when Luke calmed down. Silence was a wonderful thing.

When Neil, Ben, and Jacob brought in her trunk and carpet bag, she watched as Neil led them up the stairs. She could hear them talking in her new room but couldn't make out what they were saying.

Jacob bounced down the steps and smiled at her. "You'll be fine, ma'am. I'm going to head into town to pick up some things for your little boy there. Neil kept the crib that Emily used when she was a baby. He'll be setting that up for you."

"I didn't even think of baby furniture," she replied, feeling ashamed that they were going through all this trouble for her.

"Well, you didn't count on losing your husband either. It seems like life's handed you a hard blow. The least we can do is ease the burden for you."

"Thank you, Jacob."

He tipped his hat to her and left the house.

She heard Ben whistle from upstairs. "Gee, Boss. Did you save everything from when Emily was a baby?"

"I didn't know if Cassie would have another child," came Neil's muffled reply. She spotted Neil climbing down a ladder from the attic, carrying a bassinet under his arm. When he noticed her, he motioned for her to come up. "You might as well tell me what you want or don't want."

She eased out of the chair and climbed the stairs. Her backside ached in protest. With the hours she spent sitting on the hard wagon seat, it took a great effort to trudge up the

narrow staircase. Glancing at the still bundle in her arms, she realized that Luke had finally fallen asleep. She approached the first bedroom on the right and peeked into it, surprised to see folded pink sheets on the bed.

Neil set the bassinet on the hardwood floor beside the headboard and laid a clean blanket in it. "I figure the crib can go at the foot of the bed, if that's all right with you."

Stunned by the fact that he took care in arranging the room for her, she felt another stab of guilt pierce her heart. "I'd like to apologize, Mr. Craftsman. I shouldn't have spoken to you the way I did. It's clear that I misjudged you."

Ben came into the room with an armful of pink quilts. "Here they are, boss. They sure are fancy."

"Cassie insisted on having the best of everything," Neil dryly replied.

That explained the expensive furniture. Sarah watched as Ben and Neil moved the bed so there was adequate distance between the foot of the bed and the crib.

"After you empty the trunk, I'll put it in the attic," Ben told her.

She nodded and placed Luke in the bassinet. The blanket was folded in such a way that it would be comfortable for him. She hadn't expected Neil to be skilled at this task. Quickly, she took Luke's things and placed them in a drawer. Then she hung her dresses, shirts, and skirts in the wardrobe. As she placed her undergarments in a drawer, she tried to conceal her embarrassment over showing them her personal attire. Thankfully, they were too busy hammering nails into sections of the crib that had loosened over the years to notice. Once she set aside her bonnets, good shoes, and hats in the remaining drawers, she stepped away from the empty trunk.

Ben closed the lid and picked it up. "You didn't have a lot."

“The clothes I have are good quality. I don’t need much. I won’t be demanding.” The promise was directed at Neil though she kept her eyes on Ben.

“I’m sure you won’t,” he kindly replied before leaving the room.

Neil shook the crib. “It’s sturdy now.” He turned to her. “Would you like me to take the bassinet to the kitchen so you can watch Luke while you cook? Emily will be home in an hour and she’ll be hungry.”

“Should I make enough for you too?” she asked, still unable to make eye contact with him.

“We might as well all eat together. I like to talk to Emily at supper. I don’t get much of a chance any other time of the day, though she usually tags along for most of the chores. But then, it’s talk about the animals. You should eat with us. Emily could use a woman to talk to. My mother doesn’t get to see her more than once a week.”

Hiding her anxiety at the thought of eating with him, she nodded. “I’ll get to it.”

She reached to take Luke out of the bassinet but he waved his hand at her. “It wouldn’t be good to wake him. I can carry the bassinet while he sleeps.”

The last thing she wanted to do was argue with him, so she went down the stairs and to the kitchen, noting the gentleness with which he handled the bassinet. She breathed a sigh of relief. At least he wouldn’t be harsh on Luke because of her conduct.

“All right,” Neil began, “I’m going to pick Emily up from school. Do you need anything before I go?”

She shook her head. “You’ve already done more than I deserve. Thank you.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned to the cupboards and saw pots and pans that looked brand new. She blinked in surprise. Did Cassie buy them before the divorce?

“You’re welcome.”

Startled, she glanced back in time to see Neil exit through the door. He softly shut it behind him. She studied the rest of the kitchen, noting that the plates and utensils looked worn. There wasn’t much food to cook with, and what little there was, she suspected was there because of his mother. Gwen had mentioned that she liked to come out on Sunday after church to make them a good meal.

“That farmhand doesn’t make good dishes,” Gwen had confided. “Ever since Cassie left, poor Emily’s been living off of beans and jerky.”

Sarah took a pan out of the cupboard and inspected it. She noted the date on the bottom. It did show signs of use but not much. She suspected that Cassie wasn’t much of a cook, which made her further deduct that Emily had been eating the farmhand’s meals for a lot longer than the year that Cassie had been gone.

Frowning, she tried to remember how long it had been since Neil got the divorce. Everyone knew he got divorced. It was one of the many things her preacher spoke against. Marriage was a sacred institution that wasn’t to be dissolved under any circumstance. That was probably why Jim stayed with her, though she often wondered if he would have left her if given the chance. He certainly hadn’t been in any hurry to protect her from the thieves. He hadn’t even thought enough of her to leave her money in the event he died before she did.

Not wishing to wake her son, she resisted the urge to throw the pan across the room. Her knuckles grew white as she grabbed the handle and willed her sudden anger to subside. She was glad he died. It was a mistake to even marry him. Closing

her eyes, she scolded herself for thinking such evil thoughts. He had been her husband, and she wasn't honoring his memory. It was her duty to think well of him, even if she detested him.

She took a deep breath and concentrated on things that made her happy. Her son, of course, gave her the greatest joy in her life. She didn't think it was possible that another human being could mean as much to her as he did. Opening her eyes, she looked at him as he slept, swaddled in a warm blanket. He was tiny and fragile, but he experienced a peace that eluded her. She wasn't sure how long Neil would let her and Luke stay in his home.

Her thoughts were spinning in circles and she needed to concentrate on making supper. She didn't want to fail her first attempt to earn her keep. If Neil didn't approve of the way she followed his instructions, he might decide to put her clothes back into her trunk and order her to go. He was, in a sense, her employer, and she needed to do her job to the best of her ability. It did ease her mind to know she was offering something useful in order to stay here.

For the next hour, she gathered the few ingredients she could find to make biscuits, boiled potatoes, and stew. She made brown sugar candy for dessert, figuring a little girl might like a treat. She finished the stew just as the energetic pretty girl ran through the door. Sarah had to admit that the girl was as good looking as people claimed Cassie was.

Sarah hadn't seen Cassie but rumors of her beauty made it to her preacher who spoke on the dangers of lust and how men needed to guard their minds so they didn't fall into temptation and succumb to the whorehouse. It was after that sermon that Jim insisted Sarah wear somber colors like gray and brown and how she needed to hide her jewelry and wear her hair under her hat or bonnet. She had wondered why he

insisted on those rules but had gone along with him to please him. Suddenly, it dawned on her that there were many things she never understood about her husband.

Sarah steadied her emotions and turned her attention to the task at hand. She gathered the plates and bowls and set them on the kitchen table, wondering why there was no tablecloth. Then she reminded herself that a man taking care of a child wouldn't think of decorating his kitchen. In fact, it lacked any real feminine touches.

Emily took one look at Sarah and blurted out, "What are you doing here? I thought you were going home today."

Sarah hadn't expected the girl to be bold in her speech, so she couldn't think of a good response.

Neil, however, closed the door behind him, set his hat on the hat rack by the door, and shrugged off his coat. "Take off your coat and hat. We'll discuss this over supper."

Giving Sarah another questioning look, Emily rushed to do what her father ordered, leaving Sarah to arrange the table for them to eat. She decided that she would sit across from them.

"I will take Luke to the parlor so Emily won't disturb him," Neil told her.

She still couldn't bring herself to look directly at him so she glanced in his direction and nodded as he picked the bassinet off the floor.

"Daddy, I want to see him!" Emily shouted.

"Shhh." He pressed his finger to his lips. "He needs to sleep, Em. He's just a baby."

She immediately quieted down but trailed him as he left the room.

Sarah put the servings for their meal on all the plates and in all the bowls. She filled the glasses with milk and water. By the time she sat down, they came back into the kitchen.

“He’s like a doll,” Emily told her father. “Except, he’s more interesting because he moves.”

A slight grin crossed his face. He pulled out her chair and motioned for her to sit, which she did, neatly arranging her dress. He sat next to Emily and examined the table. “This looks like a fine meal, Mrs. Donner.”

Sarah cleared her throat and stared at the spoon in her hand. “Thank you.”

“Daddy, can I ask why Mrs. Donner is still here?” Emily asked.

Though she couldn’t look directly at Neil, Sarah had no trouble looking into Emily’s green eyes. Something about the color of the child’s eyes bothered Sarah. Neil had clear blue eyes, and from what she heard, Cassie had gray eyes.

Neil put honey on his biscuit as he answered, giving Sarah the freedom to eat while he explained the situation to the girl. “Emily, you remember how Mrs. Donner’s husband died?”

Emily mumbled an “um hum” as she bit into her biscuit, careful to not spill any crumbs anywhere but on her plate.

“Well, since Mrs. Donner’s husband is no longer alive, he can’t work. And this has put Mrs. Donner in a bad situation. You see, she needs a job in order to make sure she and her baby have a place to live.”

“What’s a job?”

“A job is what an adult does to make money.”

“So you’re giving her money?”

“No. I’m giving her a place to sleep.”

“Where?”

He hesitated for a moment. “She and Luke will be staying in your mother’s bedroom.”

“But Ma’s going to come back. You can’t give her Ma’s bedroom. She needs to sleep on the couch in the parlor.”

“Emily, she’ll be in your mother’s bedroom.” When Emily opened her mouth, he gave her a warning look. “I made up my mind.”

Emily turned her piercing eyes to Sarah. “Ma’s coming back. You can’t stay here once she returns.”

“That’s up to me to decide. Now, apologize to Mrs. Donner.”

“But she and Ma can’t sleep in the same bed.”

“Emily, apologize to her.”

Her lip set in a firm line, Emily muttered, “I’m sorry,” before she carefully bit off another piece of the biscuit.

Sarah looked at Neil. His dark brown hair was lighter than Emily’s black curls. Cassie had black hair, she recalled. Neil’s skin wasn’t as fair as Emily’s. She searched for a similarity between them but found none. They didn’t have any facial features in common, though both were very attractive. Emily was, no doubt, going to have men falling all over themselves to court her. Neil was startlingly handsome. When he entered a room, a woman couldn’t help but take a second look in his direction.

Neil looked at Sarah, and she quickly looked down, feeling burned from making eye contact with him. Surely, he didn’t know what she had been thinking. He couldn’t read minds. Could he?

Neil sighed. “Apparently, it’ll take time for us to get used to each other.” He finished the rest of his biscuit. “What we need to do is focus on what we’re doing now, and that is eating this meal. Mrs. Donner, you did an excellent job. Old Corbin doesn’t do as well as you. I think we’ll finally get some meat on my daughter’s bones.”

Sarah’s face flushed with pleasure at the compliment. “Thank you, Mr. Craftsman.”

He motioned to her plate of food that she'd hardly touched. "Aren't you going to keep eating? You must be starving."

"Oh. Yes." She cleared her throat and picked up her spoon.

The rest of the meal continued on in an uncomfortable silence. Though Sarah ate the meal, she didn't taste it. Her thoughts kept drifting to Emily who kept darting worried glances in her direction. The girl must've feared that Sarah was there to take her mother's place. Sarah wanted to assure Emily that such a thing was not going to happen but knew it wasn't the time or place for that conversation. So she ate, forcing herself to swallow the food, and saying a silent prayer of thanks when the meal was over.

Chapter Six

Neil tucked Emily in bed, surprised that Sarah had cleaned up his daughter's bedroom. Sarah had collected the toys and put them in the small toy box at the foot of the bed. The rug had been beaten so that dirt no longer clung to it. The dresser had been dusted. The hardwood floor had been swept. He didn't even want to think of how she managed to clean the room after such an exhausting day. She had to be tired. The events of the day had worn him out, and he didn't do nearly as much as Sarah had.

Yawning, he sat on the edge of Emily's bed and handed her the doll.

She looked up at him with imploring eyes. "Pa?"

"What, Em?"

She lowered her voice. "Mrs. Donner's not really going to take Ma's place, is she?"

This was a conversation that was long overdue, and as much as he wanted to put it off another day, he knew he couldn't. "Honey, your mother's not coming back."

She gasped and sat up, the blanket falling off her shoulders. "No. You said she was coming back on the day she left."

“I said that I hoped she was coming back.” And he had hoped for Cassie to return, not for his sake but for Emily’s. However, it had been nine months and she hadn’t contacted Emily. He doubted Cassie even gave thought to her only child, and it was time for Emily to mourn the loss of her mother, though it grieved him to make her sad. He chose his words with great care before he spoke. “I know that your mother and I are the only two people you know who’s had a divorce, and that being the case, you don’t fully understand what it means. You think it means that your mother has to be gone for awhile.”

She nodded, clutching her doll to her chest. She didn’t say anything but he recognized the uncertainty in her eyes.

“Well, a divorce means that your mother and I are no longer married. We have agreed to live our lives apart from each other forever.”

Her lower lip trembled, and he wanted to take those words back, to reassure her that her fantasy of having Cassie back would come true. But if he did that, he would be cruel, for sooner or later, she’d have to discover the truth and how much more pain would she endure knowing he lied to her on top of everything else that had happened to her? He rubbed his eyes. He had already lied to her in not telling her that her mother married another man.

“She has to come back, Pa,” Emily whispered. “She’s just waiting for me to grow up. Then I won’t be in her way.”

His head snapped up and he stared at her. “What are you talking about?”

She looked down at her doll and twirled its hair with her fingers. “It’s my fault she left. She often said that I was too young to be of any use to her. She said that when I got older and acted like an adult, then I wouldn’t give her headaches anymore.”

Clenching his hands together, he reined his anger in so he wouldn't yell. "She said that to you?"

"And I've been good, haven't I, Pa? I try not to spill any crumbs on the table when I eat, and I remember to put the napkin on my lap. I use utensils to eat too. I try not to run through the house or be too loud. Ma liked it quiet and clean." Her eyes grew wide. "Oh, I did almost wake the baby earlier, didn't I? Maybe I'm not old enough yet."

Adrenaline shot through him, making him want to pound his fist through the wall. Instead, he took Emily into his arms and held her tightly. "Now I want you to listen to me. There was nothing you did to make your mother leave. You didn't do anything wrong."

"But she warned me to be good and I wasn't."

He closed his eyes. Why was he learning about this now? If he had any idea Cassie was making Emily feel this way, he would have made sure she didn't do it again. "Your mother didn't mean that. She was upset because of her aunt."

"She said it before we found out about her aunt."

"When did she say it?"

"Many times."

Pulling back from her, he took her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. "I want you to listen to me, Emily. You didn't make your mother leave. Your mother had problems that you had no control over. It was those problems that made her say those things, not you. You're a good girl. Do you understand?"

She swallowed and nodded.

"Good." He urged her to lie back down and tucked the blanket around her shoulders. "I love you very much. There's nothing that's going to change that, all right?"

"I love you too, Pa."

Smiling, he kissed her forehead and stood up. "I want you to get a good night's sleep."

After he shut the door, he stormed to the kitchen and yanked open the drawer that he kept the stationary and pencils in. He pulled out a sheet of paper and pencil and slammed the drawer shut. Plopping into a chair, he gripped the pencil and wrote a letter to Cassie. He knew where her new husband lived since John McCarthy's wealth made his name and address easily accessible to anyone who cared to check. He hadn't corresponded with Cassie since that day at the courthouse when he granted her the divorce she wanted, but finding out what she had told Emily was too much.

As he wrote to Cassie, he didn't hold anything back. He didn't speak on his behalf, but he wrote concerning Emily, defending her the best way he knew how, realizing that his words might not make any difference. But he had to get them off his chest, and Cassie had to know the damage she caused. Someone had to stand up for that little girl plagued with guilt and longing. He sealed the letter in an envelope and put it on the table. He would make a trip to town and mail it out tomorrow.

He returned the pencil to the drawer and slammed it. The sound of footsteps turned his attention to Sarah who carried Luke down the stairs. His anger cooled. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't wake me. I was thirsty so I came down to get some water."

He watched her as she slowly made her way to the cupboard. She looked as if she was about to collapse.

"I'll pour the water for you."

He rushed to the cupboard and retrieved a cup. He poured the water into it. Handing it to her, he frowned when

she kept her eyes on the cup. She thanked him and took the cup, her hand shaking.

“Why won’t you look me in the eye?” he asked.

Her cheeks flushed as she set the cup on the table. Luke squirmed in her arms and grunted. When she cleared her throat and looked at him, finally making purposeful eye contact with him, it dawned on him just how tired she was. No amount of exhaustion could hide her beauty. But he noted the circles under her eyes, her sagging shoulders, and the stray strands of blond hair that fell out of her bun.

She seemed small and helpless. Gone was the defiant, rude woman who made him feel like a criminal. His heart went out to her. Of course, she was tired. She lost her husband, gave birth, lost her home, and worked hard to cook supper and cleaned Emily’s bedroom. On top of that, she had a newborn to care for. A lot had happened to her over the past three days.

“Can I hold him?” he softly asked.

She glanced at her baby who wiggled in her arms, and for a moment, Neil thought she would refuse, but she nodded and gently placed the boy in his arms. She rubbed her muscles. “I know he doesn’t seem heavy but I’m sore.”

“Why don’t you sit down and rest?”

She took the cup and eased into one of the kitchen chairs. She sipped the water but didn’t look his way.

A smile spread across his face as Luke fussed, his nose scrunching and his hands haphazardly hitting his face. He knew right away what Luke’s problem was. The blanket wasn’t wrapped tightly around him. Neil brought him to the table and gently laid him on it so he could adjust the blanket. Once the soft yellow blanket fit him like a cocoon, Luke sighed and settled down. Neil picked him up and held him, enjoying the feel of a baby in his arms. He had forgotten how nice a baby could be.

“Will you teach me how to swaddle him in that blanket?” Sarah asked, her voice so quiet Neil had to strain to hear her.

“Yes.” Sitting across from her, he noticed she still averted her gaze from his. “Why don’t you look at me?”

Turning the cup in her hands, she said, “I don’t deserve the kindness you’re showing me.”

He hadn’t expected that answer. He figured she was ashamed to be in the same house with him. Though she had apologized to him earlier that day, he hadn’t been sure if she meant it or said it to manipulate him as Cassie had done many times until he caught onto her schemes. However, there was nothing sly in the way Sarah spoke. He sensed her sincerity and appreciated it. It was one of the nicest things anyone had said to him in a long time.

“Let’s forget about the last three days,” he offered.

She looked at him then, and the relief on her face warmed his heart, making him aware that he had said the right thing. “Thank you, Mr. Craftsman. I’m sorry I misjudged you.”

He smiled. “You can call me Neil. We might as well be on a first name basis since we’ll be sharing a house.”

“Then you should call me Sarah.”

“I will.” Feeling like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, he grinned at the baby who stared at him with wide dark blue eyes. “He’s a good looking boy. Why did you name him Luke?”

She shrugged. “I liked the name.” Then she took another sip from the cup.

“I forgot how small Emily was when she was born. I remember staying up at night and staring at her. I wasn’t sure what to make of her at first.” A low chuckle resonated from his throat. “I don’t think she knew what to make of me either, to

be honest. But we bonded and I can't imagine my life without her."

She furrowed her brows. "It's odd for a man to stay up with a baby. That's what a woman does."

Sighing, he decided to ignore the comment. He didn't feel like explaining Cassie's lack of interest in Emily.

As if Sarah understood the reason for his silence, she returned to the cup and drank the rest of the water before talking. "Can I ask why you named her Emily?"

"For the same reason you named him Luke. I liked the name."

"It's a good name." She brushed back a few strands of her hair behind her ear. "Do you think I should tell her that I won't try to take her mother's place? I don't wish to upset her."

"I'll explain it to her. It must be a shock to her. She's not used to having anyone but me and her grandmother around. She thinks that her mother's going to come back but she's not. That's why we got a divorce."

"I'm sorry."

He brought the baby up to his shoulder and patted his back. Looking ahead at the beige wall in front of him, he shrugged. "There's nothing to be done about it now. She wanted to leave and I let her." The baby burped, the action serving to lighten the mood a bit. He settled the baby back into his arms.

Her gaze drifted to her son. "You handle a baby well."

A slight smile graced her lips, making her especially pretty in the light of the kerosene lamp. It'd been too long since he'd been around a woman. Naturally, he'd be sensitive to her presence. Uncomfortable, he turned his focus to Luke who continued to stare at him in open wonder. He grinned, recalling the hope that Emily had given him after she was born. That same hope shone in this boy's eyes. How amazing that

someone so small could affect him like this. Perhaps that was the nature of babies. To give hope...a new life...a second chance. Their lives loomed before them, as an unwritten slate. Hope. It was long overdue for him and for Emily.

Sarah yawned. He looked up. She had propped her elbow on the table and rested her head in the palm of her hand. Her eyes grew heavy.

“Why don’t you get some sleep? I’ll watch Luke for you.”

She jerked up, her eyes wide. “Oh, I can’t inconvenience you. You have to get up early.”

Sarah was a proud woman, one who worked hard. Maybe too hard. He recalled the work she had done in the short time she’d been there. He refused to let her go on without rest. “Let me help you. You barely got any sleep since you gave birth. If Luke gets hungry, I’ll bring him to you.”

“It wouldn’t be right. It’s my job.”

“You can’t do your job if you’re exhausted. I took care of Emily. I know what to do with a baby.”

She opened her mouth, as if to ask a question but shut it, probably deciding whatever she was going to ask was none of her business. Easing out of the chair, she smoothed the skirt of her brown dress. “It would be nice to get more than three hours of sleep. All right. If you need anything, please wake me.”

“I will. And I’ll make sure to take him to his bassinet in your room when he falls asleep. Tomorrow, I’ll take the tub to your room and fill it with hot water. I’m sure you could use a warm bath.”

She swallowed and brushed her eyes. Whether the actions sprang from her feeling tired or the struggle to hold back tears, he couldn’t decipher. When she spoke, her voice was soft. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

His heart warmed at her sincere words. What a refreshing change from the way she'd been earlier. He cleared the lump in his throat. "You just did."

She shot him a confused look but wished him a good night and climbed the steps, her movements slow, giving further evidence of her exhaustion. Something about her touched him, and for the first time, in a long time, he felt a glimmer of faith in a beautiful woman.

Chapter Seven

Two days later, Sarah put on her dark gray church dress and her matching hat. Gathering Luke in a blanket, she swaddled him the way Neil taught her to and carried him to the barn. Emily voiced a polite greeting in front of the wood building but didn't smile.

"It's a lovely day," Sarah said, noting the way the sunlight made Emily's raven curls shine. She took in Emily's pink dress and brown wool coat. Her pink hat fluttered in the breeze. Despite the cheer in her attire, she looked as if her entire world had collapsed around her. Hoping to lighten the mood, Sarah spoke. "That's a pretty necklace."

Emily fingered the gold chain with a single pearl hanging from it. "My mother left it for me." She looked up at Sarah with her chin sticking out, as if she was challenging her. "It means that she's coming back."

Sorrow settled into the pit of her heart. How wrong this girl was. She placed her hand on the girl's shoulder but Emily jerked away from her. "I'm sorry, Emily. I didn't mean to upset you."

"She is coming back. I don't care what anyone says."

Not sure of how to respond, Sarah finally nodded. "All right." Arguing with the girl wouldn't make any difference, and it certainly wouldn't make it easier for either one of them to live in the house together. Though Sarah and Neil managed to come to a cordial relationship, she could tell that Emily would take longer to get along with. And who could blame a seven year old who wished for her mother to come home? Sarah rocked her alert baby. "Will you let me stay when she returns?"

Emily stared at Ben who was getting the buggy ready for their trip into town. Though Ben and the horses remained at a good distance, Sarah heard him talking to one of the two geldings as if he were talking to a person. Sarah grinned. She liked Ben. He had a good heart.

Emily's loud sigh brought Sarah's attention back to her. "Ma doesn't like to cook or clean. Grandma did most of that, but if you did it, then I could spend more time with Grandma. I think Ma will be happy if you stayed." She squinted at the sun before looking at Sarah. "All right. You can stay. But you have to sleep on the couch downstairs. My ma will need her room back. She needs her beauty rest and Pa's snores keep her awake."

Sarah had heard Neil snoring when she went to the kitchen the night before, so she understood why Emily accepted that. She turned her attention to Neil as he exited the barn. He stopped by the geldings and said something to Ben. He wore a black suit and hat for church. The sight of him caused her heart to flutter. Quickly, she looked away, praying for forgiveness. Her husband's burial would take place on Tuesday, for goodness' sakes!

"Are you ready?" Neil called out to them.

Emily ran to the buggy. "Yes, Pa!"

She leapt into his arms. He tossed her in the air and twirled her around. The scene was so wonderful that Sarah

giggled. Emily squealed with delight and protested when he settled her on the seat. When he glanced Sarah's way and waved her over, she caught the amusement in his eyes. There was something endearing about a man who adored his child. She had never seen a man who cared more for a child than Neil cared for Emily. Frowning, she recalled how Jim reacted to the news of her pregnancy. She could only imagine how he might have been as a father, and she found him sorely lacking.

"If you wait any longer, we'll be late," Neil yelled.

Blinking, she forced aside her unbidden thoughts and joined him and Emily, noticing that his farmhands climbed into a wagon. "Do they go to your church?" she asked Neil.

He shook his head. "They go to the country church. I go to the one in town. It's the same one my mother goes to. Which one do you go to?"

She told him.

"That's on our way. Well, hop in." He held his hand to help her onto the seat. Neil's buggy was more comfortable than the wagon Jim owned. "Are you sure you feel well enough to ride all the way to town?"

Pleased by his concern, she was quick to assure him that she felt fine. It was true she was still sore, but he and his mother had given her plenty of time to rest so she felt much better than she had two days ago.

"If the road gets bumpy, let me know and I'll go slower or try to find a smoother path."

Her face flushed when she realized he was still holding her hand. Even with their gloves on, she noted how well her hand fit in his. Determined to ignore the pleasant sensation, she said, "I'll tell you."

He released her hand. She breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn't comfortable with touching a man who wasn't Jim. Not that Jim had touched her much. But still, he was her husband.

She had no business liking another man's touch, even if it was innocent. She softly cleared her throat and waited for Neil to sit next to Emily in the buggy. He snapped the reins. The horses began their lazy pace. The soft cushion in the buggy felt like heaven after enduring Jim's hard wagon for ten years.

Emily, who seemed much happier, chatted about her hope for snow, how she wished for Spring so flowers would appear, and how she wanted to go on the rope swing again. Neil kept a steady but careful pace and led the two horses to the smoother parts of the road, which Sarah was grateful for. The ride did tire her more than she anticipated, but she wanted to go to church so she didn't complain.

When Neil stopped on a vacant street that was four blocks from her church, he explained, "It's best if you walk the rest of the way." He pulled the brake, got out and helped her down. "What time does your church service end?"

She told him. Before he walked away, she whispered, "Why are you letting me out here?"

He glanced at Emily who seemed to be more interested in the lace on her dress than in their conversation. "I think it's best if they didn't see you with me."

He was right, she knew. If she was brave enough to disregard what people thought of her, she would tell him to drop her off in front of the church anyway. But she did care what they thought, and she didn't want to have to explain why she was living in Neil Craftsman's house. As he walked back to the buggy and got in beside Emily, she stepped back, unsure of how to respond.

Neil peered at her, seeming undaunted by the fact that he was shunned. "We don't get out until twenty minutes after you do, so I suggest you stick around and talk to your friends, and then we'll be waiting here for you. All right?"

She nodded, ashamed that she was, in fact, relieved that he was willing to hide their situation from the rest of the world. She knew his mother wouldn't say anything. That woman didn't make it a habit of telling anything to anyone unless it was common knowledge. Perhaps her discretion stemmed from having a son who had engaged in ungodly activities. Her cheeks grew hot at the reminder. She knew he wasn't the same man he was back then, but part of her had a difficult time looking beyond his past.

As Neil clicked the reins on the geldings, she closed her eyes, trying not to cry. Of all people who treated her with kindness, it had to be the one person she didn't want to be seen in public with. *What kind of woman am I to deny him?*

Biting back a wave of self-loathing, she opened her eyes and turned to walk down the street, past the quiet park and closed businesses. She found her way to her white church where the people in her familiar world gathered inside to catch up on what was happening to everyone else. The only time Jim would touch her was when they arrived at the church. He held her arm. Of course, he patted her hand on occasion, but he only hugged her to initiate lovemaking.

Those sessions didn't come often. She didn't care much for the grunting and huffing and puffing of the whole thing, and it seemed to her that it never lasted beyond a couple minutes. It was the only time he kissed her, which was why she looked forward to it. She didn't know what was so great about it other than the holding and kissing. But since finding out about her pregnancy, he said there was no need to try for a baby and that was it. And she discovered that she didn't miss it at all.

Her face flushed with heat. She hated Jim. Stopping on the block that led to her church, she turned around. Maybe she should go to Neil's church this morning. She didn't care to be

reminded of her husband. It didn't occur to her how cold he had been until he left her to the mercy of two thieves.

Someone came up behind her and gave her a big hug. "Sarah! I'm so glad to see you, and look at your baby!"

Forgetting her anger, she smiled and turned around. "Caroline! I missed you."

"My husband and I are sorry about what happened with Jim. What a terrible tragedy."

"Yes." What else could she say? That she was glad he was gone?

Caroline put her hand on her arm. "I wish Hubert and the kids were better. My mother is with them right now so I can be here. I'd hoped to see you. I do want you to stay with us. We certainly have plenty of baby things, but I don't want to risk your little angel getting sick."

Sarah's eyes grew wide. "Oh, I already found a place."

"Really? Where?"

She shifted from one foot to the other, the biting chill stinging her nose. The words had slipped and now she had to proceed. She released her breath in the cold air. "Not far." When Luke let out a small whimper, she silently thanked him. "Luke has been a real blessing."

Caroline nodded. "He must be a comfort at a time like this."

Caroline and Sarah walked into the church. The white walls and wooden pews with the wooden pulpit didn't seem the same, and Sarah couldn't understand why she felt as if she had entered someone else's church. She grew up here and married Jim here. It was all she knew. But it didn't seem right.

"You will sit with me?" Caroline asked.

Sarah fought off the wave of claustrophobia that washed over her. The fifty gabbing people gathering into the

small space overwhelmed her. She forced her mind on her dearest friend. "I'm sorry, Caroline. What did you say?"

The younger woman's face was one of sympathy. "What a terrible ordeal you've been through. It's a wonder you can think with all the grief you've endured. Can I hold your son?"

Sarah handed her Luke and sat next to her. Rachel, her other friend, came over to express her sympathy, and soon everyone else followed suit. Everyone asked how she was doing, and she was as vague as possible about where she found a place to stay. Fortunately, Luke would cry and she had to tend to him, giving her a perfect opportunity to avoid their questions. Though no one mentioned it to her face, she was well aware that they knew Jim had a gambling secret.

When the preacher stood up, he gave his usual sermon about the dangers of associating with immoral people. "Their wicked ways will taint you. They will lead you into awful sins. And don't think that just because they say they've changed that they really have. Their behavior is ingrained into them. They were born that way and they will always be that way. A man cannot spend his time cavorting in a whorehouse and be a good husband. He doesn't know the first thing about treating a woman with respect and love. He will only use women and defile them with ungodly practices in the bedroom. Such things are shameful. You will become just as wicked and vile as him."

Sarah knew her face was a bright shade of red. Did he know? Did they all know where she found shelter? Was that why he brought up Neil in his sermon? He didn't always discuss this topic. Oh, he must know. Her stomach tensed in knots. Luke's cries didn't help matters either. Everyone seemed to be watching her and shaking their heads. The preacher even pointed at her. Or at least, she thought he did. By the end of the sermon, she was sweating.

Bolting out of her seat, she clutched Luke to her and rushed to the front door, only to be stopped by a group of men who blocked her exit, their large backs turned to her. They seemed oblivious to her. Clearing her throat, she said, "Excuse me, gentlemen. I need to get some fresh air."

They immediately let her pass, and she breathed a sigh of relief, glad to be out of that restrictive environment. The cold weather never felt so good on her hot skin.

"Sarah? Is something wrong?" Rachel called out as she ran up to her.

Sarah turned to the older woman, noting the concern on her face. "I...I had to take care of Luke. He needed to get outside."

Rachel pulled her aside so they were out of earshot of the group of people who mingled on the church steps. "We know, Sarah."

Sarah's arms tightened around her son. Her ears hummed. It couldn't be true. She'd been careful. "You...you do?"

"It's not your fault. We know you are innocent."

It suddenly dawned on her that Rachel wasn't talking about Neil. "What?"

Her friend rubbed her back. "None of us knew about Jim's gambling problem until his death. We don't blame you for what he did."

Sarah nearly collapsed with relief. "I had no idea he did that."

"Of course you didn't. It was a horrible shock."

As Sarah allowed herself to be surrounded by people who offered their comfort to her, she felt a nagging sense of guilt when she considered how grateful she was that none of them knew her secret. By the time she met Neil and Emily who waited for her in the buggy at the vacant spot, she couldn't look

at them. How shameful she was. The preacher called men like Neil unredeemable sinners, but was she any better when she refused to acknowledge that a man like Neil had shown her more kindness in the past few days than the preacher had in the years she had known him?

Neil wrapped his warm hand around hers, ready to help her into the buggy. She wanted to thank him, but the tears came and her voice choked. She couldn't have felt worse about herself if she tried.

"Are you in pain?" he asked, the concern in his voice making her cry even harder. He gently picked her up and put her in the buggy next to Emily. He searched his pockets until he found a handkerchief and offered it to her. "I have to get my mother but then we'll be on our way and I'll take it slow. Then I want you to lie down and rest. All right?"

Managing a weak nod, she accepted the cloth from him and pressed it to her eyes. Her guilt weighed down on her like a pile of bricks. Why did Neil and Emily have to be so nice to her, showing her more care than most of the people in her life ever had? Why couldn't Neil have been the monster that she thought he was? And, most of all, why did she have to care what others thought?

Neil didn't know what to do about Sarah. Upon returning home, she took her son to her room and spent the rest of the afternoon crying. She came to the kitchen and began cooking supper when his mother insisted on helping which, according to his mother, only made her break into another wave of hysterics.

Now, as he talked to his mother while Ben and Cal cheered Emily on as she rode her horse in the gated section by

the barn, he was at a loss in knowing what to do. "I don't understand crying women," he finally said.

"Men usually don't." His mother smiled. "But I think she's beginning to acknowledge her husband's death. Being around the people who knew him may have reminded her of him. She lost her husband and her home. She's dealing with a newborn. All of those must have taken a toll on her."

That made sense. Neil agreed with his mother's analysis. "The only thing that will get her through it is time."

When his mother announced supper, he helped Emily unsaddle her horse and washed her up before sitting her at the table. He noticed that Sarah wasn't in the kitchen. "Is she still in her room?" he asked his mother.

She nodded. "She said she doesn't have an appetite. I'll save her some of this meal, and she can eat when she feels up to it. Meanwhile, would you take this hot cocoa up to her? She should at least have something to drink."

He took the ceramic mug and went up the stairs. He cringed. He could hear her crying from behind the closed door. Grief, he understood. Surely, he endured plenty of it from Cassie, but the continual sobbing was another thing. Bracing himself for dealing with a sad woman, he tapped on the door.

Footsteps echoed on the floorboards until Sarah opened the door. Luke was sleeping in his bassinet. His first instinct when he saw her puffy eyes and red nose was to take off running down the steps.

Planting his feet on the floor, he cleared his throat. "My mother said you aren't hungry but wanted me to bring you something to drink."

Her lower lip trembled. "I don't deserve it."

"Please, take it." He thrust it in her direction, the hot liquid threatening to spill out of the mug. "It's hot cocoa."

She accepted it. "Thank you."

"If you get hungry, we saved a plate for you. All right?" She nodded, staring at the cup in her hands.

He sighed. "I know it can't be easy for you, what with losing your husband and all. But you have Luke. He's healthy and a good sleeper. At least you have something to remember your husband by." Trite words. He knew that's all they were, but he couldn't think of anything else to say. "Time will ease your pain."

More tears welled up in her eyes.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Donner. I'm no good at this kind of thing. I'll leave you alone."

He didn't wait for her response. Instead, he hastened down the steps, relieved to be in the kitchen with his mother and daughter. When Cassie cried, it was a few tears and a glance in his direction to see if he noticed. When Sarah cried, it was for real, and he realized that a sincere woman scared him.

He asked his mother to stay and help him with Sarah. What a crying woman needed was another woman since only another woman would understand her. But his mother informed him that Sarah wouldn't talk to her. "There are some things too painful to discuss," his mother concluded. "Sarah will heal. In the meantime, I'll do the cooking and cleaning."

Neil thought this sounded like a good plan so he asked Jacob to go into town and pick up his mother's things, but Sarah happened to be walking back to the house after making a trip to the privy and hurried over to him.

"I have to work," she told Neil. "Your mother doesn't have to stay here. I know that I've been acting inappropriately today, but I will make up for it. I promise. Please don't send me and Luke away."

"Jacob, will you excuse us?" Neil asked his farmhand. Once Jacob went back to the barn, Neil turned to her, wondering what she was talking about. "What's this about me

sending you and your son away? I don't recall saying I was going to do that."

She clasped her hands together. "I haven't been doing my part. You and your mother have been doing everything for me."

He crossed his arms so he wouldn't hold her. She looked like she needed someone to hug her, but he knew he wasn't the right person to do it. "We want to give you time to absorb everything that's happened to you. You've been through a traumatic experience."

"I still need to do what I'm here for. I appreciate everything you and your mother have done for me, but I have to earn my keep. I don't usually spend so much time resting. I'm going to stop doing that."

Her anxious expression, the way her eyes pleaded with him, and the way she wrung her hands tore at his heart. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. Sarah, you're only human. It's all right to have some help. And don't worry that I'll send you away. You can stay for as long as you want."

"Obviously, this is a temporary arrangement. I understand that. I do have a friend who offered me a place to stay once her family recovers from an illness. She made the offer today at church. I will try not to be a burden in the time I'm here."

"Oh."

He didn't realize she had another place to go to, and he questioned why the news upset him. He should be glad for both of them. He could go back to his normal life and she and her son would have a permanent place with someone from her church. Then things could be the way they were meant to be. And in that moment, it occurred to him that they were worlds apart. Her church would never accept him, and that meant she couldn't either. She had to accept his help but he knew how the

world worked. Though she might see him for who he was, her friends didn't. He had been right to let her out of the buggy where he did so no one would see her with him.

He managed a smile. "Well, you don't have to worry about a thing. You're welcome here for as long as you need to be."

She relaxed. "Thank you, Mr. Craftsman. I would like to help your mother wash dishes."

"Did you get anything to eat?"

Blinking, she shook her head. "No. I'm not hungry."

"Far be it from me to tell you what to do but I'd feel better if you ate. You need your strength."

"You're right. I'll eat."

He watched her as she walked back to the house. In the short time she had been there, the place seemed less empty. But she would be moving out soon and it would be pointless to try to talk her into staying when she could be with her friend instead of with him. Though he loved Emily, he couldn't talk to his daughter the way he could talk to an adult, and he felt a connection with Sarah he hadn't felt with anyone in a long time. It was as if Sarah understood the pain of loneliness, of wishing for something that would never happen.

That observation, of course, couldn't be accurate. He had longed for Cassie to come around to loving him, but she didn't and after awhile, he gave up. He remained faithful to her, knowing it was the right thing to do despite her infidelity. He was actually glad when she asked for the divorce. But Sarah...She had a good marriage, and though her husband was dead, she had the memories from their time together. It was wrong to envy Sarah those memories, and yet, he envied her all the same. And even though he envied her, he sensed a common thread between them, which was ridiculous because

they had nothing in common. Two people couldn't have been more different.

“Should I get your mother's things?” Jacob asked, interrupting Neil's thoughts.

Neil looked at the older man. “No. I'll send her home.”

Turning to the house, Neil went to do that.

Chapter Eight

Sarah dried the dishes and put them away, grateful that Neil was giving her another chance. She had to be strong. She spent too much time wallowing in her guilt. Guilt that didn't solve anything. Sighing, she closed the last cabinet. If she had the courage, she would have told Neil to take her directly to the church. But he understood. He chose to drop her off so no one would see them together. Closing her eyes, she groaned. Knowing he understood didn't make it any easier.

"Sarah, are you all right?" Neil's mother asked.

Her eyes flew open and she quickly stood straight. "Yes. I'll be fine." She smoothed the hand towel and set it on the back of a chair so it would dry.

Neil entered the house and turned his sky blue eyes to his mother. "Are you ready to head back home?"

Gwen shook her head and walked over to him. "But I'm supposed to stay and help."

"I think it's best if Sarah has time to figure out how she wants to run the house."

Sarah glanced at him, noting that he looked her way. Startled, she averted her gaze and pushed in a kitchen chair. She knew he was sending his mother home because of her, and

she was pleased that he took her wishes into consideration. It was such a new thing for someone to actually listen to her.

Gwen turned to her, her expression soft. "Sarah, do you need my help?"

"Mother," Neil interrupted. "I spoke to Sarah and this is what we agreed on. Don't bring her into this."

Gwen seemed as if she wanted to protest but decided against it. "All right. Let me get my coat." She left the kitchen, the sound of her shoes clacking along the floorboards of the hallway.

Sarah fiddled with the hand towel. "Thank you." The yellow cloth fell off the chair, so she bent to retrieve it. She realized her hands shook as she returned it to the back of the chair. She hated confrontations.

He shrugged. "It wasn't a big deal."

She could argue that point. Jim, after all, hadn't ever cared enough to do what she wanted. His mother always came first.

"Emily is due to go to bed in an hour," Neil said. "Since tomorrow is a school day, I'd like her to get a good night's sleep. Will you tuck her in bed and tell her a bedtime story? I know that it's awkward for you since she's having a tough time with her mother's absence."

"I'll manage. Earlier today, she agreed to let me stay. I don't expect there to be a problem."

He raised a brow on his handsome face. "How did you manage that?"

"I agreed that if her mother returns, I'll sleep on the couch in the parlor."

He rubbed his eyes, looking weary. "I tried to make it clear that Cassie's not coming back."

Walking over to him so that no one would overhear them, for who knew if Emily would leave her bedroom, she

said, "She obviously loves her mother. I suppose it will take time before she realizes the truth." She looked at him, realizing that the strain of watching Emily hope for something that wasn't going to happen was difficult for him. "You're doing the best you can."

His hand fell to his side and he took a good look at her, as if trying to determine whether or not she spoke sincere words. Finally, he smiled. "Thank you."

She wondered how often he heard a kind word. Her heart twisted in her chest. How many other people responded to him like she had days ago, like the people in her church did?

His mother entered the kitchen with her coat. "All right. I'm ready to go."

Neil went over to her and slipped her coat on. "Emily!" he called out. "Do you want to say good-bye to Grandma?" He winced before looking in Sarah's direction. "I'm sorry. Your son is sleeping, isn't he?"

A cry from upstairs brought a smile to her lips. "I was going to wake him anyway. He's due for another feeding." As she made her way to the bottom of the stairs, she cleared her throat. "I do appreciate your help, Mrs. Craftsman."

"Anytime. That's what I'm here for."

The woman smiled at her, setting Sarah's mind at ease. She hadn't wished to upset her.

Emily rushed down the steps. "Grandma, you're leaving? Why? You were supposed to tuck me into bed and tell me a story about how my ma couldn't wait for me to be born."

Sarah paused, her foot on the first step, unsure of whether or not she should leave. She wanted to be sure Emily was fine with her tucking her in.

"I'll have to do that some other time, sweetie," Gwen told the girl. "I apologize for breaking my promise. I'll tell you that story next Sunday."

Emily frowned but nodded. "All right."

"Good girl." She hugged her, her eyes twinkling with the love she had for the girl. "Now, you mind Mrs. Donner. She'll tuck you into bed tonight so your pa can take me home. I'm sure that Mrs. Donner knows a bedtime story you haven't heard yet. That will be exciting, won't it?"

Emily's dubious expression gave Sarah insight into the girl's skeptical nature. "Do you know a new bedtime story?"

Sarah grinned. "I know a couple of good stories. You'll have to tell me if you've heard them or not."

The girl seemed interested in the challenge. "I'll tell you if I heard them."

"Please do. I'm sure you can even tell me a really good one."

A wide smile spread across her face. "I do! I know lots of good ones." She peered up the steps. "Will you bring the baby?"

Sarah's attention returned to her crying son. "I will."

"Oh good!"

Neil clapped his hands together. "Well, since everything's settled, Grandma and I will head out. I won't be back until about two and a half hours." He kissed Emily's forehead. "Go easy on Mrs. Donner. No scary stories. We don't want her to stay up all night because she's too afraid to sleep."

Sarah hid her chuckle at his joke. She didn't realize he had a sense of humor. It was nice to see that being shunned by most of the people in town didn't take his joy away. After she said good-bye to them, she led Emily up the steps and let the girl help her change Luke's diaper.

Emily scrunched her nose and waved a hand in front of her face. "That stinks!"

She nodded. "Would you believe that a lady at church told me that newborns don't have stinky diapers?"

"She was lying."

"Either she lied or she forgot. She's eighty so she hasn't changed a diaper in a very long time."

"She must have been lying. There's no way a person can forget how awful that smells."

Sarah laughed as she set the dirty cloth diaper in a pail filled with water and ammonia. "I'll have to wash it with the other used diapers."

Emily walked over to the wardrobe and peered in the partially opened door. "Mrs. Donner, can I ask you a question?"

Sarah fastened the pins on the new diaper while her son kicked his feet and arms into the air. "Yes. What do you want to know?"

"Why don't you have any pretty clothes?"

She put her son on the thick baby blanket on her bed and worked on swaddling him. "What do you mean by pretty clothes, Emily?"

The little girl shook her head, her long curls bouncing around her shoulders. "Your dresses are dull colors. You only wear browns, blacks and grays." She inspected the dresses hanging in the wardrobe again. "They don't have any nice designs on them either. They're plain."

"Oh. Well, I was taught that it's important for a woman to dress modestly."

"What does 'modestly' mean?"

She shrugged. "I suppose it means that I'm not to draw attention to myself."

"Why not?"

Aware that Emily was staring at her, she messed up on swaddling her son and unwrapped the blanket so she could do

it right. "Because men are weak and beauty tempts them into doing something wrong. It's up to women to dress in such a way that will not lead them to have impure thoughts."

"What are impure thoughts?"

Her face flushed. Certainly, she wasn't the person to be answering these questions. Emily, after all, wasn't her daughter. Luke grunted and kicked his blanket off of him. "Perhaps you should talk to your father about this."

"He says that I should wear whatever I want, as long as I'm fully covered. And he lets me wear pinks and purples. They are my favorite colors. One time, he even said that men like looking at pretty ladies and that I will have my pick of men when I get older."

Sarah gasped, forgetting her squirming son. She couldn't believe Neil would fill his daughter's head with such immoral thinking. Maybe the people at her church were right to avoid him.

Emily didn't seem to notice Sarah's shock, for she continued. "Of course, I'll have to be very careful in who I let court me. Pa says that I need to pick the right kind of man. It doesn't matter what he looks like. He has to be a good person. He needs to be honest, decent, hardworking, and loyal. He has to only be with me and no one else. He has to appreciate me and love me. Love means that he will put my wishes first and always be kind and considerate to me. Pa says that if a man treats me like I'm the most important person in the world, then he's the right one."

Sarah relaxed. That didn't sound bad. In fact, it sounded rather nice. How often she had wished Jim would have considered her thoughts and feelings. Sighing, she returned to her task of bundling her son.

“You are pretty. Why do you hide it?” Emily asked as she twirled around the room with her arms stretched out. She seemed to enjoy the way her dress twirled around her ankles.

And she had no idea that she possessed an uncanny ability to catch Sarah off guard. “I don’t try to hide it.”

“Sure you do. I remember how my mother looked, and she used to let her hair down. She looked best that way. She did pull her hair back when she had to, but she said that buns were for old, miserable women who couldn’t find a man. Then she would wear pinks, purples and yellows. I heard many people compliment her beauty. People could say that about you too if you dressed better and let your hair down.”

“That might be true, but I believe the inward person is more important than how one looks on the outside.”

Emily seemed to think over her words. “It is important to be nice. No one likes a rude person. But I don’t see what is wrong with looking as nice as you can. If men get the wrong idea, you need to put a rock in your purse and whack him on the head with it. That’s what my pa says I should do in a case like that.”

Her jaw dropped. “He told you to do what?”

“Pa wants to be sure I can protect myself. He even taught me how to throw a good punch.”

Sarah blinked, stunned. She shook her head and forced herself to focus on finishing her task. Neil had to be one of the most unconventional thinkers she had ever met. Imagine, telling a little girl to look pretty and teaching her to punch boys out! Such things weren’t proper for girls. But Emily wasn’t her child, so she had no right to interfere.

When Luke was properly swaddled and moved his head and mouth in search of sustenance, Sarah decided it was time to feed him. “Are you ready for that bedtime story?”

“Yes!” Emily ran out of the room.

Despite the odd conversation, Sarah found that she enjoyed talking to Emily. She grinned and joined Emily in her bedroom so she could tuck her into bed.

Three days passed and Sarah got ready for Jim's funeral. She had to let out a few seams in her black dress since it didn't fit right around her waistline and hips anymore. Sighing, she tried not to think about how her figure had suffered from the process of carrying a baby for nine months. It was vanity to compare herself to how she fit a dress before getting pregnant, and despite what Emily thought, being attractive wasn't proper. So why did it pain her to look at the extra weight that surrounded her belly where she had once been flat? She wasn't overweight, and the dress hid her imperfections. Still, it wasn't pleasant to think about, so she focused on the blessing of having her long-awaited child.

She straightened out the skirt of her dress, making sure she looked presentable for her husband's funeral. She put on her gray wool coat and scarf. Picking up her son, who was bundled in two layers of clothes and a thick blanket, she went down the stairs where Neil waited for her so he could take her to the cemetery.

"Would you prefer to go with one of the farmhands?" he asked as he stood up from the table and put his cup into the empty sink. "I planned to find a remote spot to drop you off so it will appear as if you walked to the gravesite."

"I'll go with you."

He nodded and opened the door for her. While she passed through, she noted the pleasant smell of soap he bathed with the last evening. Strolling with her across the dry lawn, he

said, "I plan to go to the mercantile. Is there anything you would like me to pick up for you?"

"Would you buy cloth? I need a new dress." That was true. The ones she had were either from before or while she was expecting, and those no longer fit right.

Once he helped her into the buggy and they were on their way, she took a deep breath, noting the sting of the frosty wind as it filled her lungs.

He motioned to the gloomy sky. "I think it's going to snow tonight. The clouds are just the right shade of gray for it."

She directed her gaze to him, taking in his profile. Everything about Neil Craftsman seemed strong and masculine, but when he smiled, he softened, giving away the tenderness that existed beneath his hard exterior. Watching him with Emily showed her a side of him she never would have guessed was there. It was obvious that he adored his daughter but took care not to spoil her. He seemed determined that she would grow up to be a gracious and kind woman.

Why did the people at her church insist that he was a monster? Her conscience pricked at her. She was just as bad as them, for she refused to be seen with him. Unease set into her bones as she looked at the gentle rolling hills. She stuck to her side of the buggy so she wouldn't accidentally brush her arm with his.

They spent most of the ride to town in silence. Neil would make a comment once in awhile regarding the weather or something Emily did. Sarah managed to offer a polite reply, knowing her mounting tension made it difficult to be a good conversationalist.

Finally, he said, "I know it can't be easy to go to your husband's funeral. I also know saying that I'm sorry doesn't ease the pain of losing him."

She glanced at him, as he looked straight ahead while he led the horses to an old dirt road that rounded the back of the cemetery. Losing Jim wasn't anything like she imagined it would be while he lived. She thought she would be devastated to lose him, but she actually felt relieved. He wasn't around to dictate how she did things, such as what to cook, how to arrange things in the house, or where to go or not go in town. Neil left the decision of what to cook up to her and even let her move some items around in the kitchen and the parlor so they were easier for her to get to. He offered to have one of the farmhands take her into town whenever she needed. He even gave her some money for anything she might need for her duties around the house or for Luke. She hadn't imagined that a woman could experience the freedom of making her own decisions, and she found that she enjoyed it.

However, going to a funeral was another story. She dreaded it. "I'll be glad when it's over," she replied, her voice low.

"I can imagine."

No, I don't think you can. All the people, all the questions, and, God help her, Jim's mother would be there.

He pulled the horses to a stop and set the brake. He approached her side and offered his hand to her. "I'll pick you up here. We're behind enough trees so no one will see me."

Hesitant, she rubbed her son's back. Bracing herself, she dared to speak, fearful of his reply. "You must think I'm rude."

To her surprise, he shook his head. "No. Not rude. Just smart. The people you know won't approve if you're seen with me. You lost your husband and your home. You can't afford to have people avoid you. You need all the support you can get. I even told Emily that she can't tell the other kids."

His Redeeming Bride

His kind words, that were meant to soothe her conscience, only served to make her feel worse. Biting her tongue so she wouldn't cry, she accepted his hand and let him help her to the ground. She stood next to him for a moment and marveled that he seemed like a tower of strength. She desperately needed that strength for the unpleasant encounter she was bound to have with Jim's mother, but she knew she couldn't ask Neil to go with her.

Neil smiled at her, his expression sympathetic. "Just worry about yourself and your son, all right?"

Nodding, she turned to the cluster of evergreens in front of her. This was it. One more encounter with Jim's mother and she would be free of the woman, once and for all.

Chapter Nine

Sarah's nerves were on edge as Jim's mother ran over to her. The overweight fifty-two-year-old woman dabbed her tears with the black handkerchief that matched her dress and hat.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were coming," she told Sarah, her voice choking up. "Poor Jim. Someone as kind as my son shouldn't have died so young. Oh, how lovely to see his child. Is it a boy or a girl?"

Sarah looked at her sleeping child and noticed that Jim's mother extend her arms to Luke. Sarah had the sudden urge to take her child and escape. Jim hadn't cared about Luke. It didn't feel like Luke even had a father. She forced her arms to cooperate with her mind's command to let Beatrice Donner hold her grandson.

Beatrice's tears flowed freely down her pudgy cheeks. "How lovely. Yes, you are a sweet little thing, are you not?" she cooed to the baby. Glancing at Sarah, she asked, "Is this a girl or a boy?"

She blinked at the woman's impatient tone. "A boy," she squeaked. She shoved her hands into her pockets so the intimidating woman wouldn't see her trembling hands.

“A boy! How wonderful! Yes, a precious boy. Little Jim.”

Clearing her throat, she spoke up. “Actually, his name is Luke.”

The woman frowned. “Why?”

“Because I like that name and Jim didn’t care if I named him that or not.”

“Oh, he did care.” The woman pressed Luke close to her bosom, sending a sudden wave of panic through Sarah. Beatrice would give Luke back to her, wouldn’t she? Beatrice clucked her tongue at her. “Even if Jim didn’t voice his wish to name this precious gift after him, he most certainly wanted a namesake. All men do. Why, I named Jim after his father. And this boy will be Jim too.”

“You can’t rename him,” Sarah snapped, her irritation overcoming her fear of the woman.

“I can and I will.”

“But you have no right. I’m his mother.”

“And I am the mother of his father. If it weren’t for me, Jim never would have been born. Then he wouldn’t have married you and had this child.”

“No, Mrs. Donner. His name is Luke.”

“It was Luke. It is now Jim.”

Sarah clenched her hands in her pockets, wishing she had a purse with a big rock in it so she could club the bossy woman over the head with it. Neil’s advice to Emily shouldn’t be confined to hitting men.

The preacher approached them. “Sarah, how it grieves me to bury your husband today.” He patted her shoulder. “I’m sure Jim is up there watching us and hoping we’ll manage on without him.”

Beatrice sniffled. “He most certainly is, Preacher Amos. My boy had a good heart. He wanted the best for everyone.”

He nodded, his face solemn. The lines on his face deepened as he frowned. "That is true."

"I'm his mother."

"Oh, I should have noticed the resemblance."

Sarah studied Beatrice and didn't see much similarity between her and Jim. Jim had been thin, short, and balding. Beatrice had a head full of graying brown wavy hair tightly pulled back into a bun that scraped the collar of her coat. She stood taller than most women and had a rounded appearance. She truly was a most intimidating woman. But Sarah conceded that they did have the same round face and narrow, long nose. Jim had worn glasses and had a pointed chin.

So unlike Neil who was extremely handsome with his muscular build, strong jaw, high cheekbones and head full of dark brown wavy hair. She recalled how strong and warm his hand felt when he helped her out of the buggy. Never had a touch felt so electric.

Luke's cries broke her out of her appalling thoughts, and she blushed as if the preacher and Jim's mother could read her mind. "I'll comfort him," she said, eager to hold her son.

Beatrice stepped back. "Now, Sarah, don't be selfish. I haven't seen my grandson until today and you had all this time to be with him."

"You can't deny a grandmother the joy of holding her grandchild," the preacher agreed. "I remember when I first held my granddaughter. I was proud of my daughter for having her. Isn't it wonderful that God has blessed Jim's mother with a grandson? It takes the edge off the grief." He leaned close to Sarah and whispered, "Remember the commandment to honor your mother and father, Sarah."

Sarah bit back a sarcastic reply and immediately felt guilty for thinking an unpleasant thought regarding the preacher. She watched Beatrice take her son to Jim's closed

brown casket. Tears welled up in her eyes and she quickly wiped them away with her scarf. She prayed that the funeral service would end soon so that she could take her son and go back home.

The preacher turned to her. "Come along. We should start the service."

Reluctant, she followed him to the closed casket and watched while Beatrice showed Luke to two of her close friends who had come with her.

Sarah saw Caroline and Rachel heading her way and turned to them. They embraced her. Warmth flooded her heart as she held onto them, enjoying their support. "I'm glad to see you," she told them.

Rachel looked at Sarah with compassionate eyes and squeezed her hands. "We can't even begin to imagine what it's like to lose a husband."

"I'll be fine. Don't worry for me," Sarah replied, releasing her friend's hands.

"Sarah," Caroline began, with a nudge at her arm, "I have good news. My family is well again, so you are welcome to come to our home. We cleared out the attic so you and Luke can stay with us."

Sarah smiled at her friend's thoughtfulness. "I appreciate the offer. Really, I do. But I have a permanent place to stay now."

"Oh. Where are you staying?"

She glanced from Caroline to Rachel, knowing her childhood friends could be trusted, but they wouldn't understand why she willingly chose to stay with Neil and Emily. She didn't understand it herself, but she wanted to remain with them. If she kept it a secret, then no one would have to know. Neil said she could stay with them as long as she wanted to, and Emily needed a mother. There was something in the child that

reminded Sarah of herself. Maybe it was Emily's longing for her mother's love and Sarah's longing for Jim's love that made her feel close to the girl. They had wished for the unobtainable in others. Sarah felt it bonded them together. And she did like Emily's inquisitive and fun nature. Despite the fact that her mother abandoned her, Emily kept her optimism. Her heart ached to be a mother to the girl.

"Sarah?" Rachel asked.

Sarah blinked and focused on her friend. "What?"

"Who are you staying with? It can't be anyone from our church. We would have heard if that was the case."

"I found a place outside of town," she slowly responded. "I'm watching a child so I can stay there."

"So you found another widow?"

Sarah's hands clenched around her scarf as she offered a half-truth. "The person's spouse is no longer with them."

"How lovely," Caroline said. "Well, not lovely that you and this woman lost your husbands but lovely that you two are there to help each other. You know what I mean?"

"I do." And Sarah was content to let them assume this lie. She knew it was wrong to lie, of course, but it would be far worse to tell them the truth. "It looks like the preacher wants to start."

The three friends grew quiet and huddled together as Preacher Amos began his sermon. She listened as he droned on and on about what a great man Jim was, but she suspected the preacher, along with other church members, were gossiping about Jim's gambling when she wasn't around. They would never approach her about it since she had been married to him. Oddly, this didn't bother her. Perhaps if she cared for Jim, it would have, but she was glad to see the men lower the casket into the ground. The only thing that caused her panic was watching Jim's mother cuddling Luke. As soon as the preacher

dismissed everyone, she left Caroline and Rachel so she could get to the woman who was walking away from the grave with her two friends and her son.

“Mrs. Donner,” she called to Beatrice, not hiding her irritation as she ran after the woman. “I would like to have my son back.” She stopped in front of the woman and made eye contact, not wavering as she had in the past.

Beatrice shook her head. “I’m just going to take him to Milly’s so I can get acquainted with him.”

“You didn’t ask me if you could do this. Luke is my son and I demand you give him back to me.”

Beatrice gushed into a fresh round of big, fat crocodile tears. “I just watched my son get buried and now I am forbidden from seeing my only grandchild. The only grandchild I’ll ever have, I might add. What kind of daughter-in-law are you to grieve me beyond that which I can bear?”

Rachel and Caroline caught up to them.

“It is you who grieves me, Mrs. Donner,” Sarah snapped. “Ever since I married Jim, you have been a thorn in my side, and if you think I’m going to let you continue to prick me now that he’s not here to stop me, you have another thing coming.” She held out her arms. “Now, give me my son before I pull your hair out!”

A couple of men and women ceased their conversing to watch the showdown. Sarah ignored them, knowing very well that she gave them more ammunition for the rumor mill. But she would go to hell and back if it meant getting her son from that horrid woman.

“Mrs. Donner,” Caroline started, running her tongue across her lips. “Sarah will be at church this Sunday. Maybe you can see him there, and I’m sure Sarah will be willing to have lunch at my place after the service. You’re certainly welcome to join us too. You’ll get to see Luke again.”

"You mean, Jim. His name is Jim," Beatrice insisted.

"No. His name is Luke!" Sarah was screaming but she didn't care. She had as much of this woman as she could take. Truth be told, it was amazing she even lasted this long with being civil to the miserable old coot.

"Sarah, it's not wise to make a scene," Rachel whispered. Turning to Jim's mother, she said, "My friend has offered to have you over for lunch on Sunday. Will you accept or not?"

Beatrice's mouth formed a thin line. "I accept."

"Sarah? It is only fair to let the grandmother see her grandchild," Rachel softly added.

Sarah swallowed the lump in her throat. It didn't occur to her that having a baby meant she would have to deal with Jim's mother. She assumed that once Jim was dead, she was free from her. Now she felt trapped. Trying to remain cordial, she said, "I won't leave Omaha to live with you, Mrs. Donner. I like it here."

"Of course, you won't," Caroline soothed. "No one expects you to leave everyone you know."

Beatrice frowned. "I don't recall offering you a place to stay. I merely wanted to visit with my grandson, little Jim."

Sarah's hands tightened into fists. "His name--"

"Very well!" Caroline clapped her hands. "So it's agreed. Mrs. Donner, I look forward to having you as my guest on Sunday."

Rachel eased the baby out of Beatrice's arms and handed him to Sarah who clutched him to her bosom, feeling like a mother bear protecting her cub. Luke squirmed in her arms, so she relaxed her grip.

"Sunday," Mrs. Donner remarked, her expression cool.

"Sunday," Rachel and Caroline replied in unison.

Sarah stared straight ahead at the trees, wondering if Neil had returned yet. She needed to get out of there.

"It can't be helped," Rachel said, her voice soft. "It's not right to keep her away from Luke."

Gritting her teeth, Sarah closed her eyes. "I hate her. I do. I really hate that woman."

"Sarah, you don't mean that," Caroline admonished.

"Yes, I do." Sarah shook her head. "Forgive me for snapping at you. It's just that I could never please her, and she spent all of her time with Jim while ignoring me. She can't even accept the name I gave my son. I know all she wants is to see Luke, and she couldn't care less if I'm there or not."

"Oh, Sarah. That's not true."

"Don't tell me what is true and what is not true. I was there all those times Jim and I went to visit her, and she sent me to do all the chores so she could sit and talk to him. Jim never once defended me, no matter how many times she criticized me. He said it was my duty as his wife to make his mother happy and comfortable."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" Rachel asked.

"Jim was always around," Sarah replied. "Or if he wasn't around, he'd find out about it. We had many terrible fights because of her. I didn't wish to make the situation worse."

Caroline sighed. "Well, that doesn't change the fact that she is Luke's grandmother. If you didn't get along with Luke's wife and Luke died, would you want his wife to forbid you to see your grandchild?"

Sarah's cheeks grew hot. "I wouldn't be rude to my daughter-in-law. If I don't like something she does, I'll keep my mouth shut."

"How can you be sure you'll do that?"

Frustrated, she struggled to keep her words clear so she wouldn't stammer. "Because I refuse to be miserable. I know what it's like to be miserable. Married to a miserable man who had a miserable mother. There was absolutely no joy in my marriage, and I'm sick and tired of living with people who have nothing good to say or do for other people."

Her friends gasped, and Caroline brought her hand to her mouth. "Oh Sarah, you don't mean that!"

"She can't," Rachel insisted. "It's the devil himself talking through her."

Sarah's body shook with anger as she noted all the familiar people who were staring at her. "Don't you all have something better to do than to be in my business?"

"It's the grief talking," Rachel said. "Sarah, maybe it's time you went home. Take some time to work through your feelings."

Angry but not knowing what to do about it, she nodded and stormed off, aware of the murmurs going on around her. More gossip, more humiliation, more judgments. If they knew what Jim was really like, would they insist on adding to her misery? By the time she reached Neil's buggy, she had cooled down enough so she could manage a smile in his direction.

He returned her smile and held his hand up. "Just a moment. I want to show you what I got for you."

Startled, she stopped and watched as he took out a bag.

He pulled out a light green cotton cloth with white polka dots on it. "This is for your dress." Then he showed her a barrette and a matching ribbon. "The ribbon is for your hair or for the dress. It's your decision on what you want to do with it."

Dumbfounded, she said the first thing that came to her mind. "I don't wear green."

“I know but you should. Green will go well with your blond hair and fair complexion. But if you don’t like green, I also bought yellow and purple.”

She saw that the lavender fabric was a solid color while the yellow fabric had small white flowers on it.

“Yellow and purple will look good on you too. I did get purple and yellow ribbons to match.”

As he put the items back into the bag, she didn’t have the heart to tell him that she wouldn’t be making a dress from any of those fabrics. He seemed proud of himself for buying them for her, and she couldn’t fault him for being generous.

“Thank you,” she finally said as he helped her into the buggy.

“You’re welcome.”

Once he sat next to her and picked up the reins, she asked, “Did you mean what you said about my being able to stay at your place for as long as I wished?”

He glanced at her before he urged the geldings forward. “I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it. Life’s too short to mince words.”

“Well, that’s good because, as it turns out, I won’t be going to live with my friend after all.”

Never mind that she made a conscious decision to stay with him and Emily. She chose to let him think that her friend changed her mind rather than tell him the truth, that she found joy in being near him and Emily after spending years of misery in being married to Jim. She did like Caroline. But something about Neil and Emily drew her to them.

Neil nodded. “Then I’ll tell Emily when I bring her home from school.”

“Emily’s a wonderful girl. You’ve done a good job of raising her.”

“I hope so. I tend to second guess myself. But a girl definitely needs a woman around.”

Feeling better about her and Luke’s future, she breathed a sigh of relief and enjoyed the ride back to her new permanent home.

Chapter Ten

A month later, Neil shook hands with Dan Adair. “So I’ll meet you at the bank in a month.”

“Looking forward to it,” Dan replied. He turned to the pasture where Neil’s prime cattle chewed the grass. “Yep. Those will make good steaks.”

Neil waited until Dan headed out on his horse before he rode his horse back to the house. Once he arrived at the barn where Jacob, Cal, and Ben waited for him, he broke into a wide grin. “Dan Adair said yes. That means I can give you all a raise.”

“Wahoo!” Ben threw his hat into the air.

Jacob shook his head at Ben before he turned to Neil and grinned. “You won’t hear any complaints here.”

Neil chuckled at their enthusiasm. It felt good to raise their wages. They certainly deserved it. “Go out and celebrate. I can handle the rest of the day by myself.”

The men didn’t argue. Instead they said, “Yes, boss,” and scampered to get their horses.

Neil hastened to the house. Doing business with Dan, one of the wealthiest people in Omaha, was no small accomplishment. Dan was very selective when it came to

choosing cattle to purchase since he prided himself on buying the best of the best. Neil's careful breeding and pasture selection enabled his cattle to thrive, but it was the help of his farmhands that got the tasks done.

As soon as he opened the kitchen door, Sarah turned from the dough she was rolling out on the work table. "How did it go?"

He took his hat off and put it on the hat rack. "Good. Dan said he'll buy the cattle."

She smiled widely at him, her eyes twinkling. "That is good news! Your hard work has paid off."

It made him feel even better that she shared in his joy. "I learn as I go."

"Well, congratulations."

He glanced at the clock. He had another half hour before he had to pick Emily up from school. Looking at Sarah who had returned to the dough, he noticed that she was wearing a plain gray dress and had her hair pulled back in a bun. "Have you had time to start a new dress?"

She stopped rolling the dough for a moment before continuing. "No. I've been too busy with everything else."

She did work from the moment she woke up to the moment she retired for the night. He couldn't expect her to do everything. He decided to make it easier for her. "I'll get a seamstress in town to make the dress for you."

"No!"

He blinked at her quick response.

Setting the rolling pin beside the dough, she took a knife and began cutting into it. He couldn't be sure, but he thought her movements were stiff and anxious. She shook her head and a few stray strands of her fine golden hair tumbled from the bun. He thought it made her look softer. Not that she wasn't soft to begin with, but he rather fancied her hair best when it

was down. Startled at his thoughts, he directed his attention to what she was rambling about.

"I mean, I can do it myself," she continued in hurried sentences. "I like to make my own dresses. I'll start it tonight."

Surprised that this should cause her alarm, he held his hand up to silence her. "I'm not trying to rush you. You can start whenever it's convenient."

Her shoulders relaxed and she turned back to the dough. This time when she cut into it, she took her time, carefully tracing the edges of her squares with the knife. "I know you're helping me. I appreciate it."

A movement from the bassinet caught his attention. He smiled. He looked forward to coming home to a baby. "I see Luke is awake." He sauntered to the corner of the kitchen and knelt in front of the boy, swaddled in a blue blanket, who seemed to be content to look around the room. He laughed, enjoying the baby's open curiosity about the world he was born into. "Hi there, Luke. How are you doing?"

The boy peered up at him and gurgled a response.

"I see his eyes are getting lighter," Neil noted.

"Yes," Sarah replied. "I don't expect them to stay blue. Neither Jim nor I had blue eyes."

"What color eyes did your husband have?" Not that he cared but he thought it would be rude if he didn't ask.

"Brown."

"And so do you. I'd say that this little man here is going to have brown eyes then."

Luke snorted.

Neil chuckled. "Well, I didn't say that life was fair. You're stuck with the cards you're dealt, mister."

Sarah turned from the dough and placed a hand on her hip. "And what is wrong with brown eyes?" Though she sounded offended, her slight grin betrayed her humor.

Neil shrugged. "Nothing if you like boring."

"Boring?" This time a hint of laughter laced her voice.

"Yes. Brown is a boring color."

"Well, you have brown hair."

"Brown hair is fine."

She shook her head. "This is a fine example of hypocrisy."

Raising an eyebrow, he said, "People would look strange if they had green or blue hair. Brown is a necessary hair color. Though I do admit, blonds have a certain appeal to them. Why don't you let your hair down more often so I can enjoy looking at it?"

She gasped and reached up to touch her bun, as if making sure it was still in place. "Neil Craftsman, you are bold."

He picked Luke up and focused on him so that she wouldn't detect the heat running up his neck and coloring his face. It'd been a long time since he talked to a woman that way. "Granted, I am bold. I confess that I enjoy looking at a pretty woman who also happens to be nice."

He hadn't thought an attractive woman could be a friend, but she was proving him wrong on that. His initial impression of her had turned out wrong. She was sincere and kind. He envied Jim. Jim lucked out when he married her.

A foul odor took his mind off the intrusive thoughts of Sarah and her late husband. He looked in her direction. "I think Luke's given you an unpleasant surprise."

She took a moment to respond. When she did, she wiped her hands on her apron and came over to him. "I'll change him."

"I'll do it. I used to change Emily. I think I still have a clothes pin upstairs I can use to plug my nose. Why don't you finish up whatever you're cooking? Then, with any luck, you

can get started on that dress. I'd like to see you in a better color than brown, gray or black."

Without waiting for her answer, he climbed the steps to change Luke.

Sarah managed to finish making supper, but she had a hard time concentrating. Neil had a way of unnerving her, and to her surprise, she liked it. She picked her son up and sat in the rocker with him so she could nurse him while the meal cooled. Neil would be returning with Emily soon, so the stew, potatoes and freshly baked biscuits would be ready when they got home. For the moment, she had the house to herself.

Gazing down at her son, she caressed his cheek while he suckled from her breast, relieving the fullness in it. She learned that if she didn't nurse him on a regular basis, her breasts became uncomfortable. It wasn't something anyone told her. She got lectures on how to raise him and how to maintain the balance between her husband and child. But no one told her the basics in caring for a newborn. She realized that Jim's mother would have been the one to do this, but she was glad to have Neil's mother teach her instead. It wasn't difficult to change diapers or bathe Luke, but she worried if she performed her tasks correctly. Feeding him was easy since nature took care of that.

Jim's mother. She didn't know what to do about Beatrice Donner. She faked an illness last Sunday in order to avoid another lunch at Caroline's because it meant she'd have to endure Beatrice again. Every Sunday that woman snatched Luke right out of her arms as soon as she arrived at church and wouldn't give him back until it was time to leave Caroline's house. As if that wasn't bad enough, ever since her outburst at

the funeral, the people she grew up with whispered and shot curious glances in her direction. She actually approached one of the women about it, but the busybody denied having pointed at her and snickering with her friend. Of course, she denied it. There was no reason to admit it.

No one knew where she was staying, and this offered her a safe haven. At least here, she had peace. And Neil was turning out to be a good friend. Someone she couldn't remember had told her that he changed for the better after Emily was born, despite his lapse in judgment one night five years ago. She didn't know the details. She only heard that he went to the saloon, drank some alcohol, gambled, and visited a soiled dove's room. That knowledge alone used to frighten and disgust her. But then she got to know him and saw how he loved Emily.

She didn't know a man more devoted to his child. And he helped her with Luke. There was something tender in the way he cared for both children. She'd have to be made of stone not to find it touching. Surely, a man who lived a scandal-free life for five years and opened his home to a widow and her baby couldn't be as wicked as Preacher Amos claimed. Maybe he had been wicked at one time, but didn't everyone deserve another chance? What good was redemption if only a select few got to experience it?

She switched Luke to her other breast. Darting a glance at her wardrobe, she spied the colorful fabrics Neil bought her. Green, yellow, and purple. They were pretty, but if she wore attractive colors, wouldn't she be inviting the wrong kind of attention from men? If the preacher was correct, nothing good came from such attention.

Neil called me pretty. She didn't do anything different than when she lived with Jim. She wore the same bland colors and pulled her hair back when Jim was alive, and he never once

called her pretty. But Neil called her pretty, even when she tried to hide it. Why the memory made her heart beat faster and her face flush, she didn't understand. Well, she did understand it in part. It pleased her. Vanity. It was all vanity, and vanity was wrong.

What if it's not wrong to be beautiful? Her first impulse was to reject the question. But then she asked herself, why would she reject it? Because her parents, Jim, and the preacher simply told her that being beautiful was wrong? What if *they* were wrong? What if being beautiful was actually permissible? They had been wrong about Neil. What if they were wrong about beauty?

She took a deep breath, unsettled by the way her thoughts were going. She hadn't taken the time to question her beliefs before, and she wasn't sure she wanted to now.

The kitchen door opening from downstairs caught her attention. Neil and Emily were home. Noting that her son had fallen asleep, she carefully pulled him away from her breast and wrapped him in his blanket. Once she set him in the bassinet, she buttoned her clothing and left the room.

The scene that greeted her as she eased down the steps caused a smile to form on her lips. Emily tugged on Neil's coat as he tried to get it off. Sarah noticed the amusement in his expression.

"Do you mean it, Pa? Are we going tomorrow?"

"Right after breakfast," he replied, finally succeeding in hanging his coat up. He crossed his arms and gave Emily a pointed look. "Someone needs to pick her coat off the floor. Sarah's not your maid, you know."

"Oh!" As if she just discovered her folly, Emily hastened to hang her coat on the lower hook. "There. She'll never know."

"That's what you think," Sarah spoke, her tone playful.

Neil and Emily looked in her direction.

"Fortunately for you, I have a soft spot for little girls." Sarah went to the working table and placed food on everyone's plates. "How was school today?"

"It was fine. But what I'm really looking forward to is hunting with Pa tomorrow."

Sarah blinked. Watching the girl sit next to her father at the table, she realized that Emily was telling her the truth. She set the plates down and sat across from them. "Hunting?"

"Yes. Pa says that I'll even get a chance to shoot a deer if we see one."

Sarah turned her attention to Neil who was eating his meal as if this was the most natural conversation in the world. "You're going to let her shoot a gun?"

He nodded. "I can't exactly let her shoot with her finger."

Emily giggled. "You're silly, Pa."

He grinned and winked at her. "I do what I can to make my favorite daughter laugh."

Though Sarah enjoyed the exchange taking place in front of her, she was anxious to settle the matter at hand. "I don't think it's right for a girl to shoot a gun."

"You've never shot a gun?" Emily dropped her fork so it clattered on her plate. "Pa, can you imagine that?"

Sarah bristled and shifted in the chair. "I don't want to shoot a gun. That activity is for men, not women."

"Says who?" Neil lifted his eyes to Sarah.

Flushing, she shrugged. "It's not proper. The man is supposed to be the protector of the home."

"What happens if the man isn't there to do the protecting? What do you think the settlers did when they journeyed west for land? The men taught women how to shoot guns. I should teach you how to do it."

Her jaw dropped. She watched, dumbfounded, as he took a big bite of stew. He couldn't be serious!

Emily squealed with delight. "Can I teach her too?"

He nodded and swallowed the food in his mouth. "You sure can, honey."

"Well...I mean..." Sarah put hands on the napkin resting on her lap and looked at Neil. "The next thing I know, you'll be saying that women should wear pants!"

"I have a pair of pants," Emily spoke up, seeming to be unaware of Sarah's shock.

"You put pants on your daughter?" Sarah asked him.

He frowned. "Of course, I do. I can't have her riding a horse and helping with the farm work in a dress. And hunting isn't comfortable in a dress. Honestly, Sarah. I don't see what the problem is. Women in this part of the country shoot guns and wear pants. It's not like it is back east. Life is harder here."

"Not in a town the size of Omaha. The more it expands, the more women can act like women."

He sighed and tore his biscuit in half. "But some of us are farmers. And that means there are farmers' wives who'd rather do the hard work in a pair of pants. Some women even hunt for food. That's what Em and I are doing tomorrow. We plan to get a deer for you to cook. Would you really have her out there in a dress?"

"But what about those pants that look like skirts? At least those are feminine."

He brought the biscuit halfway to his mouth and stopped. "That's not a bad idea."

Encouraged, she offered, "I can make one for her. Then she'll look...pretty when she acts like a boy."

"She's not acting like a boy. She's acting like a girl who's been raised on a farm."

She had a hard time accepting it, though it was logical. Still, Preacher Amos would never approve. But he wasn't here, so what did his opinion matter? She stabbed her potato with her fork and stuck it in her mouth, noting the buttery flavor. For some reason, the food tasted better than it used to when Jim was alive. She sipped on the milk. Even the drinks had more flavor in them. Of course, she knew it was the people she ate with that marked the difference.

So what if Neil had a tendency to treat Emily like a son? Did a man know any better? This was why she stayed here, to remind both of them that Emily was a girl. Content, she finished her potato and listened as they discussed where to hunt the next day.

Neil stepped into the house, assured that the animals were taken care of for the night. After he put his hat and coat aside, he made his way up the stairs and paused at the last step when he saw Sarah pulling the pink blanket up to Emily's chin. Sarah sat on Emily's bed, smiling and talking to her. Emily said something and Sarah laughed. The soft laughter reminded him of tinkling bells. The scene brought back the many times when he pleaded with Cassie to pay attention to Emily. He closed his eyes, still wishing that Cassie had cared about her daughter.

Footsteps caught his attention. Opening his eyes, he watched as Sarah closed the bedroom door. When her gaze fell upon him, she stopped. He took that as his cue to speak. "It's nice to watch you with Emily."

The kerosene lamp on the small table in the hallway was lit enough so he could make out her smile. "I have to get Luke but I could make hot cocoa when I get downstairs. Would you like some?"

“Yes, I would.”

“I’ll get Luke and be down shortly.”

He nodded as she went to her bedroom. In the light of the kerosene lamp, he saw her pick Luke up from the bassinet. She hummed while she set him on the bed to change his diaper. He recalled the night she gave birth to him and how he watched them, feeling more alone than he had in his entire life. But now, he didn’t feel that aching loneliness. Instead, he felt connected to the scene playing out in front of him.

He crept across the floor, opened Emily’s door and saw that she was fast asleep. His heart warmed when he saw how well Sarah had tucked his little girl into bed. Sarah was a good mother. He shut the door and went to the kitchen, deciding that he would be the one to make hot cocoa that night. It was the least he could do. Emily had stopped talking as if Cassie would return. When he ventured to ask her about it, she remained silent. Most of the time, she hid her pain under laughter, but there were times when he caught her crying, when she thought she was alone. He prayed that Sarah’s presence would be the balm to soothe Emily’s wounds.

He made the hot cocoa and had it ready by the time Sarah came down the steps.

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that,” she said, though he thought he detected a hint of pleasure in her voice.

Shrugging, he motioned for her to sit. He rested a cup in front of her and sat on the other side of the table. “Once in awhile, I don’t mind doing a woman’s task.” He kept his voice light so she understood he jokingly referred to their supper conversation of treating Emily like a boy.

She eased into her seat, setting Luke on her lap so he sat up. His back and head rested against her bosom. Luke bobbed his head for a moment but settled into a comfortable position. Neil noticed the boy seemed unusually interested in staring at

him, and he wondered what it was that the boy found so fascinating about him. Sarah brought the cup to her lips and took a drink. Even then, Luke didn't break eye contact with Neil.

Finally, Neil reached across the table and tapped the baby on the nose. He was rewarded with a grunt.

Sarah quickly set the cup down, giggling. "You can't be funny when I'm drinking something. It's not fair. Someday I'm going to spit my drink out."

He chuckled. "That won't do."

She wrapped the yellow blanket tighter around Luke. "I notice you let Emily do things that I thought only boys should do. You also do things that I grew up believing only a woman should do."

"I don't believe there is a distinction."

"So, you really do consider me to be your equal?"

Locking his eyes with hers, he nodded. "I do. I know I haven't done a good job of respecting women in the past, but I do now."

"And you treat Emily the way you do because of that?"

"I want to make sure she understands that just because she's a girl, it doesn't mean her opinion is less important than a boy's."

She paused for a moment, as if choosing her words carefully. "And when you take her hunting, let her wear pants, and have her ride a horse, she's learning that she can do anything a boy can do."

He grinned. "I might be biased because I'm her father, but I think she's better than most of the boys in this area."

"There's nothing wrong with a father favoring his child." She sighed and pushed loose strands back into her bun. "Jim didn't care much for Luke. Maybe he would have if he would have known he had a son on the way. I like to think that

anyway, especially since the people we associated with thought boys were more important. They carry on the family name." Clearing her throat, she shrugged. "It doesn't matter now anyway. He's not coming back."

Her bland tone surprised him. He expected a heartfelt declaration in such a statement. "You don't sound upset by that."

"That makes me a bad wife, doesn't it?"

He studied her in the dim light of the kerosene lamp. Her face, filled with a mixture of guilt and sorrow, told him more than words ever could, and his immediate sense of relief told him more than he wanted to admit. "Then your marriage wasn't what others thought it was."

She shook her head. "I used to convince myself it was. But it was a show to make him look good. Everything he did was to make himself look good."

"I assumed you were happy with him." He drank half the cocoa in his cup before he continued. "It's easy to give others the impression that everything is fine when it isn't. For years, I acted as if Cassie and I had a good marriage." He saw her nod and realized it was a nod indicating understanding, for she had done the same thing. The burden he'd been carrying for almost nine years suddenly seemed overwhelming. He needed to tell someone, someone who had gone through their own travesty of a marriage. "I don't want Emily to find out. She adores her mother, and it would devastate her if she knew why we got the divorce."

Her eyes widened. Surely, she hadn't expected this. "You don't have to tell me anything."

"I wouldn't mind someone who'd listen and keep it to herself." He studied her, wondering if she would agree to his terms. When she nodded, he continued. "When Cassie and I divorced, I told everyone it was so she could return to

Pennsylvania to care for her sick aunt. But that was a lie to protect Emily. The truth is that Cassie wanted to marry another man, and I let her.”

Her jaw dropped.

Shifting his gaze to the brown liquid in his cup, he hastened to explain, “Cassie and I didn’t have a good marriage. I thought we did at first. She was nice and beautiful. I fell in love with her right away. I thought she loved me too. About five months into our marriage, the doctor told me that she was too far along to be carrying my child. I asked her about it and she confessed that she married me because the father of the child left her. Well, I wasn’t one to judge. I had my share of running around. I was disappointed because I really wanted to be the father, but I was determined to work through it. I figured there was no reason why anyone should know the truth.

“A month later she received a letter from the father of the child. She told me that she wanted to go back to him because she still loved him. I refused. I said that she made her vows to me. We were bound to be married for the rest of our lives. She spent the next week acting as if she agreed with me. Then she made an attempt to leave me. She snuck out in the middle of the night. When I woke up and she wasn’t in bed next to me, I went looking for her. I found her talking to another man outside the barn. It didn’t take long to figure out that he was the one who sent the letter. She wanted to go with him, but he said he changed his mind. She said that it was his child, but he said he didn’t want to be tied down to a child and left. I was tempted to go back to the house and act as if I didn’t hear what happened, but I demanded an explanation. Needless to say, things went downhill from there. Finally, years later, she found someone else she wanted to marry, so I let her go. The only reason I stayed with her was because of Emily.”

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears which she quickly blinked away. After a long moment, she spoke in a quiet voice. “Emily doesn’t know you’re not her father?”

He shook his head. “No. And I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Of course.” She looked down at her son and held him close. “Did Cassie want to take Emily with her?”

“No, and I was glad. Emily’s the one good thing Cassie gave me.”

She nodded and took another drink from her cup. Sighing, she placed the cup on the table. “It must be hard then, knowing she wants her mother to return but knowing she won’t.”

“I hate to see Emily disappointed. Maybe I should have told her the truth.” And that was the part of the burden that hurt the most. In his desire to idolize Cassie for Emily, he’d ultimately prolonged the girl’s pain.

“You’re doing the best you can. Someday, when I have to tell Luke about his father, I don’t think I can tell him that Jim didn’t even care that I was expecting. I want him to feel that he was loved. You want the same for Emily. We all want to be loved.”

And that was something neither Sarah nor Neil experienced in their marriages. She didn’t have to say it. He understood, and that understanding seemed to solidify a bond between them, giving him hope. Hope in a beautiful woman.

Chapter Eleven

That Sunday, Neil knocked on Sarah's bedroom door. "Are you ready for church?" he asked, noting that she sat in her rocking chair, holding Luke and staring out the window at the falling snowflakes.

"It's snowing," she replied, glancing at him.

He entered the room and checked the bucket of chopped wood by the box stove. She would need more wood before the day was up. For the time being, her room was comfortable and warm. Turning his attention to the window, he said, "I don't think we'll get much snow. The weather is warm enough so the snow won't stick around for long. The road will be clear enough to get to town and back."

"I don't think it's wise to risk it. It would be best to stay here."

Frowning, he studied her profile. She was such a beautiful woman, even with her hair pulled back into a bun and a gray dress on. He wondered what it was going to take for her to wear a better color? Shaking his head, he brought his focus back to the conversation. "Sarah, is there a reason you don't want to go to church? You didn't go last week."

"I was ill." She continued to stare out the window.

“A headache. I remember.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything else.

Sensing something was amiss, he sat on the edge of her bed so they were only two feet apart. Leaning forward, he softly asked, “What are you hiding from?”

Blinking, she turned her large brown eyes in his direction, her vulnerable expression filling him with a sudden urge to protect her from the world and all of its problems. “Jim’s mother will be at church.” Returning her attention to the window, she spoke in a voice so soft he had to strain to hear her. “I know she has the right to see Luke, but I don’t want her to.”

“Why?”

“Because it means I have to see her. We never got along. I tried, at least in the beginning, but nothing I did pleased her.”

“She’s a hard person to deal with?”

“Yes.”

He could relate. Nothing pleased Cassie either, and after awhile, he gave up trying. It surprised him that he and Sarah shared so many things in common. He had sensed her loneliness when she moved in, but it seemed frustration, heartbreak, and sorrow also bonded them together. He wanted to hold her, to reassure her that she wasn’t the only one who suffered hard emotions but figured it wasn’t his place to do so.

The click clack of dress shoes echoed off the floorboards as someone ran up the stairs. Emily rushed into the room, her cheeks red. Straightening her coat, she exclaimed, “That snow is sticking together! I can make a snowman if it snows enough. Do you want to help me, Pa?”

Peering out the window, he took in the snow still falling. “We might get enough to cover the ground so we can roll up a large snowball or two.” He shifted his gaze to Emily and then

to Sarah and sighed. He couldn't solve Sarah's problem, but he could do his part in giving Sarah more time to figure out how to handle her mother-in-law. "You know, Em, it might be too slippery to go into town today. I'm afraid we'll have to skip church."

"Yay!"

He frowned. "You're not supposed to be happy about that."

She put her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. When her hand lowered, she said, "I'm sorry. I just didn't want to wait to play outside."

"We're going to do an extra devotion tonight to make up for missing church."

"That's fine, Pa. By then it'll be too dark to play outside."

He wasn't sure what to make of his daughter's comment. "All right. I'll change out of my suit and then we'll see what we can do out there."

"Can I go out now?"

"Yes."

Without hesitation, she sprinted out of the room and down the steps. The slam of the kitchen door notified him that she made her way outside.

Sarah chuckled under her breath.

He raised his eyebrow. "You just wait until Luke is her age. He'll be doing the same thing."

When she looked at him, mirth replaced the angst in her eyes. "I know. She really is a sweet girl...and honest. If she doesn't like something, she lets you know." She shrugged. "Then again. I suppose all children are natural truth tellers."

"I can't speak for other children, but Emily definitely doesn't hold anything in. I want you to know that I appreciate the attention you give her." He set his hands on his knees and

straightened his spine. "As much as I teach her boy things, like hunting and riding a horse, I realize there's a need for her to learn how to be a girl and, one day, a woman."

"Since I've spent my entire life being female, such lessons come naturally to me."

He laughed. "I don't doubt it."

A smile lit up her face. But too soon, before he had time to thoroughly enjoy watching her filled with joy, she returned to her glum state. "I understand that I can't keep avoiding my mother-in-law. I also realize she has a right to see her grandson. At least I don't have to live with her. Jim was taking me to her so I could stay with her for six months when we passed through your property."

"That's why you two were all the way out here."

She nodded. Staring out the window, she whispered, "I am glad I met you. You're the first person I met who actually listens to me. You know, without trying to mold me into someone I'm not."

A heat rose to his face that had nothing to do with physical desire. It was something altogether different, and it was the most wonderful feeling he ever experienced.

Luke squirmed and scrunched his nose.

She looked at Neil and grinned. "I think he'll be complaining if I don't feed him."

He stood up. "I should go see what kind of mess Emily's managed to make out there. She has a tendency to throw snowballs at the horses."

Gasping, she turned to him. "Oh, she does not."

"She's a good aim too."

"Why, she acts too much like a boy. It's a good thing I'm here to teach her better manners than that."

Chuckling, he made his way to the door. "She's also a good shot, you know."

“You’re not helping at all. She may be a smart girl but what man wants a woman who can beat him at shooting?”

He didn’t hide his wicked smile. “You’d be surprised. Some men find strong women appealing.”

She huffed. “A man still likes to be the one to protect and provide. And that’s not submissiveness talking. It’s just human nature. It’s how we’re made.”

“True. You win this argument.”

She blinked. “I wasn’t aware we were fighting.”

Shrugging, he replied, “Then we’ll call it a debate. And you still win.”

Before she could respond, he closed the door to give her privacy. His heart light, he skipped down the steps to find Emily.

The following Sunday, Sarah took a deep breath to settle her nerves as she lumbered to the church. The bitter wind blew against her face but her hat held her hair in place. Luke grunted and snuggled closer to her bosom. She wrapped her coat tighter around him and pressed forward.

Caroline and Rachel were the first to see her. Breaking from the crowd gathering outside the church before the service, they rushed over to her.

“Oh Sarah, we worried that something horrible happened to you,” Caroline said.

Rachel nodded. “And since we don’t know where you’re staying, we couldn’t come by to check up on you.”

Blushing, she tapped her foot on the ground. “I didn’t feel well, but I’m fine now.” That wasn’t exactly true, but she didn’t feel like listening to them defend Beatrice again.

“Were you sick like my family was?” Caroline asked.

“Not as badly as your family but it was enough to make me queasy.” That much was true. Jim’s mother had that affect on her.

“We looked everywhere for you,” Caroline continued. “It’s as if you dropped off the earth. No one knows where you’re staying.”

“Oh, that’s because it’s a ways out...there,” Sarah vaguely replied. “It sure is cold. We should get into the church.”

Without waiting for them to speak, she brushed past them and stomped up the steps, aware of the constricting in her chest. Just as she entered the building, Jim’s mother blocked her entrance.

“Well,” the woman snapped, hands on her hips. “I was beginning to think I’d never see my grandson again.”

“I-I’ve been ill, M-Mrs. Donner,” Sarah stammered.

“Then it’s most fortunate I plan to stay for awhile.”

“You are?”

“You needn’t act like that’s a bad thing.”

“I’m sorry.” Sarah gulped the nervous lump in her throat. “I’m still not feeling well.” That couldn’t be considered a full lie since she felt as if she was going to throw up. “I have to sit down.”

Caroline and Rachel caught up to them.

“Sarah, you should have waited for us,” Caroline said. “Oh, hello, Mrs. Donner.”

Jim’s mother narrowed her eyes at Caroline. “I trust your lunch offer is still good. Who knows when Sarah will bless us with her presence again? It seems the poor thing has taken ill after my son’s untimely demise.”

“Losing a husband can be hard for a woman,” Caroline replied, her hand on Sarah’s arm. “Surely, you can understand that.”

“And not seeing one’s grandson, Jim the fourth, is also hard.”

Caroline looked to be at a loss for words for a couple of seconds but quickly nodded her consent. “I didn’t mean to imply it wasn’t, Mrs. Donner.”

Beatrice straightened her coat and pursed her thin lips together. “Then I will join you and my grandson after the service for lunch, as we’ve been doing when Sarah chooses to attend her Sunday obligation.”

Caroline glanced at Sarah. “Do you feel up to it?”

“Perhaps the commandment, *Honor thy mother and father*, ought to ring a bell?” his mother inserted, her voice sharp.

“I can’t!” Sarah shook her head. “I have to leave right after the service.” Neil would be expecting her. She couldn’t let him and Emily sit out in the cold, waiting for her to show up. And who knew how long Jim’s mother would keep her at Caroline’s house? The last time she endured the lunch, Neil and Emily sat in the buggy for a full half hour because she was late. She couldn’t do that to them again.

“Can you make it into town for supper?” Caroline asked Sarah, looking uncertain.

Beatrice waved her hand and gave a curt nod of her head. “There’s no need to go through all this hassle. If you just tell me where you’re living, I’ll go there.”

Seeing little option, Sarah’s shoulders slumped. “I’ll be at your house at five, Caroline.”

Caroline looked relieved. “Then it’s settled.”

“In the meantime, I’ll hold little Jim during the service.” Beatrice held her hands out.

Realizing she had no choice, Sarah gave Luke to her, ready to remind the woman that his name was Luke. But it wouldn’t do any good.

Beatrice took the child and went to the other side of the small church, causing Sarah to experience a wave of panic. *She wouldn't run off with him, would she?*

"I guess we'll sit over there today," Rachel said. "Let me gather the children and I'll join you."

"I'll do the same," Caroline added.

Sarah watched her friends hurry to perform their tasks, grateful for their support. But the doubt lingered in her mind that they wouldn't rush to help her if they knew she was staying at Neil's place.

It was a little after six and Sarah finished washing the dishes with Caroline after the supper. She glanced at the clock, wondering how she was going to slip out of there at seven. All through the meal, she tried to come up with an excuse to leave that wouldn't arouse suspicion as to where she was living. She managed to avoid the questions so far, but she worried she couldn't keep it up much longer.

Wiping her hands on the towel, she laid it on the back of a chair and followed Caroline into the parlor where Caroline's son played the piano. Sarah glanced at Beatrice who cooed at "little Jim". Sarah clenched her hands under the skirt of her dress, hoping no one detected her growing anger.

Caroline's husband, Hubert, read his newspaper while Caroline went over to fluff the pillow under his feet. She patted him on the shoulder and went to sit next to Sarah on the couch.

"Caroline," Hubert began, not glancing up from his paper, "I'm thirsty."

Caroline, still out of breath from cleaning the kitchen, exhaled as she stood up. "Would anyone else like some coffee?"

Beatrice kept on cooing at Luke, so Sarah eased herself off the couch, wishing to get away from all the comments that Beatrice kept making about how adorable “little Jim” was.

“I’ll come with you, Caroline,” Sarah said.

“No, Sarah. You’re my guest. Please sit and relax.”

“But I want to help.” *And I don’t want to be near Jim’s mother.*

Beatrice cleared her throat. “Actually, I could use a cup of tea. Caroline, why don’t you work on the coffee, and Sarah, why don’t you work on the tea?”

The next half hour was filled with similar demands. Beatrice wanted Sarah to get her a blanket for “little Jim,” refill her cup of tea, put sugar in the tea, and heat the tea up again since it was too cool for her liking.

By the time Sarah returned with the heated tea, Beatrice groaned. “I must say, it’s amazing my dear son didn’t perish under your care, Sarah. You take forever to do anything.”

Sarah resisted the urge to pour the steaming tea on the woman’s head, and the only reason she managed that feat was because she didn’t want to harm Luke. Biting her tongue, she placed the cup on the table and sat next to Caroline who squeezed her hand, sending a comforting message to her. Sarah offered a thankful smile at her friend.

“Can I play?” Caroline’s daughter, Jane, asked.

“No,” Hubert replied.

“Why not? I’ve been watching Stephen, and the last song he played was simple.”

“I said no, and that’s final.”

Jane huffed. “I can do it. I know I can!”

Hubert frowned at her. “A girl needs to know her place, and you are to be the audience.”

“Why?”

“Because boys are better at these things than girls.”

Sarah gasped.

Hubert looked in her direction. "Do you have something to add, Mrs. Donner?"

"Girls can play a piano as well as boys can, Mr. Jones," she replied, her heart pounding fast in her chest since she'd never argued with him before.

"That's preposterous! Girls aren't as blessed as boys are."

"You are in error. I know a little girl who can hunt and ride a horse just as well as a boy can."

He grimaced. "What parents are permitting their children to do! How will that girl ever know her place in the home if she acts like a boy?"

"She's not acting like a boy!"

"Sarah," Caroline whispered, "calm down."

"No. I will not calm down." Sarah straightened her back. "God made men and women equal, so it stands to reason that boys and girls are equal too."

"Blasphemy! Is this what Jim's death has done to you?" Hubert threw his paper on the floor and glared at her. "May I remind you that the Good Book tells women to submit to their husbands?"

"Submission doesn't mean she is to be a slave, nor does it mean she has to forgo the things that are interesting to her. I believe the Good Book also tells men to love their wives, and love doesn't forbid what is good for the other person. No harm will come if you let Jane play the piano. She might even be better than Stephen."

He laughed. "A girl being better than a boy. That's rich! You would do good to remember your place, Sarah. The preacher won't like hearing such rebellion from your lips. The man is to lead. The woman is to follow."

Shaking Caroline's hand off her arm, Sarah bolted up. "The woman is not to blindly follow the man. She is to use her judgment."

Snorting, he shook his head. "Judgment? Don't be foolish. If it weren't for men, women wouldn't know how to function in society. Why, even balancing the budget is too much for them."

Sarah couldn't take it anymore. She turned to Beatrice. "I'm leaving. Give me my child."

"But my time isn't up," her mother-in-law protested.

Caroline stood up, wringing her hands. "We should relax. I know. I'll bring out cake."

"Yay! Cake!" Stephen and Jane ran to the kitchen.

"Come on, Sarah. Will you help me?" Caroline asked, her voice taking on a pleading tone.

"No, Caroline. I'm not staying." Sarah held her arms out to receive Luke.

Beatrice held onto the baby. "Leave if you like, but I'm going to visit with my grandson."

"You have no right to withhold my child from me!"

"And you have no right to dishonor Jim's mother," Hubert snapped.

"I'm keeping him," Beatrice added.

Sarah's body shook with rage. "You like tea? Well, here it is!" She grabbed the cup and dumped the cooled tea in the demanding woman's hair.

As soon as Beatrice loosened her hold on Luke and screamed, Sarah snatched her child and ran to the door.

"Don't you dare follow her, Caroline!" Hubert yelled.

Caroline remained at Sarah's heels. "Sarah, I'm so sorry. Apparently, this whole idea was a mistake."

Sarah grabbed her coat and opened the front door.

His Redeeming Bride

“Caroline! Get in here right this minute!” Hubert ordered.

“Good night, Sarah,” Caroline told Sarah before turning to the parlor entrance where Hubert stood, arms crossed and a scowl on his face. Caroline shook her head at him. “I will not go in there, you...you...man!” Caroline fled up the staircase.

Taking that as her cue to leave, Sarah shut the door and raced down the street.

Chapter Twelve

Two weeks later, Neil went to town. The April air felt warm on his skin. He did enjoy Spring. Soon, he'd be planting beans. But today, he was about to make a good profit for selling his best cattle.

Before he had to go to the bank to meet Dan Adair, he wanted to pick up a bow that Emily mentioned liking last time she stayed with her grandmother, and he thought Sarah might like something pretty to go with the green dress she was making. He wasn't sure what happened that night she went to visit her friend Caroline, but she started the dress that night. It also marked the last time she went to her church. Any attempts to find out why were expertly avoided by comments regarding Luke or Emily. Deciding it wasn't his business, he gave up and acted as if nothing happened.

Now as he scanned the shelves at the mercantile, he realized he had no idea what a woman like Sarah would want. Cassie liked flashy, sparkly, lacy things. But Sarah wasn't Cassie, a fact that often relieved him. However, even if the contrast between Cassie and Sarah was like night and day, he figured women liked beautiful things.

A girl with blond curls and a blue dress bumped into his leg. Startled, he glanced down at the four year old.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He smiled. "I'm the one who should apologize, Rachel. I'm blocking your way to the candy." Looking up, he saw the girl's mother who held a one-year-old boy. "Good morning, Mrs. Larson."

Mary Larson returned his smile. "Good morning, Neil. How are you and Emily?"

"We're fine. I think she's starting to realize Cassie's not coming back."

"Her aunt's been sick an awfully long time."

He suspected that Mary knew there was more to the story, though she kept it to herself. He silently thanked her for her compassion in the matter. "Yes, and there's no cure for her."

Nodding, she shifted her son to her other hip. "I keep praying for you, Neil."

"Thank you, Mary. You're one of the few people who seem to think there's hope for me." He chuckled as her son pulled her bonnet off her head and tossed it to the floor. "Let me get that," he said, retrieving the blue object off the floor and handing it to her. "I see that Rachel and Adam are doing well."

She laughed and took the bonnet from him. "When Adam's not grabbing things, he manages fairly well."

"Good morning, Mr. Craftsman, Mrs. Larson," the owner, Ralph Lindon, greeted them as he walked over to them. "Can I help you with something?"

"Ladies first," Neil offered when she looked at him.

Nodding, she turned to Ralph. "I was wondering if your new hats came in today? My old one is ready to wear through."

A hat. Sarah would need a hat to go with her new dress. He couldn't have her wearing a black hat with light colors. He watched as Ralph showed Sarah five new hats that recently came in. Making his way to the sewing supplies, he picked up a green ribbon and a pin in the shape of a yellow flower. Both would make suitable accessories on a hat.

"I don't know what's gotten into her."

Neil looked over his shoulder to see if the man was talking to him, but Hubert Jones stood in front of Preacher Amos. "Caroline is completely rebellious and I blame it all on Sarah Donner."

"A woman who's not married is a dangerous creature," the preacher agreed. "We must find Sarah a husband as soon as possible."

"But what good will it do to find her a husband when we don't even know how to find her? It's like she fell off the face of the earth."

"We'll find her, Hubert. Omaha isn't so big that we can't find a sheep that's gone astray."

"I hope it's soon. I don't like the way Caroline's been acting ever since that night Sarah came by for supper. She's gotten it into her head that she won't cook or clean for me until I let Jane play the piano. I tell you, the devil is behind this."

"Rebellion in the house is a bad thing." The preacher took a deep breath and rubbed his bald head. "We'll get things settled."

At least Neil now had an idea of what bothered Sarah. After he selected a hat and a bow for Emily, he purchased his items and headed for the entrance. As he opened the door, he nearly bumped into Mary's husband.

"Sorry, Dave."

Dave gave a slight nod but refused to make eye contact with him.

Neil cleared his throat and hurried around the formidable man.

He wound his way through pedestrians on the boardwalk until he got to his horse. Placing the hat, ribbon, pin, and bow in his leather pouch, he hastened to his business meeting.

Dan Adair waited for him outside the bank. "Good to see you, Mr. Craftsman."

Neil shook the older man's hand. "The pleasure is mine." He held the door and waited for Dan to enter the small building.

Dan shook his head. "I'd like to have a drink at the saloon before we discuss payment."

He followed Dan's gaze to the tall building across the street, though he didn't have to since he knew exactly where the saloon was. He had visited it often enough before he married Cassie. Uncertain, he cleared his throat. "To be honest, Mr. Adair, I'd rather not."

"Why?"

Shifting from one foot to the other, he replied, "Because I don't go there anymore."

Dan threw back his head and laughed.

Noting the curious looks from the patrons inside the bank, he closed the door and moved to the side so he wouldn't prevent the flow of traffic on the boardwalk. "It's true. I haven't been there in eight years."

"Now I know you're pulling my leg. People saw you in there five years ago."

His heart thumping and heat rising to his face, he struggled to remain calm. "That was a mistake."

"Hey, I'm fine with it, pal." Dan slapped him on the shoulder. "Believe me. I've had my share of alcohol and

women. It certainly is a good way to celebrate a major business transaction, don't you think?"

"No. It's not. I used to think it was fun, but I learned that it leaves a man feeling empty and a woman feeling degraded."

Dan's laughter grew louder, attracting attention from several men and women as they passed by.

"Please, Mr. Adair. People are starting to stare," Neil whispered.

"You can't be serious about not having a drink with me in the saloon."

He gritted his teeth when he realized that Dan wasn't going to lower his voice.

Dan stopped laughing. "Aren't you being too strict?"

"No. I don't engage in that behavior anymore."

"But five years ago--"

"Was five years ago," he firmly interrupted. "I'm not the same man I was then. I beg your pardon, sir, but I'd rather deal with business and go home."

Dan scowled. "I don't think this deal is suitable after all. Imagine you, of all people, being a hypocrite. I expected better of you."

Neil watched as Dan pushed past the crowd and strode down the boardwalk. With Dan went a large profit. Irritated, Neil stared at the onlookers. "Don't you all have anything better to do than to watch men conduct business?"

They quickly dispersed.

To his surprise, Hubert Jones and Preacher Amos shook their heads at him. "What?" Neil demanded, glowering at them.

"A leopard never changes his spots," the preacher said. "Your little display of holiness doesn't fool anyone."

“You allow a young widow and her son to starve to death on the street and you dare lecture me about holiness?”

The minute he spoke, he regretted his words, for it wouldn’t take long before the uppity men realized whom he spoke about.

“I’m out of here!” Neil huffed past them and hustled to his horse.

Hubert Jones yelled after him, “People don’t forget what kind of man you really are, no matter how good you pretend to be!”

Yanking the reins on his stallion, Neil hopped onto his horse, noticing that Dave and Mary Larson happened to hear Hubert’s comment. He couldn’t handle Dave’s wary expression anymore than he could handle Mary’s sympathetic one. He needed to get out of town, and he couldn’t get out fast enough. Digging his heels into the horse’s sides, he rode the stallion hard out of there, caring little if anyone stared or not.

There’s only so much a man can take. Why can’t they just let the past go? It’s been seven years and I haven’t done anything since then. And no one knows what happened that night five years ago.

Five years ago was when his life, his heart, had changed. He recalled it as if it was yesterday...

Neil gulped another shot of whiskey and slammed the glass on the table at the saloon. Counting the money in his pocket, he set some on the bar and made his way up the steps. His feet were a little unsteady but he was sober enough to enjoy himself. He found the head soil dove who waited for customers in her bedroom. She sat, lounging on her chair, her bodice barely covering her body. She was working on her ledger books.

He leaned against the doorframe, ignoring the loud cheers from downstairs as another poker game ended. "Would you like to add some more to your profits tonight?"

A smile crossed her face as she turned her gaze in his direction. "Mr. Craftsman, I was beginning to think we'd never see you again."

She moved so that he caught a generous view of her cleavage. His body tightened in response. She turned from the ledger book and stood up. Swinging her hips in a manner that aroused him all the more, she twirled her blond hair around her fingers. Though she was forty, she could still bring a man's blood to a boil. He handed her the required fees.

She counted the money and peered up at him. "Did you have a particular woman in mind? Eliza and Joyce are free at the moment."

Eliza. He remembered her. No matter what mood he was in, she managed to make him feel good. He needed that tonight. "Eliza."

The woman winked at him. "She'll be thrilled." Slipping her arm through his, she led him to Eliza's room and knocked. "Eliza, you'll never guess who's here."

The door opened and the redhead with a luscious body which was hidden in a robe gasped. "Oh my goodness. Neil, is that really you?"

He smiled. It had been almost a year since he and Cassie had shared a bed together, and he recalled their last time. For all the interest she had shown him, she might as well have been dead. After that, he lost any motivation to have relations with her. He settled into a loveless marriage, and he had been faithful the entire time. But seeing Cassie in bed with another man earlier that day, obviously enjoying herself, was the final straw. If she could go off and sleep around, so could he. Only, he knew better than to get personally involved with another

woman, which made the soiled doves at the saloon a perfect option. There were no expectations so no hearts would be broken. Just a simple transaction to take care of his needs and their pocket books.

The redhead slid her arm through his and led him into her room. "I sure missed you," she cooed, bringing his thoughts back to the present.

He raised an eyebrow. "You did, did you?"

"Of course. You tip better than other men."

He laughed. "I got to give you credit for honesty. You never were one to hold back, Eliza."

She closed the door and winked. "It doesn't hurt that you're good in bed."

"Now that is something I need to hear." He pulled her to him and kissed her, letting his hands caress the soft curve of her back, relishing the way her breasts pressed against his chest. "You feel good," he whispered. He brushed her neck with his lips. He loved how soft and feminine women were. "I may have to pay your boss so I can spend more time with you. Once may not be enough." *Especially when it's been so long.*

"I'm sure we can arrange something. I certainly don't mind." Eliza removed his jacket and hat and set them on the chair next to the bed. She glanced over her shoulder and gave a knowing smile in his direction. "I can see that you're eager to get started."

He cleared his throat as her eyes drifted to the evidence of his arousal. He should have been embarrassed, but she did this for a living and knew what to do to turn men on, so he didn't bother hiding it. Instead, he unbuttoned the first three buttons on his blue shirt while she slipped out of her robe. His heart raced with excitement as she settled on her pink sheets, her bed squeaking under her slim weight.

She arched her back and rested her hands over her head, her legs slightly parted. "How long has it been since your wife took care of you, Neil?" she softly asked.

Shrugging, he took off his shoes and lumbered to her. "About a year, I think."

"Marriage isn't what you expected then?"

The sympathy in her voice caught him by surprise. "No."

"I hear that all the time, you know. It seems to me that marriage isn't as great as people make it out to be. If it was, a man wouldn't feel the need to seek comfort outside the home."

Removing his shirt, he let it drop to the floor and sat on the bed, running his hand over her hip. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Not many men do. Very well. I'm here to please you. Just tell me what you want and I'll oblige."

He moved his hand up and over her breasts. "Respond to me. Act like you want to do this." Even as he said it, he chided himself. *Fool. Don't be weak.* But he was, and it scared him. Cassie's indifference to him in bed had more of an impact on him than he thought. *I'm not here to think of her.* He leaned over to kiss Eliza, the scent of perfume and sex with her other customers drifted into his awareness.

She moaned and pressed her hands on his shoulders, pulling him closer to her.

Now this is what he wanted. He maneuvered his body so that he was lying on top of her, holding her tight and deepening his kisses. When she wrapped her legs around his waist, he found himself fighting back tears. Why couldn't Cassie do the same? Would it kill her to show some affection? *No. I'm not here to think of her! I'm here to forget her.*

Realizing there was one surefire way to forget her, he straightened up and knelt in front of Eliza who was the very

image of sensuality with her legs and arms open to him. There. All he had to do was focus on that image and enjoying himself wouldn't be a problem. He managed to unbuckle his belt when something fell out of his pocket. The clank of a shiny object bouncing off the hardwood floor brought everything around him to a screeching halt.

Pulse racing, he jumped up and got on his hands and knees to retrieve the item from under the bed.

"What is it, honey?" Eliza asked, moving so she could look at what caught his attention.

Honey. That's what he called Emily. *Two-year-old Emily.* Grabbing the silver button, he recalled his daughter giving him the item that had fallen off her doll's dress. He wanted to put it back on but she protested. "Love you, Pa. Yours."

Emily. He closed his eyes for a moment, his thoughts pushing past the alcohol he consumed. Her face formed in his mind. Her wide green eyes, sweet smile, and pretty black curls tumbling around her heart-shaped face. "I love you too," he had told her. And he did. She was his daughter.

Then his eyes opened and he looked at Eliza. She was someone's daughter. Her father had probably looked at her when she was little and loved her too. The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. *My God. This could be Emily someday.* Bolting to his feet, he stumbled for his shoes and slipped them on, his fingers trembling as they worked the laces.

"Neil. What's wrong?" Eliza asked, sitting up.

"I can't do this. You deserve better than this." His voice choked on the tears that threatened to emerge. Yanking his shirt and belt off the floor, he rushed out of the room, ignoring Eliza's questions and the snickers from men and women as he passed through the saloon. He pushed through the front door and ran until he found an alley where he tripped.

He emptied the contents of his stomach until he had nothing left. His fingers dug into the cool fabric of his shirt and the leather of his belt as he willed his nausea to go away. A wind passed over him and calmed his stomach. Relieved for the reprieve, he sat back, leaning against the brick wall of the building next to him. He inhaled the fresh air, noting the soothing contrast between that and the stale smell of perfume and sex in Eliza's room.

"What am I doing?" he asked.

His heart constricted, sending the tears, and he no longer held them back. His life was a mess. One big, complete mess. He had a wife who didn't love him, a daughter who wasn't his, and barely enough money to get through the upcoming winter. Cassie drained his bank account, but some gambling had afforded him one night with a prostitute, someone he had to pay to enjoy being with him. But what if Emily had been in Eliza's position tonight? The thought made his stomach roll and he heaved.

For the next half hour, he remained still, eyes closed and shivering as he mentally worked through his life, and for the first time, he saw it for what it was. He made the decisions that led him to this point. He thought visiting the soiled doves and sowing his wild oats was fun. Some of the men he did business with did it, so it couldn't be wrong...or so he reasoned. But it was wrong, and coming here tonight had been a horrible mistake. Those women weren't treated with respect. They were merely a means to an end. He would kill a man who dared to treat Emily the way he had been treating them. Self-loathing filled him like thick bile.

How could he do that to someone else's daughter? *I'm doomed. There is no redemption for a man like me.*

"Sir, do you need help?"

Neil opened his eyes and saw an older man wearing a suit. He stood in front of him, concern in his eyes.

"You look like you could use a cup of coffee," the man said. "If you'd like, I'll take you home and Martha will brew us a pot. Then we can talk."

Neil was ready to protest but the man's kind smile was like balm for his shattered soul. Nodding, Neil stood up and shrugged into his shirt. "I don't make it a habit of vomiting in an alley," he said, his voice low.

"Do you get drunk often?"

"No. I usually don't drink at all." Neil slipped his belt through the loops in his pants. "I try to keep a clear head."

"Something bad must have happened to drive you to drink."

Neil buckled his belt and arched an eyebrow. "You're perceptive."

"Either that or able to use common sense. Do you want to talk about it?"

He sighed, weighing the pros and cons of opening up to a complete stranger. Finally, he decided he had nothing to lose. It wasn't like most of the town didn't already know his past indiscretions. He recalled how ashamed Cassie had been when she found out. Not that she turned out to be any different. She just happened to hide her activities better than he did.

"All right," Neil replied. "Where do you live?"

The man pointed down the street. "Five blocks in that direction."

"I should get my horse." Though Neil dreaded the task of going back to the saloon to untie his stallion, he didn't see that he had much of a choice. Once he returned to where the chubby 5'6" man stood, they sauntered down the dark street, passing lit lanterns that were hooked on poles. Several people

passed by, some on horse, some walking. They nodded polite greetings which Neil and the man next to him reciprocated.

"My name is Bill Peters. People call me Preacher Peters."

Neil stopped. His horse also paused but nudged him in the shoulder.

"Did I say something wrong?" Bill asked.

"You don't know who I am, but I'm sure you heard of me. My name is Neil Craftsman."

Bill smiled. "Yes, I've heard of you. Will you still be coming to my house?"

He frowned. "You're willing to associate with me?"

"Sure. Why shouldn't I?"

"I haven't exactly led a holy life."

"The last time I checked, no one was perfect. You seem like a man who's down on his luck and could use a friend."

Neil realized Bill was being sincere by the kindness on his face. For a reason Neil couldn't comprehend, this particular minister decided to reach out to him. "I do need someone I can talk to."

They moved forward, making light talk until they reached the preacher's house where his wife welcomed Neil and went to make coffee while they rested in the parlor. While he and the preacher drank the hot, soothing liquid, Neil told him everything, feeling like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He worried that the man would kick him out, but he took it all in, nodding and listening.

"So today when I came home early from selling some cattle, I found Cassie in her bedroom with one of the men who I purchased feed from. It wasn't a pretty scene. I'm just glad Emily was with my mother so she didn't see it. I lost my temper and pounded my fist through the wall. Then I went

after him, and I would have beat him into the ground had it not been for the fact that he was too fast for me. But she reminded me that I hadn't been the ideal husband. And she was right. You see, I tried to run off with another man's wife when I realized Cassie loved Emily's father." Neil took a deep, shaky breath. "I wasn't a good husband. And I'm not a good man, Preacher. I deserve what I got."

"You gave up and went to the saloon to ease your pain," the man said.

"I guess. At the time, I thought I was just going there to have relations. I suppose you're right." Neil let out a bitter laugh. "It's ironic if you think about it. I know everything there is to know about the physical act of intimacy, but when it comes to love..." He exhaled. "When it comes to love, I don't know a single damn thing."

"That's not true. It is your love for your daughter that got you out of the saloon."

"Only because of a button."

Bill set his empty cup on the table that sat between them. "Sometimes a button is a miracle. Neil, I believe that good things can come out of any situation. All it takes is what you're going to do now. You have the choice to go back home and be a good husband and father. Maybe after time when Cassie sees that you are sincere, she'll come around to loving you, and you can have the marriage you hoped for. But even if that doesn't happen, you might want to continue being the best husband and father you can be for Emily's sake."

"I do want to do that. I'm not happy with who I've been. I would like Emily to be proud of me."

"I hope you'll let me help you as you turn your life around."

"You mean like me stopping in once a week to visit with you?"

He nodded. "You are certainly welcome to do that. However, I meant coming to church."

Neil shifted in the chair, holding his cup. "Your congregation won't like it."

"I'd be surprised if they didn't. I preach forgiveness, mercy, and love. It's true that judgment happens, but it seems that you've dealt with that. Now it's time for redemption. Everyone deserves a second chance. And it helps when you can be surrounded with people who've been in your shoes. There are many people in my church who've done things they regret."

"Really?"

He chuckled. "You act like you're the only one who's ever done something wrong. I guarantee you'll be glad you came to my church. And if anyone gives you a hard time, let me know and I'll deal with him."

"All right."

His anger faded as the memory receded. Neil turned his stallion onto his property. He recalled how he went to that church the next day and was surprised to learn that Preacher Peters had been right. He wasn't alone, and the congregation welcomed him. Though Cassie refused to go, he took Emily with him to church and from there, his life turned for the better. But then, when he ran into the people who didn't believe he changed, it was easy to get discouraged. *I'm not the same man I was back then. What will it take for people to realize that?*

Chapter Thirteen

Later that day, as Sarah was cleaning the supper dishes, Neil rushed into the house and slammed the door. Startled, she almost dropped the plate. “What is it?” she asked. “Did Emily fall off the horse?”

“No.” He darted to the bassinet and picked it up, his anxious movements causing her tension to rise. “You have to go to your room. Now!”

Without thinking, she put the plate in the cupboard and ran after him. “Why? What happened?”

He moved so fast that she could hardly keep up with him.

“Neil.” She gasped for air once she reached her bedroom where he wrapped another blanket around Luke since the room was chilly. Claspng her hands over her heart, she asked, “Won’t you tell me what’s going on?”

The knocking at the kitchen door made him bolt straight up. “It’s a long story but the people from your church found out where you are.”

Her eyes grew wide.

“That’s why you need to stay here.” He strode over to where she stood in the doorway. “I won’t let them come in this house, but they can’t see you or Luke. Understand?”

Another round of loud knocking came from the closed kitchen door.

“No,” she said, her voice firm.

“I don’t have time to explain but I ran into your preacher and let it slip that I know he didn’t take in a widow with a son. I didn’t say your name or that you were staying here, but he put two and two together and there he is at the door.”

“No, I meant that I’m not hiding.” She steeled her resolve and marched down the steps.

He followed close behind. “Sarah, what are you doing?”

“I’m tired of pretending that I don’t know you.”

Grabbing her arm, he stopped her as she reached the bottom step. “You don’t know what you’re doing. Some people haven’t forgotten what I used to do, and they don’t mind ostracizing me. I don’t want that to happen to you because you associate with me.”

“I’m not ashamed of you, Neil.” She took a deep breath, her eyes meeting his. “I admit I was, but I’m not anymore.”

“You have no idea how tough it is to be an outcast.”

“And you have no idea how tough it is to be a mindless puppet.” The knocking brought her attention back to the preacher. She stormed to the door and flung it open, ignoring the near faint Jim’s mother did against the preacher’s side. “May I help you?” she asked, forcing her voice to remain steady.

Preacher Amos put his arm around Beatrice’s shoulders to steady her. Focusing his bewildered stare at Sarah, he said,

“Mrs. Donner, are you aware that you are committing a grave sin?”

Frowning, she crossed her arms, tucking her trembling hands under her elbows. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You are living here, in this house, with a man you’re not married to.”

“We’re not intimate. I am staying in the spare bedroom with my son.”

“Oh, she’s lying!” Beatrice sobbed into her handkerchief. “My dear little Jim is being subjected to...to that man.”

“My son’s name is Luke,” she snapped. “When will you ever get it right?”

“Mrs. Donner, you do have to consider who you are staying with.” The preacher leaned forward, keeping his voice low. “Mr. Craftsman is known for having his way with vulnerable women.”

“I had a reputation for going to the saloon to women who knew what they were doing,” Neil clarified.

Since she didn’t hear his approach, Sarah jerked.

The preacher turned to her. “You cannot stay here with a man who delights in the company of prostitutes. It is not right. You need to do what’s best for you and your child.”

Neil took a step toward the preacher and Jim’s mother. Beatrice immediately backed up, but Amos stood firm. “I’m tired of having to remind people that I don’t do that anymore.”

“He doesn’t,” Sarah agreed. “In fact, he leads the kind of life you tell people to live.”

The preacher shook his head. “Maybe he hasn’t made his move yet, but you just wait. When you least expect it, he’ll attack.”

“If he was that eager to take advantage of me, he would have done it already. I don’t mean any disrespect, Preacher, but I can’t believe how closed-minded you’re being.”

Beatrice gasped, her eyes wide.

The preacher’s face grew red.

“Well, it’s the truth,” Sarah insisted. “Doesn’t everyone deserve a second chance? Isn’t redemption the message you preach every Sunday?”

“He’s blinded you with deceitful words,” Beatrice replied through choked sobs. “You were always foolish and gullible. Jim protected you but ever since he died, you’ve had no one to hold your hand and give you the comfort you so desperately need. I will do the noble thing and let you stay with me so Jim’s child can have a secure home.”

Sarah’s hands clenched. “I’d rather eat pig slop than be subjected to a life of misery with you.”

The woman gasped again, holding her handkerchief to her mouth.

The preacher shook his head. “Do you see what staying here has done to you? You are turning into a willful and disobedient woman.”

“If that’s true, then it’s your fault.”

“Oh, is there no limit to her rebellion?” Beatrice asked the preacher.

“Rebellion?” Sarah asked. “I call it freedom. Finally, I don’t have to pretend to be someone I’m not, acting like everything’s fine when it’s not, and being the perfect little person because I’m not. As far as I’m concerned, my life is much better off without you or Jim!”

The preacher tried to pat Sarah on the arm but she pulled back. “Sarah, you’re not thinking straight. You need to calm down.”

“Calm down? I need to calm down because you didn’t feel like putting me up in your spare bedroom? You know, the one you use as your personal library? You had the room and you had the means to care for me and Luke, but you didn’t want to be inconvenienced. So Neil had the kindness and decency to take me in when no one else would. That’s what it means to do what’s right. Getting up and speaking pious platitudes doesn’t help a widow who needs to take care of her son. I wash my hands of this church.”

“You see what happens when a sheep strays from the flock?” the preacher grimly told a hysterical Beatrice. “She gets eaten by a wolf.” He turned to Sarah. “We’re taking you and your baby home where you can regain your senses.”

Neil blocked him before he could reach for Sarah’s arm. “She said no.”

“She’s just a woman. She doesn’t know what’s good for her,” Amos replied.

“Are you going to leave my property or do I have to get my gun?”

“You have no right to threaten me.”

“I have a right to defend anyone on my property. I also have the right to get unwanted trespassers off my land. If I have to force you, I will.”

The preacher clenched his jaw. “This isn’t over. You can’t keep Sarah a prisoner forever. We’ll rescue her.” His movements were stiff as he led a crying Mrs. Donner to the buggy.

Sarah breathed a sigh of relief, though she understood the reprieve was temporary. The preacher would be back, and he would most likely bring prominent men from the congregation with him. She rubbed her eyes, suddenly feeling weary.

"I don't suppose that's the last we'll see of him," Neil calmly replied.

Looking at him, she sighed. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"If I wasn't here, they would leave you alone. You don't need this, especially after what happened with Dan Adair."

He stood silent for a moment, staring thoughtfully at her until she blushed. When he gazed at her intently like that, she felt a tingle travel from her head to her toes.

He smiled. "It seems that you paid me the highest of all compliments."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "How so?"

"You believe in me." Clearing his throat, he quickly added, "I better check on Emily. Will you be all right?"

Luke's cries caught her attention. "Yes. Thank you for not making me go with that woman." She hurried up the stairs to care for her son.

Sarah asked to join Neil when he went to church that Sunday, and when he asked her if she was sure, she said yes. She was tired of hiding, as if acting like she did something wrong. The truth was, she wasn't. So why hide from the town? Later that week, she asked to go to the mercantile to purchase some food items that she needed.

After Neil helped her out of the buggy, he said, "I have to go to the bank and post office. When I'm done, I'll fill up the basket with anything you need. I know how difficult it can be to carry a baby and a bunch of food."

Nodding, she entered the mercantile, holding Luke in her arms. She smiled at the owner who looked up from the

flour sacks he was arranging on the shelf. "Good morning, Mr. Lindon."

"Well, I'll be if it isn't the disappearing Mrs. Donner." He grinned, his wrinkles deepening as he laughed. "I heard rumors that you appeared here and there, but I hadn't seen you with my own two eyes to make sure people told me the truth."

"I had a baby. I wasn't in shape to do a lot of traveling."

The man ran his hand through his white, shaggy hair. "So that's true too? You're staying with Mr. Craftsman because no one would take you in when you lost your home after Jim's death?"

She shook her head, thankful no one else could hear them. "I don't like gossip."

"It's not gossip if you tell me what you're doing."

"I see you still have a funny way of rationalizing things."

He shrugged. "I like to know what's going on with my customers. I don't see that as being intrusive. It just means I care. And I do care about you, Mrs. Donner. You are one of the few customers who always had a kind word for people at a time when they needed it."

"You mean, you've been listening to me talk to people when I shop here?"

"A man can't help but overhear some conversations as he stocks the shelves."

She didn't know if she liked him or not. Sometimes, he displayed great kindness, but then there were times when he was a downright snoop. "You're rationalizing again."

Sighing, he gave her pleading look. "So I care too much. What's the harm? If it makes you feel any better, I assured Preacher Amos and several others from your church that you wouldn't dare share a bed with Neil Craftsman unless you married him."

Her face flushing, she struggled to find a proper response. Fortunately, the bell rang above the door and Caroline and Rachel stepped into the store. As soon as they saw her, they ran in her direction.

"I'll leave you to your friends." Ralph patted Luke on the head and went to the counter to take care of a customer.

"Oh Sarah, I am so sorry that Hubert was rude to you," Caroline said as she gave Sarah a big hug. "I had no idea he could be that way. I mean, he's been demanding at times, but never did I see him exhibit such bad manners."

"And Jack and I decided to leave the church," Rachel added. "When we heard the sermon the preacher gave on the fall of the righteous, we knew he was talking about you and couldn't believe it. I mean, you grew up in that church. He should know you better than that."

Caroline nodded. "With everyone, including us, turning you away when you needed a place to stay..." She pressed her hand to her chest. "I am sorry that I didn't take you in, Sarah."

Rachel anxiously nodded. "I am too. We could have found a spot for you in our home."

Pleased, and relieved, Sarah smiled. "Caroline, your family was sick. And Rachel, your house is already packed as it is. There's no harm. It's all worked out. And I'm glad we're still friends."

"Always," Rachel replied, giving her a hug. Then she looked at Luke. "He looks like you. I don't see much of Jim in him at all."

"He's a darling," Caroline agreed, touching his chin. "His eyes are brown, just like yours."

"And he has your blond hair, your nose, and your forehead." Rachel lowered her voice. "Thankfully, one of Jim's better features was his chin. I never did understand what you found appealing about him."

Sarah shrugged. "He was attentive and kind to my sister. When she eloped with Raphael, I thought he might turn his affections on me once he got to know me."

"But he didn't." Caroline's voice was solemn.

Giving her friend a sharp look, Sarah asked, "How can you know that? I never said anything."

"You didn't have too. It was written all over your face."

Sarah glanced at Rachel who nodded. "It's true, Sarah. You looked happier after he died."

Sarah closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I didn't realize my feelings were transparent." It made her feel exposed, and she didn't like that.

Caroline bit her lower lip, an action Sarah recognized as her nervous habit of trying to bring up unpleasant topics. At Sarah's urging, Caroline spoke. "You might as well know that Preacher Amos and Hubert have begun a search to find a husband for you."

"What?" Noticing Ralph's curious glance in her direction, she lowered her voice. "They can't do that."

"They are convinced that you need a husband to bring you back to your senses. They believe that Mr. Craftsman has bewitched you."

"Oh, that's silly. Neil's been nothing but generous and kind. Why, he even lets me make decisions and stands up for me."

Rachel touched her arm. "Then he really has changed?"

"Yes. He's not the same person he used to be."

"Then he must be like the prodigal son. I heard Neil started out along the right path and lost his way. So he's found his way back. That's wonderful. I remember when he got married to Cassie and his mother was telling everyone that she hoped he would stop his life of...Well, you know."

The bell rang again and Sarah detected a knowing gleam in Ralph's eye when Neil walked through the door. *Leave it to Ralph to enjoy a person happening to show up when others are talking about him.* She could sense the rumors ready to fly as soon as she left the place.

"We won't keep you," Caroline whispered. "We believe there's nothing going on between you and Neil, regardless of what the preacher and my idiot husband says."

Neil stood at a distance, directing his gaze to the candles on the shelf in front of him. Sarah decided that it was time to let people know she wasn't ashamed to be associated with him. "Neil? Would you like to meet my friends?"

His head snapped in her direction, his eyes wide. Even Ralph's jaw dropped, and two elderly ladies stopped to stare at her. To his credit, Neil simply nodded and approached them.

Seeking to appear calm while her cheeks grew hot from embarrassment to have such an attentive audience, she made the introductions, marveling that her voice sounded steady.

Neil tipped his hat and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you," to Caroline and Rachel.

"Any friend of Sarah is a friend of ours," Rachel replied. "Perhaps you and Sarah should bring your children to my house after church this Sunday and we can have a late lunch together."

Neil glanced at Sarah, and she realized he was asking whether or not she would accept the invitation, so she gave a slight nod. "We would be delighted."

"Well, good." Rachel exhaled, looking relieved, and said, "I suppose Caroline and I should go."

"Yes," Caroline agreed. "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Craftsman."

As they hastened to the door, Neil turned to Sarah. "You didn't have to do that."

She inwardly grimaced when she saw Ralph raise an eyebrow. The elderly women shook their heads and whispered whatever it was that nosy old ladies said to each other when they didn't like something.

"I know," Sarah finally replied, "but I wanted to."

"I'll get a basket and you can put whatever you want into it, all right."

"All right."

While she shifted a cooing Luke to her other arm, she caught sight of Caroline and Rachel giggling. Frowning, she wondered what they found amusing. When Caroline's eyes met hers, Caroline mouthed, "You look happy with him."

Sarah, understanding the insinuation, gasped. Were her feelings that obvious? A quick glance in Ralph's direction notified her that they were. Ralph still had that annoying gleam in his eye. Her friends giggled again and slipped out the door.

Neil returned with the basket. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." Face redder than a tomato, she hurried to select the foods she wanted so they could get out of there as soon as possible.

Chapter Fourteen

June brought warm breezes and longer days, and to Sarah's dismay, it also brought an onslaught of single men who either came under the guise of checking out Neil's cattle for purchase or came outright and asked to court her. One such man rode up to the property on his horse while she was hanging the clean laundry on the clothing line to dry in the warm wind. Emily stayed with her to help her.

"Mrs. Donner, don't the sheets look like they're dancing?" Emily asked, pointing to the white sheet that would have blown across the field had it not been for the pins holding it firmly in place on the line.

She gave her a mischievous look. "It does. Can you dance like that?"

Emily scrunched her nose as if thinking about it. Finally, she nodded. "I think so. You tell me if this is right." In her eight-year-old enthusiasm, she flung her arms around and twirled in fast circles before she fell on the soft green grass.

Chuckling, she took the girl's hand and helped her up. "That was perfect!"

Emily bowed, so she clapped her hands.

Then Sarah bent to retrieve a towel from the basket. “Will you hand me more pins?”

“All right.” She rushed to obey. “Here.”

“Thank you. You are a wonderful helper.”

“Do you think I’ll make a good wife someday?”

“Oh, there’s no doubt about it. You’ll be an excellent wife. You can cook, clean, do laundry, make people laugh, and you look pretty.”

“But I don’t know how to sew a dress.” She frowned as Sarah lifted one of her dresses and put it on the line. She hastened to give Sarah more pins.

“Well, I’ll teach you how to sew.”

“Really?”

“Sure. It takes a lot of practice and patience. It won’t be as easy as cooking or cleaning.”

“Oh, but I can learn, can’t I?”

“You’re a very smart person. I have no doubt you can do anything you set your mind to. I understand why your father takes you hunting and horse riding.”

Emily bounced around Sarah. “Look, the towel looks like it’s dancing with the dress.”

Sarah watched as the two items got tangled up. “I put them too close together.”

“Can we dance?”

She grinned. “I think someone is trying to get out of helping with the laundry.”

“I’m not, Mrs. Donner. I promise. I just want to dance one time with you.”

Sarah quickly lengthened the space between the towel and dress before joining Emily. “What do you want me to do?”

“Hold my hands and I’ll lead.”

Sarah obeyed and laughed as Emily led her in circles until she tripped and fell. Emily tumbled next to her, also laughing.

“That was fun,” Emily replied.

“Yes, it was. I can’t remember the last time I laughed so hard.”

Emily wrapped her arms around her neck and hugged her. “I’m glad you’re here, Mrs. Donner.”

Warmth flooded her heart as she embraced the girl. “I’m glad I’m here too, Emily.” She stroked the girl’s soft hair. “You’re a good girl.”

“Mrs. Donner?” someone asked.

Startled, Sarah looked up, just noticing the tall man who loomed before her. Squinting, she helped Emily up and smoothed her dress. “Yes, I’m Mrs. Donner. Do you need something? Perhaps you are here to see Mr. Craftsman about his cattle?”

“No, ma’am. I came by to pay you a visit.” The man ran his hands along his suspenders, and he wore a grin that made her think of a jester in a royal court. Taking off his brown hat, revealing his wild brown mane, he nodded. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Turning to Emily, he said, “And you.”

Emily gave a polite greeting and returned to the basket.

“You’ll have to forgive us, Mr....?” Sarah began.

“The name is Barney Weiss.”

“Mr. Weiss, I hope you don’t think us rude if we finish hanging up the laundry.”

“Oh, a man never minds a woman doing woman’s work.”

She stiffened for a moment but proceeded to the clothes line where she set to the task of hanging up one of Neil’s shirts. The wind carried the scent of him that the soap and water didn’t eliminate. She momentarily stopped, enjoying

the reminder of Neil's masculine scent that reminded her of the outdoors and hard work. It was probably silly to enjoy the smell, but she found that she liked to think of anything that had to do with him.

Barney cleared his throat, bringing her attention back to the chore. She accepted the pins from Emily and hastened to hang the shirt next to her dress.

"I hope you don't mind a personal question," Barney told her.

"I have nothing to hide," she replied. "Ask anything you like."

"You and Mr. Craftsman aren't...Look, I don't mean to pry but it wouldn't be appropriate if the situation lent itself to that of an intimate nature."

Emily gave him a hard look. "My pa is a good man. He sleeps in one bedroom and Mrs. Donner sleeps in another one. I sleep in the third bedroom."

Sarah wasn't surprised by the girl's outspoken tone, but Barney apparently was, for she noted his jaw dropping. "Emily is right, Mr. Weiss. Neil has offered me a place to stay and that is all. There is nothing improper going on."

He seemed relieved. "I heard you were an honest woman. I worked with your husband."

"So you and Jim were friends?"

"We talked on occasion. He said you were an orderly woman and a fine cook. He had no complaints."

"He must have loved her," Emily spoke up, handing Sarah more pins.

Sarah watched Barney, wondering if Jim ever said that to someone he knew, for he never said it to her.

"I assume so," Barney replied. "Men don't go around discussing their feelings to other men."

Just as I thought. Why should she hope that Jim found something in her to love? The sting she experienced was a slight one and would be gone soon enough.

"That's not true," Emily argued. "My daddy's farmhand tells everyone how much he loves his wife. He says she's the best thing that ever happened to him."

It was true. Sarah had heard him brag about her one time when she was in the barn. She also recalled the envious feeling that lodged itself in her gut for the rest of the week. Sighing, she hung up a pair of Neil's pants.

Barney laughed. "Maybe I should say that some men don't go around talking about their feelings."

"That would be better," Emily agreed.

"I have to admit, you have a good sense of humor," Sarah told him. "Most of the men who've been coming by don't like an outspoken girl."

He shrugged. "The way I see it, a girl has a right to speak her mind."

She arched an eyebrow but didn't say anything. She had a hard time believing him, and she didn't know why. Once she hung up the last item of clothing, he offered to carry the basket for her. Reluctant, she accepted, for she knew it meant he would want to come into the house and stay awhile. Once they reached the porch, Emily said she was going to find her father.

"Neil Craftsman certainly is teaching his daughter to be bold," Barney remarked as she opened the kitchen door.

Jim's mother looked up from the table where she was feeding five-month-old Luke.

Sarah ran over to her, struggling to be polite. "Mrs. Donner, I asked you not to give him cow's milk. You know he gets constipated when he drinks it."

Beatrice waved her hand. "Little Jim wouldn't stop fussing, so I gave him a bottle. What's the harm?"

“I asked you to come and get me if he was hungry.” She stopped herself before reminding the woman that she still breastfed *Luke*. She didn’t want to disgust Barney.

The woman chuckled. “My dear, Sarah, I saw that you had company and didn’t wish to intrude.”

My dear Sarah? The only time the irritating woman used those words was when they were in front of other people. Flushed, Sarah grabbed the bottle from Luke and hoped the three ounces he drank wouldn’t cause too much trouble to his body.

“What are you doing?” Beatrice asked, her eyes wide.

“I’m back now, so I’ll feed him.” Sarah picked him out of her arms and stormed to the stairs so she could go to her bedroom for privacy.

“Sarah, I was only trying to help.”

Sarah whirled back, astonished at the tears the woman was “unsuccessfully” trying to dab with a handkerchief Barney handed her. Biting back a comment on how sick and tired she was of seeing Beatrice play the same scene for almost every man that had been coming out to see her, she stumped up the stairs, not caring if she seemed rude or not. Life was getting unbearable with all the men showing up several times a week.

“It’s all because Preacher Amos wants to see me married to someone who’ll take me back to his church,” she muttered as she shut the door to her room. “Well, I’m not going back. I have a mind of my own and I’ll use it!”

Luke cooed at her and grabbed her necklace.

Setting him on the floor so he could sit, she took off the family heirloom and placed it in her jewelry box which sat on her dresser. Picking her son back up, she realized that Jim’s mother hadn’t changed his diaper and quickly proceeded to do the chore before she fed him.

“Pa!”

Neil turned to Emily after he finished unsaddling a horse. Straightening up, he let Ben take the gelding. “Hi, Em. Are you and Mrs. Donner finished with the laundry?”

“We are.” She skipped over to Ben and watched as he put the horse back into its stall. “I want to ride him after supper. Can I, Pa?”

He grinned. “Yes, you may. Do you have a clean pair of pants?”

“I do. Mrs. Donner put a patch on my old ones so I can wear those again. I like her. She teaches me how to do female things and she tells me good stories and dances with me. We were having a lot of fun before another one of those men showed up.”

The smile faltered. “Another man came out to see her?”

“Uh huh.” She hopped up on a bucket that was turned upside down. She held out her arms and balanced on one foot. “He was thin and tall. You know, he’s not as ugly as that Mr. Bonnet that came by last week. But I think he was pretending to like me. I don’t believe he really likes the way I think.”

He frowned, wondering if Sarah found this one interesting. Why couldn’t Amos and Beatrice stop sending men out to visit her? Neil thought that he and Sarah worked out a reasonable solution with Beatrice by allowing her to visit twice a week for two hours so she could see Luke, but the woman continued to send men in hopes that Sarah would marry one of them. It bothered Neil to no end, especially when the men wanted to ask him about Sarah, to see if she was worth their time. He hated answering those questions, so he often found something else to do. Yes, Sarah was worth any man’s time and

attention, but he would rather die than tell them that. And he prayed that they wouldn't find out. With each new potential suitor, his stomach tensed into all kinds of terrible knots.

"Is the man still here?" he asked Emily, ignoring the knowing grin Ben threw his way.

His farmhands made it no secret that they wanted to see Sarah become the next Mrs. Craftsman, and he had to admit that the thought pleased him as well, though he didn't think their friendship progressed to that stage yet. She still needed time to establish who she was as Sarah instead of taking on her husband's identity.

"Yes. They're in the house. I didn't want to be around them so I came here." She stopped walking on the bucket and looked at him. "Are you going to stop these men from coming out? I don't want her to leave." Her eyes lit up. "I know! You could marry her. Then they'd have to stop."

"I should see if Mrs. Donner is giving Sarah a hard time," Neil said.

Ben chuckled.

"Don't you have work to do?" Neil snapped.

"Not at the moment, boss."

"Well, find something. I don't pay you to watch my love life."

"Interesting you should use the word 'love' in conjunction with Sarah."

Groaning, Neil hurried out of the barn, Emily at his heels.

Once he opened the kitchen door, he was relieved to see that Sarah had abandoned the stranger who sat at the kitchen table talking to Mrs. Donner.

They immediately stopped talking and glanced in his direction.

"Where's Sarah?" he asked.

“She’s in her bedroom with her baby. She mustn’t be disturbed,” Beatrice said. “She is doing what nature designed her to do.”

“You mean breastfeed?”

She gasped.

“Mr. Craftsman, I do not wish to intrude but I don’t think such talk is appropriate to delicate ears,” the nasally sounding stranger admonished him.

“Last time I checked, this was my house, which means I can say whatever I want. There’s nothing inappropriate in mentioning a woman breastfeeding her child.”

Beatrice gasped again, bringing her hands up to her ears.

He rolled his eyes and bounded up the steps, almost breaking into laughter when he heard Emily say, “I plan to breastfeed when I have a baby someday. Sarah said that it’s the best kind of milk a baby can get.”

“Oh, Barney, do you see why Sarah needs you to rescue her from this horrible place?” Beatrice whined.

Gritting his teeth, Neil knocked on Sarah’s door.

“Who is it?” Sarah called out.

“Neil.”

She opened the door, holding a sleeping Luke in her arms. “Did Emily send for you?”

“No but I thought I’d make sure no one was causing you problems. I know it upsets you when Beatrice is here.”

“I thought if I let her come spend time with Luke, then she wouldn’t keep sending men out here to meet me. But she’s getting worse. I don’t know how else to handle it than to hide in my room.”

Relieved because she didn’t want this man anymore than she had wanted the others, he asked, “Do you want me to get rid of them?”

Sighing, she nodded. "I should be able to do it myself, shouldn't I?"

"I don't mind helping you out. Sit tight. I'll get rid of them." And he was more than happy to do that for her if it meant she wouldn't get attached to the man. He returned to the kitchen.

"Mrs. Donner, why do you keep calling Luke 'little Jim?'" Emily asked, jumping up and down on the floor.

"Why, it's his name of course," Beatrice answered.

"But his mother calls him Luke."

"Yes, but my son would have named him Jim, after his own name. It's a family tradition."

"I don't think it's right to call Luke by another name. His father died and his mother is the one who named him. Pa says that we need to call people by the name our parents gave us. I was here when your son died, and he died before Luke was born, so he never named him. So it's up to Mrs. Donner to name him and she named him Luke. That means Luke is his name."

"Sometimes we must honor the wishes of the dead."

"But Mrs. Donner said that your son didn't care about Luke."

Neil paused, taking a sudden interest in this new information. Sarah hadn't told him this.

"Of course, he cared about Luke." Beatrice shook her head. "I mean, little Jim."

"No, he didn't." Emily stopped jumping and leaned on the kitchen table so she could look the woman in the eye. "She told me that when the robbers came, Jim ran off and left them with her. He got shot while he was trying to get away. I don't think your son was a nice man for leaving her to the robbers. My pa wouldn't have done that to her."

“How dare you compare your father to my son?” Beatrice stood up, her face red. “I don’t need to put up with your insolence, little girl.”

“I’m not trying to be insolent, Mrs. Donner. I’m just trying to tell you that your daughter-in-law is a good person and you should call your grandson Luke because that’s the name she gave him.”

“She’s right, Mrs. Donner,” Neil finally spoke. “The least you can do is call her son Luke.”

“Why, I can’t believe you would dare intervene in a family affair,” Beatrice huffed.

“This is my house, and as far as I’m concerned, this is Sarah’s house too. When you’re here, you’ll do as Sarah says.”

“Neither one of you knows how to honor a parent.”

“We are honoring you by putting up with your demanding presence twice a week, Mrs. Donner. This is her house and while you’re here, you will have to respect her wishes. If I hear that you aren’t, I’m going to personally take you back to town. Do I make myself clear?” He crossed his arms and waited for her to argue with him.

Beatrice shook her head and looked at the man sitting next to her. “Mr. Weiss, are you going to let him talk to me like that?”

Mr. Weiss stood up, put his hat on his head, and tipped it in Neil’s direction. “I agree with what he said, ma’am. If you’ll excuse me, Mr. Craftsman, I’ll find my way out.”

Neil nodded.

Beatrice angrily straightened her dress and followed Mr. Weiss out of the house.

Emily turned to him. “That was much better than what I was doing to get rid of them!”

Neil smiled. “It’s getting harder to fend them off, isn’t it?”

"It is. I hope you'll do something about that."

He studied her. "You're not still hoping for your mother to return?"

She sighed. "You told me she's not coming back. I guess it's time I listened."

He knelt down and hugged her. "I'm sorry, Em. I really am."

"I know, Pa. And I'm sorry too."

"You have nothing to be sorry about, honey."

"I'm going to do everything I can to make sure Mrs. Donner stays. I do everything she asks. If I make myself useful enough, she won't want to leave."

"Honey, there's nothing you can do that will make Mrs. Donner leave, all right?"

The sound of footsteps on the staircase interrupted them. Neil stood up to see Sarah entering the kitchen.

"Em here did a great job of fending them off for you," Neil said.

Sarah smiled. "Thank you, Emily. And thank you, Neil."

"Where's Luke?" Emily asked.

"He's taking a nap. Would you like to learn to sew? We'll start with a simple pattern."

"I sure would!" Looking at him, she wondered, "Do you need me to help with anything outside?"

He laughed. "No. You can help Mrs. Donner."

Sarah grinned. "We'll call you when supper's ready."

He nodded and left the house.

Chapter Fifteen

Sarah had a nagging sensation that things were building up to a confrontation, and she discovered she was right on the second Sunday in July. Her hands shook as she slipped into the dress she made from the green fabric Neil bought for her. She couldn't remember a time when she wore such a daring color. She felt as if she were committing a sin, though she knew she wasn't. Pressing through the task, she finished and went to the mirror.

Exhaling, she picked up the brush and ran it through her wavy blond tresses that fell softly down her back. One woman at the church wore her hair down, and Sarah thought the style was attractive so she decided to imitate it. Picking up a ribbon, she forced her hands to steady as she pulled the sides of her hair back and wrapped the ribbon to keep her hair out of her face. She placed her hands on her stomach and studied her reflection. Wide brown eyes, fair skin, dark blond hair that fell over her shoulders, and a dress that hid her flaws. She liked what she saw.

No wonder the preacher told women not to dress themselves up. I didn't realize I was this pretty. She shook her head and placed her new white hat, with flowers tucked into it, on her head. Then

she slipped on her white gloves. “No. There’s nothing wrong with looking good. I was made this way.”

Determined, she picked up six-month-old Luke whose eyes grew wide. She laughed. “Don’t you recognize your mother?”

A smile lit up his face and she kissed his forehead. His blond hair smelled of the lilac soap she bathed him with the night before.

“I love you, you know,” she whispered.

He cooed in response.

She held him close to her, taking comfort in his presence, and strode out of the room and down the steps. When she entered the kitchen, Neil looked up from the paper he was reading. Emily, who sat next to him as she played with her dolls, jumped out of her chair.

“You look as pretty as my ma,” she said.

Sarah blushed. “Thank you, Emily. You look pretty too.”

Neil put his newspaper on the table and stood up. “Em’s right, Sarah. You’re the loveliest woman I’ve ever seen.”

Sarah’s eyes met his and her breath caught in her throat. No man had looked at her the way he looked at her, and she wasn’t sure what to make of it, except that she enjoyed it.

Clearing his throat, he continued, “We’re running late. I’ll bring the buggy around.”

She watched as he left.

Emily went to the table and picked up a doll that Sarah didn’t recognize.

“Emily? Where is Cass?”

The girl fiddled with the blond hair on her new doll. “Oh, I got tired of her. I asked Grandma for this doll instead. She came with a sister.” She held up the other blond doll.

“Their names are Amy and Amanda. They’re twins. I’ve never seen twins before. Have you?”

Sarah thought about it. “No. I haven’t.”

Luke giggled and reached for her hair. Sarah gasped and gently pulled his hand away, amazed at his strength.

“You shouldn’t hurt your mother, Luke,” Emily admonished. “You could pull her hair out and then she’d be bald.”

A smile crossed Sarah’s face. “I don’t think that’s a concern, but it did hurt. Are you taking those dolls to church?”

“Yes.”

Horses neighed from outside. A quick peek out the open window showed Neil pulling the buggy up to the house. “We should go.” Sarah took a step forward.

“Pa loves you. He’s going to ask you to marry him.”

Sarah halted in mid-step. She couldn’t be sure what Emily was thinking because the girl had her head bowed over her dolls. Stopping Luke from grabbing for her hair again, she said, “Surely, he hasn’t told you this.”

She shrugged. “He doesn’t need to. I see the way he looks when he talks to you. He didn’t look at Ma that way. He and Ma rarely said anything to each other, but he spends all his free time with you.”

Feeling heat rise to her cheeks, she pushed aside the flip flops in her stomach. “He and I have formed a friendship.”

“Michelle says that when a boy and a girl spend a lot of time together, it means that they are courting, and courting means they love each other.”

Sarah had heard the name but couldn’t remember where. “Who’s Michelle?”

“She’s one of the older students in class. She graduated this year.”

Oh, the know-it-all Michelle from Emily's school. That explained the comment. "Well Emily, life isn't simple and neither are people. You can't tell for sure what will happen."

Emily looked up at her then, her green eyes intense. "Do you love him?"

The question, so bold, threw her off guard. Before she could answer, Neil opened the kitchen door. Breathing a sigh of relief, she held her son with one arm and held her free hand out to Emily.

Emily, holding onto her dolls with one hand, accepted Sarah's extended hand and didn't ask her anything else. Apparently, eight year olds were smarter than Sarah gave them credit for. She wasn't comfortable with the girl asking if she loved her father. Could Emily tell? Was Sarah that obvious, even to children? And if her feelings were that transparent, did Neil know?

After Neil helped Emily into the buggy, he turned to Sarah and held his hand out to her. Aware of the fact that Emily studied them, Sarah murmured a thanks and accepted his hand, noticing how warm and firm it was. Her face flushed as his touch sent tingles through her body. He placed his other hand on the small of her back as she stepped into the buggy. This sense of nervous excitement had been steadily increasing whenever he was near. She didn't know how she could stop it, or even if she wanted to. It was a wonderful sensation but one that made it hard to think.

During the ride to town, Emily did most of the talking. When they got to the church, they sat next to Rachel and Caroline's families. Preacher Amos blamed her for the fact that Rachel and Caroline's families left his church to go to the one Neil did. She did enjoy Neil's church, and it amazed her that women dressed to look their best and that Preacher Peters told the men to treat women as their equals. The concepts were so

new that it took her a good month before she felt comfortable sitting through a sermon. Caroline said her husband began to teach their daughter to play the piano, and Caroline and Rachel agreed that their families were happier at the new church so it all seemed to work out.

On that particular day, people complimented her on her dress, saying she looked beautiful. She wasn't prepared for the kind words, so she didn't know how else to respond than with a shy thank you.

It wasn't until after they returned home with Neil's mother that the confrontation occurred. They had just finished their supper when a loud knocking brought Sarah to the kitchen door. She gasped when she realized Preacher Amos and his congregation stood outside the house.

"Mrs. Donner, it is with a heavy heart that we approach you," the preacher told her.

She glanced at her son who sat on the hardwood floor playing with two pans and a wooden spoon. The clanking made it hard for her to understand the preacher. Turning back to the group of fifty people, including Jim's mother, she stepped outside and shut the door, determined that she wouldn't show her apprehension. "What is it?"

"Would you look at the dress she's wearing?" a woman hissed to the woman standing next to her. "Absolutely dreadful."

"I don't recall the Good Book speaking against a woman wearing the color green," Sarah said, shoving her shaky hands behind her back.

The woman snapped her head in Sarah's direction.

Sarah waited for a reply but it never came. Satisfied that she finally managed to shut old lady Mildred's mouth, she looked at the preacher.

"It appears that living in this house, under the influence of Mr. Craftsman, has done incredible damage to you, Sarah," Amos spoke, his expression sad. "Now, I don't blame you. None of us do. We realize now that not taking you in when you had nowhere to go was wrong. We are here to correct that problem. You have a welcome invitation to stay with anyone in this group that you choose."

Taking a deep breath, she replied, "I wish to remain here."

A round of disapproving murmurs greeted her ears.

"We cannot allow this rebellion to continue," the preacher insisted. "As the man who's responsible for your spiritual well-being, I have to take you away from here. Unless you designate someone to stay with, you will go with Beatrice Donner."

Sarah gave a sharp look at Jim's mother who smiled smugly at her. "No. I will not live with her. It is enough that I let her come by twice a week to see Luke."

"Then you refuse to do what's right."

"I'm not doing anything wrong."

"That proves it." Beatrice nodded emphatically at him. "There's no hope for her. She's fallen too far away from what's right. We can't let her lead her son into the same immoral fate that she's chosen."

Sarah's spine stiffened. "You're not taking my son anywhere!"

"Your son is also Jim's son, and since Jim is dead, that means half the rights of guardianship go to me."

"It does not!" She stomped her foot and yelled, "Get out of here! All of you!"

"Sarah," Amos began, "we have to consider what's best for the child."

The door opened behind her, stopping her from screaming at them again. She jerked to the side so Neil's mother could step onto the porch.

"What's going on here?" Gwen demanded, her hands on her hips and her gaze sweeping the crowd.

The preacher shook his head. "This does not concern you, ma'am. We merely have business with Mrs. Donner."

"Well, if you're on my son's property, then anything you have to say is my business." She crossed her arms. "So, Sarah, what are they doing to trouble you?"

"Mrs. Craftsman, I don't want to involve you in this mess," Sarah whispered.

She waved her hand at her. "I have a son who's gotten himself into quite a few messes in his time." She glanced at the crowd. "Though I can tell you all, he doesn't do so anymore." Turning her tender eyes to Sarah, she asked, "What is it, Sarah?"

The warmth in the woman's expression brought tears to Sarah's eyes. Quickly dabbing them away, she cleared her throat and replied, "Jim's mother came to take Luke."

"Little Jim," Beatrice snapped. "And of course, I came to take him from this den of immorality."

Gwen's lips tightened. "I assure you that there's nothing of the sort going on. They have behaved themselves."

"A mother has to stick up for her son, no matter how much of a brute he is," Jim's mother hissed.

"Interesting you should say that," Sarah noted.

Beatrice gasped. "Jim was the gentlest man the world has ever known."

Sarah was ready to disqualify that remark but the condemning words fell silent. What else did the woman have but her illusion of how things were between Sarah and Jim?

Gwen put her hands up to stop the murmuring from the group. "None of that matters now. What does matter is

that we are moving forward. And since that is the case, I might as well make the announcement. My son and Sarah are getting married, so all of this talk is useless.”

Sarah felt as if the air had been knocked out of her lungs. Marriage? She and Neil had discussed nothing of the sort! Not that the idea didn’t appeal to her. In fact, the notion rather pleased her. But still...no agreement had been made!

“That is out of the question!” Beatrice grabbed Amos’ hand. “You must stop this. If they marry, I’ll never get Little Jim to live with me.”

A horse’s neigh interrupted the people. Looking at the source of the sound, Sarah saw Neil riding his stallion up to the porch, the evening sun beating down on him. When he reached the porch, several people backed away. “What’s going on here?” he demanded.

“Oh good, you’re here!” Gwen skipped down the steps. “I was just telling this nice group of well-wishers the good news.”

Sarah’s stomach tensed into an even bigger knot than before Gwen showed up. Darting a glance through the window she saw that Emily was playing with Luke. Luke laughed at the silly faces Emily made at him. That scene helped ease her tension...but only a little bit.

“Good news?” Neil, predictably, asked.

“Yes.” His mother beamed at him. “I was just telling Preacher Amos and the nice people that attend his church that you and Sarah are going to get married.”

To Neil’s credit, Sarah didn’t see him flinch the way Jim had when her parents presented him with the proposal. Instead, Neil’s eyes met hers, but she had no idea what he was thinking.

Beatrice clutched her hands to her chest. “I can’t allow this to happen. Sarah, you are free to marry whoever you wish,

but I will be taking my precious Little Jim home.” Beatrice barged toward the door.

In the next instant, Sarah blocked the woman’s way to the door. Neil jumped off the horse so he stood between her and Beatrice. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest while Neil spoke in low, even tones.

“Mrs. Donner,” he told Beatrice, “hasn’t it worked out that you get to see Luke twice a week? Sarah hasn’t been unfair to you. In fact, considering the degree of hostility you’ve shown her, I surmise that she’s been a saint when it comes to dealing with you.” He peered over his shoulder at Sarah. “When do you want the wedding?”

The question caught her off guard as much as the onlookers staring at them did. “Oh.” She cleared her throat, her heart racing at the thought of being his wife. “I...When do you think Preacher Peters will be able to perform the ceremony?”

“You see?” Beatrice turned to the group. “They didn’t plan on getting married. They are only saying this so I can’t have my Little Jim.”

“His name is Luke,” Neil sharply stated. “And by tonight, he’ll be Luke Craftsman because we’re going to town to get married right now.”

Sarah’s jaw dropped. *Now?*

Gwen squealed and ran over to Sarah. Wrapping an arm around Sarah’s shoulders, she told Beatrice, “I assure you that my son will be a good father to Luke.”

Beatrice turned to the preacher. “You have to stop them. They can’t get married! I want my grandson.”

“You are welcome to see him, but it will be on Sarah’s terms,” Neil said. “Now, I advise everyone to get off my property before I have my farmhands chase you off.”

“But...But...” Beatrice stared at the preacher.

Amos sighed. "If they are willing to do what's right, I won't stop them. You'll have to concede to what Mr. Craftsman says. Once he marries Sarah, he has the authority."

"Good." Neil nodded. "Then it's settled. No one has to come out here anymore trying to convince Sarah to leave."

Sarah turned her eyes to the strong man in front of her. Did he sound relieved about that? She wondered if it could be true, that he did want to marry her. But after Jim, she hardly dared to hope for such a thing. It was Gwen who announced the marriage, and Neil was doing his part by rescuing Sarah, once again, from a bad situation.

The preacher put his arm around a sobbing Beatrice and instructed the group to get into their buggies and wagons so they could depart.

Neil turned to Sarah and his mother. "Well, if I'm going to get married, I should at least take a quick bath. I don't want to smell like I've been spending all afternoon in the pasture."

"Oh good!" Gwen clapped. "I'll watch Emily and Luke and tuck them into bed."

Neil turned his face to the early evening sun, giving Sarah a good view of his profile. She was struck by his handsome features. He was so unlike Jim, and those differences weren't just on the surface. Her breath caught in her throat. *I do love him.* She mentally slapped herself. *No. Don't fall in love, Sarah. Don't you remember what happened last time? Don't let yourself be hurt like that again. Remember, he's only doing you a favor. He knows that you'll keep Luke if he offers you a permanent place in his home and life.*

Gwen opened the door and told Emily the news. Sarah took her focus off of Neil to study the girl's reaction, wondering how she would take it. After all, Sarah wasn't her mother. As if sensing her uncertainty, Neil pressed a hand on her arm and

walked through the doorway so he could sit next to Emily. Sarah held back, not feeling it was her place to explain the situation to the girl.

To her surprise, Emily nodded. "I know that Ma's not coming back. I didn't want to believe it, but it's true. It's like you always say, Pa. We have to move on and make the best of it. I'll try not to do anything to make Mrs. Donner leave."

The last sentence tore at Sarah's heart. She moved to the porch swing to regain her composure. Too much was happening too fast, and she didn't know what was going to happen next. She watched as the last person hopped on his horse and left the property. Closing her eyes, she wondered what she could do to make Emily feel secure.

Neil sat next to his new bride in the buggy, aware of the darkness surrounding them and the unspoken question hanging in the air. What did this new development mean to their relationship? Did they continue as before...or did they proceed forward? He knew that Sarah was in shock. Even he couldn't believe they were married. The preacher took the task to wed them in stride, as if he expected it. The ceremony was short and private. They only had the pastor's wife and son for witnesses. It was so unlike his wedding when he married Cassie. But then, that didn't come as a complete surprise. Cassie had been eager to be the center of attention. Not Sarah. Sarah would rather stay out of sight and watch others.

Crickets chirped through the still air.

Beside him, Sarah gave a slight jump.

"Are you all right?" he asked, thankful that he had something to say, even if it was a standard question.

She chuckled, her smile relaxing his nerves. “You’ll think I’m silly.”

He grinned. “What?”

She shook her head. “Well, I ought to tell you that I hate corn. I mean, I don’t mind when it’s on the plate, but when it’s high on a stalk like these all around us...It’s easy to imagine that someone is hiding in the shadows, especially when it’s dark out.”

“Then it’s a good thing I grow beans.” He inched over to her and slipped his arm around her shoulders. “I don’t mind protecting a pretty lady.”

She settled against him and he became aware of her body. She was softness and curves, the very thing that enticed his senses. He had been able to keep such thoughts suppressed for the past few months, but now that they were married, it seemed the defenses he had carefully built to protect himself from loving a woman were tumbling around him. Not only was she a woman, but she was a beautiful one. She both terrified and excited him, and he didn’t know what to do about either emotion.

He rested his head against her hair, noting the scent of lye soap she used to wash in the river. Washing in the river...This thought led to images of her bathing in the river. Wet, long hair falling down her back, soft plump breasts with drops of water lingering at her pink nipples, and further down...Heat swelled in his loins and his slacks suddenly seemed restrictive. Struggling to think of something else, anything that would make the bulge in his pants less noticeable, he focused on the gelding pulling their buggy along the smooth path.

“It’s silly, isn’t it?” she whispered, squirming closer to him. The curve of her breast pressed into his side.

His heart pounding, he forced his mind on her words. "What's silly?" He winced, realizing his voice came low and husky.

Thankfully, she didn't seem to notice. "It's silly to be afraid of stalks of corn."

He found a smile stretching across his face. "I don't know. When I was a kid, my father would grow them and one time I ventured in the cornfield. If I recall right, it took a good day for my father and his farmhands to find me."

She turned her face to him, her concerned expression piercing his shield. "How awful! How old were you?"

"About eight. Emily's age. I learned not to venture in again unless I left a trail to find my way back."

Her eyes widened. "You went in again?"

He shrugged. "I did on a challenge."

"That is awful."

He laughed at her incredulous expression. "I couldn't let Tommy Larson win one up on me."

"I hope Emily has more sense than to go into cornfields!"

"Oh, she does. She's a smart little girl. It's the boys you have to watch out for. They're the ones who are constantly looking to get into trouble."

"Are you saying that Luke might try something that foolhardy?"

"I'd guarantee it. Fortunately, he'll have his big sister to keep him in line."

"Well, I must warn him about cornfields when he's older."

It was a natural mothering instinct, he knew, that caused her to start fretting over her son before he could even crawl. And he loved her for it. He pressed his lips against her temple,

keeping them there a moment longer than necessary. "You're a good mother, Sarah."

She smiled but looked down at her hands which remained folded in her lap. He couldn't be sure but he thought he saw her blushing in the moonlight.

The gelding moved the buggy past the stalks of corn that marked the edge of Dave Larson's property and the beginning of his pastured land. "Is this better?" He motioned to the flat landscape.

"Much. I like being able to look out at the prairie."

And I like knowing that I'll be looking at you for the rest of my life. He kept the thought to himself. She was completely unaware of her affect on men, even when she had worn her drab colors. Try as she might, she couldn't hide her beauty. It didn't surprise him that men came out to talk with her. He nearly jumped at the chance his mother offered when Amos and his congregation came out.

Even if they married to make sure Beatrice Donner didn't take Luke from her, he wanted to be with her. It was a bonus that marrying her gave Emily a loving mother. Thankfully, Emily's questions about Cassie had stopped. Though she still missed her mother, she had told him that she liked Sarah and hoped Sarah would stay for a long time. *The poor girl's been through so much.* He prayed that this would be healing for her.

He pulled the buggy to a stop in front of the house and helped her out. "It's been a long day." He held her hands, not wishing to break contact but knowing it was inevitable. Her skin was warm and soft. The moonlight made her blond hair shine as it tumbled over her shoulders. Her eyes met his and he saw something in them he hadn't seen in any other woman's. It was a promise. A promise of hope, of happiness, and most importantly, of love.

Taking a deep breath, he said, "I am glad we're married."

She smiled and whispered, "I am too."

He leaned forward, ready to kiss her, recalling how sweet their kiss had been when they said their vows, and suddenly, the front door opened. Startled, he jerked back and released her hands. He tipped his hat over his eyes so that his mother wouldn't detect his embarrassment.

"Are you married?" the woman asked as she bounded down the steps with Luke in her arms.

"Yes, we are," he replied. "I should put the horse and buggy away." Turning to Sarah, he said, "No one will try to take Luke from you anymore."

"Thank you, Neil." She took Luke and kissed the boy on the forehead. He squirmed and pulled on her hair. Laughing, she said, "I think I know why women keep their hair up all the time. Has he eaten?" she asked his mother.

"No. I thought you might want to do that since you mentioned liking that part of the day the best," his mother replied.

Sarah nodded. "I'll take him upstairs. And thank you, Gwen."

Once the kitchen screen door shut behind Sarah and Luke, Neil turned his attention to his mother.

She motioned to the buggy. "I'm ready to go home."

She couldn't be serious. "No. It's late. You should stay here for the night."

"I insist on going home. I need to meet with my friends tomorrow morning."

"Mother, it's almost eleven. Just how early were you planning on seeing your friends?"

Raising her eyebrows, as if challenging him, she said, "Early. Very early."

His Redeeming Bride

He shook his head. She was lying. “Get back into the house. You’re tired. We’ll get you settled on the couch in the parlor.”

She let out a long sigh. “Is it wrong for a mother to want her son to have time with his new bride?”

“It’s not that kind of marriage. We agreed to it so that Mrs. Donner won’t take Luke away.”

“Sarah’s a good woman, the kind I prayed for you to receive.”

He glanced at the screen door. The kerosene lamp lit the kitchen and part of the stairway. Sarah was upstairs. In her bedroom. Was she waiting for him? “I don’t deserve a good woman.”

“I think after all you went through with Cassie, you do.”

He took a long look at his mother, noting the caring expression on her face. It never occurred to him that she picked up on the truth when it came to Cassie. He assumed she was blind to it, but as he studied her face, he realized she knew the truth all along but chose to appear ignorant in order to make life easier for him and for Cassie.

“It’s been a long day,” he finally said. “Go on in and get some sleep, all right? You won’t be in the way.”

Her expression reluctant, she obeyed and went into the house.

No. Sarah wasn’t waiting for him. She’d feed Luke and then go to sleep. Repeating that to himself, he hopped into the buggy and took it to the barn.

Chapter Sixteen

A week passed and Sarah wasn't sure how to relate to Neil. He was her husband, and yet, he wasn't. He kept his distance, stayed in his bedroom at night, and treated her as kindly as before. She didn't feel it was right to expect more. After all, getting married was his mother's idea, and he understood that Luke's future was at stake. He did the right and noble thing. Had it not been for Luke, he wouldn't have married her at all.

Sarah tried to go back to the way things were before the wedding, but she found the task daunting. It was merely a ceremony they went through. A pastor, some vows, a kiss, and a piece of paper. That was all there was to it. They should be able to continue on, enjoying the friendship they had developed over the course of five months. It should have been that easy. So why wasn't it?

One Saturday morning as she cooked eggs in a skillet, Emily sat in a chair at the kitchen table and entertained Luke who sat in his high chair. Luke giggled and Emily continued to make the dolls dance in front of him as she sang an off-beat tune. Sarah smiled. How nice it was to see the two getting along as if they were related by blood. Then again, Sarah decided she shouldn't be surprised. Children didn't make

distinctions regarding lineage like adults did. And Luke didn't know any father but Neil.

Frowning, she turned her attention back to the skillet. Luke had a right to know about Jim, and that meant he had a right to know Jim's mother. For the longest time, she prayed for a child, but if it had been her choice, Neil would have been Luke's father. Not that Neil hadn't taken Luke in as if he were his own, but there would have been something special in knowing that she and Neil created a new life together, something that was a blend of the two of them. She bit her lower lip and flipped the eggs over, careful not to disturb their yolks. Was there even the possibility that there might be more children?

The kitchen door opened and Emily threw her dolls down and ran to welcome her father. Sarah chuckled as he picked Emily up and gave her a big hug.

"I missed you, Pa," she said, hanging onto his neck.

"With the way you act, you'd think I'd been gone for a year." Though he rolled his eyes, his smile indicated his pleasure. He set her on her feet and hung up his hat. "And who do we have here?"

He knelt in front of Luke. Luke watched as Neil put his hands up to his eyes, quickly put his hands down, and said "Peek a boo". This game earned Neil a round of giggles from Luke. Neil did it again, which only made Luke laugh harder. Emily joined in and helped her father play the game.

"All right, all right," Sarah intervened through laughter of her own. "It's time to eat breakfast."

As they scrambled into their seats, she gathered the plates and set them down, filling them with eggs, bacon, biscuits and jelly. After she sat next to Luke so she could feed him, she listened as Neil and Emily explained their plans for riding in the pasture for the day.

“Why don’t you come along?” Neil offered. “You might want to learn to ride a horse.”

Sarah shook her head. “No thanks. You may like them and I understand their usefulness, but I have no desire to ride one.”

“It’s not scary,” Emily told her. “Why, I was riding one by myself when I was five.”

Sarah’s eyes grew wide. “Five?”

Neil nodded. “She was born for it. I’ve never seen anyone ride one as naturally as she does.”

“I could teach you,” the girl insisted.

“No. I’d rather not, though I do appreciate the offer. I want to work on the purple dress I’m making.”

Neil’s eyes met hers. “You’re making another dress?”

Nodding, she fed Luke a small piece of her biscuit. “I can’t wear the green one all the time.” Looking down at her brown dress, she admitted, “I’m tired of the colors I usually wear anyway.”

“Good for you, Sarah. You look good no matter what color you wear, but you can make a man stop and stare when you put on a pretty color.”

She blushed, her heart skipping a beat at his kind words. Daring a glance in his direction, she noted the red color in his face as he focused on his meal.

“It’s true,” Emily added. “Why, I remember hearing a man at church ask Pa if you two were going to be married because the man said you would make a fine looking wife. Pa got upset because he was jealous. Oh, he didn’t say anything but I could tell because when Pa’s upset, the vein in his forehead pops out like-”

“Emily,” Neil interrupted, shooting his daughter a stern look, “finish your meal so we can get out to the barn.”

Though Emily's slip most likely embarrassed him to no end, Sarah was secretly pleased that Neil considered her worthy of getting jealous over.

"You know what?" Neil looked up from his plate of half-eaten food as if Emily hadn't said anything. "I should take Luke out there."

She paused, her fork with a little bit of egg on it halted right in front of Luke's mouth. When Luke protested, she quickly fed him. Then she glanced at Neil. "How are you going to hold a baby while you're on a horse?"

"Oh, that's easy," he said. "All I need to do is put him in the harness I made when Emily was a baby. I used to take her with me when I went out into the fields. Actually, I pretty much took her everywhere with me. I used that harness a lot back then. It's good quality. I made it out of leather. Luke will just slip right in and he'll be strapped to my chest. Now that he's old enough to take in his surroundings, I think he'll have a lot of fun checking out the cattle and crops."

"Is he that old already?" Sarah sighed, recalling how tiny he was when he was born. He seemed to have grown into a chubby big baby overnight.

"I used to fit in that small harness?" Emily asked.

"You sure did. You loved being in that thing too. You'd even take naps in it."

"Can I see it?"

"After we finish breakfast."

That seemed to be the only motivation she needed since she practically inhaled the rest of her meal.

"What do you say?" Neil asked Sarah. "Can I take Luke out there?"

Sarah tore her eyes from Emily as she gulped down the milk in her cup. "I'll get him ready."

While she changed Luke's diaper, she heard Emily and Neil up in the attic as they searched for the harness.

"Pa, did I wear that little dress?" Emily asked.

"Yes. You used to wear all these dresses."

"Why did you save them?"

"In case you had a younger sister."

"Well, you might still need them, right?"

Sarah listened for his response, for she wondered the same thing.

"Em, you think too much for a girl your age," came his response.

Sarah unpinned the cloth diaper, trying not to dwell on her disappointment. She removed the soiled diaper and dropped it in the bucket at her feet.

Emily gave a loud groan. "But Pa, you tell me that I should think all the time because it will make me smart."

He laughed. "Touché."

"Too-what?"

"Touché. It means you win the argument. You are right. You do need to think because it will make you smart."

Sarah slipped the dry cloth under Luke's bare bottom as she noted the girl's eager jumping up and down on the attic floor.

Neil grunted and some objects clanked together before he stated, "Here it is. Still in fine condition too."

"I can't wait to see Luke in it!" Emily squealed.

"You will soon enough."

A lid to a trunk slammed shut.

"Pa?"

"What?"

"What do I call Mrs. Donner now that she's no longer Mrs. Donner? I mean, do I call her Mrs. Craftsman?"

A long pause followed while Sarah pinned the diaper securely on Luke who grinned at her. She bent down and kissed his nose. He laughed and reached for her hair, but she had it pulled back into a bun so he couldn't grab it.

"Ha ha," she retorted playfully.

He grunted but quickly smiled again and waved his arms.

"What do you want to call her?" Neil finally asked.

Sarah lifted Luke so he'd stop gurgling. Hastening to the door of her room, she turned her ear so she could hear them better. She wanted to know what Emily wished to call her.

"Well, Ma's not coming back, right?"

"Right." His voice was so low Sarah barely heard him.

"Then it makes sense that Mrs. Donner is now my mother since she married you."

"In a way, yes."

"Will Luke be calling you Pa?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought about it, but I guess so."

"I think I'll call her Ma."

"She'll like that." She detected a smile in his voice.

Sarah forced back the tears in her eyes and kissed the top of Luke's head. Stepping into the hallway, she waited for Neil and Emily to descend the ladder. Once Neil shut the attic door, she watched in fascination as he put the harness over his head and strapped it around his chest.

"I'm ready for him," he told her.

She handed Luke to him and he put the baby into the harness. Luke fit into it, his back to Neil's chest so he had a good view of everything in front of him. She didn't know why the sight of a man in faded denim pants and a blue cotton shirt carrying a baby in a harness should appeal to her as much as it

did. Neil looked downright handsome. Again, her stomach did those crazy flip flops.

Luke wiggled his arms and legs and babbled.

"If memory serves, you did the same thing," Neil told Emily.

Emily waved at Luke. "I'm going to have more fun than you because I'll be riding a horse! Come on, Pa! Let's go." She ran down the steps, calling out, "We'll be back for supper, Ma!" Then she flung open the kitchen door and rushed outside.

Sarah turned to Neil. "You won't be back for lunch?"

"We usually eat out in the pasture like the other farmhands do. Don't worry, I can find something edible for Luke. I'll even change and wash the diapers if you hand me a couple of clean ones."

She retrieved the new cloth diapers from her dresser and handed them to him.

He shoved them into the pouch he had sewn to the back of the harness. He took a moment to study her. "Are you sure you're all right with this?"

"Yes. I am. I trust you with him." She went over to Luke and kissed him on the top of his head. His blond wavy hair was soft to her lips. Smiling at Neil, she softly continued, "Neil, as far as I'm concerned, Luke is your son. Not only are you the only father he's ever known but you pay more attention to him than Jim would have. I hope you'll let him call you his father."

Neil brought his hands up to her arms and pulled her closer to him, his touch gentle but firm. "I do think of him as my son."

She nodded, aware of her flesh tingling where he touched her. "I know, and I'm grateful for that."

He leaned closer to her, his eyelids closing, and she followed suit, pulse racing, realizing that they were about to

kiss. His lips brushed against hers just as the kitchen door swung open and an impatient Emily called out, “Pa? Are you ready yet?”

They bolted from each other at the same moment, and for the brevity of the kiss, it consumed her with a searing heat that sparked her body in a way that Jim’s kisses never did. Clearing her throat and feeling flustered, she said, “You better go.”

He hesitated for a moment before he nodded. “You’re right. If I wait any longer, Emily will be charging up here like a knight going into battle.”

She chuckled at the image of the little girl wearing armor.

“Pa?”

“We’ll be back at supper time,” he replied.

Sarah stared after him as he traveled down the steps, thinking of the kiss and wondering what possibilities might lay ahead for them.

Late that night, Neil stood in the hallway, contemplating his options as he had every night since he married Sarah. The hallway was covered in darkness, but he knew where the three bedrooms were like he knew the back of his hand. The moonlight streaming through his bedroom window gave enough light through his open door to show him that Sarah left her door partially open. She used to shut it. That meant she was inviting him in, didn’t it?

They had kissed earlier that day. She hadn’t pulled away from him. Well, not until Emily interrupted. He thought that Sarah might be open to pursuing the physical side of their marriage. Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward, his bare

feet gliding slowly across the cool hardwood floor, barely making a sound. He would ask. Just one question and he would know either way.

His heart raced as he reached her door. She did touch his shoulder while she poured his coffee for him at supper. She hadn't done that before. He took that as a hopeful sign. *Maybe I'm reading too much into things. I want so badly for her to love me.* It hadn't occurred to him until that moment that he needed her...or that he loved her.

He didn't like this feeling of vulnerability that love required. It was easier to step back, to pretend that they weren't married and simply live as they had been. Friendship was nice and safe. But neither his heart nor his body was eager to play it safe. A man was hard pressed to find a woman better than Sarah. Neil would be a fool to turn his back on the chance of making their marriage all it could be.

That's where I'll start. I'll tell her that I love her and that I want to be a real husband to her.

Taking a deep breath, he softly knocked on her door. The door swung open and his gaze fell to her sleeping form tucked under her covers. The cool night air drifted through the room. Luke rolled over in his crib. Neil debated waking her up but didn't have the heart to do it. She worked hard on the purple dress that day. Inspecting the flattering dress that rested on her rocking chair, he realized she had completed it. He hoped she would wear it tomorrow. It would look nice on her.

He noticed Luke shiver, so he closed the window until it was open a crack and pulled the blanket up to his shoulders. The baby sighed and Neil smiled. It had been a fun day, taking the boy and Emily out to the fields. The only thing missing was being able to come home and kiss Sarah the way he wanted to.

Tomorrow. I'll tell her how I feel tomorrow. Sure, it was something he promised himself every night, but he was

determined this time. That, and he knew his body wouldn't leave him alone until he made a move to figure out if she wanted to join him in bed. Deciding that the next day would answer his questions, he quietly left the room and spent the rest of the night trying to sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

Sarah tied the purple ribbon around her hair. She inspected her reflection, noting the braiding of her hair and the way her dress showed off her curves. Blushing, she fought the urge to throw on one of her drab dresses. But she wanted Neil to be attracted to her. Maybe it would give him ideas pertaining to the bedroom. Twirling the brush in her hand, she wondered if it was wrong to tempt him, but how could it be wrong to tempt one's own husband to bed? It was strange that she was even interested in lovemaking since she didn't enjoy it with Jim. However, she had a feeling she would enjoy it with Neil. He actually listened to her and treated her with respect. His touch and kiss made her feel things that Jim's hadn't, at least not since she realized Jim would never love her.

She set the brush on the dresser, straightened her back, and opened the door. She wasn't an untried woman. She knew what a man and woman did together in bed, and she wanted that closeness with Neil. Should the chance come to act on her desire, she would give into it. Nodding, she marched out of her bedroom and down the staircase, determined to give Neil a kiss. If a kiss wasn't bold enough to get his interest, then he was a lost cause.

However, as soon as her foot landed on the bottom step, she saw that Neil and Emily were talking and looking out the kitchen window.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. She bypassed Luke, who was holding onto a chair so he could stand, and joined them at the window. Her eyes took in the dark gray sky and light rain. The strong wind whistled against the house and bent the smaller trees on the property. “I knew it was windy but I didn’t realize a storm was brewing.”

“We won’t be going to church today,” Neil replied. “Emily, change into your play clothes. Then gather your dolls and come back down here.”

Something in his tone worried Sarah. She waited until Emily was upstairs before asking, “Do you think it’s going to be bad?”

He turned to her, paused for a moment, and smiled. “I was hoping you’d wear that dress today. You look beautiful.”

Her cheeks grew warm. Smoothing her dress, she thanked him. “I have to admit that wearing light colors is nice.”

A heavy tree branch fell off one of the trees and hit the porch swing.

She jumped.

He picked Luke up and put him in her arms. “Take Luke to the storm cellar. Is there anything you want to keep?”

Startled, she shook her head. “No. I don’t think so.”

“All right. I’ll get Emily.”

As soon as he raced up the stairs, she hurried out the door, dodging a smaller tree branch that flew at her. The wind, picking up in intensity, twisted the skirt of her dress around her legs, making it difficult for her to run across the lawn to the storm cellar at the back of the house. She pressed forward into the strong wind, clutching Luke to her chest.

Ben was the first to see her as the farmhands rushed into the underground dwelling. "I'll get him in for you."

She handed him the crying child and followed him in, thanking Jacob who held the door for them. One last look at the dark sky caused chills to run up and down her spine. It was a spooky sight, and she prayed Neil and Emily would hurry. As soon as her feet landed on the dirt floor, Ben handed Luke back to her.

Cal held a lantern in the center of the group of five farmhands who huddled together in the small space. "There's no need to worry, Mrs. Craftsman," Cal assured her. "This shelter is secure."

"Do you think we're really going to have a tornado?" she asked. She had heard of tornadoes but never experienced one.

"We can't say for sure. We just know when it looks bad, it's best not to take our chances."

She nodded and turned her attention to the cellar door. How long would it take Emily to get dressed and grab her dolls?

The sound of hail pounded on the door. She backed away from it and the men gathered around her so she was in the center of the group. Closing her eyes, she said a quick prayer for Neil and Emily. The wind grew stronger, and the group stood in silence. She took in the worried looks on the men's faces.

"I'm going to get Neil and Emily," Ben said, reaching for the door.

A loud knocking stopped him. He eagerly unlocked the door and held onto it as Jacob held his arms up. Sarah watched with relief as Jacob took Emily from Neil who stepped into the cellar. They fought the wind and hail so he could lock the door. Overwhelmed to see that he and Emily were safe, she pushed passed the farmhands so she could hug Emily. Then she turned

to Neil and kissed him. It wasn't something she planned to do, but she was so grateful to see him that she didn't stop to question the wisdom of her actions. When she pulled away, she recalled their audience and turned her focus on Emily and kissed her forehead.

Ben slapped Neil on the back. "We were starting to get worried."

Neil waved his hand. "You know how hard it is to get rid of me."

"It sounds bad out there, boss," Cal added.

"It is. There's a tornado somewhere out there. I could hear it."

The mention of a twister was enough for Sarah to stay close to Neil and Emily. It suddenly occurred to her that losing either of them would have caused the grief that Jim's passing had not. Ten years of her life she spent with Jim and did not mourn his passing. But half a year with Neil and his daughter changed her entire life. With Neil, she had a man worth loving, and with Emily, she had a daughter.

Once the winds died down, they ventured out, noting the fallen tree branches that were strewn across their wet property. Hail, the size of a silver dollar, littered the grass as well. Part of the roof on the barn needed repairing and a few other places needed fixing, but it could have been worse. The bunkhouse, barn and house were still standing. Most of the animals were safe. She counted her blessings and said a prayer of thanks for each one.

"It looks like we got some work to do," Neil told the farmhands.

Cal laughed. "Heck, if that's the worst of it, let me at it!"

The rest of the men nodded.

Neil turned to Jacob. "Go check on your wife and son. The tornado sounded like it was southeast, so your place should be fine, but it never hurts to be sure."

"Thanks, boss," Jacob said as he hurried to his horse.

The rest of the farmhands departed to start the repairs.

"Oh, I grabbed this on my way out with Emily," Neil turned to her and handed her the locket that her parents had given her. "I know how much this necklace means to you and if the house got blown down, I wanted you to have it."

She took it from him, her hand trembling. "Neil, I...I don't know what to say," she whispered, touched that he thought to retrieve it.

"There are some things money can't replace." He stroked her cheek with his fingers, brushing away a tear, and kissed her.

"This is the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me," she finally replied when she trusted her voice to remain steady.

"I told you she was going to cry," Emily spoke up, holding her two dolls and looking satisfied that she made an accurate prediction.

He glanced at his church suit. "I'm going to help the men after I change." Neil smiled at Sarah and ruffled Emily's hair.

"Hey! I like to look nice," Emily argued, combing her fingers through her tangles.

"The wind already messed it up. There's not any more damage I can do," he replied.

"Come," Sarah told the girl. "We'll fix your hair so it'll look good again."

Seeming to be happy, Emily joined them as they walked back to the house.

Neil spent the rest of the day thinking of Sarah and how happy she looked when she saw him and Emily enter the storm cellar. Cassie hadn't looked at him that way, but he knew what the look meant. It meant that he mattered to her, and that made him feel as if he were ten feet tall.

He worked through supper, hardly noting the time since he was determined to get the barn roof finish. Jacob suffered no damage to his home, so everyone fared well despite the horrible storm.

By the time he entered the house, it was a little after ten. To his surprise, Sarah was waiting at the kitchen table for him. She looked up when he opened the door and asked if he wanted something to eat.

His growling stomach reminded him that it had been a long time since he ate. "Would you believe I forgot I was hungry?"

"Then it's a good thing that I'm here to remind you," she joked. "Come and sit down."

He hung his hat up and removed his boots by the front door and obeyed her, enjoying the fact that she was taking care of him. "Are the children asleep already?"

"It is after ten," she replied as she pulled out a plate of food for him.

"Are you going to eat anything?"

"I thought I'd share some cookies with you."

"Cookies? I'm surprised Emily left us any."

She grinned. "I hid some from her." She placed a small plate of cookies in front of him and squeezed his hand. "But don't tell her."

He glanced at her hand, liking the soft feel of it. "I wouldn't dare."

During the next half hour, he ate and talked with her. He offered to help her wash the dishes, but she insisted he sit and enjoy a cup of milk while she took care of it. "It's only two plates and a fork," she said.

He nodded and remained sitting. "Thank you for waiting up for me."

"It was my pleasure."

Pleasure. The word echoed in his mind. His hunger sated, his mind turned in another direction. He eased out of the chair, standing still long enough to calm his racing heart. Her back was turned to him, and his eyes traced the curves beneath her dress. His all too familiar arousal beckoned him to act on his desire for her. He was tired of pushing his longing aside. Tonight, for better or worse, he would approach her as her husband, and if she refused, then he would honor her wish for him to leave her alone. Either way, he had to know if that kiss she gave him in the storm cellar meant that she loved him.

He moved softly across the hardwood floor, his feet hardly making a sound. She draped the damp hand towel on the edge of the sink. Taking a deep breath, he reached for her arms and gently pressed his body against her back. He couldn't afford to be subtle, but he didn't want to scare her either. She paused, her hands resting on the edge of the sink, looking straight ahead.

He didn't know if that was a good sign or not, but he proceeded. His hands trembled as he kissed the side of her neck. Though he had his share of women, this one made him feel like the past had never happened. The slate had been wiped clean, and with the wiping of the slate came an onslaught of uncertainty and hope. The silence surrounding them bore down on him so much that he felt as if she must hear the beating of his heart.

“I love you, Sarah,” he finally whispered in her ear. Eternity seemed to hang in the balance as he waited for her to respond.

Sarah turned to him. He stood so close to her that her breasts pressed into his chest. His eyes held a question, and she understood what it was that he was asking. Her heart thrilled at the thought of going to his bed. She already knew how she felt about him, and now it was time to tell him. Running her hands up his arms and wrapping them around the back of his neck, she softly made her confession. “I love you too.”

No other words were needed. He leaned in to kiss her, pulling her into his arms and letting her know how much her reply meant to him. She felt his need. It was more than a physical urgency to consummate their marriage. He wanted all of her—her mind, her heart, and her body. It was such a wonderful feeling after being in a cold marriage for ten years.

When their kiss ended, he continued to hold her. She buried her face in the side of his neck. He was strong and solid, dependable and faithful, generous and kind. How could she not love him?

She joined him as he walked up the stairs, careful not to wake Emily or Luke. She understood that she would be going to his bedroom. Once he closed the door so they could have their privacy, she blushed. “My body isn’t what it used to be...before I had Luke,” she admitted, keeping her voice low. “You might want to draw the curtains.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her. His lips were soft. “I know having a baby changes a woman’s body, but I want to see you.”

Forcing aside her unease, she nodded and allowed him to remove her dress, followed by her chemise and pantaloons. She stood in front of him, staring at the floor, feeling ashamed

that her stomach wasn't as flat as it used to be and wishing she had insisted on the darkness.

"I don't know why you worry yourself over things that don't matter," he replied. "You are beautiful."

When she dared a look in his direction, she was surprised by the expression on his face, for his eyes and smile told her that he liked what he saw, that he hadn't been saying those words just to soothe her fears. She relaxed and gave herself permission to watch as he undressed. She never saw Jim naked. He kept his robe on until he was under the covers. So it was with fascination and curiosity that she took in Neil's naked form. He let her take in her fill of him, the heat rising in her cheeks when she realized her gaze lingered at his erection. She knew what it meant, but knowing Neil could look at her and be aroused did wonders for how she viewed herself.

Once he settled next to her in bed, he kissed her. His hand cradled her head, allowing him to deepen the kiss. He traced her bottom lip with his tongue. Nervous but longing for more, she encouraged him, parting her lips. The invasion of his tongue into her mouth should have startled her. Jim never kissed her this way. But she found that she liked it and returned his passion with her own. She reached up and caressed his jaw, noting the stubble. She liked that too. It reminded her of strength and hard work, both of which she viewed as the very essence of masculinity.

His free hand lingered at her shoulder before moving down to her breast. His thumb brushed her nipple, sending a tingling sensation down her spine. He was gentle, giving her time to adapt to this. Jim hadn't touched her this way. She now knew the difference between a mechanical touch and a loving caress. What Jim had done out of obligation, Neil did out of desire. Desire for her. It only made her appreciate him all the more.

He groaned, the sound rumbling from deep in his throat. His mouth left hers and traveled along her jaw and to her ear. His lips lingered at her neck, causing an involuntarily shudder to course down her body. Who knew a mouth could be so amazing? Or that a hand could bring forth a swell of pleasure as it cupped her breast?

He shifted closer to her so their bodies touched, and she felt his arousal against her hip. She wondered if he would let her touch him there. Jim had always said no. But Neil wasn't Jim. He might say yes.

"Neil?" she whispered, opening her eyes.

He was kissing her shoulder. "Hmm?"

"Would you mind if I..." Her cheeks flushing, she cleared her throat. "May I touch it? I would like to know what it's like."

Neil lifted his head so he could look at her. His eyes, which seemed darker in the moonlight, met hers, and there was no doubting the compassion in them. "He didn't let you explore his body?"

She shook her head.

The mattress shifted as he rolled onto his back. He took her hand and brought it to his erection. "Explore me, Sarah. My body belongs to you."

Her curiosity overrode her embarrassment, though she knew she had no reason to be embarrassed. He was right. They were one. Just as she belonged to him, he belonged to her. Just as he had the freedom to touch and enjoy her, she had the freedom to touch and enjoy him. Still, she felt relief when he closed his eyes. She lightly stroked him, feeling his hardness. His groan of pleasure emboldened her, so she gathered the courage to wrap her hand around him. He rewarded her with another groan, and despite her awkward blushing, she pressed on. His body was so different from hers. Where she was soft

and yielding, he was firm and hard. They complimented each other, and she suddenly realized that lovemaking was supposed to be a joyous and pleasurable act, not something to be rushed and tolerated for the sake of producing children.

When she was satisfied with her learning of him, she settled next to him and kissed him. The intensity of her kiss surprised her, but she also liked her newfound confidence. This time she slid her tongue into his mouth so she could taste him. He eagerly responded to her, his hands which had been gentle were now insistent. But she liked this too. It meant he needed her, and she loved being needed. She pulled him to her and let him roll on top of her. He settled between her legs. She knew she was ready for him. She'd be slick and warm. The ache between her legs begged for him to enter her. But he didn't do as she expected.

Instead, his lips left her mouth and traveled down to her breasts. His tongue teased her nipples. The tension between her legs increased. She squirmed against him, longing for him to do something to satisfy her. She'd never felt this strange urgent sensation with Jim. This was much better, she realized. So much better.

And it didn't end there. She gasped when Neil's mouth left her breasts to kiss the length of her stomach. He wasn't going to kiss her...down there, was he? It seemed such a wicked thing to. Jim had never ventured there, and he'd only touch her to spread her legs so he could enter her. But then, that was Jim. This was Neil. She never imagined two men could make love so differently. She lifted her head off the pillow, wondering if he was really going to do it, and the sight of his head between her legs shot a thrill through her. Maybe it was wicked, but as he kissed her sensitive region, she decided that wicked was wonderful. Closing her eyes, she rested her head on the pillow

and gave into the urge to feel. No more thinking. No more wondering. Just feel and get caught up in the moment.

A soft cry escaped her lips when his tongue traced her swollen folds and plunged into her. She reached for the blanket beneath her and grasped it in her hands, unable to stand the sweet torment, yet wishing for it to continue. And it did. She didn't know this feeling was possible. She never once imagined that a man might kiss a woman down there and make her hips move in rhythm with the thrusting of his tongue. She was building toward something. It was a startling discovery, and the moment she realized it, she pleaded with him to take her there.

He moaned in response. Then she felt him slightly shift. She was ready to squeak in protest when he slid two fingers into her, heightening the bliss he'd brought her to. Then his tongue caressed her sensitive nub, and she knew she was there. Right at the brink. The moment she gave into her much needed release, she cried out, her body jerking in what had to be wanton behavior. But if this is what wanton meant, then she didn't want to be a proper lady anymore.

As her mind began to clear from her heavenly ascent, he moved on top of her, his body covering hers. She felt wonderfully weak, still gasping for air, her body still humming from pleasure. She eagerly accepted him as he entered her. She groaned and clenched around him, welcoming him to her.

He steadied his weight on his elbows and moved inside her. She dared to open her eyes to see what he looked like when he made love to her. His eyes were closed, but his expression seemed focused and somewhat pained. But his ragged breathing and low groans told her he enjoyed this. She wanted to bring him pleasure, like he had brought her. She gripped his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist as he increased the momentum of his thrusting. His movements drew out the lingering effects of her release, making her groan

in rhythm with him. Then he abruptly stopped and arched his back. She felt a throbbing within her as his seed poured into her. He moaned and she smiled, satisfied that he found his release.

He didn't roll off of her, as Jim used to do as soon as he was done. No. Neil remained inside her. He held her to him as if his very existence depended on her. His kisses were no longer urgent but soft. His lips lingered on her neck, her cheeks and finally on her lips. Tears fell from her eyes. Lovemaking was so different with Neil. Even after she met his needs, he wanted to be close to her.

Neil stopped kissing her and asked in a whisper, "What's wrong?"

She opened her eyes and noted his concern. She smiled. "Nothing's wrong. I just didn't know making love could be this wonderful." She laughed despite the fresh tears forming in her eyes.

He returned her smile. "I didn't know it could be this good either."

She wondered what he meant but he kissed her with such tenderness she forgot her question.

When he got off of her and settled next to her, he pulled the blanket over them and brought his arms around her. She snuggled against him, feeling content, relaxed, and well-loved. He kissed the top of her head. Her eyelids felt heavy and before she knew it, she fell asleep.

Chapter Eighteen

October brought days warm enough to open the window and enjoy the fresh air, which is exactly what Sarah did. She hummed a pleasant tune while she made breakfast. Because it was Saturday, Emily and Luke slept in. She loved Saturday mornings since she didn't have to rush to get Emily ready for school.

She wondered when she would have to deal with Jim's mother. She hadn't seen the woman after the previous month when she came over and called Luke "little Jim". Neil happened to open the screen door at that moment so he overheard her. He then ordered Beatrice to leave, saying she was welcome back when she called Luke by his correct name. Sarah was grateful to Neil, for he was quick to stand up for her. He was so different from Jim, and Sarah made sure to pray her thanks every day for that.

The front door opened and Neil stepped into the kitchen, taking off his hat. Sarah's heart skipped a beat at the sight of him. His short dark hair fell slightly over his forehead and a smile graced his lips. Soft lips, she thought. Lips that brought her much pleasure in bed. Her cheeks grew warm at the turn her mind took. With Jim, no such thoughts had

invaded her daily routine, but with Neil, she often found herself wishing for nightfall when they could be as one in their bedroom.

“What are you making?” he asked, approaching her.

She motioned to the cookstove. “Pancakes and eggs.”

“It smells good.” He took her in his arms. “And so do you.”

Wrapping her arms around him, she pressed herself against him, loving the way their bodies fit together. “I miss you when you’re not here.”

Bringing his lips within an inch of hers, he chuckled. “I’m usually at the barn or in the fields.”

She closed her eyes, waiting for the kiss. “That’s too far away.”

“If I was in the house all day, you’d get tired of me.”

“That’s hard to imagine.”

His lips touched hers and she melted in his arms. He deepened the kiss, and she gave a slight moan as his tongue found hers. She didn’t know how he did it, but he managed to make her tingle from head to toe. He slid his hands down the curve of her back and caressed her bottom. She felt the male part of him pressing against her stomach and lowered her hand, ready to stroke it.

“All you two ever do is kiss.”

Startled, they pulled slightly apart. Neil brought his hands higher up on Sarah’s back and she brought her hand back up to his neck. She cleared her throat, surprised the girl was already awake.

He grinned at Emily. “You’ll just have to get used to it. I wanted to thank your ma for making a good meal.” He kissed Sarah on the cheek before he let her go so he could run over to Emily and swing her around.

Sarah laughed as Emily squirmed and giggled.

“What are you doing up so early?” Neil asked her as he set her down.

“I heard Ben and Cal fixing the side of the house.”

He groaned. “I told them to wait until another hour. I’m sorry they woke you up.”

Sarah took the skillet off the range. “I’ll get Luke.”

He shook his head. “You’ve got enough to do. I’ll change his diaper and bring him down.”

She smiled her thanks as he ran up the steps to Luke’s bedroom. Turning to Emily, she asked, “Would you like to help make breakfast?”

“After I go pee.”

Sarah laughed as the girl hurried out the door so she could go to the privy. Emily was adorable. Any woman would be blessed to be her mother. Blinking, she realized that she was her mother. Sure, she hadn’t given birth to her, but in her heart, she felt as if the girl was her own daughter. And Emily did call her ‘Ma,’ so she felt the same way. She sighed with contentment. Her life was complete, and she hoped that she might ease the pain that Emily suffered in losing her real mother.

Later that day, Neil took Sarah, Emily and Luke to town so Sarah could visit with Rachel and Caroline. He talked with Rachel’s and Caroline’s husbands for a brief time before he went to collect the food items that Sarah wanted at the mercantile. After he returned, he joined them for supper.

His wish for a complete family had finally come to pass. Preacher Peters had been right. He not only reaped the bad things he did, but the good as well. A man couldn’t ask for a better gift than a wife and children who loved him.

The next day after church, he brought his mother home with them as usual and noted that Sarah and his mother fussed over the children and talked as if they had known each other their entire lives. His mother had gotten along with Cassie, but it was different with Sarah.

And as his mother joined him in checking on the horses, she pulled him aside. "Neil, I want you to know that I am happy you have Sarah in your life. Now when my time comes to join your father, I can rest assured knowing you're with a good woman."

Concerned, he frowned. "Is something wrong with your health?"

She patted his arm and smiled. "Oh, I didn't mean to worry you. I am doing fine. I'm just glad my years of prayer came to good."

He hugged her. "Thank you for praying, Mother."

The horse in the stall next to them neighed. "I think I'm supposed to get to work. Come, I'll walk you to the house and get into my work clothes."

Upon their return to the house, he opened the door, surprised at the scene that greeted him. Sarah was wiping flour off the floor, and Luke was screaming from his high chair, covered in the white powder, while Emily stood by the table, also crying.

"Please, Emily, I can't think," Sarah yelled. "I need you to go outside so I can clean this up."

Emily's tear-filled eyes turned to Neil and his mother. She sobbed even louder and ran past them and to the field, probably to the tree that she liked to climb when she was upset.

"I'll comfort her," his mother said and quietly departed.

Neil's eyes scanned the kitchen, noting the canister of flour that rested on its side on the work table. Children's handprints and footprints marked the area. A rag had been

tossed to the side of the kitchen table and Sarah had a bucket of soapy water sitting next to her.

Sarah remained on her knees, her hair and dress partially covered in flour. She wiped the sweat from her flushed face and glanced at Neil and sighed. "I didn't handle that well at all," she scolded herself.

Ignoring a wailing Luke, he reached for a clean dishtowel and rinsed it in a clean bucket and knelt next to her. "What happened?" He carefully wiped the floor, trying not to make the situation worse by spreading the wet pasty substance all over the place.

She shook her head. "Emily wanted to help me make supper so I went to change into this dress. While I was gone, she got the flour off the shelf, and Luke dragged the chair across the room. Then he got up on the table and spilled the flour everywhere. I came down in time to see Emily trying to pull him down to the floor, but I thought she was hurting him so I yelled at her and..." She brushed the tears from her eyes. "I put Luke in the chair and Emily was trying to help me clean this mess, but she was making it worse so I told her to stop."

He rinsed the rag in the bucket next to her and waited for her to continue.

"I feel awful, Neil. She kept apologizing, but all I did was yell at her."

Taking her in his arms, he let her cry on his shoulder, glad that Luke had calmed down. It was hard to concentrate with him bellowing. Rubbing her back with one hand, he softly replied, "I understand, Sarah. It's all right."

"No. It's not."

"You're not perfect, and being a parent isn't easy. We all have moments of weakness."

"Sometimes I feel like the worse parent who ever lived."

He chuckled. "I've felt that way too. It's normal."

She took a deep, shaky breath, settling in his arms. "Do you think she'll forgive me?"

"Yes."

Pulling away from him, she studied the kitchen. "I can't clean this until I apologize to her."

"I'll clean this up, and I'll clean Luke. I believe Emily went to that tree by the river."

She kissed him. "Thank you, Neil."

He watched her as she stood up and carefully stepped over the mess on the floor so she could leave the house. Despite the misfortune that occurred, it warmed his heart that she cared enough about Emily to talk to her.

Sarah approached Emily and Gwen who talked in hushed tones beneath the tree. The breeze swirled the red and yellow leaves around them, though they seemed not to notice the colorful dance. Instead, Gwen had her head bowed as she held the girl close to her, and despite the low tone the woman used, Sarah noted the tenderness in it.

Sarah waited until they noticed her before she spoke. "May I talk to Emily?"

Emily shook her head, her eyes filling with tears again, but Gwen patted her shoulder. "You have nothing to worry about, sweetheart." The woman stood up and brushed the blades of grass off her skirt. As she passed Sarah, she stopped for a moment, rested a hand on her arm, and whispered, "Cassie was always rough with her. She doesn't know anything but fear when it comes to a mother being upset."

The words pierced Sarah's heart. Closing her eyes for a brief moment, she nodded her understanding and waited for the woman to depart before stepping toward the girl.

Emily jumped up. "Please don't go away! I promise I won't make another mess. I'll be a good girl!"

Sarah embraced the child. "Emily, I'm not leaving, and I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

Emily pulled back and stared at her with a bewildered expression on her face. "You're telling me you're sorry?"

"Yes. I was wrong to yell at you."

"But I made a mess."

Sighing, Sarah clasped the girl's hands in hers. "That's all it was, a mess. And it was an accident. I know Luke tipped the canister over and I know you would never hurt him. You didn't deserve the way I treated you."

"Really?"

She smiled as she brushed the hair out of the girl's eyes. "Yes. Oh, Emily, I love you."

Emily blinked away the remaining tears in her eyes and gave her a wide grin. "I love you too, Ma, and I forgive you."

Sarah hugged her tightly to her bosom. "There's nothing you can do to make me stop loving you. I hope you will learn that."

"I'm glad you're here. You've made Pa happy."

"He's made me happy too, and you have also made me happy. Luke has a wonderful sister to take care of him." Feeling better, Sarah held her hand to Emily. "I think we're both a mess. Your father is cleaning the kitchen and Luke. Why don't we get cleaned up before we make supper?"

Emily tilted her head up, her eyes squinting because of the sun. "You'll still let me help you?"

"Of course. A mother couldn't ask for a better helper."

Nodding, Emily took her hand. "Will we make steak and soup again? It's Pa's favorite meal."

"What about some brown sugar candy for dessert?"

"Yes, he'd like that too."

She raised an eyebrow. "And you?"

"Yes," the girl confessed. "I'd also like it."

“Then we should definitely make it.”

As they walked to the river to wash up, Emily chatted about the fall weather and how she loved the changing colors of the leaves. Sarah listened, grateful that children were more forgiving than some adults she knew.

A week before Christmas, Sarah took Emily and Luke to visit Gwen. Then she left to go to the doctor. Her suspicions proved true. She was expecting. She hadn't expected to get in the family way, at least not so soon. After all, it had taken her ten years to conceive Luke. She hadn't wished to bring Neil along, though he offered to drive the buggy. Instead, she opted to have Jacob do it. Jacob had business to tend to in town for his wife anyway, so it worked out.

Her apprehension grew as Jacob brought her and the children closer to home. Try as she might, she couldn't sit still, and Luke's fidgeting didn't help. What would Neil think? Jim's reaction flashed through her mind. She recalled how disappointed she was when he didn't show any interest in the child she carried. She couldn't remember a time when she felt more alone.

Neil will be happy. He loves children. Surely, this will be a blessing. As much as she tried to convince herself, she couldn't quite believe it, so it was with a heavy heart that she accepted Neil's hand as he helped her down from the buggy.

“Didn't you go to the mercantile?” he asked, searching the buggy.

“Oh.” She forgot all about picking up more cloth to sew.

Jacob glanced her way but didn't say anything. She didn't think he saw her slip into the doctor's office, but he must be wondering where she went.

"Help me down, Pa," Emily insisted.

He held his arms out to her and she jumped into them.

Sarah took Luke who was trying to crawl out of the buggy. "Neil, can I talk to you, in private?" she asked, her voice uncertain.

His eyebrows furrowed, but he nodded and joined her and the children in the walk to their house. Once he shut the kitchen door, she rushed to put Luke down for a nap while Emily went to her room to play.

Neil stood in Luke's room, watching as she tucked the blanket around her son. Luke smiled at her and kicked at his blanket, so she sighed and handed him a toy to play with until he fell asleep. Realizing she couldn't delay the moment any longer, she led Neil to the kitchen.

"What is it?" Neil asked, his expression serious as he stood in front of her by the table.

Her stomach twisted into a tight knot. *He's not Jim. He's not Jim.*

"Sarah, is something wrong?"

She gripped the back of a chair and braced for an unpleasant reaction. "I'm fine. I went to the doctor and found out that I'm expecting."

The first thing she noticed was that he looked relieved. Then a smile lit up his face. "Sarah, that's great."

Startled, she failed to respond when he kissed her.

He cupped her face in his hands and pressed his lips to her forehead. "You had me worried. I feared you were sick. You haven't had much of an appetite lately. I had no idea you were in the family way. I can't think of a better Christmas present than knowing we created a child together."

“You’re pleased?” she whispered, hardly believing her ears.

“Very much so.”

She exhaled and released her death grip on the chair. “I’m glad.”

After he gave her another kiss, he shouted for Emily to come downstairs. “We have to tell her the good news!”

Once Emily bounded down the steps and settled her feet on the kitchen floor, he put his arm around her shoulders and said, “You know that thing you wanted for Christmas?”

She nodded.

“Well, you got your wish. Now, I can’t guarantee you that you’ll have a sister, but we’re going to try our best to give you one.”

“You two have been talking about another baby?” Sarah asked, curious as to what else they talked about when she wasn’t around.

“Luke is a boy,” Emily told her in a matter-of-fact tone. “I would like a baby girl so I can put her in dresses and decorate her hair.”

Neil patted her on the shoulder. “Em, if we don’t have a girl this time, we’ll try next time.”

Sarah’s heart leapt at the thought of having more than one child with Neil. She had dreamt of a house full of children when she was a child, but Jim hadn’t wanted more than one. Once she expected Luke, he made it clear that they wouldn’t engage in lovemaking again since the purpose of doing it had been accomplished.

“How long will it take until I find out if I’ll have a sister or a brother?” Emily wondered.

Neil looked Sarah’s way, the same question in his eyes.

Sarah cleared her throat, forcing her thoughts back to the conversation at hand. “The baby should be here in late July.”

“Good. I will be out of school so I can help when the baby is born,” Emily cheered.

Neil laughed. “You sure can.”

“You’ll be an excellent helper too,” Sarah added, finally allowing their enthusiasm to infect her.

Suddenly, expecting a baby was something she could enjoy. Her heart swelled with hope and anticipation for the year ahead.

Chapter Nineteen

In the second week of May, Neil kept the bedroom window open to alleviate Sarah's discomfort as she approached the seventh month into her pregnancy. He woke before dawn that morning, aware of the breeze floating into the room, and though he had his covers up to his neck, he shivered. Glancing at a sleeping Sarah, he saw that she had kicked her covers off in the middle of the night. He closed the gap between them, pressed his chest against her back, and let her body heat warm him up.

He lifted his head off the pillow and gazed at her in the waning moonlight. She looked peaceful. Her eyes were closed, and her mouth was slightly open, as if inviting him to kiss her. He settled his head back onto the pillow, closing his eyes and enjoying the feel of her firm round behind as it cushioned his erection. How nice it was to lay with a woman in bed, knowing she wanted to be there, knowing they frequently came together to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh.

He let his hand drift to her growing belly. She turned to him in her sleep so he slipped his arms around her, enjoying the light lavender scent from the shampoo she used to wash her long hair. She didn't often wear her hair down, saying her

tangles were horrible to comb through, but when she did, he took the time to admire the golden tresses that fell softly against her fair complexion.

He felt a jab from her abdomen and grinned at the life moving in her womb. The life he helped to create. His heart swelled with love and pride for his unborn child. Love for Emily and Luke came naturally to him and didn't detract from his feelings for this one. *Elizabeth if she's a girl or Joseph if he's a boy.* Neil thought to the many nights Sarah kept him up, wanting to pick the right name for the baby, and they finally agreed on those two. He had to admit he didn't mind it when she kept him up, for they usually ended up making love and he hadn't thought intimacy could come with the joy he found in bed with her.

Recalling those nights only served to whet his appetite for her. He wondered if she would be in the mood for some fun before the day officially started. Running his hands along her back and caressing her bottom, he pressed his lips to the top of her head. She sighed and snuggled against him, her curves further arousing him.

He took a good look at her, realizing she still slept, and lost heart. Being with child couldn't be easy on a woman, and she worked hard. She needed her rest more than he needed to make love at that moment. Ignoring the insistent throbbing of his erection, he focused on the peace of being with her. Soon daylight would come and with it the day's work. Work. Yes, he would focus on that until it was time to get out of bed.

"Why did you stop?" came a whisper.

Opening his eyes, he pulled away from her and gave her a good look. "You're awake?"

She kept her eyes closed but smiled. "I felt hot."

He chuckled. "That was my fault. I'm afraid I used you to get warm."

Her eyelids fluttered open and he noted the tenderness in them. "I'm sorry, Neil. I know it's still chilly at night. I will have to bring another blanket in for you."

He graced her cheek with a quick kiss. "Don't be sorry. I don't mind a little chill. The important thing is that you're comfortable."

Eyes twinkling, she rolled away from him and began to unbutton her nightgown. "I am terribly hot. I think I'll have to take this off."

Interest peaked, he sat up in bed. "Well, then I should help you with that." Taking her hands, he helped her sit up before he pulled the light material over her head and threw it aside, not caring where it landed. He shrugged out of his night clothes, glad to be rid of the confining cotton material. He took a moment to appreciate her naked form, once again feeling a sense of pride that she carried his child.

"You are a lovely sight, Mrs. Craftsman," he whispered, his voice husky.

A mischievous grin crossed her face as she reached forward to caress his arousal. A tingling sensation coursed through him. He groaned his appreciation and leaned forward so he could kiss her. Her lips were soft, and they parted for him, a sign he recognized as her invitation. He gladly accepted it, taking his time to taste her lips before he sampled the taste of her tongue. His hands cupped her sensitive breasts, careful not to cause discomfort. He caressed them, marveling at their softness and the pink nipples that hardened from his attention.

She let out a sigh and slid her hand down the full length of the male part of him that enjoyed her attention. She wrapped her hand around him and squeezed. Breathing heavily, his mouth left hers to travel down the length of her neck. She tilted her head to grant him better access, moving her hand in an up and down motion that she had mastered.

“Oh Sarah, you make me ache for you.”

A seductive chuckle left her throat. “You must be telling me the truth. You’re as hard as a rock.”

“You’re a wicked woman,” he teased. “But I love it, so don’t change.”

“Are you going to keep talking or are you going to lay back?”

He raised an eyebrow as he obeyed her. “Want to be on top this time?”

“In a moment.”

Her eyes met his and he caught the naughty gleam in them. His pulse quickened, knowing where her thoughts were going. She left a trail of kisses down his chest, and still, she went lower. She waited, teasing him with the feathery touch of her fingers. He watched as she flicked her tongue along him. He groaned, half in agony and half in pleasure.

She glanced up at him and gave him a knowing smile. “Eager for me, are you?”

He moaned. “You are a cruel woman to tease a man like this.”

“It serves you right for teasing me last night.”

A smile formed on his lips. He loved it when she paid him back, and he loved it even more that she finally felt comfortable enough with his body to fully enjoy it. She took him into her mouth and he leaned back and closed his eyes, giving himself to the rush of pleasant sensations that spread through him. She took her time, tasting him and bringing him closer to the peak.

“Sarah,” he whispered, knowing he was right on the edge of his release. “Straddle me, sweetheart.”

She rose from him and settled over him. She lowered her body onto his but didn’t take him into her. Instead, she

pressed her woman's flesh against his erection. He grabbed her hips and moaned. She was wet and warm. Ready for him.

Work. Cattle. Ropes. Horses. The images reined in his throbbing desire, granting him time to pleasure her. He wouldn't allow his release until she had hers.

She bent forward so that he could kiss her, and he slid his hands up to her breasts so he could enjoy their fullness. Moaning, she deepened their kiss, opening her lips to accept his tongue as it interlaced with hers. Then she straightened her back.

Careful to not hold her too close, he slid his hand down her belly and lower still until he found the sensitive nub to caress. She let out a low groan. "Oh Neil, don't stop."

He shifted so he could bring himself into her. As she moved her hips, he watched her in the first lights of the morning, her back arched and her breasts displayed before him—a sight he never tired of. Her response to him only thickened his arousal but he held off, focusing on her and how wonderful it was that she not only participated in bed with him but was eager for him.

Her breathing came heavy and her tightening around him notified him that she was on the edge of the peak. Knowing she most enjoyed it when he pressed deeper into her while she had an orgasm, he did just that and was rewarded with a gasp as she let go. He stilled his movements, allowing her to take her fill of pleasure. Her eyes closed, her lips swollen from their kisses, her cheeks flushed, her breasts shuddering. Oh, she was a beautiful sight. The kind of sight that made a man grateful to be a lover.

When she rocked her hips, he closed his eyes and gave into his need. His body shuddered beneath her as his release came. If there was a better experience in this life, he couldn't

think of what it might be. His breathing still heavy, he opened his eyes and smiled at her.

She smiled back and leaned down to kiss him, her tongue playfully tracing his lips. He sighed and tasted her once more before she got off of him and settled beside him, snuggling against him in his arms. When he gained enough coherence, he brought his hand to her belly, hoping he hadn't disturbed his child, but apparently he had for a good kick met his hand.

They laughed.

"I love you," he told her. "And I love our child."

She kissed him. "I love you too. I can't wait to find out if we're having a girl or a boy."

"I don't care as long as you and the baby are healthy."

"I hope it's a girl. Emily wants a sister in the worst way."

"You're right. That's all she talks about anymore." He kissed her cheek. "If we have a boy, we'll just have to try again."

"At least we know that trying is fun."

Smiling, he kissed her again, this time letting his lips linger on hers.

It was midday when Neil saw her. He just finished checking the cattle in the pasture when he decided to go to the house and grab lunch.

The surrey making its way to his home got his attention as soon as his gaze settled on it. He took the hat off his head and wiped the sweat off his brow. Squinting in the sunlight, he placed the hat back on and lumbered to the house as it got

closer. Nearing the porch, he slowed to a stop, feeling a chill run up his spine.

"Not her. Let it be anyone but her," he whispered.

But as soon as he saw the raven-haired beauty wearing a lacy pink dress and holding a matching parasol, his hopes plummeted. Cassie. She sat next to John McCarthy, laughing and resting her hand on his arm as she spoke to him. The sight was enough to make him vomit. He had hoped to never see her again. So much for that wish.

His gut tightened like a fist as he waited for John to stop the four passenger surrey ten feet away from where he stood. He forced himself to remain still while he waited for John to help Cassie down from the rig. A third man—one he didn't recognize—hopped out from the backseat.

She held the parasol above her head. Taking a look at the house, she wrinkled her nose as if she smelled something bitter. "It never was quite adequate," she told John.

Frowning, Neil paced over to them, his movements stiff with apprehension. "What are you doing here?"

Looking at Neil, Cassie eyed him in a way that denoted the fact that she felt superior to him. "How lovely it is to see you."

Be cordial. Don't make a scene. The last thing he needed was to attract Sarah or Emily's attention. "I didn't ask you to come here."

"Then it's good for you that we're not here to see you. I came to get Emily."

He felt as if he had been punched in the stomach. Forcing his voice to remain calm, he said, "No."

She twirled the parasol in her hands. "You can't keep her, Neil. She belongs to me."

"Says who?"

"Me. I'm her mother."

"A real mother wouldn't abandon her daughter and not correspond with her for two years."

She stopped the twirling and set a hand on her hip. "I had to get some things settled. Now that they are, she can come with me."

"Over my dead body."

"You won't stand in my way of what's rightfully mine."

"She's not yours. You gave her up when you married John."

"But I need her. John won't get his inheritance unless he has a child, and I can't have any more children," she pouted. "She's all I've got."

He fought the urge to pick her up and toss her onto the scurry. But he'd never been rough with a woman and he wouldn't start now. He clenched his hands. "That's why you're here? I ought to slap you, Cassie. How dare you use a little girl to get money?"

She shrugged. "She'll have some of it too. You can't give her the things that John can. Why, we'll send her to the best school for girls. She'll have whatever she wants."

He gritted his teeth. John returned with the overweight man who appeared to be in his forties. "Get off my land," he snapped. "You're not getting Emily."

John motioned to the man standing next to him. "Mr. Craftsman, I present my attorney, Harry Martin. He's the best lawyer in the area. I assure you that I paid handsomely for his services, so it would be wise if you didn't interfere."

Straightening his back, Neil said, "I don't care how much money you spent. You're not getting my daughter."

Harry cleared his throat. "Now, that's just it, isn't it, sir? You aren't the girl's father."

"Yes, I am."

"No. I'm afraid you're not."

“Pa, what does he mean?” Emily stepped from the kitchen door and onto the porch.

His muscles tensed. How much did she hear? “Get back into the house,” Neil told her, his tone firm. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“How can you be like that?” Cassie admonished. Turning to Emily, she held her arms out and said, “I came for you, sweetie!”

Emily stood still, and Neil couldn’t tell what the poor girl was thinking. She stared at her mother, her hands behind her back, and bit her lower lip.

“Leave her alone!” Neil barked at Cassie. “She doesn’t need this.”

Sarah emerged from the house, carrying a fussy Luke in her arms. Her gaze fell on the visitors, particularly Cassie. Turning to the girl, she said, “Emily, come into the house. Let the adults do their business.”

Cassie glared at Neil. “How could you be so selfish? You have another child and one on the way. You can make do without Emily.”

“She’s a person, not a possession,” Neil snapped. “She can’t be replaced.”

She stamped her foot on the ground. “And she’s not your child!”

“Enough,” Harry interrupted before Neil could yell at Cassie.

“What do they mean, Pa?” Emily asked him.

Harry handed Neil a document. Neil’s hands trembled as he debated whether or not to read it. Meanwhile, Harry walked over to Emily who scooted back until she stood with Sarah. Sarah placed a hand on her shoulder.

“She’s not your child!” Cassie yelled at Sarah. “You have no right to touch her.”

“Sarah, take Emily into the house,” Neil pleaded.

Sarah nodded when Harry intervened. “Ma’am, you don’t have a legal right to withhold a child from her real mother.”

Sarah paused in mid-step and Emily remained with her, even as Cassie waved her forward.

Cassie pointed at Sarah, her face flushed. “You turned my own child against me.”

“You didn’t want me,” Emily spoke, her voice low.

Cassie immediately cooled down and smiled at her daughter. “Is that what they told you? Sweetie, nothing could be further from the truth. I went to make a better life for us, and I found it.”

Emily narrowed her eyes at her. “Then why didn’t you tell me you were leaving?”

“I couldn’t. The time had to be right or Mr. Craftsman wouldn’t have let me go.”

“Will you stop lying to her?” Neil demanded, his hands clenching the document into a crumpled mess.

“Who’s lying to who?” Harry replied. Looking at Emily, he said in a gentle tone, “Emily, the man you think is your father really isn’t. Your real father is Fred Miller, and he signed that document Mr. Craftsman is holding, testifying to that.”

He stormed over to Harry. “I’ve raised her since she was born. She belongs here!” He shoved the document at the lawyer. “I don’t need a piece of paper to tell me whether I’m a father or not.”

“Apparently, you do.”

Emily wrapped her arms around Sarah’s waist. “I don’t want to go!”

Everyone turned their attention to her, noting her pale face. Sarah hugged her close and stepped closer to the front door.

"There," Neil replied to the lawyer, thankful Emily spoke up. "She said what she wants."

"She's only eight," Cassie said. "How can she know what she wants?"

"She's nine, Cassie, and she's smarter than you give her credit for."

"Nine, eight. What's the difference?" She shrugged. "What matters is that she's with me."

"It wasn't important before," Emily said. "You said I got in the way. You said you wished I wasn't born. Then you left without saying good-bye."

Cassie shook her head. "Because I was getting a home for you. You will be very happy with me and John. Why, he can afford to buy you whatever you want."

"I have everything I want."

Harry held his hands up. "This conversation isn't necessary. The fact of the matter is that Emily *is not* Mr. Craftsman's child. She *is* Mrs. McCarthy's child. The facts are the facts."

"That's why Ma left, isn't it?" Emily looked at Neil. "She married someone else."

Neil couldn't take it anymore. "Get off my property."

John, who had been silent, spoke up. "Come along, Emily. I assure you that your mother and I are very happy together and we'll make you a good home."

Emily screamed and ran into the house, her feet pounding the hardwood floors as she raced up the stairs. Sarah quickly took Luke inside and followed her.

Cassie made a move to enter the house, but Neil blocked her before she could reach the porch steps. "She doesn't want to go."

John placed a hand on her shoulder. "We'll get Emily. Don't worry."

Cassie huffed, spun on her heels, and went to the buggy where John helped her into it. Neil breathed a sigh of relief.

The lawyer approached him. "I suggest you get yourself a good lawyer. You'll be going before the judge, and I don't fancy that he'll think a man of your reputation is fit to raise Mrs. McCarthy's child. Good day, Mr. Craftsman."

Neil resisted the urge to punch the man while he hopped into the surrey.

Sarah hastened to put Luke in his crib so she could talk to Emily. She went to the girl's bedroom where Emily laid on her bed, crying into her pillow.

"Emily?" she softly asked.

Emily looked up at her, her tear-filled eyes red and puffy.

"Don't let her take me," she pleaded. "Promise me."

Sarah sat next to her and drew her into her arms. "Oh, Emily. Your father and I will do everything we can to keep you here."

"But you can't let me go with them. I know why they're here. I heard her talking to Pa. My mother doesn't love me. She never did. She just wants to get money. I heard her. That's all I'm worth to her, and I hate her!"

Sarah smoothed the girl's black tresses that shook as she broke into a fresh wave of tears. Sarah swallowed the lump in her throat and held her tighter to her bosom. "Oh honey, are you sure that's what she said?"

"Yes. You were changing Luke's diaper and I was in the kitchen. They didn't know I was listening through the window. She said she is going to send me away to a school. She doesn't want me. She just wants the money."

Sarah kissed the girl on the top of her head and pressed her cheek to the soft hair. She wished for the words that would ease the girl's pain but knew nothing she said would work.

"I don't care what they say. He's my father. I had time to remember how things really were when my mother was here. Pa protected me from her but he couldn't stop everything she did. There were things I saw and heard. I didn't understand them at the time but I'm older now. She thinks I don't remember or that I don't understand but I do." She shifted from her so that they made eye contact. "You're my mother now, aren't you?"

Giving the girl a soft smile, she nodded. "Yes, I am. But I am sorry about how things were for you and your real mother."

"I used to be too. Maybe I still am. I don't know what to think."

"Don't be afraid to think and feel what you need to. Getting angry and sad aren't wrong."

"I know." She hugged Sarah. "I don't want to leave. You have to promise me that you'll do whatever it takes to keep me here."

Determined, she agreed. "I promise."

They remained together, holding onto each other, for a long time.

Sarah spent the rest of the afternoon with Emily, wondering what Neil was doing. He had come up to tell them he needed to find a lawyer in town so she knew he'd be gone for awhile. She prayed he'd find good news.

When the supper hour came and he hadn't returned, the nagging unease in the pit of her stomach made her sick.

Though she struggled to eat and remain upbeat for Emily's sake, the girl wasn't fooled.

"You think Pa's finding bad news," Emily said, her hands in her lap and the food in front of her untouched.

Letting her fork clatter on the plate, Sarah gave up trying to eat the meal. "I don't know what to think. In my experience, if things take a long time, they tend to go badly." She glanced at Luke who sat in the wooden high chair. He babbled, oblivious to the events going on around him as he played with his food before eating it. Turning her eyes to Emily, she smiled. "You need to eat, honey."

"You're not eating."

The girl's boldness no longer surprised her. "No. But I'm an adult and I can handle going without food better than you can."

"I don't feel like eating either."

Sarah heard Jacob welcome Neil back. She stood up and began collecting their plates. "Let's clean up. I want to speak to your father."

Emily rose from her chair. "Can I go with you?"

Sarah paused, their plates feeling heavy in her hands. "I'd rather talk to him alone first."

She frowned but nodded her consent.

After Sarah cleared the table and cleaned Luke the best she could, she left Emily to play with him in the parlor so she could talk to Neil. As soon as she found him by the cattle fence, she ran to him. He stood a good distance from the farmhands, and his back was turned to her so she didn't realize he was crying until she caught up to him. Closing her eyes and gripping her apron, she braced herself for what he would tell her.

Before she could ask what happened, he looked at her and shook his head. "We're going to lose her."

His sorrow pained her as much as the thought of losing Emily. Blinking back tears, she asked, "Do you know this for sure?"

"I went all over town, and that lawyer Cassie got is one of the best. He can win the case. No other lawyer wants to go near him. Well, there is one but I can't afford him."

Watching her husband defeated unnerved her. Neil had been a formidable wall of strength ever since she met him. She didn't know how to handle this, but one thing was for sure, she promised Emily that she wouldn't send her to a woman who didn't love her.

"How much money do you need?" she asked, struggling to remain calm.

He told her, still staring straight ahead into the fields.

She anxiously thought through anything they had that had any value. "What about my necklace? It should be worth something."

"No, Sarah. It's all you have of your parents." He wiped his face with his shirt sleeve.

"What good does a necklace do me at a time like this if I can't sell it?" When he shook his head, she took his face in her hands and turned his head so he had to look at her. "We're going to keep her. We'll do whatever we have to but we'll keep her."

He pulled her into his arms. Closing her eyes, she leaned into him and rested her head on his shoulder, aware of the movement the baby in her womb created. They remained silent for some time. Her determination swelled until she found a confidence that things would work out. One way or another, Emily wouldn't go with Cassie and her husband.

An idea came to her. "Neil, what about Dan Adair? If you sold your cattle to him, would that bring in enough money for a lawyer?"

“He won’t do business with me.”

“But you have the best cattle in the area. Dan can get a better price with your stock than anyone else’s. He’s a businessman, right? He’ll want to make the most money he can.”

“I’d have to do things his way. He’d expect me to have a drink with him at the saloon.”

“Then have a drink with him. I know it goes against what you want to do, but this isn’t the time to be worried about what others are going to think about you.”

“It’s not others I worry about, Sarah. I don’t like going to the saloon. It brings back too many memories. I don’t like remembering who I was.”

“Then don’t think of that. Think of saving our little girl.”

“You’re right. Of course, you’re right.” He kissed her. “I won’t be able to rest until I get this settled. I’ll go visit him tonight.”

“You should eat first,” she replied. “You haven’t had anything since breakfast.”

He nodded. “I’ll get something quick. I want to head out to Dan Adair’s place before it gets dark.”

She wrapped her arm around his waist as they walked back to the house. He put his arm around her shoulders and held her close to his side. Sarah made up her mind. They would get through this, and Emily would stay with them. *I’ll do my part to make that possible.*

Chapter Twenty

The next day, Neil arrived at Jack Silverman's office. John and Cassie's lawyer, Harry Martin, set a court date for the following Monday, so Neil didn't feel like he had time to waste. If he had any hopes of keeping Emily, he had to act fast. The only lawyer willing to confront Harry Martin in court was Jack Silverman.

Neil sat in the waiting room, tense as he waited for Jack to see him. Finally, after what seemed like hours, Jack opened his office door and waved him in. Once Neil explained the situation, he waited for Jack to say whether or not he'd take the case.

"Your past works against you, Mr. Craftsman," Jack told him. "Mr. Martin will claim you're not suitable to raise Emily, but you have a good chance right now so be careful."

Neil shifted in his chair. "I told you that Cassie doesn't care for Emily. She left Emily behind to marry John McCarthy."

"Can you prove it?"

"Well, she married him."

The lawyer shook his head and leaned forward. “Mr. Craftsman, Harry Martin claims that you requested the divorce.”

“I granted the divorce so she could marry John.”

Jack placed his arms on the desk and folded his hands. “Cassie married John because you were unfaithful to her. Adultery is one of the reasons a judge will grant a divorce, though most spouses end up leaving and living separate lives.”

“I didn’t commit adultery.”

“There are witnesses who saw you enter a prostitute’s quarters at the saloon during your marriage.”

Taking a deep breath to calm his nerves, he said, “I was going to but decided not to. Nothing happened. Cassie was the one who had lovers.”

“That isn’t known.”

He slowly exhaled. “Because I hid it the best I could.” Suddenly feeling weary, he rubbed his eyes. “I didn’t want Emily to find out.”

“So there’s no proof. That is why you have to be careful. Judge Richards and Judge Johnson pride themselves on their moral standing. I’ve checked on John and Cassie and both of them have clean backgrounds, except for the fact that she is divorced. However, as bad as divorce is viewed, it fails in comparison with a man who was known for visiting prostitutes. As hard as it is to tell you this, the fact remains that most people judge you based on what you’ve done, regardless of how you live your life now.”

Neil left the office, wondering if the meeting with Jack was worth half the cost of Sarah’s necklace. He hated having to sell it to Ralph Lindon, but Sarah was right. Emily was more important. With the other half he’d received for the necklace, he made a down payment on the lawyer’s total fee. He had to

secure the purchase from Dan Adair to secure Jack Silverman's services. As long as Dan agreed to the deal, he was set.

Neil pushed aside the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach as he entered the saloon that Wednesday. He hesitated. It was midday but a number of regulars gathered at the bar or around the tables, gambling and drinking. The atmosphere was quieter than it was at night. He spotted Dan Adair, sitting with a group of men, laughing and chugging beer at one of the round tables in the middle of the room.

I don't want to be here. He got ready to turn around and go back home but the knowledge that Emily would be gone if he didn't proceed drove him forward. His feet felt like lead as he dragged them across the hard floor. As soon as he approached the table, Dan lifted his head.

Dan grinned, and Neil couldn't tell if it was a friendly smile or a smirk. "I didn't think you were actually going to show."

Clearing his throat, Neil replied, "I gave my word. You said one drink and we'll go to the bank to do the transaction."

"Right. I remember. Sit down."

Neil pulled up the chair and sat across from him.

"Bartender, give our friend Craftsman here a beer," Dan yelled out. Turning to him, he motioned to the other men at the table. "I'd like to introduce my partners, Grant Hallows and Tim Fields."

Though Neil didn't feel like it, he shook the men's hands, his unease increasing. *One drink. It's only one drink.*

"Word around town is that you got the best cattle in the area," Dan commented as he accepted another drink from the bartender.

Neil joined the other men in taking a mug of beer from the middle-aged man who looked bored. As the man left, Neil took a gulp, wanting to hurry this up so they could get to the bank.

“What’s the rush, Neil? Sit back and enjoy yourself.”

Realizing that he had to play by Dan’s rules, he set his drink on the table and leaned back, his heart hammering in his chest. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get rid of the feeling that something bad was going to happen.

Dan nudged Grant in the arm. “Check her out. She’s a pretty one, don’t you think?”

Despite his better judgment, Neil glanced in the direction Dan indicated and saw Eliza coming down the stairs from the prostitutes’ quarters. She wore one of her satin red dresses with a low neckline, and the slit in the lower half of her dress ran up to the top of her thigh. Heat rushed to his face, and along with it came an onslaught of shame and humiliation. He recalled the times he used her for his own pleasure, and the memories sickened him. Staring at the half-filled mug of beer, he willed the unbidden thoughts away. *Think of Sarah.* Their times of joining together were good and satisfying. His face cooled and his heart calmed.

“Neil,” Dan called out, bringing Neil’s attention to him. “Was that woman any good?” He motioned to Eliza who talked to the bartender.

Neil hesitated, not wishing to answer the question, let alone remember what it was like to have relations with her.

“I heard you visited her more than the others,” Grant said, his eyes fixed on her. “With the way she moves, I can see why.”

Shifting in the chair, Neil replied, “I’d rather not think about it.”

“Why?”

His heart skipped a beat. "Well, I'm married, and the only woman I want to think about being with is my wife."

Dan smirked. "That wasn't the case when you were married to Cassie. Word is you went to visit Eliza one night after you spent some time gambling and drinking."

He forced himself to stay seated. All he wanted to do was run out of the saloon and never look back. *This is for Emily.* "I did drink and gamble, but I stopped before anything happened."

"Couldn't get it up?" Grant scoffed.

"I thought of my daughter, and I realized I couldn't go around defiling someone else's daughter."

The three men burst out laughing. Tim slapped the table with his hand.

Eliza turned to them and smiled. Swinging her hips in a seductive manner, she approached them. "Hello there, fellas," she greeted.

Neil recognized the overpowering smell of her perfume and swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. He couldn't look at her. Images of their times together flashed through his mind.

"Neil was just telling us that he remembers you," Dan told her.

Neil's jaw clenched. What was the man doing?

Eliza leaned forward, giving them a full view of her breasts.

Neil quickly averted his eyes, focusing on Dan who sneered at him.

Eliza winked. "I remember him too," she told Dan. "He was the best."

"That's because you haven't met me yet, hon," Grant said, openly staring at her bosom.

"Eliza, I think it's best if you get properly dressed," Neil said.

“Why?” Grant asked. “This is why she’s here. To give men pleasure, and it certainly is a pleasure to look at her.”

The other two men chuckled and nodded.

Dan took a drink of beer before placing his mug back on the table. “Maybe I should get a turn when Grant is done. Of course, that is if Neil doesn’t want a turn at her first.”

“Aren’t you married?” Neil snapped.

“Sure. But a wife is for bearing children. A woman like Eliza is for enjoying.”

“What you mean is that a woman like Eliza is to be used.” Neil looked at her then. “What I did wasn’t right, Eliza, and I apologize for it. You have a good heart, and you don’t need to sell yourself like this when you could settle down with a good man who’d treat you right. Take it from me. It doesn’t satisfy beyond a few minutes. Then it leaves you feeling empty.”

Her countenance fell and he noticed the uncertainty in her eyes.

“You can’t know how wonderful lovemaking is unless you find the man who’ll treat you right. Don’t you want better for yourself?” Neil softly asked her.

Her lower lip trembled.

Dan slammed his fist on the table, causing the mugs to rattle. “Just as I thought, Craftsman. You’re still as narrow-minded and judgmental as you were a year ago. I’m sick of being around men like you.”

Just as he stood up, the front doors swung open, and Grant shoved Eliza into Neil’s arms.

“Well, what do we have here?” a familiar voice asked.

Neil jerked to his feet, letting go of Eliza as soon as she was standing upright. “Harry Martin?”

“I don’t think Mr. Silverman will be able to defend you in court,” Harry said, looking pleased. “How unfortunate it is

that witnesses can attest to the fact that you were drinking and ready to engage in other...immoral...pursuits. A little girl needs parents who will demonstrate how to live just lives."

Shooting a look from Harry to Dan and his partners, he realized they had set him up. "So, you had no intention of doing business with me," he told Dan.

Dan crossed his arms. "Nothing personal. McCarthy gave me a nice sum of cash for my assistance."

"I'm sorry, Neil," Eliza said, tears filling her eyes. "I didn't have a choice."

"Shut up!" Dan snapped. "You've done your part. Now go."

"You don't have a right to talk to a woman like that," Neil retorted.

"She's not a woman. She's a whore," Dan scoffed.

"She's a person who's been beaten down so much that she's forgotten she has worth."

"I don't understand you at all, Craftsman." Dan stood up and sauntered over to him, pushing past her and Grant.

Neil straightened up, refusing to step back even when Dan was inches away from him. Maintaining eye contact, Neil waited for the man to continue.

"A year ago, you acted like you were too good for me, but today you defend a whore. You want to know why I won't buy your cattle? Because I don't need a holier than thou hypocrite telling me how to live my life."

"I didn't tell you how to do anything," Neil calmly stated. "It seems to me that you are telling yourself that, and my actions have confirmed it."

One moment, Neil was on his feet, and the next, Dan punched him in the jaw. Neil stumbled back and fell onto the empty table behind him, aware that the wood ripped under the

force of his weight. He landed on the floor, and before he could get up, Dan leapt on him to punch him again.

“Stop him!” Eliza screamed.

Neil took a swing and hit Dan in the nose. While Dan swore under his breath, Neil struggled to stand up. Grant and Tim pushed him down.

“Now, there’s no need to get violent,” Harry Martin said. “You boys did a fine job and will be paid.”

Dan wiped the blood from his nose. “You broke my nose, you son of a bitch!” Looking at Grant and Tim, he barked, “Stand him up.”

They obeyed while Eliza ran to the bartender.

“Listen here, Craftsman,” Dan hissed. “I’m going to see to it that you don’t get to keep that girl of yours if it’s the last thing I do.” Dan landed his fist into Neil’s gut, doubling him over.

The bartender ran over to them with a rifle, Eliza at his heels. He cocked the gun and pointed it at them. “I don’t want any more trouble in the bar. Get out.”

Neil waited in a period of time that seemed to span minutes but probably only took a matter of seconds before Dan told Grant and Tim to release him. His knees buckled under him, but he quickly caught his balance.

Eliza wiped the tears that fell on her cheeks, her body trembling. The bartender motioned for Dan to back away from Neil.

Dan obeyed but gave Neil a cold stare. “I’ll be in court on Monday, and Grant and Tim will back me up when I tell them you wanted to take the whore upstairs.”

“And I’ll tell them he didn’t!” Eliza yelled, though her voice shook.

Dan smirked. “Who’s going to believe the word of a whore?”

Harry waved his hand at Dan. "Don't worry about a thing. The case is closed up." He looked at Neil. "Jack Silverman won't defend you once the gossipers in town spread their rumors. If you're willing to let Emily return to her mother, then we can forget all of this."

"I'll defend myself," Neil said, displaying a confidence he didn't feel.

"Given your past and the witnesses, I don't see how you have a chance." Harry sighed. "It's almost a shame too. You obviously care about the girl as if she were your own."

"And it's a shame that you put money before people," he replied.

Dan motioned to Neil. "You see what I mean? Holier than thou. I'll be in court." He stormed out of the saloon, Grant and Tim following close behind.

The bartender lowered his gun and returned to the bar while the lawyer nodded to Neil and left. Neil bent down to retrieve his hat from the floor and placed it on his head.

Eliza ran up to him. "Neil, I'm sorry. They threatened to tell my son the truth about his birth. I gave him up for adoption twelve years ago, and I don't want him to know about me."

"You don't have to explain anything to me," Neil softly told her. "Why do you continue to stay here?"

Taking a shaky breath, she shrugged. "I'm not good for anything else."

His heart ached for her. How many times had he believed the same lie? "Go see Pastor Peters. He gave me a new start, and he can give you one too. I'm sorry I was one of the men who used you."

"No man's ever spoken kindly to me before, Neil. Thank you, and I'll see the pastor you mentioned." She wiped her wet cheeks. "I hope you get to keep that precious girl."

His Redeeming Bride

Neil nodded to her and exited the saloon.

Chapter Twenty-One

Sarah sat across from Reverend Amos and Beatrice Donner as the preacher informed her of what occurred with Neil at the saloon. She glanced out the window where Emily and Luke played with Neil's mother. Gwen was trying to teach them how to plant flowers, but Luke kept tossing rocks across the green lawn.

"We regret to inform you of what your husband is doing," Reverend Amos said, his expression solemn. "He was found drinking beer and getting ready to sleep with a prostitute at the saloon. Now, this isn't something I enjoy telling you, but I feel it is my duty to make you aware of what is going on."

She shifted her gaze to Jim's mother who crossed her arms and nodded, as if satisfied that this happened. "I hate to say 'I told you so,' but I never approved of your marriage to that horrible man."

Unsure of what to say or do, Sarah remained still, absentmindedly rubbing her stomach, aware of the baby bouncing around in her womb. From the open window, she heard Luke and Emily laughing.

"We don't blame you, Sarah," the preacher added. "You were without a husband and living in the same house with

Mr. Craftsman. I'm sure you wished to marry him in order to have a secure place and to alleviate any guilt regarding certain activities."

"Neil and I didn't sleep in the same bed until after we married," she replied, surprised at the intensity with which her words came out.

Beatrice shook her head and pursed her lips.

"I don't care if you believe me or not. What you think doesn't matter anymore," she told the irritating woman who gasped.

"Regardless of whether or not you're telling the truth," the preacher began, "we need to decide what to do from this moment forward. You have your son and this unborn child to think about. It's not wise to have them raised in a home with a father who's running around a saloon, drinking and sleeping with the soiled doves there. You know how darkness can creep up and slip into people's lives. Children are the most susceptible. It is your duty as their mother to protect them from an immoral future."

Releasing her breath, she pondered how to respond.

Beatrice clasped her hands together and leaned forward on the couch. "Sarah, my dear, I am not coming in the spirit of malevolence. I assure you my intentions are for the good of you and your children. Jim wouldn't want this life for you, and we must think of his son."

"She's right, Sarah. Fortunately, we have a place for you and your little one. You won't have to worry about a place to stay. Of course, this will mean that you are to never marry again. We cannot condone a divorce. We dare not add one evil upon another, but a permanent separation will do no one any harm and will protect your reputation."

"We must look forward," Beatrice agreed.

Emily called out a greeting to her father, turning Sarah's attention back to the window. Emily ran up to Neil and he lifted her up in his arms and hugged her. Even from the distance she was at, she could tell he had gotten into a fight. A bruise was already forming on his jaw and his suit and hair were ruffled. Luke stumbled as he ran to him but quickly got up to continue walking to him. Neil bent down and hugged him too. Gwen struggled to her feet and limped over to them.

The preacher continued, "Come along, Sarah. Beatrice is staying with Willow Mills. You and Jim used to visit her."

"We'll make sure that Mr. Craftsman never taints you or your children again," Beatrice added.

They stood up, as if they had rehearsed this moment, and waited for Sarah to respond.

Holding Luke in one arm and Emily in another, Neil watched his mother approach him, a worried look on her face.

"What happened?" she asked, removing the gardening gloves from her hands.

He shook his head. "I have to talk to Sarah. It looks bad."

"What do you mean, Pa?" Emily wondered, her arms around his neck.

"I can't get a lawyer, honey. I'm going to have to defend myself in court on Monday."

"Why? I thought Mr. Silverman agreed to represent you as soon as your business with Dan Adair went through," his mother said.

"There was no business." He forced the words out, bitterness welling up in his chest. "I need to speak with Sarah before I give you the details, all right, Ma?"

She nodded. "Of course."

The sound of a man's voice stopped him from approaching the front door. *It didn't take him long to get here with them.* For all he knew, Harry Martin had John and Cassie wait for him outside the saloon and followed Neil to the house. A feeling of dread threatened to engulf him when he noticed the deputy with them.

"Mr. Craftsman," Harry began, looking pleased with himself, "I have a temporary order from the judge for you to relinquish custody of Emily."

His hold tightened on Emily as she shook her head in protest. "No."

Harry held the document out to him. "Read it for yourself."

"Neil?" His mother turned her eyes to him. "What's going on?"

"I'm not going!" Emily screamed. "My mother doesn't love me. She'll send me away!"

Cassie pressed her hand to her chest. "My goodness, Emily. Is that what Mr. Craftsman told you?"

"No. I heard you." Emily looked at Neil, an anxious look on her face. "Don't let them take me, Pa!"

Cassie shook her head, her eyes wide. "I don't know why she thinks that," she told the lawyer. "I would never send her away. I love her."

Deputy Owen Russell stepped past John, Cassie and Harry. He glanced at Emily and Luke before directing his attention to Neil. Taking a deep breath, he sadly stated, "I'm afraid Mr. Martin does have a court order for you to relinquish guardianship of Emily until the hearing on Monday."

"On what grounds?" Neil pressed, his heart hammering in his chest.

“There was a fight in the bar. Apparently, you attacked Dan Adair, and Judge Richards isn’t sure Emily’s safe with you.”

Anger heated Neil’s face. “He attacked me.”

“Unfortunately, all the witnesses claim you attacked him. Well, there was the woman who said you didn’t, but it’s her word against three other men.”

“Even the bartender?”

The deputy nodded. “If you don’t let Mrs. McCarthy take her daughter, then I’m ordered to arrest you until Monday when you’re due to appear in court for the hearing.”

Emily’s screaming and his mother’s sobbing distracted Neil. He willed his mind to clear above the noise so he could make sense of the man’s words. “What?” he finally managed to squeak. He blinked as he struggled to focus on the deputy. In the back of his mind, he was aware that Sarah ran out of the house with the preacher and Mrs. Donner close behind her. “I don’t understand,” he told the deputy.

Sarah caught up to him and took Luke. He couldn’t take his eyes off the man in front of him whose expression told him that he didn’t want to do this.

The deputy closed his eyes for a moment. “I’m sorry, Mr. Craftsman. I don’t agree with what’s going on, but I have to carry out the judge’s orders.”

Cassie walked over to him and reached for Emily, and Neil jerked back.

John pressed through the deputy and Cassie and grabbed Neil’s arm. “I recommend you let go of the child,” John told him, his tone calm but his words cold.

Neil snarled at him. “Back off, McCarthy! You think you can do whatever you want because you have money?” He wrapped his other arm around Emily. “Emily’s my daughter,

whether you like it or not. You have no right to come into a man's family and tear it apart."

He smirked at him. "The judge disagrees with you."

"No!" Neil felt the tears but refused to stop them from falling down his face. If Sarah and Luke weren't standing nearby, he would have run off with Emily and hide her, but he had his wife and son to think about so he had to stay there. His arms shook as he clung to his daughter. "No!"

"Neil, what happened?" Sarah asked.

Her anxious voice broke him from John's intense stare. He blinked so he could get a clear view of her through his tears.

Harry Martin turned to her. "I found your husband holding a prostitute at the saloon. When Mr. Adair advised him against his improper conduct, Neil attacked him."

Reverend Amos nodded. "It's just like I told you, Sarah. A man who has a tainted past will never change."

Sarah looked at the preacher, back to the lawyer and finally to Neil. "Neil?"

Neil gulped the lump in his throat. "Mr. Martin and Dan set me up. Dan never wanted to buy my cattle. He wanted revenge. They planted Eliza there and told her to play her part, but nothing happened. She said hello but that was it. Then one of Dan's men pushed her into my arms and the next thing I know, Martin showed up and Dan came after me. They're lying so John and Cassie can get Emily. Mr. Silverman won't represent me in court if people believe that story." He shot a look at the preacher and Mrs. Donner. "Word travels fast."

"Unfortunately for you, it does," Mrs. Donner snapped. "You have defiled my son's wife, but you will not defile his son."

Deputy Russell interrupted before John could grab Emily. "Mr. McCarthy, let me handle this." When John stepped

away, the deputy took the paper from Harry and presented it to Neil. "Which one is it? Will you consent to hand Emily over or will you go to jail?"

"And take a moment to consider your wife and son," John said.

"You mean Jim's son!" Beatrice added.

The meaning of the deputy's words finally sank into him, and Neil understood the implications of what both options meant. His mind quickly worked through the dilemma. If he had to represent himself in court, then he needed to gather people who could vouch for him. Mr. Silverman mentioned gathering anyone who could impress upon the judge the fact that Cassie didn't want to be a mother to Emily, and there was one person who knew the truth. Someone who was impartial. Someone who would make the ideal witness. Mary Larson. The only way he was going to get a chance to talk to Mary was if he was out of jail.

A temporary sacrifice if I can win the case. If he went to jail, he wouldn't even have a chance to get Emily back. "Em, honey," he whispered, his voice choking as he worked through the words he would tell the girl, *his girl*. "I have to do what they say."

"No! Take me home!" she protested.

Emily's words pierced his heart. Despite Emily's screams and struggles, he pried her arms from his neck, unable to stop his tears as they continued to fall down his face. "Don't you see what your selfishness is doing to her?" he bitterly asked Cassie.

Emily kicked and clawed at Cassie. John took the girl and held her arms and legs in place. Emily let out another high-pitched wail.

Gwen covered her face and turned her back on the scene while Sarah continued to glance from one person to the other, also crying.

"We'll see you in court on Monday." Harry tipped his hat to Neil and the others before he joined John and Cassie as they carried a shrieking Emily down the sidewalk.

"Shameful." Beatrice shook her head. "Absolutely shameful. Jim never would have done anything that would have resulted in this shameful event."

"It is shameful, ma'am," Deputy Russell replied. "A girl shouldn't be dragged from the only home she's ever known." He turned to Neil and handed him the paper. "I apologize, Mr. Craftsman. I hope you find a way to get her back."

Neil watched the man as he left the group. The deputy's words were well-intended but did nothing to ease the ache in Neil's heart. He brought his hand to the back of his neck which was sore from where Emily had clung to him. *Oh Emily, forgive me.* He took a deep breath to steady his emotions so he wasn't crying anymore. *Forgive me.*

Reverend Amos interrupted the silence. "Sarah, you can see that judgment is a part of this. No man gets by with wrong living. Don't allow yourself and your children to suffer as that little girl is."

"Get out of here," Neil snapped, anger replacing his sorrow.

"We'll be glad to, as soon as Sarah consents to go with us."

"No. No! She's my wife and no one can undo that. Now get out of here before I make you!"

Beatrice gasped. "Oh, he is a monster!"

"Shut your mouth," Neil ordered. "I'm sick of listening to you spout off about how I'm unfit to raise your grandson."

You're an intolerable woman! A person would have to be a saint to put up with your bellyaching."

"If you're looking for people to say you're fit to raise a child, you won't get us to agree," the preacher said. "Come on, Sarah."

The preacher motioned to the sidewalk.

Neil waited for her to say no, to tell this miserable old coot that her place was by Neil's side as she had done in the past.

But she didn't.

"Sarah?" Neil asked as an icy grip clenched his heart.

She paused in mid-turn, her profile making it hard for him to determine what she might be thinking. When she spoke, her voice was so low that he could barely make out her words. "I can't stay."

"What?" He made a move to take her arm so she would have to face him but the preacher stopped him.

"She made her choice," the man reprimanded him.

Neil watched her leave with Reverend Amos and a satisfied looking Mrs. Donner. He wanted to run after her and cling to her, but his feet froze to the ground. *What just happened? I woke up this morning with Sarah, Emily, and Luke safe at home. And now they're gone?*

His mother came to him and hugged him, but too much had happened in the past hour and he failed to know what to do to get himself from under the mess that had suddenly become his life. He stood there, his body going numb. Only one thought kept running through his mind: *What just happened?*

That night, Neil banged on the front door of Willow Mills' residence. Sarah clamped her hands over her ears and

begged Beatrice and Willow to make him go away. She rocked back and forth on the bed, unable to take it anymore. Neil had been begging to talk to her for the last three hours and it left her in a turmoil of heartache as she struggled with what to do.

Beatrice opened the front door. Sarah stayed in the guest bedroom, but she could hear them since the front door was right by her room.

"Mr. Craftsman, you can't keep on like this," Beatrice said. "Sarah doesn't want to see you."

"I need to talk to her. You didn't give me a chance to talk to her," he argued.

Sarah squeezed her eyes shut, feeling as if she couldn't breathe but knowing she had to in order to sustain the life growing inside of her. She became painfully aware of the baby she and Neil created each time the baby jabbed her. Just that morning, she and Neil had been laughing and sharing the joys of impending parenthood. But all at once, everything had been ripped apart and the pain in her chest grew stronger with each plea Neil gave for Beatrice to let him into the house.

"I love her," Neil continued after Beatrice denied him entrance. "I would never betray her."

"It's too bad that you had witnesses."

"They're lying."

"I don't care to have this conversation with you...again. Now get out of here or I'll send for the sheriff to take you away."

Sarah gasped back another sob and hummed a tune to block out the rest of the conversation. *What should I do? What should I do?*

In the corner of the room, Luke watched her. He picked up one of his blocks and brought it to her, a smile on his face, as if he hoped to cheer her up. Seeing him only served to bring another round of fresh tears to her eyes. She knew Luke

wasn't Neil's son, but she couldn't help but see Neil whenever the boy smiled.

Beatrice entered the room. "There. I finally got him to leave. The neighbors complained to the police and they took him away."

"Is he in jail?" Sarah couldn't stand the thought of him being in prison.

"No. Unfortunately." Beatrice knelt by Luke and smiled at him. "Hi, Luke. You are a handsome little boy, aren't you? You look a lot like your mother." The woman turned to Sarah. "As much as I love my son, it is good that Luke inherited your looks."

Sarah nearly fell off the bed, for that was the first kind word she ever spoke to her. "I...Uh...Thank you."

Beatrice sighed. "I suppose I haven't been a very gracious mother-in-law, have I?"

Unable to answer the question, Sarah let her hands fall into her lap and took a good look at Jim's mother, as if seeing her for the first time.

"If there is one thing Mr. Craftsman taught me, it's that I should have treated you better." The woman sat next to Sarah on the bed and took one of Sarah's hands in hers. "I am sorry. I didn't realize how I seemed until recently. Sarah, you must understand that I want what's best for you and Luke. I don't want to see Mr. Craftsman hurt you by sleeping with other women and drinking. You are the only family I have left now that my husband and Jim are dead. I have no other legacy except for Luke."

Forcing her heartache aside, she focused on Jim's mother. "Mrs. Donner--"

"Beatrice." She smiled as Luke climbed on her lap and showed her the block. "I would like to be a friend, instead of a mother-in-law. I know I haven't been a good one. Is there any

chance that we might work through our differences and become friends?”

“I must admit that I’m a little overwhelmed.”

“I understand. I have no right to ask for what I don’t deserve.”

“I meant that it’s sudden but I would welcome the chance to be friends.”

The woman’s body relaxed and her smile grew wider.

Willow walked into the room. “Mr. Craftsman left town. He won’t be coming back tonight. The sheriff confirmed it. Now you can get some peace and quiet, Sarah.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Mills.”

The old woman nodded and departed.

Returning Beatrice’s smile, Sarah said, “Thank you for calling him Luke.”

Beatrice laughed. “I have to admit, I’ve grown fond of the name you gave him. He sure has changed since I last saw him.”

Deciding to let the past go, Sarah updated the woman on what Luke accomplished in the past few months.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Neil's heart hung heavy in his chest, and he spent the night lying awake on the couch in the parlor. He couldn't bring himself to go upstairs where he spent his nights with Sarah and where Emily and Luke slept in their bedrooms. He couldn't even bring himself to go to the kitchen where they spent their time eating and talking, often laughing. But there was no laughter now. In fact, the absence of laughter made the silence all the more deafening.

The morning came and he dragged his feet up the stairs, each step echoing of a loneliness he didn't want to acknowledge. Ignoring the children's bedrooms, he lumbered into the room he and Sarah shared, quelling the memories of how they expressed their love for each other in their bed. Instead, he opened the wardrobe and sighed at the sight of the pretty yellow, purple, and green dresses she had made. She even made a pink one to wear during her pregnancy. Though she kept her gray and brown dresses, she rarely wore them anymore.

He touched the soft fabric of the green dress, recalling the first day he saw her in it. They married later that day. The unwanted memory brought the emotions he had been carefully

suppressing. He smelled the fragrance of the lavender soap she liked to use, and for a moment, he closed his eyes, imagining that she was standing in front of him, telling him that she didn't believe what everyone else was saying, that she knew he wouldn't betray her. The comfort departed under the weight of the truth. She didn't trust him, and she took Luke and their unborn child with her. And Cassie took Emily.

Emptiness plagued the house so much he couldn't stand it. He quickly dressed in another suit, shaved and combed his hair, determined to focus on what he needed to do, and that was get Emily back. He couldn't force Sarah back, and he wasn't sure if she'd let see him see Luke or their child, but he knew that Emily didn't want to be with Cassie and that Cassie didn't really want her daughter. If nothing else, he had to protect that precious girl.

Straightening his tie, he took a deep breath and cleared his mind. Feeling ready, he placed his hat on his head and headed for town. He took the buggy, more out of desperate hope than belief that Sarah would change her mind and come home. He had to try to talk to her. Maybe a good night's sleep would clear her thinking. Maybe she would listen to him instead of what others were probably telling her.

When he arrived in town, he rode by Willow Mills' house but no one was there when he knocked on the door. He decided he would come back after he saw the judge. He parked the buggy in front of the courthouse and worked things out with the clerk to get an appointment with one of the judges that afternoon. After that, he went to the bank to withdraw enough money to buy Sarah's necklace back. He had planned to add it to Dan Adair's payment to pay the lawyer, but since Jack Silverman did, in fact, refuse to see him when he tried to explain the situation after he departed from Willow Mills' place the previous day, he had no reason to withhold the money.

The bell rang over his head as he opened the door of the mercantile. Ralph was nowhere in sight so he waited by the front counter. Peering through the glass display case, he saw Sarah's necklace. Just the sight of it made him want to weep. It was a long shot that she might want to listen to him, but he couldn't let her sacrifice her parents' only gift to her.

"I don't want a toy. I want to go home to Pa," a girl said.

Neil turned his attention to the back of the store. He thought he was the only customer in the place. Rows of shelves hid his view of who she was with, but he'd recognize Emily's voice anywhere. His heart raced with excitement at the thought of seeing his daughter. He took a step forward when he heard Cassie.

"Come on, Emily," she pleaded. "Pick something to play with. You can pick all the toys if you want. John has a lot of money and can afford anything you want."

"I want Pa!"

Cassie gave a loud sigh. "I explained that to you. Mr. Craftsman isn't your pa."

"Yes, he is!"

"No, he's not. Now, I'm your mother. You would do well to want to be with me."

"Why? So you can send me away as soon as John gets his money?"

"Emily, you'll be going to a very prestigious all-girl school. You'll have opportunities that you'll never have here."

"But I want Pa."

"But you should want me. I'm your mother."

Neil rushed to the back, recognizing the irritated tone in Cassie's voice. That was never a good sign.

"You don't love me. You left me. Pa would never have left me!"

“You ungrateful brat.”

He heard the slap as he rounded the corner, and he grabbed Cassie’s hand before she could slap Emily’s cheek again.

Cassie whirled around and slapped him with her free hand.

He grabbed her other hand. “You’re not allowed to lay a hand on Emily,” he snapped.

Cassie struggled against him. “Let go of me, you brute.”

“Listen to me.” Keeping his voice low, he continued, “I won’t let you hurt her.”

Emily ran over to Neil and stood behind him. “Take me home, Pa.”

His heart ached to do just that, to pick her up and leave with her. “I wish I could, honey.”

Cassie jerked her hands out of his. “I don’t get it, Neil. She’s not yours. She’s mine.”

“You didn’t want her.”

“That’s why she is hostile to me. You’ve polluted her thinking.”

“No, he didn’t,” Emily cried, holding onto Neil. “She’s hit me before, Pa. I didn’t know it was wrong before, but I know better now.”

Neil glared at Cassie, reminding himself that he couldn’t strike a woman.

“Oh, she’ll lie to get whatever she wants,” Cassie argued.

“You won’t get her, Cassie.”

Cassie straightened her back and adjusted her blue hat which matched her lacy dress. “The decision’s already been made. You are unfit to be a father.”

“I love her. That qualifies me.”

She shook her head. "You have another child and one on the way. It doesn't matter if you have Emily or not. You can obviously have ten more if you want, but I can't have any more children. She's all I got."

"Don't you mean, she's all John's got? I know he stands to inherit a pretty sum of money if he can give his father a grandchild. Jack Silverman did his homework before you and John had your lawyer set me up at the saloon."

Rolling her eyes, she sighed. "I'm giving her the opportunity of a lifetime. A school back east will do her more good than a mediocre education out west."

"I don't want to go to that stupid school!" Emily shouted. "I keep telling you that but you won't listen."

Ralph arrived, looking shocked. "May I help you folks?"

Neil closed his eyes for a moment, willing himself to calm down.

When he opened them, he saw Cassie pasting on one of her terrific smiles. "Mr. Lindon, how nice it is to see you again. I swear you haven't aged a day since I left."

Stopping himself from rolling his eyes, Neil said, "It's personal business. There's no need to get involved in it."

Cassie shot Neil a dirty look.

Ralph glanced between them but shrugged off any other questions Neil suspected he had. "All right. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Yes," Cassie sweetly replied, turning to him. "I would like to buy these two dolls for my daughter."

"I don't want them!" Emily screamed.

Before Neil could stop her, she ran out of the store. He lunged forward to go after her when Cassie grabbed his arm. "You let me have her, Neil, or I'll make sure John takes away your farm."

Neil shook her off of him and hurried to catch up with Emily.

Cassie groaned but ran after him.

As he opened the door, he saw Emily dodging some people on the boardwalk, ignoring questions people asked about where she was going. He called after her and ran, pushing past a couple of men who refused to get out of his way. He was aware that Cassie followed, though her heels hindered her from getting too far.

"Emily!" he yelled when he saw a horse nearly run her over as she darted across the street.

The rider shouted at her.

"Watch your language!" Neil snapped. "She's just a girl."

"Yeah, well if you're her father, you're doing a lousy job of making sure she stays out of the street," the man bickered.

Neil grunted but decided to let the matter go. He caught up to Emily once she got to the other side of the street. "Emily," he said as he turned her to face him. He knelt in front of her. "Honey."

She hugged him. "I hate her," she cried. "She's mean."

"I'm doing everything I can to get you back."

"Just take me home."

"It's not that easy. If I take you home now, I'll get sent to jail. Then I won't have any chance to appear before the judge. I have to make it to court, honey. If I don't, then I'll lose you for good."

"I wish you were my real father. Then this wouldn't be happening."

He brushed the dark curls out of her eyes and kissed her cheek. "As far as I'm concerned, I am your real father."

Cassie caught up to them, panting. "This is enough disobedience, Emily. You have to come with me."

"I'll run away," Emily argued. "I'm not going with you."

"And where do you think you're going to go?" Cassie scoffed.

Emily jutted her chin forward. "I have places I can go."

She crossed her arms and smirked. "How cute. I know where your grandmother lives."

"I have other places."

She didn't look convinced.

Neil stood up, holding onto Emily's hand. "Can't you let her stay with me until Monday?"

Cassie narrowed her eyes at him. "Why? So you can have time to run off with her the way you did once before? Only that time, you also ran off with Mary Larson."

"Cassie," he warned.

"What is she talking about, Pa?" Emily looked up at him.

"He didn't tell you?" Cassie pressed her hand to her chest and shook her head. "The man you insist on calling 'Pa' isn't all he appears."

"Stop it," Neil barked.

"Why? You filled her head with all sorts of bad things about me. I might as well return the favor." Turning to Emily, she smiled. "Your pa took you and left me. You were a baby when it happened. So you see, he never loved me."

"That's not true. I did when we were first married."

"And we all see how well that worked. Within a year, you were trying to marry another man's wife."

"I don't want to go into this." He tightened his hold on Emily's hand.

"Why should I have stuck around with you after that?"

"Fine. You want to call a spade a spade? You wanted to run off with another man right before Emily was born.

There. Are you happy that you just told Emily all our secrets? She's only nine for goodness' sakes."

"I don't care," Emily intervened. "I just want to go home."

"And you will," Cassie agreed. "With me."

Emily let out a high-pitched shriek, startling Neil. Cassie pressed her hands to her ears.

A lawman and Dan Adair approached them.

"Sir, is there a problem?" the lawman asked them.

Neil examined the fat man with a bushy beard. The man wore a deputy's badge, but Neil hadn't seen him before. But that didn't cause him unease. The deputy was with Dan Adair. Dan looked at Neil and scowled. Neil hid his apprehension. Was Dan Adair talking to the deputy about what happened at the saloon? Neil couldn't handle any more problems.

Cassie motioned to the lawman. "Mr. Craftsman is under a court order to let this girl come home with me. I'm her mother, but he's trying to take her."

To Neil's horror, a group of onlookers began to form a circle around them, and one of the faces in the growing crowd was Judge Johnson, the same judge who was presiding over his case. He grew tense, realizing that this would hurt his case if he didn't watch his words.

Forcing his voice to remain calm, he turned to the deputy. "I'm not taking her home. I know Emily has to go with Mrs. McCarthy. She was with her at the mercantile when I stopped by to see Ralph Lindon. I caught Cassie and Emily in the middle of a disagreement. When Emily ran out, I followed her."

"A likely story," a woman muttered to one of her friends.

He gritted his teeth. Couldn't people mind their own business?

"It's true," Emily told the woman. "I want to be with my pa."

The woman's eyes widened. "Hmm...Seems to me that a girl could learn manners when speaking to her elders." She shot a searing look at Neil.

Ignoring her, he turned to the judge. "I assure you, your honor, that I have no intention of disobeying the law."

Cassie nodded in satisfaction and reached for the girl's hand. Emily let out a high-pitched cry, causing several people to back up.

"What am I supposed to do?" Neil asked, frustrated when Emily refused to let go of his hand while Cassie pulled at her other hand.

The deputy approached the judge and said something to him, but Neil couldn't make out his words over Emily's continual shrieking.

Preacher Peters and Beatrice walked up to the crowd. Neil glanced at the preacher, wondering why he'd be talking to Beatrice. Did he believe Beatrice? Had Neil lost his support too?

Emily's frantic kicking at Cassie took his mind off of them. Forcing aside his unease, he knelt by his daughter. "Emily, honey, you can't do this."

Instead of listening to him, Emily continued to kick at Cassie, who stepped back, looking bewildered.

The deputy tapped Neil on the shoulder. "Sir, the bartender said that there was a ruckus at his bar involving you and Mr. Adair over there. All I need you to do is confirm that this is the man who attacked you at the saloon."

"What?" Neil asked.

"That is Dan Adair, correct?" the man replied.

“Yes.”

Cassie wiped her tears with a lacy handkerchief. “I don’t know what to do, Judge Johnson. Can we get this deputy to bring my daughter home?”

Mary Larson, who’d been watching, stepped forward. “May I say something, Judge?”

Judge Johnson looked her way. “Of course, you can.”

Mary glanced back at her husband and her three children before she proceeded. “I was there when Emily was born, and over the years, I have seen how things were in the Craftsman household. Cassie didn’t want her daughter, sir. When Emily was born, Cassie didn’t take care of her. But Neil did.” Her youngest child ran up to her and she picked him up. “I had to make the girl’s clothes and when I brought them over, I saw some things I wish I hadn’t. Cassie was harsh with Emily.” She took a deep breath. “Sir, I don’t want to go into detail, but one time I had to stop Cassie from beating the girl. Cassie kept screaming that Emily dumped flour on the kitchen floor and deserved to be taught a lesson. Emily had bruises all over her body. Neil was gone when it happened. I told him about it. I never saw Emily without him after that day.”

Neil had a sudden desire to take Emily away from there. She had been three when it happened, and by the look on her face, he realized she had forgotten that incident.

Cassie glared at Mary.

Mary shifted her eyes from Cassie and back to the judge. “Maybe I was wrong not to say anything, but when Sarah Craftsman told me what happened, I couldn’t sit by and let Emily return to her mother without telling the truth.”

Several women in the crowd whispered to each other.

To Neil’s surprise, Ralph Lindon pushed through the crowd until he stood by the judge and deputy. “I have

something I need to report. This girl should not go home with that woman.” He pointed at Cassie.

Huffing, Cassie crossed her arms.

“What do you mean?” Judge Johnson asked.

“I saw Mrs. McCarthy slap her. She was about to slap her again when Mr. Craftsman stepped in to stop her,” Ralph continued. “The girl kept saying she wanted to go home with Mr. Craftsman. I also overheard Mr. McCarthy telling another customer about the money he was due to inherit once he gained full rights to Emily. Now, I try not to intrude in other people’s lives, and I know you’re due to hear this case on Monday”—he sighed and shook his head—“but I can’t wait until then to tell you that a child needs to be with a parent who loves her.”

Cassie’s eyebrows furrowed as she stared at Ralph. “How can you possibly know all of this?”

“Mirrors. I have them located throughout the mercantile,” Ralph explained. “And I hear things, even when people are whispering.”

“Sir.” The deputy nudged Neil in the arm. “We need you to sign some papers. Then we can get the court proceedings underway.”

“Court proceedings?” Dan asked. “You mean to sue Neil, right?”

“No.”

“But you said that we were going to make things right with Craftsman.”

“That I did. And that I will. The bartender at the saloon is demanding that the wrongful party in yesterday’s brawl pay him for the broken tables and chairs. Once I take Mr. Craftsman’s witness into account, the case will be underway to sue you for the damages.”

“You’re kidding,” Dan said.

“Nope. He’ll need all matching tables and chairs, so you’ll have to replace all of the old ones in the place. He also has to replace the mugs. A couple were chipped.”

“What do you mean he wants matching tables and chairs? None of his old things matched.”

He shrugged. “I guess he wants to match them now. I believe the total comes to \$64.”

Neil inwardly cringed at the amount.

“That’s a whole month’s wages,” Dan retorted.

“The bartender has fine taste,” the deputy replied.

John McCarthy walked by with a man Neil didn’t recognize. The man with the spectacles and graying hair under his black hat stopped John and pointed at Neil. Something in the stranger’s gait seemed familiar. His eyes widened as he realized his mother was dressed in a man’s outfit, wearing a wig and a hat. He recognized her because of her slight limp.

Dan turned and saw John. “Is this what I get for my trouble, McCarthy?”

John scanned Dan and the onlookers. “What are you talking about? Who are all these people? Why is Mr. Craftsman with Emily?”

“I’m not going to pay the bill, McCarthy.” Dan stepped forward so he was in front of John. “You didn’t give me nearly enough money to cover the damage at the saloon.”

“What are you talking about?” John asked.

The deputy placed his hands on his hips and motioned to Dan. “Your friend over here started a fight in the saloon that resulted in the loss of valuable inventory. The bartender’s demanding restitution.”

Neil’s eyebrows furrowed. He’d seen that posture before. And the deputy mentioned matching items. What man cared if tables and chairs matched? He squinted until he

recognized Sarah's brown eyes. His heart leapt. She *did* believe him!

Dan looked at the judge and threw up his hands. "I confess. John McCarthy paid me to lure Mr. Craftsman to the saloon. I was supposed to get him to drink and hire a prostitute to get near him. Then, when McCarthy's lawyer showed up, Neil would look bad. It was so Mr. McCarthy could get custody of Emily. He paid me to do it."

John frowned. "You need to learn to keep your mouth shut."

"I won't pay for the damages."

"There is no bill," Sarah, still in the deputy disguise, said. "But now we have proof that yesterday's situation was contrived to make Neil Craftsman look bad."

John shook his head at Dan who winced.

Judge Johnson looked at Cassie. "You don't want Emily, do you?"

Cassie hesitated and looked at John.

"Forget it," John muttered, taking her hand. "Apparently, we just lost the case. And quite frankly, little girl," he said, turning to Emily, "you're not worth the trouble."

Neil was so overcome with relief that he didn't notice how the crowd reacted. He picked Emily up and hugged her. "Oh honey, I'm sorry you had to hear all that."

"She never loved me," Emily whispered, her tears wetting his neck.

Blinking back his own tears on her behalf, he watched as Sarah pulled off her wig and beard, causing a hush to fall over the excited crowd.

"Thank you, Mary," Sarah said.

Mary nodded and smiled at the judge. "It helps when my brother-in-law is a judge."

Judge Johnson returned her smile. "You're right. It's not everyone I leave my chamber for." He shook Neil's hand. "I'm glad you get to keep your daughter."

Neil thanked him as the crowd dispersed.

Sarah walked over to him. "I'm sorry I had to deceive you. I was afraid if John's lawyer knew my plan, he would find a way to stop it. I didn't know how else to get Emily back."

He wrapped his free arm around her and kissed her, feeling so grateful that he was ready to cry. Steadying his emotions, he pulled away from her. "So you do believe me."

She laughed. "Are you just now getting that? I don't wear pants and a beard for just any man."

He chuckled at the oddity of her statement.

As the crowd slowly dispersed, Beatrice, Preacher Peters, and his mother joined them.

Beatrice cleared her throat. "I hope you'll forgive me, Neil. I understand now that what I've been doing to you and Sarah is wrong. She and I had a long but good talk last night, and it became clear to me that you are a good husband to her and a good father to Luke. I hope you'll let me continue to come out to see him."

"Of course, I will, Mrs. Donner," he told her. "And thank you for the apology. All is forgiven."

She looked relieved.

"Where is Luke?" he asked Sarah.

She motioned to Willow Mills who lumbered down the street with the small boy. "I believe she began her walk over here a half hour ago."

Luke stopped, bent down and picked something off the boardwalk.

Neil's mother laughed. "Between an old woman and a small boy out to discover the world, it's no wonder it's taking them so long."

Preacher Peters patted Neil on the back. "I'm glad it worked out. Sarah was up all night devising the plan. I'll tell you, a woman that stands steadfast behind her husband is one worth keeping."

Neil grinned at her. "I certainly plan to keep her, Preacher."

"I'll see you at church."

"And me too, I hope," Beatrice said.

"The more, the merrier," he agreed.

"Can we go home now?" Emily asked.

"After I buy back Sarah's necklace," Neil replied.

"Mrs. Donner," Neil's mother began as she patted Beatrice on the arm, "did you ever check out the tablecloths at the mercantile?"

"I've never been in there," Mrs. Donner admitted.

"Well, I should give you a tour."

"Can I come too?" Emily asked.

Neil's mother smiled. "You sure can."

He set Emily to her feet so she could join them.

As the two women and Emily walked ahead of them and approached Willow and Luke, Neil shook his head in wonder. "It's strange to see them together, getting along so well."

"It's good though. Jim's mother needs something more than a grandson to keep her occupied. She was lonely."

"I was too, you know. Before you came along," Neil confided.

"You weren't the only one," Sarah whispered.

He hugged her and felt the baby in her womb kick at him. He chuckled. "I don't think he likes it when I hold you too close."

"He? Emily's determined this is going to be a girl."

"We'll see if she's right when July comes."

He wrapped his arm around her waist and led her across the street, feeling as if the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders.

It was in the middle of the night on July 20 when Sarah went into labor. Neil got the doctor and by midday, he, Emily, and Luke sat in the barn while the doctor and Neil's mother tended to the birth.

When his mother came out, he picked up Luke. Emily ran ahead to talk to her grandmother. As soon as Neil caught up to them, he already knew the baby's gender by the wide smile on his daughter's face.

"Thank you, Pa! You gave me a sister!" She ran into the house.

Neil's mother laughed. "I thought she might like the news. Sarah said her name is Elizabeth."

"Yes. That's the name we agreed on," he proudly stated. He put his arm around her shoulders and walked with her to the house where he could hear his second daughter crying.

The doctor came down the steps. "It's a girl!"

"I beat you to it," Neil's mother replied.

The doctor grinned. "Well, mother and child are doing just fine. It was a good birth, the kind every doctor wants to see. I'll send you the bill," he told Neil.

"Ah, the painful part of having a baby," Neil joked.

"I think Sarah might argue that one with you. Congratulations, Neil." He ruffled Luke's blond hair. "Don't let the girls bully you."

After he left, his mother said, "I'll make something to eat. Why don't you go up and see your wife and daughters?"

She didn't have to tell him twice. He hastened up the steps and strode into their bedroom where Sarah and Emily sat next to each other on the bed.

Emily held the now sleeping infant. She touched the baby's cheek. "She's so tiny," she whispered.

"Is there room for two more?" Neil asked.

Sarah beamed up at him. "Oh Neil, she looks like you, except for the blond hair."

He sat on the bed and set an impatient Luke on the floor. Luke ran to the bassinet and rocked it. Shaking his head, he said, "I think he's too young to appreciate the moment."

"He wants a brother," Emily replied. "Next time, you need to have a boy. Then he'll be interested."

Sarah laughed. "We'll give it our best try, Emily."

The girl seemed satisfied with Sarah's promise. Looking up, she asked, "You want to hold her, Pa?"

He held his hands out and gently took the swaddled newborn in his arms, marveling that he had a part in creating a new life. Sarah was right. He could see himself in the tiny round face, and he detected some of Sarah in her as well. His heart swelled to the point he thought it would burst.

He smiled at Sarah. "Isn't she amazing?"

She nodded, wiping away a tear that fell down her cheek. "It's better than I imagined. Last time I gave birth, and all I had was Luke. Now I have you, Emily," she hugged the girl, "Luke, and Elizabeth. I can't think of anything better to ask for."

"Me neither."

"Oh, I know what will make it better." Emily jumped off the bed. "I have a doll that Grandma and I made for her."

As she ran out of the room, Sarah giggled. "You have to admire her determination that this baby was going to be a girl."

“Do you think she had a talk with the man upstairs about this?”

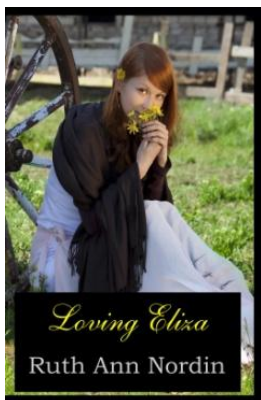
“I wouldn’t doubt it.”

He leaned forward and kissed her, letting his lips linger for a moment before he pulled away. “You’ve given me more joy than I thought was possible. I love you, Sarah.”

“I love you too, Neil.”

He moved so he was sitting next to her. Emily and Luke climbed on the bed, and Emily showed Elizabeth the doll while Luke sat between him and Sarah. This was what he longed for. A happy family. And now that he had it, his life was complete.

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