

Chapter One

“Sir,” James Harvey interrupted his commanding officer. “It’s time.”

Colonel Thornton O’Neal turned to look at his orderly. “Thank you Sergeant Harvey.” Rising from the bar stool in the Union Pacific Railroad Saloon Car, he finished his drink of brandy.

“Colonel, you can’t consider leaving this stimulating conversation?” Robert Hall questioned. Thornton had been participating in a lively discussion on Washington City politics.

“I have more pressing matters to attend,” O’Neal answered. A small grin appeared on his face as he walked out of the saloon. He heard Hall telling the others he must have received an important dispatch from President Grant. The reality of the situation was that at precisely 5:00 p.m. every evening in the passenger car, Miss Leigh Junge would be telling a new chapter of her story.

It was quite by accident he happened on to the scene. Thornton was walking from his private car to the Smoking car when a large group of children propelled past him in a hurry.

“I’ll beat you there!”

“I want to sit next to Miss Leigh! Don’t push!”

“I love her story! I can’t wait to hear about Prince Paul and Princess Catherine! Do you think they’ll get married?”

“How do I know? That bad Prince Charles is trying to get the kingdom. I can’t wait to find out what happens next!”

Thornton had let the children pass and was surprised to see the unruly moppets sitting quietly surrounding a young woman in a simple blue flowered calico day dress. Their little faces were eager and completely focused on the woman. He stayed in the back of the car and was listening to the woman tell a story of a good Prince and a bad Prince. He wasn’t certain how she did it, but her inflections and sound effects made the story come alive to him. Soon he was sitting on one of the railcar seats and was listening to the story himself. As a child he had loved the stories of Kings, Queens, and knights of old England. Since that day, he hadn’t missed a chapter of the story. He learned from one of the children that Miss Leigh told a chapter of the story every day at 5:00. The parents of the children present allowed them to go to her for the stories. It was a brief respite they looked forward too. The children loved it. They talked about the story the next day. The

children exchanged what they thought would happen next until bedtime. It kept the children busy during the long train ride. Hell, it kept him busy. He often thought about what was next. He was involved with Miss Leigh's stories as the children were. He couldn't wait until the next day at 5:00 p.m. The story was coming to an end and he didn't want to miss a word. Would Prince Paul win the fair Princess Catherine?

Thornton chuckled to himself as he walked to the railcar. He was a full Colonel at 31. He was a grown man. He had been through West Point and immediately thrown into the Civil War. He had seen the horrors of war. His friends and troops, bloodied, dead, and limbless. Through out the war he had sat quietly at night under the stars and closed his eyes. Thornton remembered he used to dream of those knights in shining armor and the beautiful damsels in distress. If not for those dreams he would have gone mad in the aftermath of the battles.

That dream of fair maiden in distress had been the root cause for his fall into the abyss of serpentine pit created by Chloe. He wouldn't believe in the fairy tale again. So why was he drawn to the tale Miss Leigh was telling? Could it be he was still that hopeful child in a man's body? Was he still hoping for the magic of Princes and Princesses? Did he still believe in fairy tales? He hoped that it was true. Thornton O'Neal had seen enough of horrors, blood, and man's inhumanity to man. He must be the perfect officer and military commander to the world. In his heart he kept the young boy with dreams alive.

Thornton took his seat in the back of the car. Leigh Junge was already finishing the story to her captive audience. *'Those silver eyes are captivating.'* He thought to himself. He concentrated on her story and was swept up into the world of make believe just like the children.

Just as he thought, Prince Paul battered down the castle gate with his troop of knights. Paul killed the evil dragon, rescued Princess Catherine and took her to live in their beautiful new castle.

"Did the Princess have children?" one of the little girls asked.

"Oh my yes!" Leigh laughed. "She and Prince Paul had three lovely daughters. They were all beautiful just like their mother."

The children clapped, oohed, and aahed.

"Tell us another story," a little boy requested.

"I'm afraid that tomorrow we will be at Rawlins Depot," Leigh sighed. She delighted in telling her stories and loved the children that enjoyed them. "My mother and I will be getting off at the station."

The little children's happy faces turned to frowns.

"Let's have no droopy faces," Leigh ordered placing her hand on the frowning face of one of the children. "Just keep the story inside your head and bring it out when you want to remember it."

"How can we do that?" a little girl asked.

"Just close your eyes, hear my voice, and let that dream in your head be real," Leigh suggested.

The little girl squeezed her eyes closed. "I see it! I understand. There is Princess Catherine!"

The other children followed suit. Soon they were all laughing. Getting up from their seats they all thanked Miss Leigh and gave her a kiss on her cheek.

Thornton had almost fallen off his seat when he heard that Miss Leigh was going to disembark at Rawlins. The silver-eyed storytelling maiden was going to be near his fort.

When the children left the railcar to return to their parents, Thornton rose to speak to Miss Leigh.

"I enjoyed your story ma'am."

"You've come every night," Leigh commented. She saw him enter the third night and every night since then. That had surprised her. He was a Colonel in the 18th Calvary and a full-grown man. She found it hard to believe that he had come to listen to her stories. She thought perhaps he wanted to get away from the others. Whenever she had seen him outside her story time, he was surrounded by macho men, businessmen, soldiers, and drooling women. One of those women was her sister in law, Theresa. All of the above were forever trying to gain his attention in conversation.

"Yes ma'am," Thornton admitted. "I couldn't help but enjoy the stories. During the war we would enjoy stories around the campfire. You're a talented story teller." This was the first time those silver eyes looked directly into his. He suddenly felt naked. It was as if those eyes bore right into his soul.

"You do me honor, sir," Leigh acknowledged. Her heart raced a little. Her beautiful sister in law couldn't gain his attention. A smile crossed her lips. Theresa had certainly tried to gain the handsome Colonel's attention.

“Is something funny?” Thornton queried. Was this woman laughing at him for listening to children’s stories?

“Not funny,” Leigh replied stifling a giggle. “I just couldn’t help but find humor in the fact that you are one of the most sought after company on this train, and you became one of my audience.”

Now it was Thornton’s turn to smile. What she had said was true. It was wonderful to escape the clinging vines of humanity. Those people weren’t interested in him. They were interested in his rank and power. “Indeed, that is true.” He really looked at the young woman before him. She had the most captivating eyes he had ever dared look into. *Could she read his soul?* If she could, she would see horror and a deep sorrow there. Leigh was attractive, but not beautiful. Her body was not tiny and delicate. Instead she had broad shoulders for a woman. He remembered his mother had broad shoulders. His father always told him to marry a woman with broad enough shoulders to carry the weight of raising a family. His father had adored his mother. *What a strange thought to bring back into his mind.* She wasn’t frail or delicate in any sense of the word. He glanced at her full bosom and came back to her eyes. *God, those eyes!* Those eyes reflected a deep sorrow. He recognized the soul of this woman because of the deep sorrow in his own soul.

Leigh flushed when she felt the Colonel’s eyes wander to her bosom. The railcar was suddenly very warm. “Excuse me, Colonel,” Leigh whispered catching her breath. “I’d like to step outside for a breath of air.”

Thornton was feeling a little warm himself. “I’ll join you.”

Leigh choked. *What would Theresa do if she saw the handsome Colonel outside with her?* The thought delighted her.

It was suppertime. Dusk was threatening the bright light of day.

Leigh felt the heat of Colonel O’Neal behind her. She felt she must say something.

“It is a beautiful night.”

“Every night in Wyoming territory is a beautiful night,” Thornton returned.

“How long have you lived here?” Leigh asked with curiosity.

“I’ve lived in the Territory since 1867,” Thornton replied quietly. “I came here after the war and was assigned with the railroad survey team.”

“You were here when the railroad came through?”

Thornton nodded.

“Tell me about the land before the settlers, the towns, the invasion of man,” Leigh inquired. She was genuinely interested. She hadn’t forgotten the filth, dirt, grease and grime of the big cities of Milwaukee and Chicago.

“Wide open expanses,” Thornton began. “One would feel like they had entered the vastness of the universe. It was like a gate to heaven. The prairies are beautiful, especially in the morning. It’s like a velvet golden cloth with pink, blue, gray, and gold sky. You can’t describe it. You really have to see it. Painters and photographers try to capture the beauty, but can’t. It’s something you have to feel when you see it.”

It was Leigh’s turn to be spellbound. She listened to every description of the land.

“When you watch the eagles soar and sweep down on the river to catch a fish it takes your breath away,” Thornton elaborated. He looked down into Leigh’s eyes. He felt his throat suddenly go dry. This woman was hypnotic. He was losing his grip on reality. Women were trouble, heartache, and pain. Never again would he give away his heart. His life was in the military. The military was his wife and mistress. “I’ve been rattling on.”

Leigh didn’t think for a minute Colonel O’Neal was talking too much. She listened intently to every word. It was almost poetry. Without thinking Leigh placed her hand on Thornton’s arm.

Before she spoke to him Thornton felt her hand upon his arm. It was if someone had put a branding iron on him.

“Please, tell me more,” Leigh pleaded. She could vividly paint the pictures in her mind. She felt wonderful listening to him. She felt him tense when she put her hand on his arm. She quickly pulled it back. She shivered down to her toes. That was an absolutely bold move. She would never have considered ever getting close to any man, much less one as handsome as the Colonel. *My God, I touched a Colonel!* She shivered more. *Touch a handsome Colonel. A pig ugly girl like her? How dare she?* It was just that she felt so comfortable listening to him.

“Are you cold?” Thornton asked when Leigh began to shake. He felt a cool night breeze.

Afraid to speak, Leigh nodded her head.

Thornton took off his military frock coat and wrapped it around her. He held her in his arms and continued. “If I’m not boring you.”

♣Payton Lee♣

“Never!” Leigh squeaked out. She inhaled the scent of the coat. It smelled of him. It smelled manly scents of leather, tobacco, and balsam. She couldn’t help but snuggle into his arms.

He talked. She asked questions. They talked all night and watched the sun rise over the mountains. His description was accurate.

Chapter Two

“Can you believe we spent the entire night talking?” Leigh said leaning into Thornton’s arms. She was captivated by the magnificent sunrise over the prairie.

“We did, didn’t we?” Thornton chuckled. He hadn’t felt this comfortable with a woman since he sat on his mother’s knee. This woman was that sort. A woman a man could feel comfortable with. She listened. She didn’t monopolize a conversation with trite and insignificant chatter. She didn’t flirt or feign interest in his conversation. Thornton even admitted he liked the feel of her softness in his arms and the fragrance of rose oil. His mother used rose oil.

An opening of the railcar door interrupted their reverie.

“Sir, I was concerned. Your bed hadn’t been slept in,” Sergeant Harvey blurted before realizing the Colonel was holding a woman wrapped in his jacket. He blushed to his boots. “I’m sorry, sir. I was just worried is all.”

“I hadn’t realized the night had slipped away, Sergeant Harvey,” Thornton smiled apologetically. “I was engaged in a most interesting discussion.”

This time Leigh blushed. It must appear to the sergeant that she had spent the night with the Colonel. Which she did, but not the way people would think. It really didn’t matter. No one but the sergeant would know. Her brother and sister in law certainly wouldn’t know or care where she was. Her nieces were barely allowed to talk to her. They were mean spirited girls anyway. Leigh didn’t like them very much. They were too much like their mother. As for her mother? Jeannette would go to bed and sleep through a war. She wouldn’t know or care if her daughter was there or not.

“Thank you for telling me all about Wyoming, Colonel,” Leigh appreciated removing his frock coat. “You know we never did properly introduce ourselves.” She extended her hand. “My name is Leigh Junge.”

A smile crossed his lips as he took her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. "Colonel Thornton O'Neal. My friends call me, Thorn."

A giggle bubbled up from Leigh's throat. "Thorn?"

"It is a nickname carried through my childhood," Thornton explained. "My Pa used to tease me. 'You are a thorn in the side of any one that riles you.'"

Leigh's giggle turned into laughter. "That is one of the cutest stories I have ever heard. I believe I will use that saying in one of the new stories I shall write."

Her laughter was infectious. Thornton found himself laughing also. He had no idea why he shared that bit of background with her, but it felt right.

"I should get back to the sleeping car and check on my mother," Leigh excused walking past the gaping sergeant.

James Harvey was stunned. He had been assigned as the Colonel's orderly two years ago, had served with him during the Civil War, and transferred with the Colonel after the war. He had never seen the Colonel with a woman other than Chloe, and he had never seen the serious Colonel smile, much less laugh.

"I'll see you in Rawlins," Thornton called after Leigh.

"You'll be in Rawlins?" Leigh turned to ask in surprise.

"That's my stop as well. I visit with my friend there and then go on to Fort Fred Steele," Thornton replied quickly. Why did he tell her that?

"I'll look forward to seeing you there," Leigh choked. How could she be so fortunate to have a Colonel as a friend? Of course he was just being friendly. After all, she was pig ugly. Hadn't her brother said that to her often enough?

Once in the sleeping car she shared with her mother, Leigh removed her calico day dress. Her mother had already left the berth. Most likely she was tending to the little brats Angela and Claudia. Those two treated their grandmother disgracefully, but her brother or sister in law never disciplined them. Leigh felt sleepy. She wasn't afraid to fall asleep. She politely asked the conductor to wrap on the berth canvas and wake her up before the train arrived in Rawlins. There were three whistle stops to go through yet and the train would arrive in Rawlins at four in the afternoon.

The Colonel found himself sleeping on a comfortable chair in his private car. This time the sergeant kept all intruders away from

pestering the Colonel by standing in front of the door. He had pulled out a private from the passenger car to guard the other door.

The train pulled to a stop in front of the Rawlins Depot. A small patrol from Fort Fred Steele was waiting on horseback next to the station house. Lieutenant Edward O'Brien and Sergeant John Bolt waited anxiously for Colonel O'Neal. Edward was waiting word from his fiancé in Washington City, and John Bolt was hoping the Colonel had time to visit West Point while he was receiving his promotion from President Grant in Washington City.

Colonel O'Neal stepped down from the train to view his welcoming committee. His face returned to the stiff grim Colonel that was expected of him. He was dressed in full blue uniform of Cavalry Hat, Blue full frock coat, red sash, saber, and blue pants with yellow cording. His boots were spit and polish shine black. He saluted the troops and walked toward his men. In his pocket was a love letter from Melissa Anderson to her fiancé, Edward O'Brien. The wedding plans were all ready for his leave next month. They would be returning together and live near the fort two months from now. O'Neal was happy for the lad. Melissa was a nice young woman. He wasn't certain how the lady would survive in the wilderness fort, but he hoped their love would be strong enough to make it work. He had a letter to John Bolt from his son, First Lieutenant Lucas Bolt. John would be proud to know that Lucas was asking for transfer to Fort Bridger to be near his father and mother. O'Neal had a deep fondness for Bolt. They served together in the Civil War. They came here together. John, his wife Alice and children, Lucas, Abigail, and Mark built the first little homestead next to Fort Fred Steele. Their daughter little Emily was born a year later. O'Neal had to admit he was very proud of Lucas. He helped John raise the boy. He even tutored Lucas for the West Point appointment test. John Bolt never knew that O'Neal had called in a marker to a friend who was a Senator from New York to place young Lucas in the academy. Yes this was his family. He had to be a stern parent, but he loved his family in the military. It was all he needed. He certainly didn't need a woman in his life to make him miserable. There weren't many women like Alice Bolt. He certainly didn't expect to find one. The women he knew were in love with his rank or family fortune. The women he knew were like, Chloe.

Sergeant Bolt dismounted and addressed Thornton O'Neal, "Congratulations on your appointment sir!"

Thornton allowed a slight grin. "Congratulations accepted, Sergeant Bolt. Before you ask, yes I did see Lucas. He sends his greetings." O'Neal pulled the envelope from his frock coat.

John was excited with the letter. But he picked up an aroma from the Colonel's coat that was strange indeed. "Sir, you smell of rose oil," John whispered. He was even more surprised to see the Colonel blush.

"It must be a scent Miss Anderson uses on her letters for the Lieutenant," Thornton quickly excused. He was instantly relieved when Bolt seemed to accept the explanation.

Thornton quickly pulled Melissa's letter from his pocket and handed it to Lieutenant O'Brien. "I believe you were waiting for this. I brought it back on my person so you would not have to wait for the mails."

Lieutenant O'Brien grasped the letter and beamed. "Thank you, sir." He immediately put the post in his breast pocket. He wanted to wait until a private moment before he read it.

John Bolt had also put his son's letter in his coat pocket. He wanted to share that letter with his Alice. "Are you ready to leave sir. Captain Chandler is waiting for us at his hotel.

"Martin is a civilian," Thornton reminded. "He's been a civilian for some time now, Sergeant Bolt."

"I know sir, but he'll always be Captain to me," John excused. "It was an honor to serve with him. He is a great and honorable soldier."

"You're right," Thornton allowed unmilitary. He even owed Martin Chandler his life. It was a debt he intended to repay. "I'm famished, and I'm certain Captain Chandler will have some dinner ready for us from the Wellington Restaurant."

"Without a doubt," John agreed. "I've feasted these two days waiting for you. It is the only food that tastes better than my Alice's cooking, but I'd not tell her that."

Thornton smiled to Bolt's comment, but returned swiftly to his military aura. "Sergeant Harvey is getting my personal retinue. He might need some assistance." He turned to point to the train where the luggage was being unloaded when he spotted the long auburn hair in a braid. He saw the same blue calico dress. Thornton wondered if that was the only dress she had. It made him feel sympathy for her.

A tall handsome man in a dress gray suit approached the object of his fascination. Thornton felt an instant of jealousy. He didn't even have a moment to tamp it down when he realized the man was shouting at Leigh. He noticed her lip quiver and could see she was choking back tears. He watched as her hands curled into fists as if she wanted to hit the man. To Thornton's surprise, the man dumped two more large valises on top a large steamer trunk that already had several pieces of baggage on top of it. He couldn't believe his eyes when he watched Leigh struggle to move the large trunk by grabbing the handle with both hands and pulling it toward the street. "What the Hell?" How could any man dump more luggage on a woman and then walk off leaving her to manage the burden by herself?

"Sir?" Sergeant Bolt queried. He had only heard the Colonel curse on very rare occasions.

"Sergeant Bolt, bring up your four privates," Thornton ordered. "We have to assist not only Sergeant Harvey, but a fair maiden in distress."

A quizzical look overtook Sergeant Bolt as he motioned the privates to follow him. What was the Colonel talking about? Fair Maiden? Distress?

Thornton was ahead of the Sergeant taking long fast strides. He was next to Leigh in moments. "Miss Junge, it appears you need some assistance. Allow my men to help you."

Leigh looked up to find the Colonel looming over her. She was embarrassed for needing the help, but realized she could not handle the situation by herself. "Thank you very much, Colonel O'Neal. I find myself really needing some assistance."

"Who was that man in the gray suit? Did he accidentally take your bags?" Thornton questioned. He wanted to know just who that man was and why he appeared to be rude to Leigh.

"That man is my brother," Leigh answered distastefully. "Yes, those are my mother's bags and he didn't want to pay for them to be taken to the hotel. That is her expense."

Thornton was incensed. He never would have believed a son could be so calloused to his own mother.

"What hotel will you be staying at?" Thornton asked without thinking how it sounded. He corrected it immediately by then asking, "I mean what hotel should my men take your luggage?"

"I'm hoping you would know the most inexpensive," Leigh almost whispered. It was embarrassing to let this fine Colonel know

she was nearly a pauper. She had some money, but spent it carefully. Leigh's plan was to get employment somewhere in Rawlins and hopefully convince her mother not to go with Carl to Auntie Ruthie's ranch, but stay with her.

"My friend owns the Rawlins Hotel. I'm sure he'll offer a special deal for you," Thornton volunteered. He knew Martin would be kind hearted to a woman obviously down on her luck. Even if Martin wouldn't, he would pay her hotel tab. "As a matter of fact, I'm staying there myself. It will be easy to have my men take all our luggage to the hotel."

"I am grateful for your kindness," Leigh appreciated in relief. She watched the soldiers take her trunk and bags to load them on a buckboard. "I will try to repay your kindness."

"Not to worry," Thornton quickly disallowed. He took Leigh's elbow in a gentlemanly fashion and led her to the boardwalk street of Rawlins. "The Rawlins Hotel is walking distance from the Depot. See! It's right over there. That tall building."

Leigh felt a lump grow in her throat. The Rawlins Hotel looked quite grand. She didn't believe she could afford to stay there.

Thornton saw the worry in Leigh's eyes. He knew she was frightened about the cost of Martin's grand hotel. When they were under the porch of the hotel Thornton suggested she manage the unloading and separating of the luggage from the buckboard. He went into the Hotel.

"Thorn!" Martin greeted from behind the hotel lobby desk. Slowly he slid from the chair and came around to greet his friend.

Thornton embraced his good friend and fellow war veteran. He was worried about Martin. Only a few months ago Martin was told that he had a blood cancer and wouldn't live many more years. Already Thornton could see his once strong and robust friend had lost some weight. Martin's walk was slower.

"I have a favor to ask old friend," Thornton whispered.

"Anything I can do for you," Martin volunteered.

"I met a woman on the train," Thornton began.

Martin crooked an eyebrow. "You? A woman?"

"It's not like that at all," Thornton defended quickly. "She tells stories. I like stories. You and only you know that. She just needs a little help."

"I love to help women," Martin chuckled. "What does she need?"

“She needs a room to stay,” Thornton explained. “She doesn’t have much money.”

“I got it covered,” Martin agreed readily. He certainly wanted to meet this woman that set Thornton’s protective nature in motion.

“I’ll be glad to pay for her room myself. I believe her mother will be staying with her.”

“Don’t you worry about it,” Martin stated. “I’ll give her a really good rate. Keep your money. I’m always there to help someone that needs it. It is sort of my last chance to do good before I’m called away. If you understand my meaning.”

“There might be a cure,” Thornton repudiated. “Damn it, Martin. Don’t give up.”

“I am enjoying every minute of my life, old man,” Martin laughed. He had accepted his fate. He was going to enjoy his life to the last moment. Helping others and doing good deeds always made him feel better. He felt bad for Thornton. His friend had taken the news badly. Martin knew why it was so hard for Thornton to accept. In the middle of a bloody battle during the War Between the States, a rebel had felled Thornton from his horse. The rebel raised his bayonet and was about to slice into Thornton when Martin saw the rebel and shot him. Because Martin had saved Thornton’s life, Thornton believed he must save Martin. No matter how much Martin had told his good friend that death was a reality to everyone. He tried to explain that some go sooner and some later. Some die by accident, war, gunshot, old age, or disease. The fact remains that everyone will face death eventually. “Bring the young lady in.

Chapter Three

“Bring in the luggage,” Thornton ordered his men. He once again took Leigh’s elbow leading her into the hotel lobby.

Leigh was dumbfounded. The lobby was elegant. The walls were plaster. There were oil paintings hanging on the walls in gilded frames. The lobby had a large red velvet circular settee in the center. Potted Palms and Trees graced the lobby desk. Two circular carpeted staircases encircled the lobby desk with a staircase on each side. The stairs led to two open halls. Doors opened to the hallways. There were mahogany tables on each wall with matching mahogany chairs. The lobby desk was ornately carved and polished mahogany wood. The polish was so shiny she saw her reflection in it as she moved towards it with Colonel O’Neal. “I don’t think I can afford to stay here,” Leigh whispered to the Colonel.

“You don’t know that until Mr. Chandler lets you know the rates,” Thornton countered loudly enough for Martin to understand. “Ahh, Martin. This is Miss Leigh Junge. She is here with her mother. Do you have a room available?”

“I do indeed. It is room 11. Just take the stairs. Make a right on the first level and walk down the hall four doors,” Martin responded. He handed Leigh the keys.

Leigh squeaked, “How much per night?”

Martin grinned knowingly. He could see by her simple calico day dress that Leigh didn’t have much money. He also was surprised to have Thornton befriending the young woman. “The night rate is 2 cents, or 10 cents by the week. Is that agreeable?”

Leigh knew very well this was a special rate, but wasn’t too proud to accept the help. “Very reasonable. May I pay in advance?”

“Are you certain you will find my establishment acceptable? If you are certain, you may pay me in advance,” Martin said too seriously.

Leigh knew he was teasing. She took an instant liking to the Hotel owner. He was a kind, sweet, generous man. He also had a twinkle in his eye that reminded her of the child the Colonel hid inside. Leigh opened her reticule and pulled out a dime. “Our first week’s rent, sir.”

Martin accepted the coin and smiled broadly. "I will live up to your faith and expectations of my Hotel."

Leigh found a large smile growing on her lips. "Thank you most kind sir. I am certain you shall." Leigh grasped the key in her hand. *Could her fortune in life finally be changing? Mother!* Leigh suddenly remembered her mother was tagging behind Carl. She wanted to share this good fortune with her mother. Jeannette had struggled in her life just as Leigh struggled. "Excuse me one moment. I want to look down the street and see if my mother has come down from the depot yet."

Thornton stepped backward and the two men watched Leigh walk out the hotel doors to the boardwalk.

"She seems to be a caring woman," Martin commented.

"Maybe, maybe not," Thornton mumbled. "I liked her stories."

"Thorn, it's been five years. Get over Chloe," Martin chided. "Not all women are like her!"

Thornton couldn't forget the heartache of loving a woman with a cheating, greedy, selfish heart. "Really? Then why haven't you married? Tell me why if marriage is such a good thing?" Thornton replied dryly.

"Because like you I let mistresses take over my life. Your mistresses are pride and the military. Mine was business and gain. It's too late for me now. It isn't too late for you," Martin snapped. He immediately regretted his harsh statement. The last thing Martin wanted to do was get angry or cause hard feelings with his friend, classmate, and fellow veteran. "Enough of such talk, my friend. Do you want to take a bath after your train journey? Your room in my private suite is already for you."

"A hot bath and shave is just the ticket," Thornton answered. He smiled at Martin and gently placed his hand on Martin's shoulder. Just in the short time he was in Washington City, Thornton could see Martin had lost a little weight. His color was just a bit paler. "I'm sure Harvey has my luggage unpacked. He is quite efficient."

"Go on. We'll have dinner at the Wellington's," Martin suggested. "I'll keep an eye on your story teller."

"Thanks, you're a good friend," Thornton acknowledged. "If her brother comes in, judge him for yourself and fix his rates accordingly. I'll tell you later what I saw at the depot."

Leigh looked down the street for signs of her mother or brother. She watched the wagon her brother had hired coming down

the road. Her mother was sitting on the outside of the buckboard with Carl's two children. Theresa was sitting next to the driver fanning herself. She could just hear Theresa complaining and her nieces whining. Carl was riding a thoroughbred Morgan. The horse was magnificent and once belonged to her Uncle Virgil. Hoosier was the only asset left from her uncle's estate. Walking next to the buckboard was Carl's valet, Jonas and Theresa's maid, Bessie.

Leigh was grateful to Colonel O'Neal and hoped she could properly thank him someday. Instead of walking to her mother, she would wait until they arrived at the hotel. There were other hotels, but obviously Carl would ask for the grandest hotel. Leigh knew immediately that Carl would choose the Rawlins Hotel. Carl would only have the finest of anything. There was so much to be done, but her next chore would be to take care of her mother. . Leigh was hungry and knew her mother would be hungry. She would ask Mr. Chandler about a reasonable place to eat. She turned to walk back into the hotel when she saw a sign. "Rawlins Hotel – Help Wanted - Manager Assistant – bookkeeper"

Martin watched Leigh enter and walk briskly to the front window. She pulled the paper sign he had Too Many Teeth place there this morning. He saw a bright and determined glint in her eyes.

"Is this position still open, Mr. Chandler?"

"Yes, it is Miss Junge. Are you applying for the position?"

"I would like to interview immediately," Leigh responded with more bravado than she felt.

"Of course," Martin grinned. He already liked her tenacity. "What are your qualifications?"

"I have completed my matriculation and have even attended some classes at Marquette Academy in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I do not have a degree, but other than working during the day occasionally as a seamstress, and housekeeper, I did the books in the evening for a friend. His business was a butcher shop on Wisconsin Avenue."

"Indeed!" Martin smiled. "What was his name?"

"Hiram Levinson. He trained me in bookkeeping and then paid me to attend to it."

Martin had a talent for seeing into people and this woman obviously was intelligent. If she could write and tell stories good enough to spell bind Thornton O'Neal, she was educated. He believed she couldn't tell a lie if she tried. To take classes at Marquette Academy was impressive to say the least. He knew about the about

the Jesuit academy and had acquaintance with the Bishop John Martin Henni. He wanted to make certain she was telling the truth. "I've never heard of that academy."

"It is a Jesuit academy founded by Bishop Henni located on Wisconsin Avenue," Leigh replied. "I'm surprised you haven't heard of it. It is a well established academy and quite prestigious."

"You are hired," Martin stated. He allowed a broad smile to cross his lips. "I'll begin training you tomorrow. It is too late today and I'm famished."

Leigh's breath had been taken away. Surely her fortunes had changed. Heavens, she hadn't even discussed the pay. It didn't matter. Leigh was good at sensing characters also, and she immediately liked and trusted Martin Chandler. He would be fair. Before she could say another word she saw Martin's eyes focus on door entering the lobby.

Carl entered the hotel in his typical arrogant grand entrance. He walked with shoulders back, head high, and a hint of a swagger to his step. He was still dressed in his fine custom designed tailor made gray wool suit. A matching bowler perched atop his thick dark brown hair. Behind him were an older woman, two young children, an attractive younger woman, and two Negro servants. Carl walked directly to Martin Chandler ignoring his sister, Leigh.

"I'll take a suite," Carl commanded pulling his billfold from his suit coat. He fingered a dollar bill and waved it in front of Martin. "This is extra for you if you see to it I get the best suite of the hotel, my good man."

Leigh choked out a whisper, "Carl, may I speak with you." She wanted to warn her brother that he was addressing the owner of the hotel, not a desk clerk. Of course Carl always spoke down to those he felt below his station.

Carl ignored her. "Well?"

Martin immediately disliked the arrogance of the man. He also did not like the demeaning intonation of this Carl's voice. *A dollar to bribe a desk clerk?* Who did this nutcase think he was? Did he truly think a clerk would be that desperate for a dollar? A clerk might be bribed for a \$20 gold piece. This man was priceless.

"Well thanku kindly, suh," Martin mimicked an accent from an Easterner's idea of western talk. "That's mighty nice o ya offerin the money to a po clerk like me. I can feed my po family fo a month with

that tip.” Martin grabbed the bill. “It’s a darn shame we ain’t got no mo nice suites. I’ll give ya the best durn room in the place.”

Carl was angry. He never meant for the clerk to take the bill. “I demand a suite. What are your rents?”

“Two dollars a day or 14 dollars a week, paid in advance,” Martin chortled. “Ya gonna stay a day or a week?”

Leigh’s eyebrows raised in surprise. She couldn’t believe the cultured man she spoke with could so quickly imitate a man from the backwoods. Obviously Martin recognized Carl’s inflated ego and arrogance immediately. He was playing her brother. She tried hard not to laugh. Giggles bubbled up and she had to cover her mouth with her hand. She was not surprised at the exorbitant amount Martin was charging her brother. His arrogance deserved it.

Martin glanced a moment to catch Leigh looking at him and gave her a wink.

Carl exploded. “Two dollars a day is outrageous. Only the finest hotels in New York dare to charge such an amount! You are a thief! You want to pocket the money you greedy little scum. Call the manager here immediately!”

The giggles turned to laughter. Leigh couldn’t contain herself. “Carl, this is...”

“What are you laughing about you imbecilic, pig ugly, fat excuse for a woman? I’ll teach you to laugh at my expense!” Carl roared. He struck Leigh with his hand with such force she fell to the floor. He raised his foot to kick her when a blur appeared out of nowhere and caught Carl’s chin with a fist.

Carl was stunned as another fist rammed into his abdomen. Carl doubled over in pain and in the recesses of his torment to obtain air for his lungs he heard a pistol cock and voice.

“If you ever raise a hand to my employee again you will be minus a limb and definitely your privates.” This voice was cultured, refined, and in earnest. Martin was furious when he watched Carl cuff Leigh.

Thornton picked Carl up by his cravat with one hand. “Women are respected in Wyoming Territory. Men have been hung for striking a woman. Remember that!” Thornton warned. With one movement of Thornton’s arm, Carl was flung against the desk.

Martin was helping Leigh to her feet.

Leigh was trying to choke back her tears and automatically covered her swollen inflamed cheek with her hand.

♣The Outsider♣

Jeannette immediately ran to Carl's side. She was fussing over him like a hurt child.

The girls and the servants stood silently as if shock.

Theresa walked directly to Thornton. She brushed his shirt off daintily as if there was some dirt on it from a scuffle. She had recognized the Colonel the moment he appeared from the door behind the long hotel desk. "Colonel, please forgive my husband's rash behavior," Theresa cooed. "It's just that his sister is such a trial. She just has no bearing or proper upbringing. Surely you must understand how irritating her and her mother are. A Colonel such as you recognizes a proper upbringing and manners. That family is so plebian."

Chapter Four

Thornton looked down upon the impeccably dressed woman. Theresa was the perfect woman. She had fine features, soft eyebrows, full mouth, perfect almond shaped eyes, and the perfect coiffure. Her bone structure was small and delicate. Her corset dress accented the tiny waist. Theresa's skin was ivory and flawless. She was the perfect woman just like Chloe. Behind all that refinement lays a venom-spitting serpent. Thornton pulled away. The gentleman upbringing by his mother prohibited him from properly putting that she cat in her place. Instead he turned to assist Leigh in righting herself.

Thornton's temper took a heated rise once again when he saw the handprint in swelling red on Leigh's cheek. A low growl erupted from his lips. It was all he could do to prevent himself from turning around and beating the shit out of that arrogant pompous peacock Leigh called a brother. That sister in law was a real prize as well. "Are you alright, Miss Junge?"

Leigh was embarrassed right down to her toes. The last thing she wanted was a scene with her new employer. Tears welled in her eyes. As hard as she tried she couldn't stop them from running down her cheeks. She saw her mother hovering over her brother. The pain of rejection was as bad as the pain of embarrassment. Carl's hand didn't hurt that much. How many times had his righteous hand slapped her down to size? This was the worst and the most painful. Her brother loved to make a fool out of her. He was always successful. Fear ran rampant in her mind. Would Mr. Chandler not accept her after all? She couldn't blame him. Who would want a reject that even her family didn't care about? "Am I still your employee?" Leigh asked hopefully when Martin assisted her to her feet.

"What kind of question is that?" Martin said softly. "Of course you are. You start your apprenticeship with me tomorrow. "The only important thing right now is to find out if you're hurt. Your cheek is swollen. I should send for the doctor."

"No! Please don't. I'm fine. I just need a cool rag," Leigh protested. She didn't want a doctor brought into this mess.

"Thornton, take Miss Junge into my private suites. Have her sit down and get a cool cloth for her. You know where the cloths are. Pump some fresh cool water," Martin instructed. "I'll be in to attend to my employee presently. First I must take care of my guests."

Carl had risen and pushed Jeannette aside. He was more arrogant than ever. "I do not appreciate your jest in accent, clerk. I also do not appreciate being accosted in an establishment. I demand to see the owner of this hotel and you may leave to bring back the sheriff. I intend to file charges against that bully."

"Mr. Junge, you are looking at the owner of this establishment. Our Sheriff Starr need only take one look at my employee and you would be in our jail, not a hotel. Please feel free to find our sheriff and bring him here," Martin replied calmly. "You needn't worry about being accosted in this establishment again, since I no longer have any rooms available for you. I am quite particular about who rents my rooms. I will not tolerate abusive pompous peacocks in my hotel."

Theresa gasped. They had never been treated like this before. She had scrutinized the other two hotels near the depot when they passed by them in the streets. She did not want to stay in either of them. She had also conversed with several upstanding women on the train that lived in or near Rawlins and they had told the other hotels serviced miners, cattle drovers, and railroad employees. Many of the beds had fleas and were smelly to say the least. They all agreed the Rawlins Hotel was the finest in the city. Theresa would only stay in the finest. She had to think of something quickly.

It finally registered in Carl's mind that the hotel owner employed his sister. "You employ my sister, but deny me a room? That pig ugly fat creature will work here? I certainly don't want to be served by that creature. Come Theresa, Angela, Claudia, we're going to another hotel."

"If I hear you refer to that bright intelligent woman one more time in your low classed pea brained imbecilic reference, I will shoot you!" Martin snarled. He couldn't believe what an impossible jerk Leigh had for a brother. He reached for his pistol. "Get out!"

Theresa swooned. She had hoped her husband would catch her before she fell. She was mistaken. Her body slumped and fell to the floor. She had to pretend she was unconscious. Surely they would see to her care properly.

Carl knelt next to Theresa. "Dear Holy Lord God, protect my wife." He turned to bark at Martin Chandler. "Now see what that creature has done? She has upset my wife. I can't even leave this place."

"Swooned my ass," Martin mumbled. He rang the desk bell. In moments two men appeared. Both were lanky young muscled men.

One was Shoshone and the other Norwegian. “Too Many Teeth please get some help and see to it that their luggage is taken to room 108. Swen, take Mrs. Junge to the room. I’ll let her husband find the doctor if one is truly needed.”

Theresa was delighted. Her scheme had worked. They would be staying at the Rawlins Hotel. That Leigh was always such a problem. At least now the mud fence ugly sister would be staying in town away from her and the children. If only she could get rid of the fat ugly mother. Unfortunately, Auntie Ruthie had extended the invitation to include Jeannette. Lord, she hated this family. She didn’t even like her daughters. Those little brats had that foul Irish blood in them from their father. No, she didn’t even like her husband. She kept the Irish man because he was malleable. He also schemed and plotted to get everything she wanted. She wanted a lot. She wanted more jewelry, a bigger house, more servants, and of course more expensive clothes to fit her perfect figure.

Swen carried Theresa to her room. When he gently placed her upon the bed she fluttered her eyes. “What happened?”

“You swooned my pet,” Carl replied lifting her hand by the bedside. “This trip and altercation was just too much of a trial for my delicate little flower.”

Theresa hated it when her husband called her pet. She also hated his flowery words. In her mind Colonel O’Neal was a real man. “I’m alright, my love,” she managed to choke out. “You really must do something about that awful sister of yours.”

“She’ll be no problem to us anymore,” Carl reassured rubbing his sore jaw. “She’s hiring out as cleaning woman to this establishment. She’s right where she belongs and in her proper class. We won’t have to see her again unless we use this hotel.”

Theresa sat up and looked around. This is a small room for our money. How will all of us fit into it?”

“The servants will find pallets in the barn out back,” Carl reassured. “We’ll manage for one night. I intend to hire a buggy and wagon by this evening so we can be on our way to Aunt Ruthie’s ranch in the morning.”

“Make certain you get rid of that fat cow you call your mother,” Theresa snapped. “At these prices we can’t afford to feed her and we certainly don’t want her taking up a third of the room to sleep with her girth. I’m so glad you are not like those fat pigs you call family.”

Carl squared his shoulders. "I am most grateful I am not like them. I often wonder if they are really my family. I wouldn't worry about either of them for now. I hate taking Jeannette to Aunt Ruthie's ranch, but she can be used for housekeeping. Aunt Ruthie did insist we bring her along. I don't want to upset Aunt Ruthie."

Carl had no reason to worry about his mother. Thornton attended to Leigh and Martin took Jeannette's hand.

"Your daughter's room is on this side of the hotel," Martin indicated leading her down the hall past the large staircase. "Make yourself comfortable. Colonel O'Neal will bring your daughter along shortly."

"I'm sorry for my daughter's behavior," Jeannette excused. "I don't know what she did to irritate her brother, but she is just like that. She inherited that sharp tongue from her father. It's the Irish in the family. You understand."

"Madam, your daughter did nothing except try to stop your son from making an absolute fool of himself," Martin soothed. "I am proud to employ Leigh as my new assistant manager. You are more than welcome to stay with us if you choose."

Jeannette was shocked. She had assumed it was Leigh's temper that set her brother off. She never considered for a moment that her son would have caused such a scene. After all, he was the son, the heir, and the male child who could do no wrong. "Thank you for the offer, I'm certain Leigh will be happy here. She never wanted me to come here, but I promised Ruthie now that we are both widows."

"Just remember you are welcome here anytime," Martin promised. He opened the door to the suite with his master key.

Jeannette's eyes popped out. It was the largest most luxurious suite she had ever seen. The center room had a large fireplace, divan, table and two overstuffed chairs facing the fireplace. There was an ornate grate in front of the fireplace. A large window with velvet curtains faced a panoramic scene of the foothills. A mahogany desk with matching chair sat against a wall. The walls were whitewashed plaster with magnificent oil paintings. A large grandfather clock stood in one corner. The wooden polished floor had a large Turkish rug in the center. Ivy plants were placed about in large pots. She peered into the other rooms through the open doors. Each bedroom had a carved mahogany armoire, double bed with large down pillows in white satin pillowcases to match a white satin down coverlet. The double beds had Irish Lace bed skirts. The center door led to a

bathroom with working water closet. There was a large tin tub surrounded by wainscoting. Above the tub she noticed a handle that would release water from a water tower to fill the tub and a kerosene heater. Jeannette had only seen these luxuries in the houses she cleaned for the wealthy in Milwaukee.

“How can we afford this?”

“No need to worry,” Martin assured. “Make yourself comfortable.” He walked out into the hall and shut the door.

Thornton had stayed on his knees dabbing Leigh’s swollen cheek carefully. Inside he recognized he hadn’t been in such a rage since the end of the war and he truly witnessed the humiliation and suffering of slavery.

Leigh was completely embarrassed. She appreciated the Colonel’s machination, but felt terribly afraid that Carl had ruined her hope and joy at finding a little happiness. She knew she wasn’t like other women with fine facial features. She was big boned, never trained in social graces, outspoken, and definitely not the Lady type. “I’m fine. Please Colonel O’Neal, I’d like to go to my room.”

“Of course. You are tired. You may want to bathe after the trip. I know I wish to wash off the grime.” He stood taking her hand to help her rise. Gently he placed his hand under her elbow to lead her to the room.

Walking toward the room Leigh commented, “You seem to know Mr. Chandler quite well. You also seem well acquainted with the hotel.”

“Mr. Chandler and I grew up in the same New York neighborhood. We went to school together. We entered West Point together. We fought together in the War. He even saved my life. We’re like brothers we each never had,” Thornton shared. “I try to stay with Martin ever chance I get. He isn’t well.”

“He looks gaunt,” Leigh noticed. “Perhaps he doesn’t eat enough.”

“Martin eats like a horse,” Thornton chuckled. “I’ll let him tell you about his illness. It should come from him. I heard you would work as his assistant manager and bookkeeper. He needs help.”

“All of us need help in some form or another,” Leigh commented.

Thornton stopped and stared at Leigh for a moment.

“Did I say something offensive?” Leigh asked with sudden dread. She certainly didn’t want to offend a Colonel and the best friend of her new employer. “I always seem to put my foot in it, even if it isn’t meant...”

Thornton roared with laughter, “No my dear young woman, you have just said something very profound. It was something my father always reminded me when I was a lad.”

Leigh grinned broadly, “My father told me the same thing. He said I should never consider myself better or worse for help, because all of us have problems and need help occasionally. I should always be ready to help another because I might need help from them someday.”

“We had very wise fathers,” Thornton chortled. “Obviously we had very wise Irish fathers.”

Leigh couldn’t help but smile and look into the soft blue eyes of the dark Irishman.

Thornton returned the look. Those brilliant silver eyes with flecks of gold and green mesmerized him. He liked to see those eyes twinkle in happiness.

At that instant they both realized something had happened to them. It was as if their very beings touched each other.

Thornton broke off first and walked her to the door of her room. It was a large whitewashed double door. He took the key from her hand and inserted it. “I’m sure you will find this suite acceptable. It is used when prominent people visit our city. President Grant stayed here. Several Washington City Senators, congressmen, and politicians.” He opened the door.

Leigh’s eyes rounded in surprise. “Oh My! I mean Oh My! I know Mr. Chandler was being kind to me, but this. This is unexpected. Luxurious. Palatial!”

“Good! Martin will be glad to know you like it,” Thornton sniggered. He pushed Leigh into the room with a gentle movement of his hand on the small of her back. Once she was in he closed the door. He would thank Martin for being so generous. It was obvious this young woman had a very difficult life. She deserved to be spoiled at least once. She deserved better than that low down snake belly brother. The thought of that man as a brother brought feelings of revulsions.

Chapter Five

“I can’t believe you rented this,” Jeannette sniped. “To receive this as a room from your new employer is obscene. Are you going to sleep with him?”

“Mother, how can you think such a thing?” Leigh groaned. She never understood why her mother always wanted to believe the worst about her.

“How can I not?” Jeannette grumped. “A housekeeper only cleans rooms like this. We don’t stay in them. Why even the bathroom has a working water closet. It has a water tap from a water reservoir, and kerosene water heater. I’ve only seen that in the richest mansions in Milwaukee that I used to clean.”

“I wasn’t hired as a housekeeper or a mistress,” Leigh snapped. There were times her mother’s lack of faith in her caused great anger. “I was hired as an assistant manager and bookkeeper. The reason we got this room was by request from Colonel O’Neal. We met on the train. He would come to listen to the stories I told the children.”

“For your stupid little stories? Come now, are you sleeping with him? What will your brother think?” Jeannette demanded.

It was too much! Leigh was tired, hungry, and hurt from the slap across the face Carl had given her. She was certain her face would bruise. Still her mother only cared for her brother and thought the worst of her. “I don’t give a damn what you and Carl think! I’m going to take a bath!”

“Don’t you swear at me! God will strike you down!”

“Let Him! It would be a relief at this moment!” Leigh snarled. She stomped into the bathing room and slammed the door shut. Once inside she began unbuttoning her simple blue calico dress. Tears started flowing down her cheeks. It never stopped hurting that her mother worshipped her brother and thought she was insignificant. “Father, I miss you so much. Why did you die on me? You were the

only one in the entire family that loved me.” The ache of her father’s death filled her lonely heart once more. Leigh couldn’t stand. She sat on a small bench in the room and sobbed for several minutes allowing the dam of pain and tears to overflow. When all alone, Leigh allowed herself to wallow in self pity. She often thought about growing old in a man’s world. How could she survive as an old spinster? A life of being all alone and unloved in a cold unfeeling world often scared her. She wasn’t pretty or feminine. She wasn’t like the other women that knew fancy clothes and were schooled in the graces of etiquette. Since she was a child she had to work hard to survive. When her father died, she had to help support her mother to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table. She definitely was not like her sister in law, Theresa who was refined, delicate, and beautiful. Her sister in law had many beautiful dresses and gowns of satin, velvet, damask, and silk. Theresa had the finest of silken nightgowns, drawers, and petticoats. Theresa had gold jewelry that sparkled with diamonds, emeralds, and jewelry. Carl had made certain Theresa had all of this and gave no support to her mother. Leigh didn’t even get Theresa’s hand me down dresses because she was so much bigger boned and breasted.

How many times had her brother and his family called her a pig ugly fat cow? Leigh knew she wasn’t beautiful like Theresa or the other fine women they worked for in Milwaukee. She also knew she wasn’t ugly, but accepted the fact she was plain and unattractive. She could only hope to help take care of her mother. It was a promise she made to her father before he died. Sometimes it hurt to keep that promise because her mother lived and died for her cruel selfish son and didn’t acknowledge all Leigh did to keep her content.

Leigh pulled the handle to fill the tub, and the handle to fill the kerosene heater. When both were filled, she found the matches on the washbasin and lit the kerosene to heat the water for her bath. It was such a wonderful convenience that Leigh pinched herself to see if she was awake.

Slowly Leigh undressed. She untied the worn leatherwork shoes, and removed her woolen socks. Next Leigh removed her faded blue calico dress, cotton chemise, and cotton drawers. Leaning over the tub Leigh blew out the kerosene heater and released the hot water to mix with the cold water in the tin tub. To her surprise she found fragrant rose salts in a vial by a shelf near the tub after she removed a washcloth and soft towel for drying from a rack. Leigh poured the rose salts into her tub. She climbed into the tub and sat in the small

heaven of serenity. The soap she used to wash her hair and body was also rose scented. She remembered her sister Judy loved the smell of roses. At Judy's funeral the congregation donated beautiful roses from their garden to place on her coffin.

Leigh closed her eyes in memory of happier times and enjoyed the sensual and luxury this rare bath provided. Leigh had fallen asleep in the tub. Fortunately she was startled awake by knocking at the suite door.

"You're Colonel O'Neal," Jeannette stated opening the door. It was an easy assumption based on the fact the man in front of her was wearing the dress blues of a military office including a red sash and saber at his side. She remembered the name from Leigh telling her she met the Colonel on the train.

"I am madam," O'Neal answered tipping his Calvary hat. "I've been dispatched by Martin Chandler to invite you and your daughter to dinner."

Always gracious with strangers, Jeannette accepted. "We will be honored to join you. I am dressed, but I'm afraid Leigh will require a little time."

"Say a half hour then?" Thornton suggested looking at the grandfather clock in the parlor room of the suite.

"That will be sufficient," Jeannette approved.

Thornton bowed slightly, turned on his heels and walked down the hall toward Martin's private quarters where he stayed when he visited.

Leigh had heard the invitation and was delighted. Not once in her life had any gentlemen invited her to dinner. She towel dried her hair. Leigh slipped on her cotton chemise and drawers, but ran into her room and opened her valise to pull out her one pair of fine silk stockings, blue satin dress shoes, and her only one fine dress of blue satin, lace collar, lace cuffed, and polka dot trimmed gown. By standards it was a simple enough ensemble. To Leigh it was her Princess Dress. She had saved for one special dress since she was twelve years old and had bought it only last year. This was a special once in a lifetime occasion and she was going to make a memory. Leigh regretted not having enough money to buy a corset. It would have helped her look slimmer in the dress. She hoped after awhile of working for Mr. Chandler she might be able to afford one.

Leigh dressed quickly, but took time combing and pinning her long auburn gold-flecked hair. When her hair was just the way she

wanted it, Leigh added a bit of rouge to her cheeks and a touch to her lips. The woman she saw in the mirror wasn't as beautiful as Theresa, but she did see a pretty woman's reflection.

Jeannette knocked on her door. "Are you ready yet? I know you heard the invite to dinner. It's been a half hour already."

Leigh answered by opening the door to her bedroom.

Jeannette glanced at her. "You look all gussied up. Are you trying to impress the Colonel?" Jeannette snapped.

"Maybe I am!" Leigh snapped back.

"Don't be silly child," Jeannette countered. "The man is too handsome by far. He wouldn't be interested in simple plain people like us. Don't get your hopes up. I don't know what I'm going to do about your temper. Watch your tongue this evening."

"Mother, understand that we've never received an invitation to dinner. The Colonel and Mr. Chandler are nice respectable people. I only want to enjoy this one special evening and look the part, alright?" Leigh said softly. "Just for tonight, don't criticize me Mother. Please!"

Jeannette frowned. "Just don't get your hopes up. We aren't their kind of people. We are outsiders looking in."

"I know," Leigh sighed. "I am hungry. Aren't you?"

"Famished," Jeannette grinned a little. She patted her hair in place and walked down the hall to the lobby with her daughter.

Thornton and Martin were standing at the lobby desk when they turned to see the two women approach.

Thornton was spell bound. He squeezed his eyes and reopened them when he saw the blue vision walking toward him. On the train in her simple faded calico dress Leigh was attractive, but completely dressed in the blue satin evening dress she looked not only beautiful, but also radiant.

"Put your tongue back in your mouth, Thorn," Martin chided. "You're drooling on my carpet."

Thornton ignored the comment as walked briskly to offer his arm to Leigh. "You look lovely, Miss Junge."

"Thank you," Leigh replied graciously. She thought he was just being polite. It still felt wonderful to have some one say she looked pretty instead of pig ugly.

Martin walked by Thornton. "You're just faster," he chortled. Martin offered his arm to Jeannette. "Thank you for accepting our invitation to dinner, madam."

Jeannette giggled like a schoolgirl. “Delighted.”

Thornton led the way holding Leigh’s hand on his arm across the street to the Wellington Restaurant. He inhaled the beautiful rose scent of his escort.

A man in a black woolen suit, starched collar, and black cravat met them at the entrance. The man’s hair was split down the middle, greased, and he sported a thick mustache.

“Good Evening, Colonel, Captain, Ladies,” Daniel Quirk greeted. “Your table is ready.” He led the way to a large round dining table set near the fireplace. The table had six chairs surrounding it. The cloth was fine Irish linen. In the center the light of a candle accented the linen with a soft amber glow. There were four place settings of polished silver flatware and folded linen napkin with silver ring.

Thornton pulled out a chair for Leigh to be seated. Martin pulled out a chair for Jeannette.

Leigh felt like floating out of her body with happiness. She felt like one of her heroine princesses being treated royally in court. It was a joy that she had never felt before. “It seems we were expected.”

“We were. Martin owns the Wellington Restaurant as well as the Rawlins Hotel,” Thornton laughed.

Leigh looked into his eyes. They were beautiful when he laughed. She could see the innocent joy of a little boy in them when he laughed.

“I dabble in a few things,” Martin added humbly.

Daniel handed the menus to Martin and Thornton.

“Is there anything special either of you would enjoy for the main course? We offer lamb roast, pork tenderloin chops, steak, chicken, and of course cutthroat trout. Trout is currently in season and fresh. For vegetables you have your choice of beans, peas, and squash. You may have your potato mashed or baked with butter and sour cream. Our appetizer is the special soup for the day, creamed potato,” Martin rattled off expertly.

Jeannette ordered first. She chose pork tenderloin chops, beans, and baked potato. Leigh chose the lamb roast, squash, and mashed potatoes. Thornton ordered the same as Leigh. Martin ordered steak, peas, and baked potato.

“Bring us a fine port wine,” Martin ordered Daniel after he had written down the order to take to the kitchen.

“You’ll find the cuisine here is excellent,” Thornton commented. “Sean Brody was an enlisted man in our unit during the war. He was quite talented in making our mess taste like real food. Sean quit the cavalry after the war and followed Martin here. A number of our unit lives in Rawlins thanks to Martin.”

“A number of men still follow Thorn in his unit,” Martin added.

“Tell us about them,” Leigh requested enthusiastically. These two men were utterly fascinating. She contemplated writing a contemporary novel. These two men were definitely the hero type in her mind’s eye.

The two men shared anecdotes about the war and the people living in Rawlins.

Daniel Quirk served the soup in fine china bowls so efficiently that Leigh didn’t realize he had until Thornton asked her if she liked potato soup.

The conversation was light and gay. Leigh couldn’t remember enjoying herself so much in her entire lifetime.

Chapter Six

“Did you rent the buggy and wagon?” Theresa questioned as she walked across the street to the Wellington Restaurant holding on to her husband’s arm.

“They’ll be in front of the hotel at 10:00 in the morning. The driver and freighter I hired told me that the trip to Aunt Ruthie’s ranch would be two days. We’ll have to sleep in the buggy overnight. The freighter’s wife will make us meals for the journey.”

“How kind of her,” Theresa said dryly.

“Not kind of her. I paid her for it,” Carl growled. “Are the girls fed and sleeping?”

“Bessie acquired some food from another Negro in town for her, Jonas, and the girls. Then she put them to bed.”

“The aroma from the Wellington is inviting,” Carl remarked.

“It will be wonderful to be served a decent meal again,”

Theresa agreed. She was pleased her husband had not asked after Jonas. She had sent him across town as soon as Carl left to send a telegram to Chicago. She had taken advantage of a friendship. When Theresa wanted something, she got it and she wanted the handsome Colonel at her beck and call. “A fine meal will make up for that hole in the wall they call a hotel room. It is so hard to believe that such a large building with a grand lobby has such tiny rooms.”

“The more people in the hotel, the more income you have,” Carl mused. “Especially at these robbery rates.”

Daniel looked up to see the new patrons enter. He had just finished serving the main courses to Martin’s dinner guests. He had also provided fresh baked warm bread in a basket and a plate of freshly churned butter.

Leigh’s back was toward the entrance so she didn’t see Carl enter, but she did notice Martin nudge Thornton for his attention. They both looked at the door. Jeannette was spreading butter on her serving slice of warm bread. She had never enjoyed such a fine meal in her lifetime.

Martin always sat facing the entrance to the restaurant when he ate there so he could watch everyone when they entered. He had in the past always stood and greeted his good friends personally. Unfortunately his illness was draining his reserve strength. He still

watched everyone enter, but now they would walk to him with salutations. He saw Carl enter and wait for attention. Carl had motioned to Daniel while he was serving the lamb roast plate for Thornton.

“What is it?” Leigh questioned when she noted the frowns suddenly appearing on her hosts’ faces.

“Nothing to worry about,” Martin reassured. “Enjoy your meal, that lamb smell scrumptious.” He put a false smile on his face as he watched Daniel seat Carl and his wife near the entrance at a vacant table. Although he was tired and weak, Martin stood and walked to the kitchen. He gave Daniel a look that ordered him to follow.

Daniel was deeply concerned when Martin went into the kitchen. Martin’s illness was no secret in town. Everyone knew and liked Martin Chandler. Most of the town had originally been under his command as Captain Chandler in the war. Daniel was one of his former soldiers. He knew it was getting more difficult for Martin to walk around a great deal.

“Yes Captain?” Daniel asked entering the kitchen.

“That couple you just seated,” Martin said taking deep breaths to talk. He was out of breath walking so quickly and it strained him to be irritated. “Please get them out of here as quickly as possible. I also want you to know that if they become arrogant and troublesome that you do not have to deal with it. Get Sean Brody and throw them out physically if you must.”

“Are you expecting trouble?”

“I hope not, but don’t put up with anything from him,” Martin warned. “Keep them away from my table if you can.”

“Then you know them,” Daniel deduced.

“Not well, and I have no intention of making a friendly acquaintance.”

“Yes Captain.” Daniel returned to Carl’s table and took their order.

Martin caught his breath and returned to the table at a slower gait.

Leigh was polite enough not to ask where and why Martin left. She believed that if he wanted her to know anything he would have told her. This was such a wonderful evening she wanted to enjoy every minute of it. Colonel O’Neal was making her a bit nervous. He would exchange a comment or two, but his eyes seemed to go around her and focus on someone behind her. At first she thought it was a

lovely female he fancied, but his eyes were cold steel blue. Those eyes were not happy eyes, but slicing and hard.

As per Martin's orders, Carl and his wife were served quickly and efficiently. Carl believed it was because of his superiority and bearing.

After the meal Theresa turned to scan the clientele when she spotted the Colonel. He was too handsome for words. She had to speak to him once more. It was then she noticed Jeannette sitting next to the hotel owner. She saw the back of a woman dressed elegantly with a perfectly combed coiffure. Her curiosity got the better of her. She didn't recall seeing a wedding ring on the Colonel. She wondered if the woman sitting next to the Colonel was the hotel owner's wife.

"Carl, your mother is sitting with the Colonel and the hotel owner. Don't you think you should tell her about being ready tomorrow morning and that she is to help get the children ready," Theresa suggested sweetly.

Carl looked in the direction his wife indicated and saw Jeannette was indeed sitting with that barbarian Colonel and insane hotel owner. "I suppose we must."

Theresa moved swiftly across the dining room to stand behind the woman facing Colonel O'Neal.

Leigh noticed Thornton's frown turn downward into a fierce scowl. She felt Theresa before she heard her.

"Good evening, Colonel," Theresa purred seductively. "What a pleasant surprise to run into you here. If we had realized you were dining here tonight we would have invited you to be our guests. Perhaps we could have made up for that ghastly experience with my husband's unpleasant sister."

Leigh's heart sank. She felt her brother come and stand behind Theresa. They would have to spoil her nearly perfect fairy tale evening.

"I do apologize for my behavior," Carl began politely but not convincingly. "My sister has no social graces. She tends to irritate me quite purposely until I lose my temper. I believe she tries to make a fool of me to bring me down to her level."

"You need no assistance in that area," Thornton clucked cheekily.

Carl missed O'Neal's sarcasm. That didn't surprise Leigh at all. Carl was too self involved to understand.

“We will be leaving for Aunt Ruthie’s tomorrow, Jeannette. Please ready early in the morning and assist Bessie with readying the children,” Carl ordered. “Good evening.” He took Theresa’s arm and attempted to leave the restaurant.

Theresa stood firmly and wouldn’t move.

“Colonel O’Neal. I do hope you will visit Aunt Ruthie’s ranch on one of your patrols. She lives on the Three Circle Ranch. Have you heard of it?” Theresa invited boldly considering it wasn’t her ranch or hospitality to offer. She was bored with Carl already and that Colonel was very handsome. A small diversion in her life might be a little interesting. It would be fun to cuckold her husband with a man that obviously didn’t like him very much.

“I know Ruth Strands. I was sorry to hear about her husband Jacob. I have visited her ranch on occasional trips to visit Washakie’s people in the Green River area,” Thornton replied testily. Was she flirting with him? That wouldn’t be a surprise. Women weren’t the fairer of the sexes. They were the deadly sex. No woman would play with his heartstrings again. What made this situation even worse was that she was a married woman. That was even lower than Chloe.

“Oh how delightful,” Theresa chirped. “I’ll look forward to seeing you again. By the way, will you introduce me to your wife, Mr. Chandler?”

“My wife?”

Leigh turned around and looked at Theresa.

“My Goodness, it’s you!” Theresa gasped in surprise and jealousy. Leigh actually looked beautiful and radiant in that gown with her hair done. Theresa was green with envy that Leigh was with the Colonel, not her. “I know now how you managed to pay for the hotel room. Your kind would do such an unspeakable thing. You little slut.” Theresa turned her back on Leigh and allowed Carl to escort her out of the restaurant. Wouldn’t Colonel be surprised with the news he would receive in the morning? How grateful he would be toward her for getting him away from that awful ugly little troll. She didn’t hear Leigh’s retort.

“It takes one to know one,” Leigh said softly that no one could hear it.

“Have some more wine,” Martin offered filling Leigh’s glass. He tried to get the sparkle of joy back in her eyes that he had enjoyed most of the evening.

“I hardly ever imbibe. I hope I haven’t drunk too much already,” Leigh accepted.

“I’ll have another,” Jeannette requested holding out her glass to be filled.

Leigh had been surprised that her mother hadn’t followed Carl and Theresa back to the hotel. It then dawned on her that her mother was actually enjoying the evening and having a little fun. That was something that rarely occurred for either of them. “A toast.”

All picked up their glasses.

“Too good friends, happy times, a mutually advantageous business arrangement, and a large thank you for every kindness,” Leigh offered in gratitude.

“And to beautiful women,” Martin added.

Leigh blushed in gratitude. It felt wonderful to feel pretty and admired. It was like one of her stories coming true. Without thinking, Leigh placed her small hand on Martin’s thin pale one. She squeezed it gently and whispered. “I feel like you are a dream and I don’t want to wake. Thank you so much for everything.” She removed her hand and looked into Thornton’s eyes that were still the cold blue, but this time reflected an inner pain and turmoil. “I cannot begin to show you my appreciation for all you have done. All I can say is thank you.”

Martin recognized the pain in his friend’s eyes. It was Chloe coming back to haunt him in the visage of another viper named Theresa. He immediately took control of the situation. “It was our pleasure Miss Junge. It isn’t often we men are able to entertain such charming and beautiful ladies. I think we should return to the hotel. I usually start early mornings. We can begin your apprenticeship.”

Leigh was up early. Too Many Teeth told her where Mr. Chandler’s private quarters were. He was already awake, but it would be best to wait for him to come out to the desk. Mr. Chandler had already given him instructions to have her wait by the lobby desk.

“I find your name most interesting, Too Many Teeth,” Leigh said quietly. “Does it have a special meaning?”

“Chief Washakie gave me this name. He told my people that I smile too much because I have too many teeth. My name is really Smile Too much Having Too Many Teeth. Captain says my name is too long for him. It makes him run out of breath, so he calls me Too

Many Teeth. It's easier," Too Many Teeth explained shrugging his shoulders. "You like your room?"

Leigh was surprised by the question. "Yes, I like my room very much. It is most comfortable and quite luxurious."

"What luxurious mean?"

"It means wealthy people can only afford places like that. I am most fortunate."

"Great White Father wealthy?" Too Many Teeth asked seriously.

"What is a Great White Father?" Leigh asked with curiosity.

"Him!" Too Many Teeth pointed to the picture on the wall of President Ulysses Grant.

"He's our President, not a Great White Father. Well he is a father, but not Great White. Then again he is White, but not great! He is our President. We elect him like you elect your Chief Washakie," Leigh elucidated. "Where did you hear that term?"

"Term?"

"Where did you hear him called 'Great White Father'?" Leigh asked pointing to Grant's picture.

"All the white men here think we are stupid. We think white man is stupid for calling leader Great White Father, but if that is what they want us to call your Grant. We call him that. You call him, President?"

Leigh giggled. "Yes, President Grant. Just like Chief Washakie."

"Much better name. President Grant," Too Many Teeth repeated thoughtfully. "White men stupid thinking we are stupid."

"They certainly are," Leigh agreed thinking of her arrogant brother. "Most white men anyway."

"I like you, Leigh. I tell Washakie about you," Too Many Teeth promised.

"What's going on here?" Martin questioned after entering the lobby.

"Leigh give lessons in English," Too Many Teeth replied. "I am going now to Green River. I get list from Washakie."

"I'll see you later, Too Many Teeth," Martin acknowledged. "I'll send for freighters as soon as you return."

"I like Leigh," Too Many Teeth stated. "I will tell Washakie I like Leigh."

"I am honored," Leigh bowed in humility. "I would like Washakie to like me. It would be an honor to have a leader of a nation be my friend."

"Careful, Miss Junge," Martin teased. "Washakie has many wives. He might trade to make you another wife. I don't want to give up my employee before I've had a chance to train her."

"Wives? Like the Mormons?" Leigh asked in shock.

"It's a long story. Some day I'll let Washakie tell you," Martin chuckled.

"If Washakie will talk to you," Thornton complained. "I have been here for three years and he has yet to speak to me. I've seen him when he met President Grant, but he refuses to speak with me. I've been up to Green River at least ten times and his warriors tell me he isn't there. He's hunting, fishing, visiting, but never available."

"He doesn't like you," Martin joked.

"Why?" Thornton asked seriously.

"He doesn't tell me," Martin laughed. "Maybe Too Many Teeth doesn't like you."

"I'm as kind as can be." Thornton griped. "Aren't I Too Many Teeth?"

"You stupid. You think I am stupid," Too Many Teeth grouched. "President Grant isn't great. He is Father, he is white, but he is President Grant."

Thornton's mouth dropped open. "Yes, it is President Grant. I thought your people think of him as a Great White Father."

"I say you are stupid," Too Many Teeth grunted. "I have a father. I did not need another one. I am not a child who needs a father. President Grant is your chief. Washakie is my chief."

"Yes, of course," Thornton stumbled.

Leigh chuckled, "I think you have answered your own question as to why Washakie does not speak to you. That uniform and rank has made you a bit haughty. These are people like you and me. They are not children. Washakie would speak to President Grant. He is our chief and Washakie is a chief."

"I like Leigh," Too Many Teeth repeated. He left for Green River.

"I'll think on it," Thornton growled. "I'm going for breakfast." He stomped out the door.

Chapter Seven

“I think you might have hit the nail on the head, Miss Junge,” Martin quipped. “You made me realize I have always conducted business with Washakie as a man and equal partner in trade. Perhaps that is why we meet regularly.”

“You meet with Washakie?” Leigh queried.

“Quite often actually. I never let Thornton know about it. Washakie is a proud chief. Thornton is a proud man. I have a feeling if Thornton takes what you said to heart, he just might finally meet with Washakie.”

“Or he’s furious with me and will never speak to me again,” Leigh choked. “I always put my foot in it. I should learn to keep quiet.”

“Why should wisdom be silent?” Martin scolded. “I hope you will always be open and honest with me. I am not afraid to learn new things and I hope you feel the same.”

“I do,” Leigh replied happily. “Let’s start with teaching me the books for Rawlins Hotel. I want to start earning my keep.”

Thornton passed the wagon and buggy that would take Carl and his family to The Three Circle Ranch. He also passed Daniel Quirk taking a breakfast tray to Martin at the hotel. His mind was spinning. Leigh was right. He had treated the Shoshone he met as if they were mentally retarded children. These people were men and women. They had family, hopes, and dreams. *Damn her for being right. Damn me for being blind.* In his deep thinking he almost ran into Bessie. She had come from the back of the restaurant and was holding a large tray of food for the Junges. That boiled Thornton’s blood. He had watched so many men and boys die for States rights under the guise of freeing slaves and the Northerners treated slaves the same if not worse. Various expletives were mumbled under his breath. This had not been a good morning. He had no idea it was about to become worse.

After Thornton finished his breakfast and was about to pay his fare, James Harvey found his table and saluted.

“An urgent telegram just came from the Fort,” Harvey reported handing the paper message to his superior officer.

Thornton’s face turned red with fury. “Is this a joke at my expense?”

Sergeant Harvey shook. “No sir! It came by the wire just a moment ago. I took it to you directly. I didn’t even open it.”

Thornton threw bills on the table and stomped out of the restaurant.

Sergeant Harvey found it difficult to keep up with the Colonel. He had to run to stay near O’Neal.

“God Dammit!” Thornton swore before he opened the hotel door. He turned to give Sergeant Harvey orders and nearly ran into the young man on his turn. “Sergeant Harvey, tell Sergeant Bolt and Lieutenant O’Brien to call Boots and Saddles. It seems we are to be an escort. We will be leaving in one hour.”

Sergeant Harvey gave a snappy salute and the stables to find the sergeant, lieutenant, and the rest of the troop. It was habit in the morning after mess to curry their horses.

In the lobby Martin and Leigh were going over receipts and records when they heard Thornton’s angry stride on the plank walk in front of the hotel. They also heard him swear and bark at Sergeant Harvey.

“Someone put a burr in your saddle?” Martin chortled in greeting when Thornton entered the lobby.

The anger in Thornton’s face was a warning to Martin and Leigh to end the discussion.

Thornton stormed past the two and slammed the door behind him when he entered Martin’s private quarters.

Leigh and Martin laughed when they heard words like, baby sitter, nanny, wet nurse, green horns, spoiled brats, and other expletives. They also heard things being thrown about in the room as Thornton prepared his bedroll and saddlebags.

At the moment the patrol troop appeared at the loaded wagon, Theresa made a grand entrance into the room. “Where is Colonel O’Neal?” she asked addressing Martin.

Martin cocked his head toward the door behind the lobby.

“Is he ready to escort me?” Theresa drooled happily.

“Escort you?” Martin queried.

“Why yes, I sent a cable to a dear friend in Chicago. He is a Senator from Illinois as a matter of fact. I explained that I had heard there was some Indian trouble. I was a little frightened. I explained that fortunately there was a small patrol here in Rawlins and a Colonel O’Neal was available to escort us. All he needed to do was contact one of those generals he knew to send an order to the Colonel. The Senator is quite efficient. He sent a telegram to me this morning saying that everything was taken care of and Colonel O’Neal would be our escort.” Theresa was proud of her accomplishment. She wanted to rub it in to that sister of her husband’s that women like her, women of beauty and breeding, controlled things. She also wanted to make Leigh pea green with envy that now O’Neal would be at her disposal.

What Theresa didn’t realize was Leigh didn’t give it a second thought. Leigh was filled with excitement about her new job. Leigh knew she wasn’t a beauty and that Colonel O’Neal was simply a nice man helping out from kindness in his heart. Leigh felt comfortable with him, but never considered him a suitor of any type. He was far too handsome for the likes of her. The only thing Leigh knew was Thornton did not like the idea of being their escort to Aunt Ruthie’s ranch.

Leigh also gave up trying to convince their mother to stay with her. After dinner and returning to their suite, Leigh had taken the opportunity of her mother’s happy mood to try and convince her to stay in Rawlins. Leigh promised she would work hard to take care of her, but Jeannette insisted she wanted to live with Ruthie.

Thornton came out of the room with his bedroll and saddlebag. He glared at Theresa.

“I’m ordered to be an escort,” Thornton snapped. “I’ll make it worthwhile by going on to Washakie’s Green River camp. I’ll think on your comment Miss Junge. Perhaps that might make a difference.”

Leigh and Martin made no comments but nodded in understanding.

“Colonel O’Neal,” Theresa cooed seductively. “I’ll feel so much safer knowing you and your men will be at our side to protect us.”

“Just how did you know I was ordered to escort you, madam?” Thornton snarled angrily.

“She arranged it,” Martin guffawed. He laughed so hard his ribs hurt and it wore him out. He had to sit down behind the desk.

“You may not be safe at all,” Thornton growled. “I just might become a Thorn in your side. You see, madam, as a military escort we will abide by my personal martial law. If you hadn’t had the military as an escort you could stop, talk, and dally, as you like. As of this moment you and your family are under my command!” With that parting shot he stomped out of the hotel. He strapped on his saddlebags and bedroll, mounted his horse, and stood patiently waiting for the Junge family entourage.

“Whatever did you say to Colonel O’Neal,” Theresa snapped at Leigh. “You simply have a way of bringing out the worst in people.”

Leigh’s heart sank. She seemed to have that habit. Why didn’t she keep quiet this morning? O’Neal may not have been in such a foul mood. She would try harder to keep her own thoughts. It never occurred to Leigh that O’Neal was not angry with her, but furious about an order from a higher command to be a wet nurse to a pack of green horns.

Martin knew what Thornton was about. He actually felt sorry for his good friend and hoped Thornton wouldn’t kill Carl and his family before they got to The Three Circle.

The last from the hotel was Jeannette. Leigh had stopped her to give her a hug and good wishes. Leigh also folded some coin and bills in her mother’s hand. With her new job she felt she could afford to give her mother half of her savings. “In case you need something. If you need anything that I can help with let me know. Mr. Chandler told me that Aunt Ruthie sends down a list every two months or so for supplies. I’ll send you letters on it,” Leigh informed.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll be with Ruthie, your father’s sister. You come out by us if it doesn’t work out here,” Jeannette replied.

Carl’s voice carried to the lobby, “Jeannette! Get your lazy fat ass out here. You’re delaying us.”

Thornton’s voice overrode Carl’s. “Watch your tongue you illiterate pup. Or this little party of yours will be delayed longer. I will personally drag you to Sheriff Starr’s office and have you arrested for obscene language in a public place.”

Jeannette hurried outside and boarded the wagon. She adjusted her bonnet as she made room sitting next to Bessie and Jonas. Carl rode his horse, Theresa and the girls sat in the fancy buggy Carl had rented.

“I can’t believe your brother treats his own mother like a servant,” Martin muttered looking out the window as the entourage left town.

“I can’t understand it either. It’s as if his blood kin are beneath him. He’s never had love for us, even before he met Theresa. Since he’s married her it has only gotten worse,” Leigh shared. “Once I asked him why he treats mother so badly. He told me a quote from the bible. *A man shall leave his family and cleave unto his wife.* Of course the quote was taken completely out of context.”

“I find most Christians take what they want things to mean to fit their lifestyle and dump the rest until needed for convenience,” Martin agreed. “I don’t really care much for religion. If truth be known, religion has created more hell on earth than a devil ever could.”

Leigh’s eyebrows arched in shock.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you, but you should know right now that I don’t believe in God.”

Leigh gave Martin a large smile. “Neither do I. God is a mythical being created by man in man’s image to be used as an excuse from obligation and responsibility. If men go out to kill and plunder for personal wealth, they call upon a religious justification for it. One of the biggest most recent was..”

“The War Between the States.” Martin and Leigh said in unison.

“We say we fought the war for the poor slaves to give them freedom and a new life from horrible conditions,” Martin started.

“In reality it was Northern greed to maintain political control for the agricultural crops of the South,” Leigh finished.

“Exactly,” Martin concurred. “Thornton and I were the idiots for believing in saving the poor slaves and fought for them.”

“That was the right thing to do,” Leigh approved. “Their lot was sorrowful. They needed freedom and right to live as all have a right to live. Your cause was just. It is the hypocrisy of government and religion that is wrong.”

“Leigh, you and I are going to become fast friends and have lively discussions,” Martin promised. He knew he was beginning to fall in love with this woman. He regretted he hadn’t met her before, but was happy he had met her even if it was at the end. He must have done something right in his life. At that moment he was relieved to

know he would not die alone. He would have a friend and love at his side. He placed his hand upon Leigh's. "You are a good person."

Leigh placed her hand over Martin's. "So are you."

They spent the rest of the day finishing the accounts. Leigh learned that Martin was more than a hotel and restaurant owner. He was a very wealthy and prominent figure in Rawlins. Martin owned all three hotels, two restaurants, a livery, two mercantile stores, the railroad depot, telegraph office, the opera house, tonsorial shop, lumber mill, and several buildings that were rented. He owned several thousand acres of land including the land surrounding Fort Fred Steele. He had sold that land to the Army for the Fort to be built. He also sold land surrounding the fort where some homes were built for the married officers, and non-commissioned men. He rented those homes since many were constantly being transferred from fort to fort.

In the evening, Martin had dinner delivered to his private quarters. It would be the start of a new habit. They ate dinner in the parlor and talked into the night about sociology, philosophy, religion, humanity, and other interesting subjects that came up during conversation.

They learned a great deal about each other and a strong bond was formed. Martin insisted she continue to stay in the suite. He told her it was very rarely used and if President Grant suddenly showed up, she could take another suite until he left.

Leigh had to admit she appreciated the luxury.

Several days after her brother and mother had left, Leigh found herself in the hotel storeroom behind the hotel recounting some inventory. Apparently she was so involved counting she didn't hear anything, or the man was so quiet she didn't hear him enter the storeroom. Leigh turned to find a calico print almost touching her nose. She backed up to see a tall white haired Shoshone with a barrel chest. Leigh didn't feel fear. She had just been surprised. "Hello, I'm Leigh Junge," she introduced extending her hand in friendship.

The Shoshone grasped her hand and laid it upon his arm. "You are Leigh. Too Many Teeth tells me you are a good woman. He likes you."

The possibility of just who this Shoshone was sent shock waves throughout her body. "Are you Chief Washakie?"

Washakie bowed politely. "I am Washakie."

Leigh curtsied. "I am most honored to make your acquaintance."

Washakie laughed. "No woman has ever bowed to me. I must tell my wives of this. They tell me to bow before them or they will make my life miserable."

"Maybe you have too many wives," Leigh chortled.

"You are correct. I have too many wives," Washakie guffawed.

Leigh was confused. "Then why did you marry so many? It seems to me you made your own bed and now must lie in it."

A wrinkle creased deeply in Washakie's brow. "What does my bed have to do with too many wives?"

It was Leigh's turn to laugh. "I didn't mean it literally, Chief Washakie. I only meant if you have problems with too many wives it is because you married too many women."

"Someone must take care of the widows," Washakie explained sincerely. "If they do not have a rich husband as myself to feed them, hunt for them, they would die. It is the duty of a wealthy chief to take the widows and orphans of his warriors that walk the ghost path."

The enormity of what Washakie had explained hit Leigh in the heart. Widows and orphans of her people were left to fend for themselves. The Shoshone had a welfare system in place. What a marvelous culture. "I think we might learn a lot from your people, Chief Washakie. You are very wise. Someone must take care of widows and orphans. I understand."

"Too Many Teeth is right. You are a good woman. You have been gifted with understanding and wisdom. He tells me you are treated badly by your family," Washakie shared. "Perhaps your wisdom comes from your heart pain?"

"Perhaps it does," Leigh agreed wistfully.

"You are alone now," Washakie stated knowingly.

"Yes, I suppose I am," Leigh returned.

"You would be Washakie's wife?"

Chapter Nine

“I told you Washakie would want to take care of you,” Martin chuckled. “Don’t worry about Leigh, Washakie. I will keep her in my lodge and care for her.”

Washakie smiled. “This is good you do this my friend. You will need a good woman by your side soon.”

“Come into my lodge, Washakie. I’ll send for food and we’ll discuss our business,” Martin invited.

“Your woman will make us food?” Washakie queried.

“Not this meal. Others prepare it for us. I want Leigh to be with us. She must learn your ways and trade if she is to carry on after I walk the Ghost path. I am like the Shoshone council. I wish women to hear and give wisdom in my council.”

Washakie nodded in agreement. They walked into Martin’s parlor together.

The next few hours were spent discussing trade goods Washakie needed for his camps.

Leigh was surprised to learn that Green River had many tribunal camps broken down by clan or community. Washakie created a fake camp he used for visits from politicians, bureaucrats, and even army visitations.

Martin explained to Leigh that Washakie was a wise chief and had been given visions to protect his people from total genocide. After the Bear River Massacre and hearing of the Sand Creek Massacre, Washakie would never allow his hidden Green River Camps to be found. These hidden camps would protect the old ones, women, and children from slaughter. Instead he put up a camp that gave appearance of a large camp, but only a few families would stay there at any given time. When they were visited, he would bring only a few of his people to fill the many tepees.

“What happened at Bear River?” Leigh inquired. She heard of the blood bath that followed Sand Creek. So many Cheyenne and settlers lost their lives for Chivington’s arrogance. She had not heard of Bear River or Patrick O’Connor.

Washakie told her the story of Bear Hunter’s camp as told by the survivors of the blood bath. Two of Washakie’s wives were

widowed survivors of that horrible day. One of the children he adopted was a survivor of Bear River.

Leigh was choking back bile while listening to the story. How horrible that such little innocents were cut down so brutally. To hear what was done to Chief Bear Hunter was completely obscene and intolerable by standards of humanity.

Washakie studied Leigh's emotions as the story of his vision to protect the people and the blood bath of Bear River by the militia. He was deeply impressed by her deep feelings for the people. "Tell me Leigh, why is it you did not cower in fear at my appearance?"

"You are an impressive man. I felt no fear or danger," Leigh replied honestly.

"You speak of me as man. The Americans think of the people as wild animals," Washakie stated boldly.

"The Americans may say that, but I do not. You are a man, Martin is a man, I am a woman," Leigh returned just as boldly.

"We are a different skin color," Washakie pursued.

"Though our skin has different pigmentation we all have red blood. If I bleed, Martin bleeds, or you bleed, it is the same blood that is our life source."

Washakie turned to look at Martin. "She is a wise woman. Keep her well my friend or I shall take her."

"You have my promise," Martin reassured. In his heart and mind he was making his own plans to do just that. In the short week he had known Leigh he discovered he loved her. He could only hope she would learn to love him. He hoped they could share a brief happiness before his life was gone.

"You also show no fear of the people," Washakie stated as fact.

"I have little to fear. I've met many people of other nations. My father's cousin married an Oneida of the Algonquin nation. Although the family ostracized him my father welcomed him and his wife into our home. I rather liked Adele. She was a fine person, a good wife, and loving mother. I've met Kewaskum, Menominee, and even a few Sioux when I visited with friends in Northern Wisconsin," Leigh informed. "I found most likable and few nasty. It is the same portion of good and bad regardless of the people's nationality. Most of the children I went to school with were mean, nasty, and sometimes cruel to me. They were Christian Americans."

Washakie thought on what Leigh said before he asked, "Your heart is burdened with sadness. You have such hopes for people. For your love they fear you and cause you great pain."

"You are quite sensitive, Chief Washakie," Leigh concluded. "My heart is burdened with sadness. It seems I can never be what others want me to be. It seems no one wishes to accept what I am. That is why I like writing stories. My stories are fantasy, but full of living people and morality."

"You must be the Keeper of Stories for my people. Come and live with us awhile. Learn about us and write our stories," Washakie invited. "Tomorrow you must come with me to my hidden mountains and meet with our people. It will give you good stories to write."

"I can't," Leigh hesitated. "I can't just leave my new employment. I must work to make a living."

Washakie scowled at Martin, "You say to me she is your woman! You cannot take care of her? I will take care of her."

Martin put up his hands quickly. "Wait a minute Washakie. I do take care of her in my own way. She has duties just like your women, but they can wait." Martin turned to look at Leigh. "I think it is a great idea for you to live with the people for say, about two weeks. I agree with Washakie. The stories should be written and kept. I've enjoyed the stories you've written down. Besides, do you have any idea what an honor it is for Washakie not only to invite you, but also take you to the hidden places? No white man has ever been allowed near them. It would be like turning down an invitation to the White House."

"You want me to go? Really?" Leigh queried.

"Absolutely. We are the result of our experiences. The things I need you to take over for me would be enhanced by an experience as a guest in Washakie's camp," Martin explained. "On the job training so to speak."

"But I can't ride a horse," Leigh revealed. "Living in the city, we walked everywhere."

"You must learn to ride a pony," Washakie blurted out. "I will teach you. When you return to this place you will ride with the pony as one spirit."

"You must learn to ride," Martin emphasized. "You will go with Washakie for two weeks." He turned to Washakie. "Fourteen sunrises and bring her back to me. Do not forget she is my woman."

You will keep those warriors of yours away from her. I trust you to protect my woman.”

“It is settled then. On the sunrise we will ride to Green River,” Washakie agreed. “I will take care of your woman. She will live with the people and write our stories. She will become one with the spirit of the pony.”

“Now we can begin our business,” Martin announced. “Leigh, would you get the books from the mercantile and the ledger?”

“Certainly,” Leigh responded. Her heart was beating with excitement and fear. Going off with a Shoshone Warrior Chief? Living with the Shoshone people? Learning to ride a horse? How exciting and frightening. She walked briskly to the safe behind the lobby desk. With nimble fingers Leigh ran the dial through the combination. In moments the door opened and she pulled out the necessary ledgers. It had only been a few days since Martin employed her and he had already trusted her with the safe’s combination. How could she ever repay such a kind and trusting man?

Leigh returned to the parlor to find Washakie handing a large leather pouch to Martin. She gasped to see large gold nuggets fall into Martin’s hand after he opened it. “Dear,” Leigh breathed erratically. It brought attention to her presence.

“Close the door, Leigh,” Martin ordered.

Leigh complied immediately. “Where?” she asked pointing to the gold nuggets.

“This is a secret of Wind River,” Washakie grinned. “Now you too share our secret. It is a guarded secret. Do you understand the power of this secret?”

“I think I do,” Leigh replied. Her eyes were still wide with wonder at the wealth Washakie had placed in Martin’s hand. “The person that reveals your secret would destroy your nation. The greed, the yellow nuggets fever those rocks cause would bring men into Wind River. They would kill all of you to dig your mountain. They would destroy all that nature provides for life. The treaty would be worthless and you would never achieve your reservation in the Wind River.”

“It is good that you understand,” Washakie said sternly. “I do not have to kill you.”

Leigh’s mouth dropped open. This was the Chief she was going to travel with for two weeks?

“He’s teasing you, Leigh,” Martin reassured.

“I looked into your spirit. You have been in my visions,” Washakie chuckled. “You have nothing to fear from me. Haven’t those Oneida or others shown you their sense of humor?”

Leigh relaxed and joined the ribbing. “Heavens no. The Oneida are too serious by far. The Sioux moved because hatred was becoming the normal attitude. The Menominee are quite shy.”

“We are happy you have come to Shoshone land,” Washakie smiled. “Come sit down. There is work to be done.”

“Leigh, in the bookshelf there is a measure. Would you get it for me?” Martin requested. “I need it to weigh the gold. With these nuggets, Washakie buys goods from me and Owen Woulfe for his people.”

Leigh laid the ledgers on the table and retrieved the measure. She placed it in front of Martin and took her seat by the parlor table. “Who is Owen Woulfe? I’ve not seen that name in the ledgers.”

“He is a friend of Washakie that became my friend. He owns a working ranch in Washington Territory north of Salt Lake City. Owen became my friend through Washakie. Chief Washakie’s sister is married to the father of Owen’s wife. I buy some of his cattle, sheep, pottery, and other things for my mercantile stores,” Martin continued. “Owen and his wife, Reilly, used their ranch before and after the war as a haven for runaway and displaced slaves. Those slaves brought great talent and knowledge to Bear River.”

“Isn’t that where the massacre took place?” Leigh concluded correctly.

“Yes, Reilly Woulfe, the daughter of my sister, Winter Sun, was in the camp just before the slaughter. Winter Sun, Red Fox, Reilly, and her children escaped just before the attack,” Washakie answered.

The subject was dropped after that statement. Martin weighed the gold and had Leigh put in the value amount in the ledger under the name People Fund.

Leigh learned that Martin took these nuggets little by little to the bank. He would take it with Federal Notes so it would look like the nuggets were payment by miners in the area. No one suspected where the nuggets came from. Even Washakie and his sons came in and left through the back storeroom so no one would know of his visits. The Chinese ran the laundry behind the hotel. They did not know or care who this Indian man was. The Chinese kept to themselves. As railroad workers they were abused and harassed. The

Chinese learned to stay away from town people and just did the work they needed for survival.

Martin explained to Leigh that the other Federal Notes he didn't turn into the local bank to cover the nuggets was sent to a bank in New York City. Some day he needed to explain that more, but it would be later. He laughed when he told Leigh how he took the supplies sent to Washakie as business losses so his tariff payments were lower, even though he was becoming richer thanks to Washakie. "If the government would learn to work with the people instead of dominate them, they would be far better off."

Dinner was delivered later than normal. Too Many Teeth waited until he was told to tell Daniel Quirk to bring the dinner.

During the meeting, Swen had managed the desk. With the railroad coming to Rawlins, there were always many guests coming and going at the Rawlins hotel.

When the food was brought in, Dick and Charlie, Washakie's sons joined the meal. The three men slept in the extra rooms in Martin's private quarters.

Chapter Ten

The sky was still lit by stars when Martin knocked on Leigh's door.

She awoke, rubbed her eyes, lit a lamp and walked to the door after tying her wrapper. "What is it?"

"I've packed your bag for the trip and brought you these clothes. A dress and petticoat won't do for your ride with Washakie. It will be different for you, but I have a feeling you will enjoy every minute of your visit," Martin chuckled. He handed her a white blouse, heavy woolen shirt, heavy woolen jacket, boots, and duck pants.

Leigh picked up the pants. "You think I should wear these?"

"Sweetheart, you must. You can't ride a pony with a dress and petticoat. Besides, when you get to camp, I know Washakie will see to it that you are given a buckskin dress and moccasins. You'll be surprised at how comfortable they are," Martin grinned. "At least I thought the buckskin pants and moccasins were more comfortable than these store bought clothes. Unfortunately I do have an image to keep."

Leigh took the clothes with skepticism. "I'll try anything once." Once Martin left her room she began to disrobe and then it struck her. He called her '*sweetheart*'. It was amazing how good Martin made her feel about herself. For the first time she could remember, she actually felt good about herself and that somehow she had a purpose and value in this life. She would be the best employee he ever had. Leigh would also enjoy this adventure and learn everything she could. It was an honor to be the Keeper of the Stories. She would do her utmost to write everything down for the next generations.

Leigh dressed quickly and discovered she liked wearing pants. It gave her freedom of movement she never felt before in the confined restrictions of a dress and petticoat. The cotton shirt had been freshly washed. The boots fit perfectly.

Martin was waiting for her when she came out of her suite. His mouth dropped open as wide as his eyes when he saw her. She was the sexiest woman he had ever seen in those duck pants. Her figure was not tiny or delicate, but it was perfectly shaped. If only he wasn't an ill man, he would wed her in the Shoshone camp and really be a husband. "You look magnificent!"

"I can't believe how comfortable this outfit is," Leigh confessed. "This could spoil a woman."

"You need to be spoiled," Martin choked out. Yes, he would set all his plans in motion while she was at camp. "Washakie, Too Many Teeth, Charlie, and Dick are waiting for you."

"I really cannot ride you know," Leigh trembled.

"I had the tamest mare in the stable saddled for you. Washakie is going to have his pony walk next to the mare to set the pace. He will take the reins. You hold on to the saddle horn. Through the trip, Washakie will teach you the spirit of the horse so you become one. Follow Washakie's instructions and you will be fine."

"This is going to be a real adventure," Leigh giggled nervously.

"Go, before I change my mind," Martin teased.

Almost ten days later Thornton arrived in Rawlins. He did not bring his troops he only brought his orderly, James Harvey.

"How was your trip to The Three Circle Ranch?" Martin greeted from behind the lobby desk. He had been working on his ledgers.

"Terrible! That pompous peacock came close to being shot several times. His shrewish wife is a nightmare in skirts. She's just like Chloe," Thornton grumbled.

"How like Chloe, Thorn?"

"She threw herself at me. She's into the power thing like Chloe. Would you believe she snuck into my tent and offered her body? That witch told me she wanted to sleep with a real man!"

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me at all," Martin quipped.

"Their daughters are horrible. I nearly smacked their nasty little mouths and desperately wanted to warm their behinds."

"Why?"

"You should see how they treated their grandmother. She is treated like a slave. Their Negroes are treated just as horribly. Those two little girls poke fun and call them names," Thornton shared in horror. "They never stop calling their grandmother or Aunt bad names like fat, ugly, pig, and other words little girls shouldn't use. All of them have no respect for anyone."

"That's a shame for them," Martin stated flatly.

"I nearly killed the brother when he came to me and told me not to lead his sister on. She's an imbecile who believes a person of a higher station might take an interest in her," Thornton growled. "Can

you believe any brother talking about his sister that way? By the way, Leigh isn't around is she? I'd hate to have her hear any of this. Leigh is a sweet kind person."

"Leigh isn't around," Martin grinned knowingly. "She's on an errand. Did you see Washakie?" Martin knew better, but couldn't help but lead Thornton down the path he wanted him to go.

"Washakie was on a trip," Thornton said disgustedly. "I asked where and Tinge told me somewhere."

"He didn't tell you Washakie came to Rawlins?"

"Washakie was here?" Thornton roared.

"Shh! Yes he was," Martin chortled. "It seems Too Many Teeth told Washakie about our sweet Leigh. Washakie came to meet her."

Thornton was red with anger and humiliation. "Washakie wanted to meet Leigh, and refuses to meet me?"

"I guess you had better take some lessons from Leigh and get Too Many Teeth to become your friend," Martin chided humorously.

"Damn!" Thornton swore. "Where is Leigh? I want to talk to her!"

"Talk to her or yell at her because she met Washakie and you didn't," Martin reprimanded. "Think about what you say and do before you say and do it."

"Thanks, you are a friend. I still would like to talk to her about Washakie. What she thought of him and maybe put in a good word for me, since my good friend doesn't."

"Actually I have tried to convince Washakie to see you. He tells me it is not the time and he will know when it is the right time. Until his vision tells him so, he will not meet with you," Martin explained.

"Maybe I should hope for him to have a good dream," Thornton laughed. "Where is Leigh?"

"She should be in Washakie's camp right about now," Martin stated waiting for the thunder to clap.

"What?" Thornton yelled thunderously. "You let Leigh, a woman, go to the Shoshone camp? How could you do such a thing? Did she have an escort? My God, I need to take a patrol up there!"

"Leigh is in safe hands. She is with Washakie. I trust him with my life. You would too if you knew him," Martin argued.

"You know him?" Thornton asked raising a brow. "You've talked to him?"

"The truth is out. Yes, many times. Before my illness I visited his main camp many times. Owen Woulfe introduced me. Since then, I meet with Washakie quite often."

"You've never told me?"

"I knew you would be hurt and upset. I'm fascinated to realize that before you jumped on me your main concern was Leigh," Martin noticed. "You have feelings for her?"

"She's a good person," Thornton allowed.

"She isn't a Chloe at all," Martin uttered strongly.

"I don't have any feelings like that for any woman!" Thornton snarled.

"Me thinks thou dost protest too much," Martin teased. "If you don't realize how much you do care for Leigh, you'll lose her."

"I'm not a marrying man. I have the military. The cavalry is my mistress."

"Your words say it, but your heart doesn't show it," Martin disagreed. "You'll lose Leigh if you hesitate."

"I don't have feelings that way!" Thornton denied. His heart had skipped a beat when he learned Leigh was away from Rawlins and he couldn't see her. He had been thinking about her the entire trip. He was hoping to ask her to tell him another story. He really enjoyed her company. That was it. He enjoyed her company like he enjoyed his friends in the army. "I'd better get a patrol up and head for Green River. We'll give Leigh an escort back."

"No you won't!" Martin shouted. The anger he released immediately drained him of strength. He didn't know why Thornton made him so angry. Was it because he was jealous of Leigh or was it because Thornton was too stubborn to understand his feelings for Leigh and the education she would receive from the Shoshone?

Thornton was taken back. He had never once heard Martin speak in such a manner. "I won't?"

"No you won't!" Martin repeated. "Leigh is a guest of Washakie. He is teaching her to ride and introducing her to the people. They are going to show her the ways of the Shoshone for her to write down. Washakie has asked her to be Keeper of the Stories. She will be back soon. I expect her back in a day or two."

I'll stay then," Thornton said softly. "Perhaps Washakie might agree to see me."

"Maybe and maybe not," Martin replied.

♣The Outsider♣

“I’m sorry I made you angry,” Thornton apologized. “I didn’t mean to upset you. You look pale. Let’s go into the parlor and you take a rest. Is Swen about?”

Chapter Eleven

The next morning Thornton emerged after a good nights rest. He decided to go to Wellington restaurant and order breakfast for Martin and himself.

Martin was awake, dressed, and shaving when Thornton left to get breakfast.

Right after he left a couple arrived by buggy to the hotel.

"Hello Swen," Owen greeted. "Is Martin about?"

"Ja, he is," Swen answered. "He's in his rooms getting ready. Should I get him for you?"

"No. We'll go to his rooms," Owen smiled. He took the hand of his three-year-old son, Owen Trevor. His other hand took the elbow of his wife Reilly. She was holding their three-month-old baby daughter, Rose Anne. Rory, a now strapping teenager as big as his father and just as broad, took his brother Colt and sister Naomi's hand. They walked to Martin's private rooms and knocked on the door.

Martin walked slowly to the door and was happily surprised when he opened it. He gave Owen a hug and then Reilly. "What's this? Another new one?"

"This is our little Rose. We just went to visit her Grandpa Trevor and Grandma Rose," Owen crowed proudly.

"Congratulations!" Martin beamed. A twinge of envy flickered. He was happy but a bit jealous that his friend Owen found such a treasure as Reilly and was able to produce a large loving family. Martin was more determined than ever to have his own little happiness if only for a brief time. "And is this little Owen? He's gotten so big. Colt and Naomi? How are you? Rory, you are a giant like your father."

"We are well," Naomi replied and curtsied. Colt bowed politely.

"Thank you," Rory appreciated. "Nothing could make me prouder than be compared to Papa."

"I am delighted to see you. My friend Thornton O'Neal is visiting. He just went over to the Wellington to fetch our breakfast. Would you care to join us? I'll have Swen take your order over there."

"I'll do it Papa," Rory volunteered.

“Thanks, son!” Owen appreciated proudly. “I’ll take everything. Your Mama will take her usual eggs and toast. You know what to get for your brothers and sister.”

“Right Papa,” Rory acknowledged. He started walking out of the hotel lobby.

“Can we go with Rory?” Naomi asked quickly.

“Sure, you and Colt can go,” Owen allowed. “Stay close to your big brother!”

“I go!” little Owen protested wiggling in his father’s arms.

“No, you stay here with Papa and Mama,” Owen ordered hugging the wiggling boy tighter.

Naomi ran out to be with Rory. She adored her big brother and wanted to be with him. She was out the door before Colt had turned around to leave the lobby. She ran directly into a tall man in a blue uniform. The terror rose like a flaming fire. Here nightmare. Her eyes opened wide in terror. Her body trembled and a forced sound erupted from her throat.

Thornton bent down to the little girl that ran into his leg. She looked Indian with high cheekbones and black eyes, but her skin was lighter. A sunbonnet covered her hair, but little black wisps had fallen out and framed her face. “Did I hurt you?”

The terror was greater with the blue man at eye level. The word *hurt* ran through her like a bullet in her dreams. The words of a Shoshone woman screaming in agony rang in her ears. ‘The blue coats are killing us. Protect my baby!’ Then there was the pain. The dream was so real. Naomi started screaming. Her voice carried down the street. Rory turned. Colt bolted out of the hotel door.

“What’s the matter?” Thornton asked Naomi worriedly. He attempted to touch her and console her.

She shrank from him in terror.

Colt grabbed his sister from behind. “It’s alright, Naomi. It was a dream. It wasn’t real.”

Rory came from behind Thornton and picked his little sister up in his giant muscled arms. “It’s alright Naomi. Rory is here. I’ll make those bad dreams go away. Shh, it all right. I’m here.”

Owen and Reilly also heard Naomi’s scream.

Reilly handed Rose to Swen. “Please hold her a moment.” She was so frightened that something had happened to Naomi. She ran with Owen to the door. He was still holding his young son.

When Reilly opened the door she knew immediately what had happened. Naomi still had nightmares about that night in 1863. The soldiers. It was hard to believe a baby would absorb such a horror, but Naomi did. Every time she saw a soldier, she ran in terror screaming.

An officer in the cavalry stood in the middle of the melee completely mystified as to what was happening.

Reilly took Naomi from Rory's arms. "Shh, my angel. It's better now. Mama has you. Nothing is going to harm you."

Naomi was sobbing hysterically and grabbed her mother's neck so hard she almost choked Reilly.

"Owen, I'll take Naomi into our suites. I'll calm her down. Will you take care of Rose? Rory, you can handle little Owen. Colt, you be a good boy for Rory and Papa," Reilly ordered walking back into the hotel. She turned her head and added, "Owen, perhaps you might explain to the poor Colonel what this is about."

"How do you do," Owen greeted handing his young son to Rory. "I am Owen Woulfe. This is my family. I'm terribly sorry for the scene. I'd be happy to explain it. If you don't mind, I need to go inside and get my baby."

Thornton nodded. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Woulfe. I'm Colonel Thornton O'Neal. I don't mind if we go inside at all. We seem to have created somewhat of a spectacle." He had glanced around to see numerous townspeople staring at him from doors, windows, and the streets. Everyone must have heard the little girl scream and were wondering what had happened. He followed Owen and his family back into the hotel lobby. Martin was standing by Swen who was holding a little baby.

"What happened Owen?" Martin inquired. "Reilly took Naomi to your suite. Was she hurt?"

Owen retrieved his baby daughter from Swen's arm. "No, she wasn't hurt. It's that nightmare."

"Nightmare?" Martin and Thornton asked inquisitively.

"Martin, you know that Reilly, Rory, Colt, Naomi, Grandpa Trevor and Grandma Rose narrowly escaped the fate of others at Bear River. It's hard to believe because Naomi was just a baby then, but she remembers it. She dreams about the blue coats coming down and killing. She remembers the screams and cries. She dreams them. Reilly and I are woken up once every winter with her cries. To make matters worse, the nightmares are still so real to her that when she sees a soldier, especially an officer in blues and brass buttons she's

terrified,” Owen explained. “I’m terribly sorry, Colonel O’Neal. I know you had nothing to do with Bear River, but there is nothing I can do. Naomi will have to outgrow her fears and nightmares.”

“Bear River Battle was in 1863. General O’Connor was a Colonel then. He headed a militia. It was not an army force,” Thornton tried to exonerate his cavalry. He didn’t know why he felt guilty but he did. O’Connor had been relieved of command and there was a lot of talk among officers that the man was bloodthirsty. He was not a good leader or officer. There had been rumors of his senseless killing of innocents and his acquisitions of wealth by plunder. O’Connor was never put into the same level as Chivington’s Sand Creek Massacre, but there were those in the military that thought he should have been.

“It was not a battle. It was a massacre of innocents,” Owen repudiated angrily. “I’m sorry, but even I relive the horrors I saw that day.”

“Tell me about it,” Thornton stated genuinely. He did want to hear the story from eyewitnesses.

The children were sent to their parents’ suites to eat breakfast with their mother. Rory took little Rose and the children to his mother. Owen breakfasted in Martin’s private suites with Thornton and Martin.

Owen told the entire story of January 29th, 1863 as retold by Trevor, Rose, and Reilly. He also related his personal experience when he had gone into the camp and saw the aftermath of bloody inhuman violence.

“If you are ever near Bear River valley. Come to my home as a guest. I’ll tell you how to get to the massacre site,” Owen offered. “We never have returned there and won’t. The town people tell us they won’t go near it either. They tell us they still hear cries and screams in the morning hours just as dawn breaks. The people and the town say the land is haunted.”

“I will,” Thornton agreed. He meant it. “How will Naomi handle a patrol of cavalry?”

“We’ll have to keep her inside, but you’ll be welcome,” Owen assured.

Leigh couldn't believe the two weeks had passed by so quickly. Washakie was true to his word. She had been well taken care of. She was given her own lodge and company. A wonderful woman named Long Face was her constant companion. Long Face spoke fluent American like Washakie. Leigh had learned that the people took names for specific reasons. Long Face had received her name because she hardly smiled. Her personality was pleasant but took her life seriously.

The Chief had ordered that all would speak American in her presence with no exception. A young warrior named, Tracker, scowled whenever someone spoke to him in American. He obeyed the chief, but hated the words as if poison was placed in his mouth.

"Why does that young man look at me with such anger?" Leigh asked Long Face.

"He isn't angry with you," Long Face explained. "He hates the American words. The boy and his father survived Bear River but lost the rest of his family. His father sent him to an American school. They beat him for wearing his clothes and for speaking Shoshone. He hated the school and ran away. Washakie took him in. Tracker still hates American talk. It reminds him of the beatings he had at school."

"Then teach me Shoshone so I may speak his words to him and make him more comfortable," Leigh requested.

"It is good for you to learn the words," Long Face agreed. "I will teach you the ways of the Shoshone."

Long Face kept her promise. She showed Leigh everything expected of a Shoshone woman. Leigh even learned to start the fire in the lodge and cook their foods. She worked with sinew and bone needles as they did to make lodges and buckskin clothing.

Chief Washakie taught Leigh the spiritual values of the Shoshone. She learned how the dead were honored with placing branches in front of their lodge up to the exposed poles on the top. She learned that women were respected and cherished by the Shoshone as the givers of life. Washakie shared with her that he would never have a council without women sitting in to listen. He would head their advice for many times their cool heads were wiser in protecting the offspring they had given life to.

Leigh laughed continually at Washakie's sense of humor. He had great wit and wisdom. Her favorite was of the money he spent to keep his wives happy with the metal washboards they were so proud

of. Leigh had no idea how important cleanliness was to the Shoshone until she lived with them.

Washakie took her every day to become with the spirit of her horse. In a week's time under Washakie's training, her mare was a part of her. When she rode the mare it was if they were one. They sensed each other's moods and just a turn of Leigh's head would indicate to the mare she must turn.

It amazed Leigh how much in tune to all of nature the Shoshone were. She relished the long talks she had with Washakie well into the lateness of the evening.

She learned of Washakie's visit to the sacred medicine wheel of the ancient ones. He told her of his visions there. She marveled at how he had followed his vision path. Washakie was the wisest man she had ever met save her own father. Washakie explained to her that the Shoshone learned their lessons of survival and serenity from the animals of mother earth's domain. Leigh also learned that she had been taken to one of Washakie's hidden secret camps.

"It would not be wise for anyone to know of your presence here," Washakie spoke softly. "We have the Christian Preachers at our main camp. If others knew of a white woman coming willingly to our camp, you would be shunned like a mad dog. It was selfish of me to bring you to my camp, but a vision was sent to me. I was told to bring you here and teach you our ways. You are to write them down for us. I was told you have a good spirit."

"You are always a wise man and great chief," Leigh acknowledged. "It is true. The good Christians would shun and humiliate me. Fortunately I've always been shunned and humiliated so it is nothing new for me. I fear it would be difficult on Mr. Chandler. For that I am grateful my presence here will be unknown. I do not regret one moment of this wonderful place and haven you have shared with me."

"Would you like to stay?" Washakie asked earnestly.

"Although I love this land and your people. It is not my way of life. I was raised in a different world and it is there I belong," Leigh replied tenderly.

Washakie nodded in understanding.

"My world is not always pleasant, but it is where I belong. I may always be the outsider looking in, but I hope I can make a small difference."

Washakie stared quietly a moment at Leigh's silver eyes.

"You are not an outsider looking in. You are inside with the vision to look out and see what others cannot see. Someday you will come to understand my words. Until then you shall have the name, Wolfrunner."

"I am honored with my name giving," Leigh smiled broadly. It was an honor to receive a name from a Chief as great as Washakie. "I am wondering how you came to choose this name."

"You have chosen the way of the Wolf as your spirit guide. A wolf is cunning but strong to family. He bothers no one, but others bother him. The wolf learns from experience and protects his offspring. The wolf kills when necessary, but is content to take from the leavings of others. The wolf is a fine and noble beast. You are fine and noble. Your name is Wolfrunner. Your people will never understand you. They will fear your wisdom and degrade you for your intelligence. Your life is difficult, but you will find the alpha male to protect you. Then you will remain content in your den and care for your children."

"A vision?" Leigh questioned.

"It is so," Washakie replied. "Go rest now. We leave in the morning. Our fourteen suns are complete. I keep my word to my friend."

Chapter Twelve

Thornton paced back and forth nervously in the parlor. Martin had collapsed after he had eaten breakfast. He called Doctor Farrah immediately and was waiting for the diagnosis. Thornton raked his fingers through his hair. If he could give up an arm or leg to prevent the inevitable for Martin he would gladly do it. Martin was his friend, his closest friend.

“You’ve worn a path in my carpet,” Martin joked emerging first from the bedroom door.

Thornton’s head jolted at his friend’s voice. “Should you be up and about?”

Doctor Farrah was behind him. “Those Shoshone herbs do seem to help. You need to take them more regularly. I also warn you not to keep such long nights,” Farrah chided.

Martin walked to a chair in the parlor and sat down.

“I think it is time you bought one of them wheeled chairs. You are getting weaker,” Farrah stated bluntly.

“Will Martin be all right?” Thornton asked in deep concern. His friend looked a little paler and a little thinner.

“I’ve been witness to a number of things Martin has been doing,” Farrah responded. “He’s just worn himself out this time. I prescribe more rest. Where is Miss Junge? You do need her to help you more as you planned. I’ll continue to check on you.”

“Leigh is on a special errand,” Martin replied. “She will be returning any day.”

Thornton snorted. He knew where Leigh was and with great difficulty kept his worry for her hidden. Martin had worked harder these past few days and exerted himself more than he should have. Martin and Owen Woulfe had spent a great deal of time together discussing many things, including his inevitable death.

Owen and his family had left yesterday to return to Bear River.

After Doctor Farrah left Thornton asked boldly, “How much time?”

Martin smiled. “He says I may have a year or two left if I take it easier. He also reprimanded me for not taking the herbs the

Shoshone gave me. I told him I simply forgot. Truth be known, I do forget. Leigh had been making the teas and tinctures for me.”

“Just when will Leigh be back?” Thornton queried.

“I would guess any minute,” Martin chuckled. “I trust Washakie with my life.”

“You never told me Washakie visited you,” Thornton grumbled.

“What can I say?” Martin laughed. “He likes me. If you would get off your high horse, he’d like you too.”

“I sure would like you to explain that to me. I surely would,” Thornton returned good-naturedly. “I’m as lovable as can be.”

“You are a pompous ass,” Martin teased. “You try too hard to cover the soft side of you. You’re always acting like the grim faced military officer. You’re really a lonely man devoted to his men. You substitute duty for love. You’ve let one woman turn you sour to life. When you get over that and become a real man again, you’ll see Washakie.”

“Don’t hold back on your feelings,” Thornton chuckled. He turned quickly at the sound of feminine footsteps walking down the hall from the storeroom to the parlor door. He heard a gentle tap.

“Martin?”

It was Leigh’s voice. Thornton felt his heart do flip-flops in relief. “I’ll get the door,” Thornton whispered softly gently placing his hand on Martin’s shoulder to keep him down. He opened the door to find Leigh, Washakie, Dick, Charlie, and Too Many Teeth behind her.

“Colonel O’Neal? Is something wrong with Martin?” Leigh asked worriedly.

“I’m fine,” Martin called behind Thornton’s back. “Thornton is here visiting. He just answered the door for me sweetheart.”

Thornton spun around to look at his friend when he heard Martin call Leigh sweetheart. He couldn’t have meant it?

Leigh walked briskly to Martin’s side. “You haven’t been drinking your tea. I’ll make some right now.” She rose and walked quickly to the kitchen. Leigh noticed Martin’s sunken eyes and loss of more weight. She would take care of that quickly. She stoked the stove in the kitchen and started boiling the water for the Shoshone herbal tea. She also placed his favorite biscuits on a platter.

Washakie, his sons, and Too Many Teeth followed Leigh into the parlor. Washakie spoke to Thornton. “You are the Colonel O’Neal. You wish to speak to me. You were kind to Martin’s woman.

For this I will speak to you.” He took a seat next to Martin. “Well? What do you wish to say?”

Thornton was flustered and in shock. The man he was ordered to maintain a peace with by President Grant was sitting before him. His tongue was tied like a schoolboy wet behind the ears. “President Grant wants me to keep peace with Washakie and his people.”

“If you have nothing to say that I do not know, we will have little reason to talk,” Washakie said irritably.

Martin was correct. He came across as an arrogant military mule. “Forgive me, Chief Washakie. I was simply surprised by your sudden appearance.”

“You are no longer surprised,” Washakie growled in annoyance.

Thornton controlled his voice and lowered his head in respect to the chief of the Shoshone. “Perhaps you need to teach me the things I need to learn about the Shoshone. Then and only then can I converse properly with their great chief.”

Washakie’s stern face softened. “This is truth. You must understand the people so you can understand their chief. Learn from Too Many Teeth. Learn from Martin’s woman. She will teach you to be happy with your heart and become one with the people. This is already in her spirit.” After those words Washakie rose to leave. He looked to Martin. “I have brought back your woman. Washakie is a chief who stands by his word. She is a good woman. Treasure her.” Before he left the room he spoke again to Thornton. “Next time you come to my camp I will let you sit in my council. You will open your head and heart. You will learn and obey the commands of your chief.”

“Thank you,” Thornton appreciated. At last he had met the great chief. He was deeply impressed and more in awe of this chief than his own President of the United States.

Washakie left the room and Thornton turned to Martin. “What is this about Leigh being your woman?”

“Does it matter to you?” Martin asked with a smirk on his lips. He knew very well his friend was jealous, but his friend wouldn’t recognize his jealousy and feelings for Leigh if he read it in an army manual. It didn’t matter at this moment anyway. Martin had already set everything in motion. The time would soon be right to share his plans with his best friend.

“Why does Washakie refer to Leigh as your woman?”

Thornton pursued ignoring his friend’s question. He didn’t notice Leigh returning from the kitchen with a tea service.

“If Martin didn’t claim me as his woman, Washakie would have made me another wife,” Leigh laughed. “Chief Washakie sees me as another orphan that needs his care. It seems that Chief Washakie has developed a fondness for me.” She placed the service on a small sideboard near Martin and poured a special tea for him. “Drink this,” Leigh ordered serving him the teacup with saucer.

“What?” Thornton asked in total confusion. “Make you another wife?”

Leigh sat on the arm of the chair Martin was seated upon. “It seems the Shoshone have a caring welfare system for women and children,” Leigh explained. “If a woman does not have a man to hunt and protect her a warrior takes her as a wife to provide for her. It seems Washakie takes that responsibility seriously. He understood I was left behind by a brother and he offered me his protection, as his wife.”

“It’s the Shoshone way,” Martin concurred. “I had to convince Washakie I would care for Leigh. I have every intention of doing so. I take my word seriously.”

“You are doing a wonderful job,” Leigh chuckled. “I have the responsibility to care for your health. I take my word seriously.” She started laughing until tears rolled from her eyes. “We are too serious by far. I can only think of why Long Face received her name. We are turning into long faces.”

Leigh’s laugh was contagious. The men allowed her humor to infect them. They laughed with her.

How many times had her father told her that laughter is life giving. Laughter cannot cure but is a healing potion in itself. She could tell that Martin had overdone it and needed some laughter for strength temporarily.

Martin calmed and found he felt better. “Thornton knows you were in camp. Tell us about your adventure.”

“It was wonderful and enlightening. I understand more about the people and I have to admit I admire them. Their community and spirituality are beautiful to say the least,” Leigh commented.

“What impressed you the most?” Martin queried.

Thornton showed complete interest in Leigh’s remarks. He was an apt listener.

"I think child rearing impressed me most."

"How is that?" Thornton asked.

"A child in our culture is raised by parents or nannies. It is a singular responsibility," Leigh revealed. "The Shoshone tell me that when the she wolf chosen by the alpha male wolf gives birth to her pups, all the female wolves lactate to feed and care for the pups. The responsibility of raising the pups belongs to the entire pack. So the Shoshone have learned from the wolf. The community raises the children responsibly in shelter, nourishment, and discipline."

"That is most interesting," Thornton stated quietly. "Are their children any different than ours?"

"There is a great deal of difference in the children. I noticed it almost immediately," Leigh remarked. "The Shoshone played quietly with each other. I never heard a cross word, a fight, a cruel word. I never heard a child lord it over another or not share a toy. If a child was disobedient or naughty, the entire camp reprimanded his behavior and spoke to the child on what proper behavior was."

"Completely different from your childhood," Martin said knowingly. Leigh had shared her childhood with Martin. He knew of how cruelly she had been treated in the Lutheran school she had attended by her peers. It sickened him to know how cruel those children had been to her because she was born into a family of poverty.

"Yes, completely different," Leigh replied hiding the pain she relived every time that part of her life was discussed. She didn't want to make the mood somber again. "What have you been up to? I can't leave for a minute without this place falling apart. You haven't been eating and sleeping properly. Don't deny it. You can't hide the truth from your woman!"

"No, I guess I can't." Martin chuckled happily. He had missed Leigh, but it was an experience he didn't want to deny to her. It had given him private time to take care of personal matters. A year was a lifetime and a moment. He would make the best of his last year on life. "I'm hungry now."

Thornton jumped at the chance to help his friend. "I'll go to Wellington's to get a noon meal."

"Don't you have a Fort to attend too?" Martin chided at his over protective friend.

"I left O'Brien in charge. I trust him completely," Thornton laughed. "Except for his Irish blarney."

“Blarney drips around here,” Martin chortled. “Leigh is back. I’ll manage very well now. You can return to your duties.”

“After I get lunch,” Thornton chuckled. “You wouldn’t send a man home hungry would you?”

After the meal the demeanor of the Colonel returned. His face was serious when he announced, “I’ve been ordered to escort a politician for a tour along the railroad line. I’ll be taking him to Fort Bridger and then take a route around Provo. I thought I would take your friend Owen’s invitation and visit Bear River.”

Martin was drinking some more of the herbal tea. “Owen will be happy to see you. I had a letter I was going to post to him. I will give it to you instead.”

“It means I will be gone for at least three months. I won’t return until the fall,” Thornton informed. “I’ve been waiting here for Mr. Donaldson to arrive. My orders didn’t let me know which train he would arrive on. When he comes I will ride with him to Fort Fred Steele. We will then organize a patrol and begin the tour of the land.”

“We’ll miss you,” Martin stated. “Even if you are a Thorn in my side.”

Chapter Thirteen

The next train brought the diplomat from Washington. He had a number of news reporters, servants, his wife, and his eligible daughter. They stayed at the Rawlins Hotel and Leigh was introduced. Melissa was beautiful beyond words. She made Theresa look homely. She was gracious and soft spoken. She didn't seem to be the shrewish, self centered, selfish woman Theresa was.

Leigh did notice the servants avoided Mrs. Donaldson and her daughter as much as possible. *Where there is smoke, there is fire*, her father often said to her. Perhaps there was more to the lovely sophisticated women than met the eye. It did seem to Leigh that the women seemed to put on an act of gentility. How many women had she met that appeared to be ladies of quality that in reality were vicious banshees? The smiles seemed to be pasted on Mrs. Donaldson's and Melissa's faces.

Melissa spent most of her time clinging to Colonel O'Neal's arm.

The flirtatious Melissa set Leigh's teeth to grinding, but she remained quiet and concentrated on her duties as assistant manager. She made extra efforts to keep the diplomatic party comfortable and saw to it that their every desire was met satisfactorily. This including hiring extra women from the town on a temporary basis. Seeing Melissa clinging to Thornton O'Neal she admitted made her envious. In the back of her mind she forced herself to realize that Melissa would be the perfect woman for a young Colonel on the rise in the military. She was well mannered in etiquette and certainly a woman for any man to proud to have holding his arm at a soiree.

Leigh choked back her envy. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but there was a dim hope that Thornton could love a simple plain girl like her, and then there was reality. Melissa was beautiful refined woman that Thornton would be attracted too.

She watched Thornton lead the diplomatic party on their way to Fort Fred Steele. He looked magnificent on his thoroughbred. He definitely looked like the Prince in one of her stories. A tear shed her last daydream.

"Why are you crying?" Martin asked. He had stood behind her and watched the entourage.

“A speck of dust actually,” Leigh lied. She couldn’t let Martin suspect her attraction to Thornton O’Neal. Even though Martin was her dearest friend, he was still a man. She sensed Martin loved her and in her own way, she loved him.

“Come with me to my rooms,” Martin beckoned. He walked slower these past days. Walking became more of a strain. His wheeled chair would be here in a day or two along with other surprises for Leigh. This surprise today would be the first of many.

Leigh walked ahead of Martin and opened the door.

When Martin entered he sat on the divan that faced the fireplace. “Come sit with me, Leigh.”

Quietly Leigh took the seat next to him on the divan.

Martin took her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. “Leigh, I think you know I have feelings for you. You’ve become a light in my darkening world. You know I am ill and I have only a little time left.”

“I know you are ill, but the herbs make you stronger. Perhaps after a time they will heal you,” Leigh protested.

“Leigh, I have blood cancer. There is no cure. I will only become weaker and weaker. Eventually I will be completely bedridden. When that time comes I do not want to be alone. I feel as if you were drawn to me by those powers of the universe. We are two energies that were destined to cross paths. At this time in my life I have every intention of being selfish. Leigh, marry me.”

Leigh couldn’t believe her ears. She had received a proposal of marriage from a wonderful and kind man. When Martin had called her to his rooms she had a horrible fear in the pit of her stomach that he was letting her go from her position and she didn’t know how she would cope. She certainly didn’t want to go to Aunt Ruthie’s ranch. “Martin.”

“Before you say no, I realize I can not be a real husband to you, but I can love you with all that I am. I love you, Leigh Junge. You are everything I dreamed of. You are the beauty in my dreary world. I want this last year of my life to be the happiest and only you can do that for me.”

Leigh sent her widest smile as she squeezed Martin’s hand. “I was about to tell you I would be honored to be Mrs. Martin Chandler. I love you very much. I have never met a kinder or greater gentleman that I would be proud to call husband.”

“Thank you,” Martin whispered and pulled out a ring from his pocket. It was a large emerald cut diamond surrounded by tiny peridot. “A token for our betrothal. You’ve made me a happy man.”

“People will say that I am marrying you for your money,” Leigh warned.

“We know better and that is all that counts,” Martin countered. “Place your head on my shoulder. I want to hold you for a little while.”

Leigh complied. It felt secure and wonderful to be encased in the glow of a love. She was happy. She would enjoy this brief period of being Martin’s wife. *Blood Cancer?* She had watched her sister die from blood cancer. It was a horror she had never forgotten. She would be the best wife she could be for as long as Martin would take a breath.

“I want to marry right away,” Martin whispered in her hair. I want you to be wife and live in my rooms with me. All that I have will be yours including my spirit.”

The reverend was brought to the hotel a day later. Martin Chandler and Leigh Junge exchanged vows. The marriage ceremony was kept private and it took several days before the word got around town that the dying Martin Chandler had married his assistant, Leigh Junge.

Just as Leigh predicted, tongues began to wag that she had married Martin for his money. Why else would an employee seduce her dying employer? Martin’s true friends knew better. Any one that knew Leigh knew better. Martin was right. The only thing that mattered was their happiness. Of course suspicions were high when freight wagon after freight wagon brought in expensive furniture to Martin’s private rooms.

“Why did you buy all these things? When did you buy these things?” Leigh questioned Martin when he rolled his wheeled chair into the parlor when the first set of furniture was delivered.

“I knew about a week after our first conversation I wanted to make you my wife. While you were with Washakie I started ordering these things that a wife of stature should have.”

Leigh’s lips turned upward to a great smile. “You intend to spoil me?”

“Without a doubt, sweetheart,” Martin returned her smile. “Mrs. Chandler should have everything money can buy.”

“But she has more that money can’t buy,” Leigh replied happily. She couldn’t remember ever being this happy and content in her life.

The second group of furniture that arrived was a grand bedroom suite for her room. Martin tossed and turned too much in his sleep for them to sleep together. The illness had also left him debilitated in many functions of the sexual kind. It didn’t matter to either of them. Their love for each other grew every day.

Martin saw to it that every piece of furniture was put in the place he had envisioned.

Leigh walked into her room with a gasp. The large cannon ball mahogany bed had a large light blue satin canopy with matching coverlet and pillow shams. The bed consisted of tightened ropes and two large feather tick mattresses. A large dressing table and armoire matched the cannon ball mahogany bed frames. A blue Turkish rug covered the bedroom floor. On the bed were two silken nightgowns he had ordered from New York. Leigh fingered the soft cloth.

“Do you like them?” Martin asked excitedly. He loved watching Leigh’s face light up with delight at his gifts.

“They are exquisite,” Leigh emphasized rubbing the soft silk against her cheek.

“Put them on for me,” Martin requested.

“Right now?” Leigh teased. They hadn’t eaten dinner yet.

“Right now!” Martin commanded.

Unashamedly Leigh disrobed completely. She laid her clothes and underclothes carefully on the bed and slipped the soft clinging gowns over her body.

Martin stared in awe. “You’re beautiful, Mrs. Chandler. Incredibly beautiful! You are perfectly formed and you look like the vision I had when I purchased them for you.”

“When I’m near you I feel beautiful,” Leigh sighed lovingly.

“Come to me,” Martin requested huskily.

Leigh obeyed.

Martin placed his cheeks upon Leigh’s soft belly. “I’m a fortunate man.”

Neither moved for a long period of time. Leigh gently stroked Martin’s head lovingly. “I am a fortunate woman.”

The days were never long enough to be together. Martin and Leigh shared everyday as if it were their last. The two openly showed

affection for each other. This couple was the envy of many married couples and single hopefuls in the town of Rawlins.

Every day for the several months that followed Martin offered a gift to Leigh during the day. Sometimes it might be a diamond bauble. Another time it would be as simple as a cut rose from the garden they established in the back of the hotel.

It was during these wonderful months Leigh discovered that her husband was wealthier than she could imagine. He was the only child of a wealthy couple from New York and had inherited real estate, several business holdings, and stocks. This didn't include all his vast holdings in the town of Rawlins and properties in the Wyoming territory. She would be a wealthier widow than any of the Rawlins townspeople could imagine. Leigh would have gladly given it all to charity if it could save her husband from his death sentence.

"Maybe if we went back East to a hospital, they might be able to help," Leigh would plead with Martin. "I don't want a penny of your wealth if we could use it to save your life," Leigh sighed in exasperation for the hundredth time. She laid her head on his chest when she sat next to him because he loved that most of all. He could lift his arm to embrace her and kiss her hair.

"We are all destined to die the minute we are born and finish growing. There are different times to die for each of us," Martin would answer.

"But we might postpone it," Leigh argued.

"We have postponed it," Martin countered. "Your love, devotion, and forcing me to drink that awful tea concoction have extended my life. I am grateful for every minute we have together. If I went to a hospital we would be separated. I couldn't bear that. I want you in my arms. I want to hold you and tell you I love you right up to the last minute. I don't want a stranger there when I go. I want to look at you one last time and tell you I love you."

"I will be there," Leigh vowed. "I want to tell you I love you too!" It pained her as she watched Martin grow weaker. He was still losing weight and was only a quarter of the man she first met.

As Martin's health declined, their love and devotion to each other grew.

Leigh had proudly written to her mother that she had married Martin Chandler and was very happy. She invited her to live with them at Martin's request. He was going to fix up his study for her as a bedroom.

The reply cut deeply into Leigh's heart. Her mother scolded her for marrying a desk clerk and her employer. She couldn't possibly leave her Carl and her grandchildren. Ruthie also needed her.

Martin's love conquered her sorrow. "We are our own family and greater love hath no two people. We will fill the void in each other's spirit."

Martin had been right. His love brightened her day each morning and throughout the day until they went to bed at night.

Washakie still came to visit occasionally and Too Many Teeth stayed near the hotel for longer periods of time.

Together Martin and Leigh expanded the hotel and hired more help. It was generally part time employment so the labor hours were short. It allowed more women of the town to earn a little more money for their families.

Leigh continued to write her stories at Martin's encouragement and when she completed one, he sent it to the typesetter at the Rawlins Journal newspaper office he owned. Her story became a leather bound book for others to read. This particular book she wrote and finished in a month Martin requested that two be bound into books. He wanted one buried with him so he could always have his Leigh close to his heart.

In every way Martin encouraged his wife and supported her with his love. Leigh couldn't imagine being any happier. They shared everything except that one day when the train brought a retinue of lawyers from New York.

Chapter Fourteen

The lawyers stayed at the Rawlins hotel and met with Martin for an hour every day behind closed doors.

Upon the exact hour, Leigh would knock and announce her entrance. She would not have her husband tired or over exhausted by any one meeting.

“What are they here for?” Leigh demanded. “We’ve never kept secrets from each other.”

“I’ve got holdings in New York. You know that my love.”

“What does that have to do with anything secret?”

“I’m writing my will,” Martin explained. “There are certain legal matters regarding my estate that have to be taken care of. It is cumbersome and boring. I must concentrate on this and while I do that I must know you are taking care of my Rawlins holdings. Don’t scold me my love.”

“I don’t mean to scold you,” Leigh apologized. “It just is so strange being kept out of all of this.”

“This is the only thing I must keep to myself for all our sakes,” Martin explained. “I hope you understand.”

“I don’t understand, but I will do as you ask and not try to interfere,” Leigh cringed sadly. “I will continue to insist that these meetings never last more than an hour. I don’t want you tire out.”

“Conceded, sweetheart,” Martin chuckled. He took his wife’s hand and kissed it tenderly. “I love you Mrs. Chandler.”

“I love you, Mr. Chandler.”

The travel to Fort Bridger had been very slow and hampered by the constant requests of the Donaldson women. Either the weather was too hot or too cold. They needed something or another. This wasn’t right, this was wrong. One would need a new parasol. The other needed a new shawl. The patrol was constantly stopping in towns for shopping sprees. What started out as two wagons for the ladies comfort had now grown to four wagons and still growing.

Thornton patience was wearing thin. He had heard the women order the servants about to do things any women of grit could have done alone. He didn’t like the way they talked or treated the servants.

It edged on the level of abuse. These women where the epitome of Chloe, beautiful and brainless with their only care being a concern for themselves.

The actual purpose of the patrol for inspection of the rail line and cities was literally cast aside for the complaining spoiled women. The diplomat, Mr. Donaldson didn't seem to mind that he was wasting government money. To him this trip was a lark and an adventure away from the pressures of his job in Washington City.

Thornton breathed a sigh of relief when he turned the inspection tour over to the commanding officer at Fort Bridger.

His men were happier when they left Fort Bridger and headed to Provo on a true military fact finding expedition.

Crossing into Washington Territory, O'Neal inquired about the Woulfe ranch he had been invited to visit. Only a few inquiries were necessary. A Mormon family led the patrol right to the huge mansion.

Thornton couldn't believe the copy of Mount Vernon built in this wilderness. It was surrounded by what appeared to be a small town. He watched in amazement at the people scurrying around to watch the military parade to the Woulfe mansion. He watched as Chinese, Negroes, Mexicans, Indians, Mulattos, and Half-Breeds came out to watch his men march by. He couldn't believe that such a mixture of peoples lived together harmoniously in one community.

The moment he arrived at the Woulfe gate he noted Reilly Woulfe holding her baby daughter walk to greet him.

He dismounted and waited for Mrs. Woulfe to invite him and his men into the grounds.

Reilly called to Large Negro named Jacob and the gates opened.

"Do bring your men in," Reilly greeted warmly. "We've been expecting you. Crooked Creek told us of your arrival two days ago."

"I had a feeling we were being watched," Thornton said politely.

"How could you not feel watched," Reilly teased. "A military patrol is like a Fourth of July parade in Washington City out here."

Thornton remembered Naomi. "Your daughter, will she be frightened by my men?"

"When Crooked Creek told us of your pending arrival, Rory took Colt and Naomi to a nearby Shoshone camp for a holiday. Colt and Naomi know Rory must return to school in the East next month, so

they were anxious to spend time with their big brother. You are safe. You won't terrify my fragile Naomi."

"I really was right sorry about that," Thornton apologized again.

"There is nothing we can do about her nightmares until she grows out of them," Reilly understood. "Don't worry another moment about that. Owen will be here to greet you in a moment or two. There was a small problem at the lumber mill he had to handle. Please come into our home and bring your officers with you. I know the enlisted men won't break military protocol to join you, so extend our welcome for them to use the barns and stables in the back for their billet."

"You are kind and generous, Mrs. Woulfe. We appreciate your understanding and hospitality," Thornton accepted with a short bow.

Thornton stayed at the Woulfe Estate for three days enjoying the company and hospitality of Owen and Reilly Woulfe. Little Owen was a bundle of energy and curiosity that Thornton found he enjoyed being an uncle. He wondered what it would be like to be a father. He thought about Leigh and wondered what kind of mother she would be. Obviously she was an educated woman. His son would love the stories she told. He removed his imagination quickly and returned to the real world of the U.S. Cavalry. He was on a fact-finding mission. He wanted to study everything about the Woulfe Estate and how it worked so harmoniously. He felt he could learn a great deal from Owen Woulfe and did.

"Are you certain you won't come with me to Bear River?" Colonel O'Neal once again asked Owen before he mounted his thoroughbred.

"I've never returned to that land of slaughter and I can't ever return. As it is I still hear the cries of the dying and the wailing of the survivors. It is a haunt for me. You'll find it quick enough. Just follow the pull of sorrow."

Thornton had no idea what his host meant until he neared the site. A gloom overtook him and his soldiers. It was like a curtain dropping around them as they headed their horses to the Bear River beyond its bend to return to Utah Territory. A pulling of emotion drew them in closer to the spot of the massacre. Some of his men started vomiting when they saw broken arms and legs on the skeletons of women. Their heads had been axed as they lay spread eagled for the rapists they endured. One female skeleton lay next to the skeleton of a

fetus. It was obvious her womb had been bayoneted and her fetus removed while she was alive and murdered in front of her. Children and babies' skeletons were scattered all over. Their heads crushed and axed. There were some male skeletons. Most of the bones were of older men. Black earth still spotted the grasses where lodges had been burnt to the ground. It was a place of devastation.

John Bolt rode his dun next to the Colonel. "We need to get out this place of death. The men are getting sick. I ain't seen nothing this bad even in the war. I'm sick!"

Lieutenant O'Brien agreed. "Sir, I can hear the screams and wailing. I swear this place is haunted."

"We should at least try to bury the bones," Colonel O'Neal said calmly. Even he was near vomiting by repulsion.

"Sir, please," John Bolt pleaded. "There is nothing we can do for these souls."

The horses were noticeably nervous. Colonel O'Neal gave the order to ride hard. In moments the patrol left the place of horror. The troop recovered in Soda Springs before they began their return to Fort Fred Steele. The entire patrol needed medical care and rest for that brief moment at the Bear River Massacre site. Every officer and soldier in the patrol vowed never to return to that place of horror and haunting.

The patrol's return to Fort Fred Steele took little time. They were back in the three-month time frame. O'Neal sent his report back to Washington City and rode immediately to check on his good friend in Rawlins. He admitted at last he wanted to see Leigh again. He would court her. She was not at all like Chloe. Martin was right about her. She was not like any other woman he had ever met. Thornton actually felt a bit giddy like a schoolboy again. He shaved closely this morning and dabbed witch hazel on his face. The severe Colonel face had disappeared as he rode his thoroughbred to Rawlins. He was riding to his woman. Little dreams of fantasy played on his mind. Leigh was in his arms looking at him adoringly. She wore a new satin dress he bought for her. By her side were their two children. He had a girl for him and she had a boy for her. They were beautiful children. At night, Leigh would sit by the fire and tell her stories to their offspring. He would be there listening in tentatively holding his baby girl. His mother and father would visit Fort Fred Steele and be so

proud of their intelligent daughter in law. Everything would be just perfect.

“Mrs. Hayes,” Leigh addressed with an arm full of new sheets. “Please help me carry this new bedding to the supply room. We’ll be using these in all the suites from now on.”

“Yes, Mrs. Chandler,” Mary acknowledged and picked up the second armful of new sheets from the delivery in the back room.

Leigh didn’t see a toy that four-year-old Maggie had left on the floor in front of the door. She slipped on the wooden toy and fell on her behind with a thud. The sheets scattered everywhere.

Too Many Teeth was bringing Colonel O’Neal to the back room when they saw Leigh fall.

The look of shock was too much for the two men. They started laughing.

The laughter was contagious.

“I was hoping you would fall for me, Leigh,” Thornton guffawed. “I’d never dream you would do it such a big way.” He walked to her side and offered his hand to help her up.

Mary was horror stricken when Leigh picked up the offending toy and looked at it. It was Maggie’s wooden toy flute. Mary Hayes thought she would lose her employment and as a widow she really needed the steady employment. She loved working for Leigh Chandler because she was allowed to bring Maggie with her. The hotel staff often worked together helping each other take care of their children when certain duties wouldn’t allow a child in tow. The Chandlers were quite lenient in restrictions as long as everyone worked together and no one person took advantage of the policy.

Leigh returned it to Maggie with chuckles. “This is yours I presume?” She accepted Thornton’s hands and glanced up at his eyes. She saw something different there this time. The last look they shared was that of an understanding and bonding of two like spirits. The look in his eyes this time was of love. But how could that be? She brushed it off as purely her imagination and looked away. “Thank you for helping me upright myself, Colonel O’Neal.”

“You are quite welcome, Leigh,” Thornton accepted. “A prince should save the princess from a fire breathing dragon not sheets. That is unless of course you could add this to one of your stories,” he teased.

“I could indeed add this to one of my stories. People need to know that all princesses are not graceful,” Leigh joked as she brushed wrinkles from her skirt and sheet lint from her apron.

“I see the personnel are wearing uniforms,” Thornton commented on her white lace blouse. The uniform was a gray silk skirt, wide black leather belt, and white cotton apron buttoned to the blouse tying in the back at the waist. He had seen several of the town women, Mrs. Hayes, and Leigh wearing an identical outfit.

“Yes, Martin and I agreed with the increase of guests to the hotel it might be a good idea for them to identify the hotel staff,” Leigh explained. “We have the men wearing a similar uniform of white shirts, gray trousers, and black belts. It is more professional and image is everything, isn’t it?”

“My uniform certainly makes an impression,” Thornton agreed laughing. “For good or bad I’m not certain. Where is Martin?”

“He’s in a private conference with attorneys from New York,” Leigh provided. “They are in the private parlor.”

Thornton’s face showed immediate concern. Martin wouldn’t send for his New York attorneys unless he was failing fast or unless there was something very serious going on. “How is Martin doing physically?”

Leigh frowned a little.

Chapter Fourteen

“What is it, Leigh?” Thornton pressured.

“He’s lost more weight. Fortunately he hasn’t lost his appetite and still eats well. He’s weaker of course. Any walking has been too exhausting and he uses a wheeled chair,” Leigh confided. “I only wish there was something I could do more for him. I want to make things better for him.”

“From the new looks of the hotel and the increased business, you are doing just that,” Thornton praised. He slipped his arm around her and hugged her politely. He smelled her rose toilet water. He loved her scent. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her, but that would be improper in public. He wouldn’t embarrass her in any way. He wasn’t going to ask to court her until he spoke to Martin. He wanted her employer’s and his friend’s approval before he took such a bold step. “I want to talk to Martin.”

“They don’t want to be interrupted,” Leigh explained. “However, their hour is almost over.”

“Hour?”

Leigh grinned shyly. “I’m afraid I put an hour limit to the discussions. Doctor Farrah told me that any extensive activity whether physical or mental was too trying for Martin.”

“You are really taking care of Martin,” Thornton admired. “I’m happy for that. Since I’ve learned of his illness I had always hoped someone would be there for him full time.”

“I do my best,” Leigh sighed. “I do care for Martin deeply. I only wish I could do more. He is such a wonderful, kind, and generous man. It seems so wrong that he should suffer this disease at such a young age.”

Thornton wanted to talk to Martin more than ever. It was obvious Martin was fond of Leigh and she was fond of Martin. Of course she would want to stay with Martin to care for him. When Leigh became his wife he wondered how he would manage that loyalty and duty they both felt for Martin.

Thornton helped Leigh pick up the new sheets.

“I am sorry,” Mary excused. “Maggie will be punished. She knows she shouldn’t leave her toys lying about.”

“Mrs. Hayes,” Leigh replied firmly. “You need not punish a child for being one and enjoying a toy. It was my responsibility to watch where I walked. Besides, the only thing hurt was my pride.”

“You won’t terminate my employment?” Mary asked hopefully. “I will be more careful. I promise.”

“Why would I terminate you? Don’t be silly,” Leigh excused. “We’ll put the sheets away and let Colonel O’Neal interrupt Martin’s meeting today.”

Thornton bowed slightly to the women and walked briskly toward Martin’s private suites.

“He’s beautiful,” Mary sighed longingly.

“The Colonel is an attractive man,” Leigh agreed.

“I wish it were me to catch his eye,” Mary stated. “He’s in love with you. Did you know that?”

“Nonsense!”

“Deny it all you want, but I saw it in his eyes. Does he know you’ve married Mr. Chandler?” Mary questioned. “I haven’t seen the Colonel in Rawlins for more than a season.”

“He’s been on special orders and patrol that took him into Washington Territory,” Leigh elucidated. She added her thought, “I don’t know if he does know we married.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t know. The fur will fly when he finds out his best friend is married to the woman he loves,” Mary predicted.

“That is pure nonsense,” Leigh denied. “The Colonel befriended me and is Martin’s best friend. There is no more than that.”

“We’ll just see,” Mary grinned. “We’ll just see about that.” She walked on to the supply room.

Thornton knocked on the door of Martin’s private suites in the hotel.

“It isn’t an hour yet, sweetheart,” Martin responded to the knock assuming it was Leigh. “We have something very important to finish today.”

“Sweetheart?” Thornton mumbled in confusion. He turned the handle of the door. Finding the door was not locked he entered. Thornton sucked in a swallow of air when he saw how much the room had changed in the three and a half months he had been gone. Catching his breath and ignoring the men sitting around the polished mahogany table Thornton bellowed playfully, “Did New York blow up? Or did you just transfer your old home here?” Thornton

remembered how the Chandler house had looked when he visited as a small boy. The O'Neal and Chandler family were neighbors on an exclusive area of New York City.

"Thornton O'Neal," Robert Simms addressed. "It is good to see you again. We were just about to discuss your part in Martin's will. It's a good thing you arrived. You saved my partners a trip to retrieve you."

"Mr. Simms," Thornton returned greetings offering his hand. "I hardly expected to see you and your retinue here in Rawlins. I trust everything with my holdings in New York are satisfactory." Mr. Simms was an older man and the oldest in the firm partnership of Simms, Better, Trane, and Colger. This financial legal firm had been handling the Chandler holdings and his family holdings for as long as he could remember. They were the family financial firm probably since before he was born.

"Couldn't be better," Simms replied. "Let me introduce you to our new junior partners. This is Walter Horne." A small thin man with a clean-shaven face and round spectacles in his mid twenties stood up and bowed. He was followed by introduction with Amos Bowles, a man in his mid twenties. Bowles was rounded in a large girth with a thin mustache and goatee. Charles Barnes was tall, broad shouldered, blonde, and handsome with a trimmed mustache he was in his early twenties.

Thornton would watch Charles as a potential rival in his pursuit of Leigh. She wasn't the most beautiful physically. Such a man as Mr. Barnes would seek after Leigh's spiritual beauty. He would appreciate a woman as Leigh for a wife.

Suddenly Simm's words struck Thornton like a blow from a prizefighter. They were working on Martin's will. He gazed upon his friend and saw how much more weight he had lost. He was now sitting in a wheeled chair and looking so much more fragile.

"What's going on here?" Thornton demanded in his military authoritative tone.

"Sit down, Thorn," Martin ordered motioning his hand to an empty chair. "A lot has happened since you left. There are things you need to know about and they must come from me. I am relieved that you haven't learned the most important yet."

"God Dammit, Martin?" Thornton bellowed. "What the hell is going on?" He was worried sick for his friend. Why was everything

changing so fast? The hotel had been expanded. There were several new buildings in the town and one large one under construction. He knew Martin would have a hand in the changes. He already owned most of Rawlins. He walked into the parlor to see the spare living quarters replaced by luxury.

"First things first. I want the rage and anger gone so I can continue," Martin said quietly.

"I could never get angry with you," Thornton stated firmly.

"You could and will," Martin countered. "Remember when I told you that you loved Leigh and you denied it? Remember when I told you that if you didn't understand your feelings soon enough you could lose her?"

"Of course I remember," Thornton chuckled. "You were right. I do love her. I've come to discuss my courting Leigh with you since you are her employer."

"I am not her employer. I haven't been for sometime now," Martin said too softly.

"Nonsense," Thornton stated. "I just saw her in your new uniforms. Nice touch! Wait a minute, did you give her the hotel?"

"I gave her everything I have in Rawlins," Martin explained. "Including my heart. I married her, Thorn. Leigh is my wife."

The news hit Thornton like an avalanche of rocks. He felt wounded, weak, and couldn't breathe. "What?" Thornton managed to whisper.

"Leigh is Mrs. Chandler," Martin uttered waiting for the enormity to finally reach his dearest lifetime friend.

"You knew I loved her," Thornton choked in anger and surprise.

"I did. I also know I fell in love with her. The difference is I needed her. I needed her now." Martin took a deep breath to finish his thought. "I knew you were in love with Leigh the moment you brought her to my hotel for assistance and protection. I also knew you were too damn stubborn and stupid to admit it for that affair with Chloe. A woman like that isn't fit enough to lick dirt from Leigh's shoes. As the days went on I realized that I had fallen in love with Leigh. I fell in love with her kindness, love for people, intelligence, caring, sharing, and just about everything that is good in a person. Washakie saw it immediately. A lot of people in Rawlins saw it. You were too blinded by your experience with Chloe. I knew we would both lose Leigh when Rawlins men started coming regularly to the hotel to visit with

Leigh. A woman like Leigh would be courted and married. I couldn't afford to lose her.

I needed her. I only have a short time left. This has forced me to be extremely selfish. I don't want to die alone. I don't want a stranger to care for me in those last months. I love Leigh with my entire being. I want to die in her arms. Yes, my friend. I am that selfish."

Thornton's anger faded into emotions of regret and sorrow. The impact of realizing his friend would soon die choked up his throat. He lost control of separation when his eyes flooded and tears streamed down his cheeks.

"You need her too," Martin smiled. "You need her as much as I do, but I selfishly took her first."

"Are you certain she isn't just after your money?" Thornton pushed out of his throat in emotional defense. If she were just after Martin's money it would be an easier pill to swallow.

"You are a fool to think it," Martin replied bitterly. "Losing Leigh temporarily to me isn't an easy thing, but I will make you face it. I won't let you create a falsehood about Leigh to heal your pride."

"If I may interject," Simms said clearing his throat. "When we received a wire from Martin regarding his marriage to Leigh I immediately set into action our investigation with the Pinkerton agency. We have monitored everything about Mrs. Chandler including her bank account, friends, and even past history."

Thornton straightened his back and listened with interest. "And?"

"Mrs. Chandler takes only a small wage for her employment as Manager of Accounts for the Rawlins Chandler Enterprise. With this money she purchases her own toiletries, clothes, fabrics, undergarments, shoes, etc. She often takes her own money to purchase shoes for children that normally would be barefoot since their family cannot afford to buy them. When a family is in need she donates food, clothing, and shelter paid from her account and never has touched a dime of the Rawlins Chandler Accounts. She refers to it as the Washakie Welfare Community. I believe she jokes about her time with Chief Washakie. She learned that the Shoshone have a welfare system, so should Rawlins. It is better than becoming a fifth wife."

Martin smiled at the revelation of Leigh from Mr. Simms. His attorney had kept this knowledge from any of their conversations. He was defending Leigh.

“Mrs. Chandler has organized the town and its officials to open a library next to the schoolhouse. She is funding the purchase of books and maintenance of the library by taking 1% of the hotel net profit. She has also managed to get the other Rawlins business men to match her funds,” Simms continued. “Mrs. Chandler has worked with our firm to open the Chandler mansion as a dormitory for the New York School of nursing. She has opened our firm’s pocketbooks as to help fund the new hospital being built on the outskirts of Rawlins. Chandler Hospital. Doctor Farrah will be the chief of staff and the other two doctors in Rawlins will work on the staff. Mrs. Chandler is working with our firm to acquire the newest and finest surgical and diagnostic tools from Germany and Switzerland. We will be outfitting the hospital with the newest equipment and furniture. We are offering scholarship funding and grants to any women offering to come to Rawlins as a nurse in the new hospital.”

Simms took a deep breath. “Does this sound like a woman after a man’s money? If you believe she is, you are a fool and I shall recommend that Martin forget his last wish in his will.”

Thornton felt like an idiot. He felt like he had been properly slapped down until he was the size of a tadpole. Martin had been right again. He was protecting his pride by trying to make Leigh look like a fortune hunter. He knew better instinctively. “Shall I bare my back for a proper lashing?”

Chapter Fifteen

Leigh looked at the clock to check the time. Their hour was over in a few minutes. She heard loud voices coming from the private parlor. Doctor Farrah had told her that the best medicine for Martin was to keep him calm and never upset him. Loud voices would upset him. She would do everything in her power to give him every extra minute with her she could. Never in her life had she been so content. Martin made her feel special and loved. That was all she needed in life and wanted to prolong this good feeling as long as she could. Her steps quickened as she walked toward the door.

Leigh rapped on the door. This time she did not call out the time. Instead she found the door was open and entered. Her eyes went directly to Martin.

“Yes, sweetheart?” Martin queried adoringly.

“The hour is up. Are you all right? I heard loud voices.” Leigh walked directly to Martin and kneeled in front of his wheeled chair. She took his hand and placed his palm on her cheek. “Doctor Farrah told me never to let you get excited or upset.”

Thornton’s heart sank. He would have given anything if he could have changed his stubborn mind sooner. How he would love to have woman like Leigh show the same affection for him. This was the woman of his dreams. Leigh was the woman he wanted for his own. She was his best friend’s wife.

“I’m afraid we did get a little loud. It wasn’t excitement or upset. It was merely forceful words,” Martin lied. “Unfortunately we do have to continue beyond the hour this time, but then it is complete.”

“No!” Leigh said rising and putting her foot down. “It is not good to exert yourself. Doctor Farrah told us that.”

“Sweetheart, this is the last. Let us complete it and I promise I will nap after it,” Martin requested taking his wife’s hand in his and brushing his lips across her knuckles.

“You promise me?” Leigh questioned skeptically.

“I do.”

Leigh lovingly ran her fingers through Martin’s thinning hair. “Very well. I will see to it that you nap before dinner.” She glanced at the men in the room. The lawyers were stoic and their expressions had not changed or revealed anything to her. She glanced at Thornton and saw something in his eyes. It wasn’t anger, joy, sorrow, or happiness.

It felt like longing. She didn't try to understand the look. Leigh left the room and closed the door. She went about her regular work, but kept a close eye on the door. When the committee came out she would help Martin to bed.

Martin took a drink of whiskey from Mr. Simms. The Doctor had suggested he sip some occasionally when he was weak and need fortification.

Thornton looked at Simms. "You said you checked Leigh's background. What did you find?"

"We found nothing. We found absolutely nothing. Leigh came from a down and out family. She has struggled for everything from shelter, food, and clothing to her own education," Simms enlightened.

Thornton then turned his attention to Martin when his friend placed the whiskey glass back on the table. "What is the last wish Mr. Simms spoke of?"

Martin grinned to his friend. "As part of my will there is an addendum to you. It is my wish that you marry Leigh within ninety days of my final departure."

Thornton's mouth dropped open. "I don't understand and people would be cruel. Widows wait a year by propriety."

"I don't care what is proper," Martin replied calmly. "Understand my friend, that Leigh and I cannot consummate our marriage. I am returning to you the woman that should have been your wife. The woman is still pure as the driven snow. When I am gone Leigh inherits all the Rawlins holdings she now manages. I want her protected from fortune hunters that would hurt her financially or mentally. I want her protected. I know that Leigh should have been your wife. Marry her and protect her. It is my final wish. Can you deny me this?"

"You know I will not deny you anything you ask of me," Thornton responded. "What of your holdings in New York? I thought I heard you say that Leigh was to inherit all your Rawlins holdings."

"My New York holdings will be held in trust until the time your children are of legal age. At that time all of your children will receive an equal portion of the New York estates and holdings," Martin explained.

"Children?" Thornton gasped. "Our children?"

"I have no doubt you and Leigh will have many," Martin chuckled. "I hope you name one of them after me."

Thornton sat back against the chair and gathered his thoughts. He was always logical and everything in life was a military campaign. In his mind he wanted a wife and children. He wanted Leigh as his wife. It was like a conqueror of long ago. There would be a king. The king wanted a queen. The king and queen would have princes and princesses. They would rule their land with love. The kingdom would grow and it was conquered with that love. Just how would he go about doing this? This would be the most important campaign in his life. It was obvious by Leigh's show of affection to Martin that his friend knew the battleground better than anyone. A good commander uses all pertinent information and takes advantage of any officer that has a personal knowledge of the lay of the land. "What if Leigh won't marry me?"

Martin allowed the side of his lips to curl into a grin. Thornton was his friend too long for him not to understand what the commander in him was doing. They had fought side by side in too many battles for him not to know what Thornton was about. "If Leigh will not marry you, she keeps the Rawlins holdings and the New York holdings will go into a private corporation that will continue to supplement the nursing school."

"Reasonable," Thornton stated coolly.

"I doubt that will happen," Martin scoffed. "The two of you love each other. It is only a small matter of time that Leigh will understand her feelings just as you have just discovered."

"Leigh is obviously devoted to you," Thornton observed.

"Yes. Leigh loves me in a special way as I love her," Martin agreed readily. "Gentlemen, would you excuse Thorn and I. We have a bit of private conversation to complete."

"The minute they leave this room Leigh will be yanking you off to a nap," Thornton teased.

"Mr. Simms, please tell Mrs. Chandler that just a little more time is needed and I shall obediently take my needed rest," Martin requested. "Thorn, as soon as they walk out the door, bolt it."

Thornton rose to walk behind the legal retinue. He bolted the door and returned to his seat with a grin on his face. "Leigh bullies you a bit."

"In the nicest sort of way," Martin chuckled. "If that woman's will were power you'd never have a chance to marry her. She has devoted herself to this sick man and works her fingers to the bone to give me one more minute of life. She's taken over everything in

Rawlins so I don't have a worry. At night we talk about her stories, our lives, our beliefs, our hopes, and our destiny."

"You've never been happier," Thornton realized.

"I have never been happier. Let me tell you this, Thorn, it is the only way to go. We all must die and it is less frightening to know you will die in the arms of your love. Remember that!" Martin emphasized.

"Tell me what can I do if she clings to her devotion to you?" Thornton asked bluntly.

"That's what I've always liked about you, Thorn. You have always been to the point," Martin replied. "That's why I gave her three full months to mourn. If not for our special love I would have asked you to marry her immediately."

"Then you do understand this could be an obstacle," Thornton stated.

"I do. I suggest you start wooing my wife now. It must be in a subtle way. She loves you as much as she loves me in our special way, but she is proper. My wife would find it difficult to break her own strong morality. Marriage to her is one of the strongest."

"How do I woo her?" Thornton mimicked. "You have the greatest experience and knowledge in that department."

"You have to let her know you care about her. Really care about her, her interests, and her passions. You must be there for her. You must let her love and care for you as much as you love and care for her," Martin instructed. "Leigh is a strong woman and carries a large load, but she needs to be weak sometimes. Every now and then she needs for someone to be strong."

They heard the doorknob rattling.

"Martin? Martin?"

"I believe I know how to start," Thornton acknowledged. "I can't thank you enough, my friend. You realized before I did how much I need Leigh. You have sheltered and protected her. In the end you return even more in perfection. I will keep your last wish. It is my promise and my pleasure."

"Thank you," Martin smiled. "I will have a happier end knowing that the two people I love most dearly will have each other in love."

This time the door rattled forcibly.

"Martin? Darling, you need your rest. You promised!"

"I'd better open that door before she breaks it down and skins me alive," Thornton joked. He rose and released the bolt.

Leigh brushed past Thornton almost pushing the door in his face. "Martin?" She looked to her husband. He didn't look worn or tired. He looked a bit healthier with a look of content.

Martin took her outstretched hand. "I will keep my promise. I will nap. Everything is as it should be."

Leigh turned to look at Thornton. "Colonel O'Neal, would you excuse us. I'll assist my husband to bed."

Thornton nodded and walked out to the lobby. He would sign in for a room. This time he would not sleep in the extra bedroom of Martin's private suite. It would be improper to intrude in the privacy of a man and his wife. He chuckled to himself. Besides if he saw Leigh in her nightdress the temptation might be too great to start seducing her. She had to be courted first. Wasn't this a strange turn of events. He had come to Rawlins to court her. He found out she was married to his best friend. His best friend and her husband wanted him to court and marry her after his death. He wants him to begin the campaign already. This was a strange turn of events indeed. The result would be the same. He would make Leigh Junge Chandler his wife.

Walking to his horse for his saddlebag and bedroll he ran into Too Many Teeth.

"I will take your pony to the livery. Your pony is good pony. I have watched you ride," Too Many Teeth volunteered.

"Comet is good horseflesh," Thornton agreed. "How have you been?"

"I have been good. I heard that you went to the place of sadness along the Bear River," Too Many Teeth said casually as he stroked Comet's nose.

Thornton was stunned. The communication with the Shoshone camps was better than a telegraph or scouts the army employed.

"We did cross the place of sadness," Thornton validated. "It made my men ill. We had to take several days to recover from the mind sickness. The sadness haunted my men. We will never cross that land again." Thornton removed his saddlebags and slung them over his shoulder. For some reason he felt he had to exonerate his nation, people, and army from that horror he could see in his mind's eye. "It was the militia, not the cavalry."

Too Many Teeth smiled broadly. “There are good and there are bad. We of the Shoshone know this.”

Thornton felt better for saying it and he felt even better for Too Many Teeth understanding the situation. If the last question surprised him, the next question left him thunderstruck.

“You make Martin’s woman your woman when he die?” Too Many Teeth asked taking Comet’s reins.

Thornton was frozen in his tracks. “What?” he managed to choke out.

“Chief Washakie want to know if you will take Martin’s woman to be your woman when he die,” Too Many Teeth stated irritably. He hated having to repeat anything he said. “Washakie like Leigh. He wants her to be happy. Washakie said she loves you and you would keep her happy.”

“Tell Chief Washakie that it is my intention to protect, love, and keep Leigh happy,” Thornton responded. He remembered Leigh telling him about the way of the Shoshone and how it was important to take care of the widows and orphans.

“I will tell my chief,” Too Many Teeth declared leading Comet to the livery.

Thornton shook his head. Was there anything that Chief Washakie didn’t know? Was there any truth to the rumor that Washakie was truly magical?

Chapter Sixteen

Thornton had barely stepped into his room and removed his military jacket when Too Many Teeth knocked on his door.

“Thorn! Thorn, open the door. Washakie sends a message,” Too Many Teeth said speaking to the door.

Thornton walked quickly to the door and let Too Many Teeth into the room. Four more than three years he waited to be important enough for Washakie to send for him or send him a message. “Come in.”

“Nice room,” Too Many Teeth commented looking about. His broad smiles showing his bright white teeth.

“Washakie wants to see me?” Thornton asked anxiously. He had waited three years to be summoned to the camp. Was it his visit to Bear River?

“Washakie sent his two sons, Dick and Charlie to take you and Wolfrunner to The Three Circle.” Too Many Teeth announced. “I will go with you.”

“Who is Wolfrunner and why would we all go to The Three Circle Ranch?” Thornton asked irritably. His hopes were dashed when Too Many Teeth gave the message and it wasn’t about Washakie meeting with him.

“Wolfrunner is adopted daughter of Washakie. She is Leigh, who is now known as Mrs. Chandler,” Too Many Teeth explained. He was still smiling and looking around the room. “Hurry, get ready. Dick and Charlie are waiting at the livery. They bring supply for the trip.”

Thornton was losing his patience. “Why are we taking this trip?” The nerve of Washakie to send his sons and Too Many Teeth and ordering him to leave his post and go on a lark.

“Wolf runner’s mother is sick. Soon she will walk the Ghost Path. A rider comes from The Three Circle to get Leigh. Washakie says Mr. Chandler to sick to take Leigh to her mother. Washakie says you must take her and protect her. You are strong and healthy. Washakie will not trust her with any other white man and the white people will not trust his sons. I am sent to get Doctor Farrah. Everything is ready. When you go to Mr. Chandler’s room the rider will come. Go! Hurry!”

“How do you know all these things?” Thornton asked in amazement.

“Washakie is guided by great spirit. He is the leader and must know everything that happens to his people,” Too Many Teeth said simply as if that was the only answer. “Go! Hurry! I will get Doctor Farrah.”

Thornton grabbed his coat and buttoned it quickly as he walked down the staircase to the private rooms. A range rider from The Three Circle Ranch was already pounding on the door.

Leigh was angry. Martin was sleeping and she had just started to nap with her head on the divan holding Martin’s hand.

Martin and Leigh had woken up with a start from the pounding and calling din at the door.

“What is it?” Leigh snapped at the stranger when she opened the door. “These are the private rooms.” She watched Colonel O’Neal slip behind the rider. “Do you know this man Colonel?”

Thornton replied, “No I don’t. I’ve been told this is a rider from The Three Circle Ranch sent to give you an important message. You’d better let us in.”

Leigh opened the door and waved her hand indicating entry.

Thornton took her elbow and led her to the plush chair next to the divan where Martin was still lying on. “You’d better sit down.”

A sinking feeling started in the pit of Leigh’s stomach by the tone of Colonel O’Neal’s voice. “Something is wrong.” She took the offered seat.

Martin was pulling himself to an upright position. He looked at Thornton and the tension that showed in his eyes. Something was wrong indeed. He turned to the rider. He recognized him as one of Ruth “What is it Max? Did Ruthie send you?”

“Yes sir,” Max Steiner replied. He took off his hat and spun it in his hands nervously. “Ms. Ruth sent me to tell Ms. Leigh that her mother is really sick. They don’t expect her to live more than a day or two. Ms. Ruth thought you might want to come up to the ranch.”

It was horrible to lose her father. At least he had been sick for some time. Now suddenly she would lose her mother? Her mother was healthy. What on earth had happened? She couldn’t breath. Leigh was making small choking sounds.

“Leigh!” Martin called out. “Thorn, she’s not breathing. She’s in shock!”

Thornton picked Leigh up by her arms and shook her gently. "Leigh! Leigh!"

Leigh gasped for air. "What's wrong with my mother?"

Max responded, "Your brother calls it the family malady. It's the same thing all the women folk in your family die from. No one knows what it is, it just happens."

Memories flooded Leigh. She remembered her Aunt Ella, her Grandmother, and her Aunt Louise. They had sick pains in their stomachs, lesions on their feet or legs, and they had a pale yellow pallor to their skin. "No....." Panic flooded Leigh like a dam bursting.

Thornton held onto her. He felt her trembling. He felt her panic and pain. If he could do anything to make things right for her, he would.

Leigh collapsed into Thornton's arms. Her legs felt like jelly. She couldn't stand on them if she tried. Leigh was always strong, but this news was too much. She wanted to be weak just once. She wanted someone to be strong for her. That someone was Thornton. He was there for her. He was holding her, soothing her, and comforting her.

"It will be just fine. I promise," Thornton soothed. "We're getting Doctor Farrah right now. I'm coming along with you. We'll leave right away. All you have to do is pack some things and change." Thornton picked up her chin with his thumb and forefinger. "It will be all right." He kissed her forehead.

Choking back her tears she remained in Thornton's strong arms. "Martin. Who will take care of Martin?"

"Who helps you the most here at the hotel?" Thornton whispered into her hair. He smelled the roses. He inhaled the scent. It intoxicated him. He loved this woman.

"Mary, Mary Hayes," Leigh replied quietly. In the warmth and strength of Thornton's arms she found she was regaining her strength and power. Her mind began to whirl and take control of her body. There were things that needed to be done.

"I'll find her. Then I'll talk to her and explain the situation," Thornton promised. "You get your bag packed. You'll be back with Martin in no time at all."

Thornton released Leigh with regret. He wanted to hold on to this moment. He felt wanted and needed by the woman he loved. He gave her strength. He knew that when she stopped trembling. He

knew that when he looked in her eyes. Her eyes still showed the pain, but the fear had left them. A deep feeling of euphoria churned inside. She needed him and he needed her to need him. His desire to protect his storyteller grew stronger in this minute. This desire would grow. He kissed her forehead and left to find Mary Hayes.

Leigh turned to Martin. "I'll get a small bag together. I must go."

"Yes you must. There are only two people I would trust with my most precious Leigh. I would trust Washakie and Thorn. Don't worry for me. I can still do things on my own. I must confess I like you doing things for me, so I don't do them on my own. I love you fussing and fretting over me. I'm selfish, sweetheart."

"I love fussing and fretting over you. I won't be gone too long. Colonel O'Neal is going to ask Mrs. Hayes to help you with some things."

"Go on, get packed. You will need to leave right away," Martin urged. He would miss her every minute, but he wouldn't let Leigh know that. He couldn't help but add, "The sooner you leave, and the sooner you will be back."

Leigh was in Martin's arms instantly. "I'll be back before you know I'm gone."

"Highly unlikely!" Martin teased. "Bring your mother back here. We can take better care of her in Rawlins. Maybe there is something we can do about this family malady."

"You wouldn't mind?" Leigh asked hopefully. Since her mother was ill she might consider Leigh's request to come and stay here in Rawlins. She would be more comfortable here and wouldn't have to work as Carl's servant anymore. She wouldn't have to work at all."

Martin didn't answer. He gave Leigh a large smile. He kissed Leigh on her lips gently and lovingly. "I adore the woman that bore you."

Leigh leaned for a moment on Martin's chest. She heard his steady heartbeat. It would be hard to leave this haven, this serene happy place Martin had built around her. The thought of seeing Carl again made her recoil, but Colonel O'Neal was going with them. Surely Carl would be more careful and gentle around a man that was smarter and stronger than he was. Her thoughts turned to her mother. She rose from Martin's haven and walked to her room.

♣The Outsider♣

Leigh packed a proper dress to wear when she arrived at the ranch. She packed clean undergarments with silk stockings and a pair of soft kid shoes. Leigh remembered her mirror, brush, and a few toiletries. Once the valise was closed she removed her clothes and put them neatly on a chair in her room. Mary would see to it that they would be washed and put in the armoire. She pulled on a pair of woolen socks. She wiggled her toes in the warmth. Next, Leigh removed the duck pants from the bureau and put them on. She took a soft pink silk shirt blouse from the bureau, put it on, buttoned it, and tucked the shirt tails into the duck pants.

“Thank you, Washakie, for teaching me how to ride. Thank you, Martin for teaching me the comfort of the male attire when traveling,” Leigh said aloud to no one.

Chapter Seventeen

Thornton had gone to the Telegraph Office and wired his command. He had to tell them he was taking a few days leave to take care of a personal problem and would be back soon. He had already spoken to Mary Hayes about Martin Chandler's care.

Mary was more than happy to volunteer to help Mr. Chandler. She openly praised Mr. and Mrs. Chandler. They had been kind and wonderful to her and her daughter. She beamed when Thornton had told her that Mrs. Chandler requested her personally over all the other employees.

Thornton noted Washakie's sons waiting with the horses by the livery. Too Many Teeth was already sitting on his pony and holding the reins of a packhorse. The only thing left was to gather Leigh and head out. It would be a long day's ride. Because they were leaving in the early afternoon they would camp one night. The Three Circle Ranch was on the south side of Sweetwater River right on Washakie's hunting grounds near Green River.

Jacob and Ruth had been good neighbors of the Shoshone. Washakie allowed them to stay because they cultivated only a small portion of land. They kept beef cattle for slaughter and to sell in Laramie. Jacob and Ruth would give Washakie ten head a year as payment for use of the land. Ruth also kept a few milk cows. The Shoshone had milk intolerance but enjoyed the creamy butter for cooking. The ranch had chickens for meat and eggs, pigs for pork and bacon, and had a stable of horses. It was a wealthy farm for the area.

Leigh was coming out of the hotel with her valise in hand when Thornton's foot hit the wooden plank walk.

Thornton took one look at Leigh and sucked in his breath. He felt like someone had punched him in the abdomen and blew out all his wind. He couldn't believe a woman could look that incredibly sexy in male attire.

The duck pants were snug showing every delectable curve of her calves, thighs, and hips. Her waist was tiny but proportioned to her body. The duck pants were held on her waist by a black belt. Black leather boots with a small heel showed from beneath the cuffed duck pants. Leigh's breasts formed perfectly rounded mounds under her silken white blouse. A black felt hat sat squarely on her head tied

on her chin with a cord. Her silver eyes were in bright contrast to the dark hat. In one hand Leigh held a small valise and in the other hand she held a folded woolen coat.

“Are we ready?” Leigh asked Thornton the moment she saw him on the plank walk. “Is Doctor Farrah ready?”

With great effort Thornton found his voice. He hoped it didn’t sound like a squeak. “He’s coming right now.” Thornton pointed to the figure riding a solid black mustang with a white blaze.

“Let’s get going. I don’t want to leave Martin alone too long,” Leigh emphasized. She fought the fluttering feelings she felt when she looked at Thornton. He was too handsome by far in his military uniform. He was the figure of Adonis she thought. She put those thoughts aside and focused on her mother. She would make her mother come to live in Rawlins with her. Martin had changed her life. She could offer her mother a comfortable home. She could offer her mother a happy home. There would no longer be a need for her mother to work and earn a keep. More importantly her mother could see her son and grandchildren occasionally without having to be humiliated, harangued, or verbally abused. She would no longer have to be a servant to her own son.

Thornton took Leigh’s coat and valise in one hand and her elbow in the other. They walked briskly to the livery. Focusing on the street Thornton found relief from staring at the vision Leigh presented. The last thing he needed was to take his hat off and cover a large hardness in the center of his trousers.

A few women from Rawlins were about shopping and walking the boardwalks. Mrs. Thatcher was the church society matron and had disliked Leigh from the minute she heard this presumptuous tart was working for the Mr. Martin Chandler. It rankled her that Leigh didn’t attend church and didn’t cow tow to her as the Rawlins church society queen. When Mrs. Thatcher heard of Leigh’s marriage to Martin Chandler she was livid. It had been in the back of her mind to bring Martin to her church when the end was near. She hoped she get control of his holdings in the name of the church. That little strumpet had ruined her plans. There wasn’t a day that Claudia Thatcher didn’t slip little derogatory remarks about Leigh Chandler to her little cluster of church society ladies.

Claudia was ecstatic when she spotted Leigh in the male clothing. This outlandish and unacceptable behavior for a proper lady

would be wonderful gossip for her society. She could bring Leigh down a notch or two more in the eyes of the Rawlins townspeople.

If only Claudia could prove that Leigh had spent time in an Indian camp as a squaw. No proper woman would allow herself to be even near the presence of an Indian.

She stopped to watch as the handsome Colonel escorted Leigh toward the livery. Oh how her own heart went pity pat when she looked at the handsome Colonel O'Neal. She was determined her own daughter, Alice would marry the Colonel. Alice was almost seventeen. She was the proper age to be courted. She would be the queen bee of Rawlins and the church society when her daughter married Colonel O'Neal.

Claudia thought about following them to the livery out of curiosity, but decided against it. She had enough gossip for one day to smear the name of that little no body from the wrong side of the tracks.

It was fortunate for Leigh that Claudia decided to continue on her shopping errand. The woman would have plenty to talk about if she had learned a woman was riding out alone five men, a doctor, Colonel, and three Shoshone warriors.

Thornton assisted Leigh to mount her Appaloosa pony. He was surprised to see how well she set the saddle and how she softly spoke to the pony while stroking the horse's neck.

"We'll have a long ride together, Buttermilk."

Thornton mounted his thoroughbred, Comet. Dick and Charlie mounted the moment Leigh sat Buttermilk. Doctor Farrah reined his horse in.

"Are we ready? Too Many Teeth tells me there is a very sick lady at The Three Circle," Doctor Farrah stated.

"It's my mother," Leigh replied sadly. "She's very sick."

"We will go now," Dick ordered.

The three Shoshone led the way out of town through the back alleys.

Once in the open range they allowed the horses to go to a full gallop. They kept up the pace for two hours and slowed the horses to a fast walk so they could rest.

Thornton was grateful to be astride. He couldn't keep his eyes off Leigh. Those duck pants fit snugly as she rode. He felt a hardening in his private parts that didn't go away. The lust he felt for Leigh couldn't be controlled. He hadn't been this out of control since he was a kid and just started getting the feelings of a man. No one

would see his embarrassment until they stopped. Hopefully the hurting would ease and go away by then. He would concentrate on some military strategy. He would try not to look at Leigh.

Dick and Charlie disappeared for a time. Their ponies were from the wild-bred mustangs and had more stamina than the barn bred mustang the doctor owned and the Colonel's thoroughbred. Leigh's Buttermilk was a wild-bred mustang like the other Shoshone ponies, but knew to stay close to the other horses. Buttermilk hadn't broken a sweat.

It was dusk when Dick and Charlie hailed the travelers from atop a large boulder.

Colonel O'Neal reined Comet in and led the group to the site Dick and Charlie led them.

Leigh looked about before Thornton helped her down from her horse. There was a lot of brush around the entrance to a small cave. She noticed a small fire had already been started in the cave.

Dick, Charlie, and Too Many Teeth's horses were already tethered under an overhang of rocks. Doctor Farrah took his horse to the same spot and dismounted. Charlie took Leigh's and Thornton's horses to the tether.

Thornton led Leigh to the cave. It was already set up and comfortable with a rabbit cooking and furs on the ground to sit upon.

Leigh sat next to the fire and turned the rabbit on the spit. "Washakie told me his two sons were used to the good life. This is luxurious, Dick. You are a great chef, Charlie."

"This is your work now," Charlie snorted. He gave Leigh a large smile. He was happy that she honored him with a compliment. He looked to his half brother, Dick.

"Father should have called you woman with running mouth," Dick teased. He was also happy to be complimented.

Thornton was surprised by the comfort and shelter of the cave. Smoke on the cave ceiling told Thornton this cave had been used several times before. He was also surprised at how comfortable Leigh was in the cave with the Shoshone warriors. She had absolutely no prudish ways. Leigh never whined or complained as the other woman he had escorted. It was if she took everything as it came with interest not fear. He had been amazed at how well she handled Buttermilk. She rode like the Shoshone. She was one with the horse. He caught himself in the middle of his thoughts. He was falling deeply in love

with Leigh. The more he was with her, the more he knew he loved her.

“It will storm soon,” Charlie stated casually.

A thunderclap reinforced the prediction.

A heavy rain sloshed against the front of the cave. Soon the rain was torrential. It was thundering and lightening with force. Bolts of light shook the earth. One landed nearby and the horses whinnied in disapproval even though they had been sheltered from the storm.

The thunderclap shook Leigh from her resolve not to show her fear of the lightening. She jumped and began to tremble.

Automatically Thornton moved next to her and folded her in his arms.

Another bolt slammed the ground nearby.

Leigh buried her face into Thornton’s shirt.

“It’s all right. I’ve got you,” Thornton whispered into Leigh’s hair. He smelled the roses. He went hard immediately. He was glad he was sitting. Leigh felt so right in his arms.

“I’m such a coward during storms,” Leigh spoke quietly into Thornton’s shirt. “I used to crawl up on my father’s lap when storms came.”

“I’m here now,” Thornton reassured. His hand stroked Leigh’s back soothingly.

“Should call her Afraid of Thunder,” Charlie taunted speaking to his half brother.

“We’re all afraid of something,” Doctor Farrah interceded. He wasn’t aware that Charlie and Dick were teasing Leigh. He didn’t know this was affection for which they considered their adopted sister.

“We know this,” Too Many Teeth added. “Dick run like baby when he see spiders. Charlie shakes like leaf when he sees little ants come to share his food.”

“And you run like the wind when you see snake,” Charlie shot back.

“What are you afraid of Doctor?” Dick asked.

“I’m afraid of rats. Slithering nasty infection carrying beasts,” Doctor Farrah responded shivering in disgust.

“What about you?” Charlie asked Thornton. “I think thunder scares me. I expect to hear more cannon, gunfire, and smell death.”

“You fought in the war,” Doctor Farrah stated knowingly. “You and Chandler.”

“We went to West Point together. We served in the regulars when the war broke out. We were Federal. We grew up together, went to school together, and fought together. Martin saved my life.”

Leigh looked up from Thornton’s arms when he said her husband had saved his life.

Thornton looked down to those silver gems staring up at him. He knew her question before she asked. “I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

This broke the special moment. Leigh pulled from his arms and concentrated on turning the rabbit on the spit. She also stirred the stew of jerky, wild potatoes, and greens Charlie had started.

Dick pulled out wooden bowls from a par fleche he brought in.

Leigh removed the rabbit from the spit laying it upon a large leaf on the floor of the cave. Too Many Teeth handed her his knife and several dry leaves he had selected from the cave floor earlier.

The group ate a hearty hot meal. There was enough for everyone to feel satiated.

One by one everyone in the cave relieved themselves in the bushes after the storm. Night had fallen and only the dim light of the stars offered a view of the path to the shrubbery.

Too Many Teeth made a big din with a stick when he left the cave. He wasn’t about to run across any rattlesnakes. Snakes were creatures of the night. A rattlesnake had bitten him when he was a child. The fright was bad enough to step on a coiled snake, but the snake had just killed and eaten a field mouse. There was no venom in the sacs of his fangs. He remembered the pain of being cut by his father thinking to draw out the poison. The cut became infected. He was in great pain until they finally arrived at the camp and his mother cleaned the wound, stitched it, and put healing herbs on it.

Leigh was certain that the noise Too Many Teeth had made with the stick would have scared every reptile, snake, and insect within a mile. She walked confidently out to the shrubs to relieve herself.

Thornton was the first outside. He took the time to spread out the bedrolls for everyone including the three Shoshone.

Dick, Charlie, and Too Many Teeth were surprised and pleased by his action. Perhaps the Colonel was beginning to soften from his hardened pride. Soon Washakie would accept the Colonel. Leigh was a good influence on the army man.

He placed his bedroll near Leigh’s.

Leigh was tired. The ride was tiring, but the emotional strain and worry for her mother made her more so. "Thank you," Leigh appreciated and crawled between the warm blankets. She was asleep almost as soon as she lay her head down.

Thornton lay on his bedroll watching Leigh sleeping. Her lips puckered in silent communication. She looked so young as she slept. In his eyes she was the most beautiful woman he had ever met and she was married to his best friend.

Thornton forced his eyes to close and get some sleep. It wouldn't do anyone any good to keep thinking about Leigh and their future. The future happiness he knew they would share when his best friend would die. What price was placed on his happiness? Would he be able to win Leigh's heart? All these thoughts pressed heavily on his mind as he finally drifted off to sleep.

Leigh woke to the aroma of hot coffee and mush cakes frying on the fire. It smelled delicious. She was happy Washakie had sent Charlie. This warrior loved cooking and loved showing off his skills.

Thornton woke to a painful erection. Somewhere in his dreams he and Leigh were embraced in lovemaking.

Too Many Teeth observed the Colonel's dilemma. He cackled like a hen, "There is cold creek water to wash on the other side of cave."

Thornton nodded gratefully. He rose with his blanket to use for a towel and walked briskly out of the cave. He found the stream, stripped in minutes and dived into the cool water.

Chapter Eighteen

The troupe arrived at The Circle Three mid afternoon.

Buttermilk hadn't stopped when Leigh leaped from her back and ran toward the house.

Aunt Ruth was at the door and opened her arms in welcome.

"Where's mother?" Leigh questioned breathlessly. They had ridden hard when they saw the ranch house in the distance. Leigh led the way on her pony.

Ruthie turned her face. She didn't want to tell her niece the news.

"What is it? Where's mother?" Leigh demanded.

Thornton was right behind Leigh. "Ma'am?"

Ruth turned to the male voice. "She died a day ago. We buried her this morning."

Rage ran rampant through Leigh. "You buried her? You knew I was coming! You couldn't wait?"

"Carl thought it best," Ruth explained believing that was the only answer needed.

"Carl thought it best?" Leigh shrieked. "Damn him! Damn you! She was my mother too!"

Thornton pulled Leigh into his arms. She was shaking in rage. He turned her face into his woolen jacket. "Where did you bury Mrs. Junge?"

"Don't let the girl's language upset you Colonel. She's just had a shock," Ruth attempted in futile explanation.

Thornton hugged Leigh tighter. He felt her choke back her sobs, tears, and anger. Her fists resting on his chest were taught with pain. This family and their adoration for this Carl were unbelievable. It was like they treated him as a king and the rest of the family his servants. As far as he was concerned Carl was an abomination of masculinity. He knew very well what a shock this was for his Leigh. He also was angry that Leigh's feelings were not even considered. "I'll take Leigh to the grave. Where is Mrs. Junge buried?"

Ruth pointed to a hill on the other side of the house. Several Crude stone carved crosses dotted the hill apex.

Thornton spotted a freshly covered grave. He kept Leigh in his arms and led her to the hill. He helped her walk up the hill and kept her upright when they stood by the grave.

Leigh broke down at the gravesite. Thornton knelt with her as she collapsed next to the grave.

“Mom. Mom. I didn’t say good-bye. I couldn’t say good bye,” Leigh cried out. Tears streamed down her cheeks, her face, her throat, and soaking her riding shirt. “I was going to take you back with me. I was going to take care of you. I was going to give you a good life. Martin is wonderful. He would have been good to you. Oh, Mom!” She prostrated her body across the dirt and sobbed.

Thornton released his hold on her and let her mourn. Her tears were pains in his heart. He wanted to take away her pain. Instead he could only feel her sorrow and let her weep until she ran out of tears. Gently he palmed her shoulders while she cried. “It’s all right to mourn.”

Dick, Charlie, and Too Many Teeth walked the horses to the barn. They knew two of the Shoshone hands that worked the ranch. It was Running Elk that had sent word to Washakie of the woman’s illness. He suspected bad weeds were given to her. He couldn’t prove anything, but she was sick and dying too quickly.

Ruth invited Doctor Farrah into the house. She offered him her homespun hospitality. Carl had been riding Hoosier looking over the cattle herd with the foreman. Theresa was napping and the girls were in the parlor playing with cornhusk dolls. Doctor Farrah didn’t think this was a house of mourning. It didn’t appear to be a house that just buried a family member in the morning.

“Thank you for the tea,” Doctor Farrah appreciated.

“What is going on?” Theresa said sleepily stretching her arms with a yawn. “Oh excuse me. I was just taking a beauty rest. Who are you?”

“I’m Doctor Farrah of Rawlins. I was sent for by one of your hands. It seems I am too late.”

“Nothing for you to be concerned over. The old lady died peacefully,” Theresa stated casually.

“The old lady was your mother in law,” Doctor Farrah stated firmly. He couldn’t believe he heard such callous words. As a doctor every life was important and precious.

“She weren’t no good no how,” Angela piped out coming in from the parlor. “Papa said she was worthless and a leech. She was a fat ugly as a mud fence old lady like his sister.”

Farrah almost dropped his teacup. He was shocked at such talk not only about the deceased, but also from the mouth of a little girl.

“Your pa never said such a thing,” Ruth denied.

Carl had always been careful to be the perfect nephew in front of his aunt.

“He did so!” Angela sassed back. “You don’t be calling me a liar.” She turned around triumphantly and walked back into the parlor.

“Don’t mind Angela,” Theresa excused. “She gets cranky when she doesn’t take a nap.”

Doctor Farrah didn’t think such talk was cranky. He thought the child needed a good talking too!

“It’s a shame you came up here all alone on a wild goose chase,” Theresa oozed seductively. The doctor was an attractive man in his twenties. He dressed well with his black travel suit, white stiff collared shirt, black work boots, and well-tied cravat. He was fair complexioned having blonde hair and blue eyes. His shoulders were broad and muscled. His chest was flat and strong narrowing to a slim waist and hip.

“He didn’t come alone. Three Shoshone and Colonel O’Neal came with Leigh,” Ruth informed offering Doctor Farrah a store bought biscuit.

“Colonel O’Neal?” Theresa brightened. “Where is he?”

“By the grave with your sister in law, Leigh,” Doctor Farrah said testily. He couldn’t believe the coldness of this family and he couldn’t believe that Leigh was of the same bloodline. Leigh was loving, caring, and thoughtful.

Theresa didn’t bother to acknowledge the doctor. She was too excited that Thornton was here. It didn’t matter he was with her sister in law. That dumpy pig ugly plebian wasn’t anywhere near her upbringing and stature. She walked out the door and looked to the hill. She saw two silhouettes kneeling by the grave. Picking up her expensive satin day dress, Theresa walked briskly to the object of her current desire.

There were no more tears. Leigh had mourned successfully. Thornton lifted her gently.

“I never got to say I loved her,” Leigh choked.

“You just did,” Thornton said soothingly. He once again folded Leigh in his arms. With a loving gentle touch, his fingers wiped away the last tears. He bowed his head and kissed the wet cheeks, the wet lashes, and her lips. He knew he shouldn’t take such liberties with a married woman. She didn’t know that she would be his eventually and he loved her with his entire being.

“What on earth?” Theresa screeched. “What are you wearing? You look like a low life slut. Don’t you know it’s improper to wear men’s clothing you little tramp?” She grabbed Colonel O’Neal’s arm. “I’m so ashamed you should see her like this. You run along and change your clothes immediately. I could just die you are so embarrassing.”

“It’s nice to see you again too,” Leigh snapped angrily. “I’m glad my mother’s death didn’t upset you too much.”

“Don’t you talk to me like that you little tramp! Your mother was sick and died. No more and no less,” Theresa barked.

“That’s enough!” Thornton growled. “Leigh is tired and upset. We traveled here immediately after hearing the news her mother was ill. Leigh’s had a jolt. I’m taking her back to the ranch.”

Leigh nearly collapsed in weakness from her sorrow.

Thornton picked her up in his arms. She laid her head on his shoulder accepting his strength. He walked down the hill toward the house.

Doctor Farrah stood when he saw Thornton carry Leigh into the room. “Did she swoon?”

“No. The hard ride here and her mourning exhausted her. She just needs some rest,” Thornton explained. “Is there a room I can put her?” he asked Ruth.

Jeannette’s room was behind the kitchen.

Thornton nodded and walked to the kitchen. He placed her gently on the small cot in the tiny room. The room had a sickening sweet odor.

Doctor Farrah had followed and noticed the same smell. He reached for the shutters on the window and opened them allowing fresh air to enter. “Are these fresh sheets?”

Ruth nodded. “I just put them on this morning.

Doctor Farrah poured some drops from a bottle into a glass of water he poured from the pitcher on the table. “Drink this.”

Leigh knew it was laudanum, but wanted some of the heartache to dull. She took the drink willingly. A few minutes later her eyes fluttered and she fell asleep. Thornton covered her with a quilt.

"I can't believe that girl is so emotional!" Theresa complained later taking Thornton's arm and leading him to the parlor. "I hope she sleeps the night away. Imagine talking to me in that tone of voice."

"She just lost her mother," Thornton said wearily. He loathed this woman of ice and selfishness.

"That's no excuse to speak to me in that tone," Theresa whined.

"What excuse do you make for your children's improper behavior and language?" Thornton chided.

"I don't know what you mean?" Theresa gasped. "That Leigh is a tart, a baboon, a leech like her mother, a no account born on the wrong side of track little strumpet. I simply can't imagine what she has said to you."

"Shut up! Shut the Hell Up!" Thornton snarled. He pulled his arm away and stormed out the door.

"Well I never!" Theresa complained. She returned to her room to sulk and make plans for dinner this evening. Why Thornton wasn't taken with her beauty and charms she simply had to figure out.

Chapter Nineteen

Leigh slept through the evening meal.

Dick, Charlie, and Too Many Teeth ate in the bunkhouse with the ranch hands. They would bed down there and wait for Leigh when she was ready to return to Rawlins.

Carl sat in stone silence. He acted like King Lear upon a throne taking his place at the head of the table. No one was allowed to touch the food until he had said grace. His pious diatribe in prayer was lengthy.

Theresa had seen to it that the girls were fed earlier and put to bed by her maid. She gave the excuse they were tired and cranky. It had been a long day for them because of the burial. Theresa was on her best behavior. She said nothing about Leigh since she sensed it upset her Colonel.

Carl and Ruth sat rigidly and made no mention of Leigh.

Doctor Farrah and Colonel felt uneasy at this table and were both astounded that no mention of Leigh's absence had been made. This was a cold unfeeling family.

After the meal Carl addressed Doctor Farrah. "I hope you aren't expecting any payment for services. I didn't send for you. I knew the old woman would die."

"That's it!" Thornton stormed. "You're talking about your own mother!" He rose from the table and walked angrily toward the kitchen room. He would spend the night on the floor near Leigh.

Thornton knelt next to the bed and kissed Leigh's lips. She moved slightly but was still fast asleep. "I'm sorry you belong to this family. It is the sorriest family I have ever had the misfortune to meet. You are the sweetest, kindest, most beautiful woman I know. I will make you happy when I am your husband. I swear to you. I love you, Leigh."

Doctor Farrah rose from the table right after Thornton. "I had no intention of charging you a fee! I was hired by Martin Chandler to care for his wife and mother in law. That is all. If you excuse me I will make my bed in the barn with the Shoshone. I find their company more appealing."

Ruth raised her eyebrows.

Theresa placed her hand over her breasts.

Carl ignored the insult and attempted to insult the doctor. "Lie with dogs and wake with fleas."

"Precisely!" Doctor Farrah agreed firmly. "My point exactly." He turned on his heels and left the house walking briskly to the barn.

"Well I never," Theresa said heatedly. "What is wrong with those people? They have no couth at all."

“It’s best we stay away from them,” Carl ordered. “I won’t have my family touched by such immoral heathens. Come along to bed my dear. Bessie can help you clean up, Aunt Ruth.”

Theresa hesitated only a bit. When Carl ordered her to bed she cringed. She hated his lovemaking. He was too Christian in his need for her. *Sex was for procreation and the satisfaction of the male* he would always say. Secretly she hated his sanctimonious lifestyle. She only used it to get what she wanted. This included submitting to his lust once a week.

At dawn, the light from a small window in the room woke Leigh. She knew she had slept the night away. Suddenly she became aware of the scent of witch hazel and the soft sounds of someone sleeping peacefully. She focused her eyes to find Thornton sleeping next to her. His head was on her pillow above her head. His long arm was circling the pillow. His body was in a seated position with his legs sprawled across the floor. He was still wearing his uniform and boots.

Leigh was touched. It was as if he were hovering over her and protecting her from the sorrow on the outside of this little sanctum.

“You are certainly my dream prince,” Leigh sighed longingly. “If only life were a true fairy tale.”

Thornton stirred.

Leigh hoped he didn’t hear what she said. She would be mortified. Thornton must never know how many feelings she had for him. He would most certainly laugh at her. She hand gently nudged his crooked arm. “Colonel O’Neal, wake up.”

“Hmm?”

“Colonel, you must wake up,” Leigh urged softly.

His lashes fluttered and instantly he knew where he was and what he was doing. “You’re awake!”

“And now so are you,” Leigh teased.

“Did you rest well? I mean did you get enough sleep? I mean are you feeling better?” Thornton inquired nervously. He stood to his full height and nearly touched the ceiling of the small room. It was his intention to watch over Leigh. He meant to make certain no one would bother her sleep and then leave to join Doctor Farrah in the barn. He didn’t mean to sleep all night in the same room. Leigh would consider him too forward or aggressive.

“I needed to mourn. I thank you for staying with me. You are such a kind man,” Leigh reassured sensing his nervousness. No one knew he spent the night with her and there was certainly nothing between them. They both had remained fully clothed. Leigh stroked his arm affectionately. “I want to go back home as soon as possible. I just want to check on a few things.”

“We can leave right after breakfast,” Thornton suggested. “If we don’t dawdle we’ll be back at Rawlins by night fall.”

“I’d like that. There is nothing here for me now. Actually there never was anything here for me. This is Carl country,” Leigh offered in bitter jest.

“You are so different from them,” Thornton uttered. “I can’t believe you come from the same blood.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment?” Leigh questioned. She wasn’t certain if he meant it was good or bad not being like Carl. She would never like anyone with a personality like her self-righteous brother.

“The highest compliment,” Thornton grinned broadly showing his straight white teeth. “It’s like an angel coming from a family of cockroaches.” He shuddered in playful jest. “You are the angel.” Thornton offered his hand for her to rise.

Leigh accepted his gesture and rose from the bed. “Thank you.”

Thornton bowed politely. “My pleasure. I must leave to prepare for the trip. I’ll be eating at the bunkhouse. I could not bear to sit through another meal with that ... I mean your family.”

“I’ll tend to personals and meet you at the bunkhouse,” Leigh said quickly without thinking. “Do you think the ranch hands would mind sharing their food with a woman?” Leigh added thinking her choice to eat with the men might be too presumptuous.

“I’m sure the men would love to share their meal with a real woman,” Thornton smiled. “I don’t think they’d like to eat with that bunch either.” He turned on his heels with a military flair and left the room.

With the exception of Bessie, no one was awake yet. Bessie had noticed the Colonel sleeping aside the cot when she came into the kitchen. The door was wide open and both were fully clothed. She knew nothing had happened and tried to be very quiet. Bessie didn’t want to disturb them. She had always liked Leigh. Carl’s sister had always been sweet and thoughtful. She always worked together and was never demanding. If she had a choice of serving anyone, it would be Leigh.

Leigh stretched and walked into the kitchen. “Good Morning, Bessie!”

“Morning Miss Leigh,” Bessie returned with a smile. She was rolling biscuits to go with the bacon and eggs she was frying. “Are you sure you don’t want me to cook some fine breakfast for you?”

“You’re a dear, but I know you heard the Colonel and my conversation. You are a fabulous cook, but it is the company that makes us ill. Do you understand?”

“Of course I do,” Bessie crowed conspiratorially. “I’d never break bread with that snooty crowd. Them peoples are wannabees. They are! They don’t know what real class is. Real class is folks like yo and the Colonel.”

♣The Outsider♣

“My head is spinning,” Leigh chuckled. “Two compliments and its only morning. I do thank you for your thoughts.”

“You go on and relieve yourself. The outhouse is right behind the house on the side. I’ll put a clean basin and towel in the room.”

Leigh gave Bessie a squeeze and walked out the door to find the outhouse.

Thornton went to the bunkhouse for a wash and shave. Later he went to the barn and talked to Dick, Charlie, and Too Many Teeth. He told them of his plans to leave right after breakfast and ride directly to Rawlins. The Shoshone acknowledged his request and prepared the horses.

Thornton went to the bunkhouse for breakfast and found Dr. Farrah talking with two of the ranch hands. These men had worked for Jacob and Ruth Strands many years. The two men stopped talking when Thornton walked in. The ranch hands didn’t trust military men and Dr. Farrah had won their confidence after a full night of painstaking conversation.

“What’s going on?” Thornton queried when they stopped talking abruptly.

“Not much. I was just asking about Mrs. Junge’s symptoms. I asked if Tom and Roger had noticed anything about her illness that might help me determine the cause of death,” Dr. Farrah responded.

His response won more respect from the men because it was a truthful reply, but did not implicate them in any way or form regarding their personal feelings and observations.

“Did you learn anything useful?” Thornton asked sitting down to eat the flapjacks, bacon, eggs, biscuits, and coffee.

“A great deal,” Dr. Farrah replied. He drank some of the coffee. “This is great coffee.”

Thornton knew Dr. Farrah didn’t want to discuss anything more. He ended the subject. “We’re going back to Rawlins right after breakfast if that’s all right with you.”

“I’ll be ready,” Dr. Farrah answered taking another swig of coffee.

Leigh went through the kitchen and back to her mother’s room. She had been so distraught yesterday she forgot to look for her mother’s heirloom box. It had her wedding ring, brooch, portrait of Leigh’s father, and a gold locket Leigh had given to her for her birthday. Leigh had saved for four years to buy her that gold locket. The treasure box also has some family letters in it and a bible with the family tree. It was gone.

“Bessie, my mother had a rosewood carved box she always kept in her sleeping area,” Leigh questioned. “Have you seen it?”

“Yes’m. Yo mother kept that box a close to her heart. It had yo sister’s hair, a gold coin, family letters, bible, weddin ring, and that locket yo bought for yor mother,” Bessie answered. “She done treasured that box.”

“Where is it?”

“Yo brother done take it afore they took her body. He went through it right quick. Gave the box, ring, and brooch to his wife. The eldest girl dun took the locket. Yo brother threw the bible in the stove fire along with the letters. He said this family now is done. It’s just him and his family. There ain’t no mo ties to the scum. Yo daddy’s picture got burnt with it. The only thin yo brother kept was that gold coin,” Bessie revealed.

Leigh’s knees wobbled. She had to lean on the table she was so upset. Her father’s portrait, the bible, the family papers were gone! They were destroyed without an ounce of care for the family or his sister’s feelings. The locket was something her mother treasured. She wanted to hold it and give it to a special child someday. Everything her mother had was gone. It was all gone. Even the money Leigh had given to her mother when she left with Carl was gone. Leigh was in the middle of complete sorrow and absolute rage.

“I know yo is a mournin, but yo ain’t et in two days. Yo need to keep up yor strength, chile,” Bessie ordered taking her shoulders and pushing her down into the chair by the kitchen table. “I fixed up some tasty flapjacks, eggs, bacon, and biscuits. Here’s some strong coffee.”

“I don’t think I can eat, Bessie,” Leigh sobbed. “He has destroyed everything I could hold on to for memories.”

“Yo always knowed what a no account yo brother is. This cain’t surprise yo none,” Bessie stated when she served Leigh her breakfast. “Yo has lived longer with that man than I served him and his family. He’s cold and selfish. Yo knows that. Yo mama fooled herself. Yo always knowed the truth of the matter. Don’t let that bastard hurt yo now.”

Leigh looked at Bessie through her tears. “If he heard us talk right now,” Leigh said allowing a giggle to slip through.

“That brother is so ignorant and self righteous he wouldn’t believe we was talking about him,” Bessie laughed. “Et that food.”

“Yes’m,” Leigh mimicked. “Bessie, why don’t you leave Carl and Teresa? They treat you so badly.”

“Yo knows I ain’t got no where to go,” Bessie replied. “Sides, I like Mrs. Ruth. I’ll stay and help out here as much as I can. It ain’t fair to that old lady to have to deal with yo brother.”

That brought another grin from Leigh. “You are a saint, Bessie. When you do want to leave, have one of the ranch hands bring you to Rawlins. My husband and I will find you a position.”

“Speakin of that, I heard yo jumped the broom with that nice hotel man. How is he doin?,” Bessie questioned. “I heard he was a sick one.”

“Yes Bessie, it is true. Martin is very sick,” Leigh hesitated slightly. “He is dying.”

“Yo appears to be happy wit him,” Bessie intimated. “Is yo?”

♣The Outsider♣

“Martin is wonderful. He is a devoted husband. His wish is to keep me protected, happy, and content,” Leigh shared. “Bessie, you wouldn’t believe how much he does to spoil me. I am the luckiest woman in Wyoming territory.”

“Yo deserves it chile,” Bessie stated patting Leigh’s hand. “Yo and yor mama had a hard life, but yo has always been sweet and took all that hatefulness from yo brother. Yo tried yo best to take care of yo mama. It ain’t yo fault yo mama was blind to yo brother’s cruelty and selfishness.”

Leigh ate the last forkful of breakfast, swallowed, and took Bessie’s hand. “Promise me that you will come to me when you are ready to leave this place.”

“Yo has my promise, chile,” Bessie replied. “Don’t yo grieve none over yo mama. She died where she wanted. Nothin yo woulda done woulda changed dat.”

“I know you’re right, but I didn’t get to say goodbye,” Leigh sighed.

“Yo just did,” Bessie emphasized. “Go on back to dat nice man yo gots. Take good care of him. Yo is done here. Even yo Auntie Ruthie is blinded by dat brother. Go on. Nothin here for yo, chile.”

“You’re right,” Leigh agreed. “I’ll get my valise and go to the barn. Colonel O’Neal said he would get things ready for us to leave right away.”

“I done packed everythin whilst yo was relieving yoself,” Bessie grinned. She stood up and went to the pantry. She pulled out Leigh’s packed valise.

Leigh rose and hugged Bessie.

Chapter Twenty

It was a quick walk to the barns. It was rude not to say good-bye to Auntie Ruth, but even Ruth was blind sided when it came to her brother. Ruth had no feelings or emotions left to spare for her niece. All the family's emotions were focused on her brother. Only her father and Uncle Virgil ever knew she was alive. Perhaps it was best to cut the family ties. Carl would wait for Aunt Ruthie to die and take everything she had. He would spend it and move on to another relative no matter how remote as long as they had money. It was fortunate for her that Carl had no idea how wealthy Martin Chandler is. He thought Martin was nothing more than a desk clerk. Leigh had no intention of informing Carl otherwise.

No one was in the barn when she arrived. It was a moment Leigh needed to break down and cry once more. She walked to Buttermilk. Leigh rested her head on Buttermilk's muzzle. Leigh sobbed and cried as if her heart was breaking. She had lost everything. It wasn't just losing family. Carl had seen to it that she had lost every connection with her family, her identity, and her proud Irish heritage. It was all about money, power, and hypocrisy. It was about wheeling and dealing with little or no care and respect for anyone. It was all about selfishness and gratification.

As Leigh's tears ran down her cheeks she suddenly found herself encircled by powerful arms. These arms turned her about to gently place her face on a powerful chest. A hand gave her a kerchief for her tears. That same hand stroked her hair.

"You go ahead and cry all you want," Thornton whispered into her hair. His breath was warm on her head. She molded into his strong arms. He wanted to stop the hurt. He knew he couldn't. Thornton felt protective. If he could keep cruelty away from this wonderful woman he would. He felt protective and possessive. He had to admit Martin was right all along. He loved Leigh with all that he is.

Thornton's strength radiated throughout Leigh's being.

"Thank you."

"For what? There is no need to thank me."

“Oh yes there is,” Leigh sobbed. “You always seem to be there for me when I’m completely out of strength. When I’m tired of being strong, you are there to let me be weak. I appreciate you more than you can imagine.”

Thornton smiled. He tilted her head up with his thumb and forefinger. “I can imagine a lot.” Without another thought he bent his head and brushed his lips against Leigh’s swollen eyes. He moved his lips to peck her nose. On to her tear stained cheeks and settled on her parted lips. “I’ll be here for you as long as you need me.” His kiss was gentle at first but he wanted more. He hungered for passion and his tongue intruded into the sweetness of her mouth.

Leigh responded to Thornton’s kiss. She was lulled into euphoria. Feelings she had no idea she possessed took control. It was a want and need to take Thornton inside to her mind as well as body. The kiss became deep and passionate. Her hands pulled him closer and her fingers raked through the hair on his nape. He smelled of witch hazel and leather. He was intoxicating. He was man. Primal instincts surged through the blood in her veins. Her body flushed in a secret fire. Leigh was breathless and light headed. There was no thought. There was only physical need.

Thornton felt Leigh respond to his kiss. Passion ignited throughout his body. He deepened his kiss. Leigh’s response sent him over the edge of reality. He was floating in exhilaration. The more Leigh responded the greedier he became. His hand slipped beneath to cup her breast. His fingers played with the hardened nub beneath her chemise. His other arm brought her closer to his body. He wanted to bring her inside of his being. He wanted to become one with Leigh. That bond between a man and woman as one united was his only thinking.

Logic and reason disappeared until Buttermilk whinnied intrusively. Bred in the mountains, Buttermilk was aware of her environment and instinctively warned of any change.

Leigh and Thornton broke apart instantly. The door opened to reveal Theresa in robe covering her lacy nightgown.

The barn was still in shadows and Thornton’s broad figure partially covered Leigh. He turned and groaned inwardly although grateful they were interrupted. Theresa had an immediate chilling affect on him and his embarrassing bulge between his legs disappeared immediately. Leigh was married to his best friend. He wanted Leigh and would have her, but he couldn’t morally hurt his friend. He had

his own code of honor. He would not touch Leigh in that way until she was his wife even it killed him with ice cold swims when needed.

“Thornton?” Theresa asked. “What are you doing here in the dark barn?”

“We’re preparing to leave,” Thornton replied stoically.

“We?” Theresa queried walking over to Thornton. “You needn’t leave. You’re welcome to stay here as long as you like.” She reached to take his hand when she saw Leigh. “What on earth are you doing here? You look disgusting. Why don’t you go back into the house and try to make yourself presentable. I’m so embarrassed for Colonel O’Neal. How you do parade yourself. You should be ashamed. Were you crying? Pity sakes, the woman is dead and gone.”

Leigh didn’t say a word. She turned her back on Theresa. In a few movements she was mounted on Buttermilk and rode out of the barn.

“No class. She has not a shred of upbringing or class,” Theresa dramatized. “At least we’re alone now.” Theresa placed her arm in Thornton’s. Her other hand quickly untied her robe. “How long has it been since you’ve been with a real woman, Colonel? Has it been as long as I’ve been with a real man? We could soothe our needs right here and now.”

Thornton plucked her arm out from his. “I will never need a woman that much.” In a moment he was on Comet and out the barn.

“Well I never!” Theresa spat stomping her foot on the ground.

Doctor Farrah, Dick, Charlie, and Too Many Teeth watched Leigh come out of the barn first. They walked to get their horses when Thornton came out of the barn. They were surprised to see Theresa come out of the barn. Her robe was untied revealing her lacy nightgown.

“That is a bad woman,” Dick mumbled. “She is bad medicine for any man.”

“She’s married to a bad man,” Too Many Teeth informed.

“Two bad people. The mix is poison.”

The group mounted their horses and caught up to Thornton and Leigh waiting at the ranch gate.

They rode their horses hard to get back to Rawlins at night. No one wanted to talk.

Leigh was confused by the morning kiss. It brought her feelings that were strange. It conflicted with her thoughts on morality and being a married woman. It also made her feel wonderful and

giddy. Even as a child in her father's arms had she ever felt so safe and content as she did those moments in Thornton's arms. Of course he was being nice. He was just comforting her. A handsome Colonel like him couldn't possibly have feelings like that about a simple plain woman as she. Leigh reprimanded herself for her thoughts.

Thornton was distressed in his forwardness. At the moment everything felt so right. He knew he loved Leigh. She is everything he could love and cherish, but he was wrong to take advantage of the moment. He hoped Leigh would forgive him. He hoped Leigh was not offended by his brazen desire.

Doctor Farrah was deep in his own thoughts. He wanted to wire his friend in Chicago and get him to check on some records for him. Tom and Roger had shared information with him that made him suspicious. He wanted to get more facts before he spoke to Martin about his concerns.

Dick, Charlie, and Too Many Teeth wanted to return to camp. They had discussions with Shoshone hands on The Three Circle Ranch they found disturbing and wanted Washakie to have the information.

The silence was deafening. The pounding of the ponies' hooves upon the earth thundered along the way. The group did not stop to eat which saved time. They arrived in Rawlins as dusk.

Claudia Thatcher was sitting on her boarding house porch when she watched Colonel O'Neal, Doctor Farrah, and Leigh ride into town. She was envious and curious as to why Mrs. Martin Chandler had left town, been gone for two days, and returned with two gentlemen, one a Colonel and the other a Doctor. She traveled alone with them dressed as a man. This gossip was getting better. With any good fortune she could ruin Leigh's reputation. There was a chance for Claudia as the matron of the Church and widow of James Thatcher to marry the handsome Colonel and still get a part of Chandler's money. She plotted to visit Martin Chandler the next day. Wouldn't Martin be surprised to find out where his little wife had been?

James Thatcher had been a reasonable husband. He made certain his wife would be provided for when he quit the railroad and went on his hunt for gold in Montana. Unfortunately, he had been one of the victims of a Sioux raid. This left Claudia a widow at twenty four and childless. She had set her cap for Colonel O'Neal when he gave her the news she was a widow.

Claudia remembered opening the door early Saturday morning before her boarders were even awake. Thornton O'Neal stood before

her in full dress uniform. Her heart fluttered when she looked up at the beautiful face. It had been a shock to learn her husband was dead, but not a great surprise. Of course she played the widow quite well for the past year, but now it was time to find a new husband and it would be the handsome Colonel. Many of the single women of church hoped to catch the handsome Colonel, but he had never given them the time of day. Colonel O'Neal had always been pleasant to her. He spoke to her whenever she managed to be near him. Claudia would embellish her stories to the Christian ladies after their meetings and they were green with envy.

Claudia was already planning her visit to Martin Chandler tomorrow. Of course she would have to be careful because she certainly didn't want to muddy Colonel O'Neal's reputation. Her mind wasn't on the evening meal her cook prepared, but her boarders were all greeted at the dinner table with a smiling face.

Dick, Charlie, and Too Many Teeth had left for Washakie's Green River camp mid afternoon. Farrah, O'Neal, and Leigh rode their horses to the livery and let young Jeremiah take charge of their mounts for feed and a rub down.

"I'm sore and tired," Doctor Farrah excused. "I'll take dinner at Wellington's and go directly to bed."

"We'll go to Martin and give him the news," O'Neal stated taking Leigh's elbow. "We are bone tired and need some rest ourselves."

"I've got muscle aches in places I didn't know I had muscles," Leigh quipped.

"Washakie did do a good job of training you to ride," Thornton complimented. "You rode like you were born in a saddle."

"I still wasn't prepared for a forced ride," Leigh yawned. "I am tired."

"It could be the emotional strain. You've been wrung out and wring tied again."

"I have cried more in two days than I have since I was a child," Leigh confessed. "I was always brave, strong, and in control. I don't know what happened to me at the ranch."

"It could be you were tired of being brave, strong, and in control," Thornton said thoughtfully. "Sometimes I run away from my bravery, strength, and military command. I run to my friend, Martin. He lets me be me."

♣The Outsider♣

“You offered me your strength when I needed some. I appreciate that.”

“I hope I’ll always be there for you,” Thornton wished. She was so vulnerable, so sensitive, and so beautiful in his eyes.

Leigh looked up to see his face. He was sincere and his deep blue eyes radiated something that made her insides quiver.

Thornton looked into those silver gems and quivered. Could he wait for her? He had to for his friend. *Damn Martin. Why did he have to marry her?* But if he didn’t, Leigh would have wed someone else and he would never be able to make Leigh his wife. *Patience!*

Leigh moved her eyes to her shoes. She couldn’t embarrass Thornton with her strange feelings. She didn’t even understand them. “Martin will still be awake. He takes dinner about this time.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Thornton stopped at the Rawlins Hotel door. “You go in and tell Martin what happened. I’ll get all of us dinner if Martin hasn’t ordered it yet.”

Leigh nodded in agreement and opened the door. She ran right into Mary.

“Mrs. Chandler! We weren’t expecting you so soon. Did you bring your mother back? Mr. Chandler had me prepare the extra bedroom for her.”

“My mother died,” Leigh replied quietly. She took Mary’s hand. “She died before we arrived. Thank you for thinking about her, taking care of the hotel, and taking care of Martin.”

“No thanks at all. You are the sweetest most generous person I know. It was a pleasure to help you,” Mary beamed hugging Leigh. “I’m so sorry about your mother.”

“Thank you,” Leigh appreciated. “Is Martin in the parlor?”

“He is. I was going to order his supper from Wellington’s,” Mary informed. “He’s missed you. Every minute I’m with him he talks about what you must be doing, what your trip was, just everything about you. He talked about how happy you make him when you wake him with your smile. He adores you.”

“And I him. Don’t worry about getting his supper. Colonel O’Neal is going to Wellington’s to get our meals,” Leigh told her friend and worker. “You go on to your room and take care of that precocious little girl you have. She must be a little jealous for the time away from her taking care of my responsibility. Tomorrow I’ll bake her some ginger snaps.”

“You spoil her,” Mary teased.

“Milk spoils, food spoils,” Leigh corrected. “You can’t spoil a child. Go on. I’ll take care of my Martin.” Leigh walked briskly to the private quarters. Opening the door she spotted Martin looking over some ledgers.

Without looking Martin commented, “ Did you run to the restaurant, Mary?”

“I sent Mary to her room. Colonel O’Neal is getting our meals, Martin.”

Martin closed the ledgers and looked to his wife. "I've missed you every minute you were gone. I'm happy you are back, but so soon?"

Leigh walked to her husband's wheeled chair and knelt next to it. She placed her head on Martin's lap. "Mama died before we got there."

Martin stroked Leigh's auburn hair. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

"Carl buried her in the morning before we arrived," Leigh sighed. "He took everything she owned the day she died. It wasn't much, but there were things that meant a lot to me and he destroyed them. Worst of all, I never got to say good bye."

"My poor darling," Martin sympathized. "Just remember what a good daughter you were."

Leigh kept her head on Martin's lap. His hand stroking her hair felt comforting. How would she bear up when she lost him? It was inevitable she would lose Martin in the near future, but she didn't want to think about it. She was so safe and secure with Martin.

After several minutes of silence Martin whispered, "I love you with all that I am. We will never say goodbye. We will always treasure each moment of our time together. Promise me."

Leigh looked up to Martin's serene face. "Every moment, my love."

Martin continued to stroke Leigh's hair until Thornton came into the parlor holding a tray of food followed by Dan Quirk and several waiters carrying other trays.

"Hope you don't mind company for dinner, Martin," Thornton grinned. "Leigh said she was hungry and I could eat a grizzly bear raw."

"You are always welcome, my friend," Martin invited. "Come along Leigh. You must eat before Thornton consumes all of this fare."

Leigh rose from her place next to Martin. Once standing she pushed the wheeled chair to the large table in the center of the parlor where the food trays were placed. Thornton pulled a chair out for Leigh and then he took a seat. They ate in silence until the apple pie dessert was delivered to each plate.

"What happened to your mother? Did the doctor find out the cause of death, or suspect the cause of death," Martin queried. "Your mother was so healthy when she left for The Circle Three Ranch. This family illness seems so mysterious."

“All my family has died at a young age,” Leigh commented. “I just remember my grandmother and Aunt Louise dying. They were healthy and then in a few months they were yellow and had lesions on their legs. It was awful to see them suffer with stomach cramps and then die so quickly.”

“Farrah told me he had an idea of what caused these illnesses,” Thornton reported. “He told me he wants to contact a friend in Chicago for clarification.”

“But he didn’t even see her body,” Leigh reminded.

“No, he talked to some of the ranch hands,” Thornton stated factually. “They told him about her sudden symptoms and such.”

“I was emotionally out of control. I forgot to ask Bessie about Mama’s illness,” Leigh sighed.

“You had every right to be emotional,” Martin soothed lovingly. He placed his hand over hers in reassurance. “It sounds like Doctor Farrah had everything in control. Don’t worry your pretty little head about it one more minute.” Martin would talk to Doctor Farrah in a few more days. That would give the good doctor time to get his diagnosis confirmed from his friend in Chicago. Martin was pleased Farrah wasn’t some quack that apprenticed from another quack. Farrah had been schooled and licensed in Philadelphia School of Medicine. Martin had learned to admire Doctor Farrah for his expertise, knowledge, education, and thoroughness.

After dessert Leigh made Martin drink his special herbal tea. He did so grudgingly with the promise they could share a brandy together before bedtime.

Although it was only the beginning of fall and the days were still warm, the nights were chilly. They sat in front of the fire and told Martin about every minute of the trip, their arrival, the little burial plot, and their return.

Leigh and Thornton helped Martin prepare for bed. Martin requested that Thornton return to his special bedroom in the private quarters. He had not used it because of their marriage, but Martin insisted he return to it and reminded him that Mary Hayes had just cleaned it in preparation for Leigh’s mother.

After Martin was put to sleep, Thornton went to his room, and Leigh went to hers.

Everyone slept soundly.

In the morning it was business as usual.

Leigh woke up, bathed, dressed and helped Martin bathe and dress for the day.

Thornton bathed, shaved, and dressed by the time Martin was sitting in the parlor. He volunteered to get breakfast.

In the meantime Leigh went back to her schedule and checked the chambermaids and linens in preparation for the cleaning of the rooms at checkout time.

After sharing breakfast with Martin and Leigh, Thornton announced he would be returning to Fort Fred Steele, but he would be back every weekend until the snows came. He would take back his room in the private quarters. It would be their special time together. The sudden death of Leigh's mother had shaken Thornton more than he realized. He sent a telegram to his mother and father in New York asking them to visit him sometime before he returned to the fort. He also wanted to share as much time with his best friend as he possibly could. He would miss Martin when he left. He would miss Martin's friendship a lot.

While Leigh was busy about her duty, including baking those ginger snaps for little Maggie Hayes, Claudia Thatcher came calling on Martin.

Martin was sitting behind the lobby desk when Claudia entered.

"Good Morning, Mr. Chandler! You are looking well this morning."

Martin groaned inwardly. He couldn't abide Claudia Thatcher and her hypocritical lifestyle. She was obnoxious and irritating with her religious fanaticism. "I'm dying, Mrs. Thatcher. I don't look well at all."

"Well I believe I see an improvement," Claudia countered cheerfully.

"Then your sight must be affected by a strange malady," Martin sniped. "Perhaps Doctor Farrah could help you."

"Speaking of Doctor Farrah," Claudia grinned. She had her window of opportunity. "He left town the other night and came back last night, with... with..."

"My wife?"

"Why yes," Claudia crowed. "And I don't mean to be a problem, but Mrs. Chandler was dressed rather strangely. Whys she wore... wore..." Claudia hesitated and then whispered, "male attire

including duck trousers. I was so shocked and horrified. Whatever would people think if they saw her dressed like that and riding off with Doctor Farrah for two days.”

“Max Steiner, a ranch hand for The Three Circle Ranch was sent to town to let my wife know her mother was ill,” Martin replied dryly. “The Doctor left with my wife to help her mother.”

“But her clothes. It is too appalling,” Claudia insisted. *Drat, it had to be something plausible like a mother’s illness.* “You must speak to your wife so she doesn’t shame you like that again.”

Martin thought it strange that Claudia didn’t mention Thornton. He wondered why. He knew she didn’t see the Shoshone. They wouldn’t be seen leaving Rawlins with a white woman. They knew such a sight would create problems. “Shame? I don’t understand. What would Leigh do to shame me?”

“The male attire! Heavens, the town would be agog at seeing her. You are the town’s most prominent citizen. She has an image to keep for your sake,” Claudia exclaimed. “And leaving with a man, unchaperoned. It simply isn’t done.”

“How would you know if they were unchaperoned or not?” Martin rumbled. “Did you follow them all the way to The Three Circle Ranch?”

“Of course not, but heaven’s tongues would wag,” Claudia insisted. “Her clothes!”

“Her clothes were meant for comfort on a long hard ride,” Martin growled. “And the only tongue I see wagging is yours.”

“I only meant to show my concern for her welfare and yours,” Claude grumbled. This was not going as she had planned. “You do have a reputation to live up too! You are Rawlins’s leading private citizen.”

“I appreciate your concern, but you needn’t worry,” Martin snarled nearly losing his patience. “I am fully aware of my wife’s comings and goings, her attire, and every thing else about my wonderful woman. You needn’t concern yourself in any way regarding Mrs. Chandler. I approve of everything she does.”

“I was just trying to be a Christian neighbor,” Claudia pouted. “I still offer you and Mrs. Chandler a special invitation to our Sunday church service.”

Martin rolled his eyes in frustration. This woman didn’t even understand the word Christian. She and her kind certainly weren’t Christ like. He even wondered if she had read the Bible; much less

understand its lessons. "I'll think on it," he forced out just to make her go away.

Claudia didn't want to give in so easily. If only she could be some doubt between Martin Chandler and his young wife. She had to use her last straw even though she didn't want to bring him into it. "She left and came back with Colonel O'Neal. It isn't proper of course. It isn't proper for a married woman to be with two single men alone out of town." She watched Martin for any sign of concern. There wasn't any. She added. "She seemed rather smitten with the Colonel and they walked too closely."

Martin could barely contain his laughter. Of course they were close. He wanted them to be close. He knew Leigh and Thorn were in love with each other even if they didn't. He even wrote in his will that they should be married right after his death. If Mrs. Thatcher would only knew the truth of the matter. He wouldn't let her ruin Leigh's reputation with her idle gossip.

"Thornton O'Neal is my best friend. We grew up together, went to school together and fought in the war together. I trust him with my life and my wife. Thornton accompanied Leigh as a favor for me. I am no longer capable of taking care of certain matters for my wife, as I should. Thornton takes care of those matters for me," Martin responded quietly. "Don't make something ugly out of a beautiful friendship."

Claudia's face turned beet red after that reprimand. "I hope to see you in church." She left the room quickly. She would bring that woman down another day.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Winter came early in Rawlins. There were heavy snowstorms that stopped most movement. It was a relief for the men at Fort Fred Steele. The Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe were more concerned about shelter from the storms than waging war on the encroaching white settlers and gold miners.

When the road was passable, Thornton would make his way the thirteen miles from the fort to the Rawlins Hotel. He wanted to be near Leigh as much as possible, but he also wanted to be near his dying friend. Every minute they shared together was going to be a precious memory.

The first day of December brought a heavy snowstorm. Leigh and Martin were sitting in front of the warming parlor fireplace. They had eaten a simple meal Leigh cooked for them. With winter coming, Leigh didn't want Dan Quirk to brave freezing weather, bitter winds, and snowstorms to deliver hot food. Instead she redid the kitchen in the private quarters. This allowed her to personally make all of Martin's meals and teas. After the meals she would wash, dry, and put the dishes away. Martin would watch her in the kitchen and they would talk over simple things such as, what the day was like, the new guests, new projects, townspeople, or any current news.

When the work was completed in the evening, Leigh wheeled Martin into the parlor and helped him move to the divan. The rest of the evening they would sit together in front of the fireplace. Leigh would read from books just recently purchased. New bookcases were being installed continually. The parlor was beginning to look like a small library.

Martin stopped losing weight. He didn't lose any more hair and he didn't become weaker. Doctor Farrah warned Leigh not to become too hopeful. The doctor told her Martin was lasting longer than he expected and he believed part of it was her loving care. "Love is an incredible medicine." He told her he would be surprised if Martin would last another year.

Leigh understood blood cancer and had experienced its wicked hand of death with her older sister, Judy. She believed Doctor Farrah's prognosis. There was a good chance Martin would not see

another winter and she wanted something special for him this last winter.

"I've been thinking," Leigh introduced snuggling into Martin's arm.

"That's dangerous," Martin snickered lovingly as he stroked her cheek with his thumb.

"Dangerous?" Leigh questioned sitting upright suddenly and staring into Martin's eyes.

"When you think, we usually end up with a new project," Martin teased. "The only project I want right now is to hold you in my arms while we enjoy the flame's flickers."

"Well this another project I want to do, and I won't be put down with a no," Leigh chuckled snuggling back into Martin's arm.

"Wife, I am in a losing position with you," Martin chortled. "I love you so much that all you have to do is ask and it shall be yours. What project shall we begin in the beginning of a freezing winter?"

"Christmas," Leigh said flatly.

This did surprise Martin. He inhaled deeply with shock. "Christmas? You don't believe in Christianity. Neither do I!"

"We don't believe in Christianity or any religion for that matter, but the people we love do believe in Christmas. We love them and we do believe that a deeply spiritual man named Jesus did walk the earth. Don't we?"

"Those are points, but I don't understand," Martin stated.

"We are surrounded by wonderful people that consider Christmas a very special time of the year for showing love," Leigh explained. "I want to share this special time of love with them. Is that so hard to understand? I have never been so happy or content in my life and I'm bubbling with yuletide cheer. I want to share our love and happiness with everyone. We will even have some travelers away from home as our guests in the hotel. What do you think?"

"I think we will plan the biggest most wonderful Christmas party Rawlins has ever witnessed. What shall we do first?"

"First I want to make a list of everyone to invite to the hotel on Christmas Day, after their church services of course. We'll start with everyone on our staff here at the hotel, the livery, well everyone and their family. We'll buy gifts for everyone, especially the children. We'll invite some of our special friends, the guests..."

"Hold it! I'm tired already. For tonight let's start with the guest list," Martin guffawed. He loved his wife so much it hurt. She

never ceased to surprise or amaze him. She made him feel wonderful, happy to be alive, and treasure every minute of life he had to share with her.

“I want a tree, a big tree. Not too big because it has to fit in the lobby, but definitely a large rotund tree,” Leigh babbled. “We’ll decorate it with sticks of peppermint candy, cranberry rings, paper chains, and glass ornaments. I’ll crochet some stars and bells, and we’ll get little candle lamps for light.”

Martin just listened grinning broadly as Leigh continued on with her plans. This would be the grandest Christmas Rawlins would ever see.

“We’ll have hot chocolate, and get Peter Jamison to play fiddle. We’ll get Allison McCarthy to play the harpsichord. We’ll sing Christmas Carols. We’ll let the children bob for apples. Oh yes, we’ll have hot cider spiced with cinnamon. The children will open presents first. We’ll make cakes and sweetbreads,” Leigh continued well into the evening.

Leigh had retrieved paper and pen for Martin after her first description of the Christmas tree. When she dropped names during her planning diatribes, he added them to the party list. Just listening to Leigh was amazing to Martin. Could such happiness be real? He was here to prove it.

Every day for the next three weeks was full of life, laughter, and joy. Leigh and Mary scrutinized Martin’s list and added the names of their guest’s children. With winter in full force the hotel wasn’t as busy. Leigh and Mary would shop every morning for presents. Martin would carefully wrap each gift with brown paper and string or ribbon if it were for a little girl. He was in charge of marking the presents with names. Every present was carefully logged and placed in the storeroom.

Maggie was put in charge of making paper chains for the tree. She took her duty seriously and when other children were brought in to help, she guided them like a proven general. The cuts had to be just right. The homemade paste applied just perfectly.

At night Leigh would crochet stars and bells for the tree. Martin was thrilled with every loop she crocheted. They would spend hours talking about the party, the guests, the tree, the children.

“I haven’t been so excited since I was a child,” Martin said lovingly one evening. He was using homemade starch and applying it on a star with a brush that he had pinned to an oiled brown paper.

“You have given me the happiest year of my life. I will never be able to thank you, my love.”

“We are a balanced ledger,” Leigh replied putting her crochet needle down and looking with adoration to her husband. “You have made me the happiest woman in Wyoming territory. I have never in my life felt so loved, wanted, and needed. Every day I have with you is pure joy.”

Leigh rose from the chair by the fire and walked to Martin’s wheeled chair. She kissed him on the lips. “I love you with all that I am.”

Tears slipped from Martin’s eyes. There were no words for Martin. How can you express true happiness and love?

Leigh was also tearing up with emotion. There were no further words needed. She changed the subject. Kneeling next to Martin she slipped his hand in hers. “Darling, let’s go beyond the guest list. I mean all the invitations were given out, but let us include everyone that wants to come in.”

“We couldn’t fit that many people in the hotel,” Martin laughed joyfully.

“Oh yes we can,” Leigh insisted.

“How are you going to accomplish that?” Martin chuckled.

“Simple. Our guests are to arrive just past noon for a Christmas meal. The gift opening is at one. We open the hotel for everyone at two with a buffet and leftovers from the meal,” Leigh suggested. “Do you think Dan Quirk and our cooks would mind?”

“I have a feeling they would be delighted,” Martin replied. “A lot of people are jumping hoops to help you with this party because they love the idea and they love you.”

“I think it is because they love you,” Leigh countered. “There are a lot of people in town that don’t think very much of me, but everyone sings your praises.”

Martin was upset by that remark. “Which people don’t think very much of you? Where did you hear such a thing? I’ve never heard any unkind remark.”

“It’s nothing,” Leigh excused. She didn’t mean to say it. It just slipped out. She never wanted Martin to hear what gossip was said about her. She didn’t want him to know that some good people of the church shunned her. Those people called her adventuress and fortune hunter. They called her the black widow spider because for her own fortune she would eat her mate. She wouldn’t let him know

the fine upstanding woman of the city ignored her because she was an outsider.

“Of course you won’t tell me,” Martin growled. “Don’t think I won’t find out. I will.”

“There is nothing to find out,” Leigh emphasized. “Please finish pinning the star, the ends are curling.”

Martin conceded and the rest of the conversation for the evening was light and happy. “How many more stars? We’ve got at least a hundred and the same amount of bells.”

“I’m finished for the most part. Mary is doing the cranberry rope. Tomorrow you and I will string peppermint sticks. Mary is making little holly ornaments with penny candy and netting.”

“That is going to be every child’s favorite tree. You can eat its decorations.”

“Absolutely! There are less decorations to put away for next year.”

“What are you going to do with the cranberry rope?”

“We’ll string it on a tree and let the birds have a Christmas meal.”

“Leigh, you are wonderful!”

“I love you, too!”

After Leigh put him to bed and left the room, Martin started thinking about finding out just who those people were that were saying nasty things about his Leigh. Too Many Teeth was with Washakie’s camp, Sven and Dan were busy with the party and really wouldn’t be a part of gossip, but Mary would know. He would find out from her.

The next morning Martin sent Leigh on an errand to the mercantile. He told her he wanted to buy little Maggie a special gift from the two of them. He heard her talking about a little doll she had seen that she wanted. It was true, but it had to be a surprise for Mary as well as her daughter Maggie. He called for Mary as soon as Leigh left.

“Did you need something?” Mary questioned entering the private quarters.

“Yes I do, Mary,” Martin responded softly. “Come sit on the divan. I have a favor and a question.”

“Certainly,” Mary obeyed.

“I want to give my Leigh a special gift. At the Rawlins Mercantile you will find a package addressed to me. Have Sam give it

to you. It's my present to Leigh that I ordered from a catalog," Martin instructed. "And then I want you tell me what unkind things are being said about my Leigh, and by whom."

"I don't know what you are saying," Mary lied. Leigh had told Mary she never wanted Martin to be upset by cruel gossip.

"You are lying," Martin snarled. "You know what is being said and by whom. I demand to know."

"It is just gossip," Mary replied hesitantly.

"Mary!" Martin bellowed. "Out with it."

Martin's demeanor startled Mary.

"The people that know and love Leigh ignore it."

"I know that! Tell me," Martin requested in a softer tone.

"It is Mrs. Thatcher's Church Society and some other women of the so called social elite," Mary confessed. "They say things that are so untrue. We all know it."

"What things?"

Mary flamed red. She slowly uttered, "Things like Leigh is a fortune hunter, a woman of low class and stature. She's unfeminine and the worse they say is that she is a black widow spider. She's waiting for you to die so she can run ramrod over the entire town because of your properties and wealth."

"You are holding back, aren't you?" Martin queried.

"Goodness me, yes," Mary replied. "I love Leigh and she doesn't want you upset by any of it."

"I won't tell Leigh I know. I'm more upset for the fact no of this was told to me," Martin responded thoughtfully. "Just write down the names of the ladies please." He raised his hand, as Mary was about to protest. "I won't let Leigh know I found out. You have my promise."

Chapter Twenty-Three

The next few days Martin spoke to many of the people who worked for him at the hotel and restaurant. After interrogation they reluctantly admitted to the gossip about Leigh. All the remarks about Leigh were started and centered on Mrs. Thatcher.

Shortly after Leigh had posted signs in the hotels, restaurants, mercantile stores, and livery inviting everyone to an open Christmas party at the Rawlins Hotel, Mrs. Thatcher's attacks grew worse.

Martin learned that Claudia Thatcher was livid in anger about Leigh and the Christmas party was the center of attention for the townspeople. Claudia had attempted to put together a Christian Christmas Party at the church after services only to find out that only her circle of five and their families would attend. The townspeople were planning to visit the finest hotel in town and view the decorated Christmas tree they heard so much about. Their families would attend a free buffet, singing of Christmas Carols, and candy treats for the children.

Martin had thought about Claudia's attacks and worried for Leigh when he was gone. He wouldn't have a woman like Claudia destroy Leigh's reputation out of jealousy, especially with his last request of Thornton. He came up with an idea at last and penned a long letter to his attorney in New York. This would be an addendum to his will. He smiled broadly when he signed the letter, sealed it with wax, and gave it to Sven to take to the station depot mail office.

A week before the big party Thornton appeared at the hotel. "I've taken a week's leave to help with the celebration," Thornton announced stepping into the private quarters and shaking off his snow covered military cape coat. "What do I do first?"

Leigh rose from the divan where she was sitting next to Martin. "Give me your coat. I'll put it in the mudroom out back by the kitchen. You'll drench our good carpets."

"I see you beat the snowstorm," Martin clucked.

"Just barely, as you can tell," Thornton laughed. "It is going to be a big one."

"Sit by the fire and warm up," Martin invited. "I'll bet Leigh brings you a hot apple cider with a touch of brandy."

“No bet!” Thornton stated quickly. “Leigh is the best hostess and kindest woman in all of Wyoming territory. She just seems to know how to make people happy.”

“I am a very fortunate man,” Martin bragged.

“Yes you are,” Thornton agreed. “You stole her right out from under me.”

“Only because you were too stubborn to realize how wonderful she was and how much you needed her,” Martin reminded. “Lucky for me because I needed her more.”

“You are absolutely correct,” Thornton concurred. He took a chair to sit next to the fire and stretched out his long legs. His boots were resting on the hearth. “This feels wonderful. I could get used to this home life. I really could.”

“You have no idea what you are missing,” Martin replied cheerily. “Leigh has made this house a home. She has brought laughter, joy, and sunshine into my dreary life. I’ve never understood the joy of sharing until Leigh came into my life.”

Thornton leaned over placing his arms over his knees. “I envy you.”

“This is a turn of events, my friend,” Martin grinned. “I used to envy you. You had everything, the looks, the charm, and the cunning. You even bested me in school grades. In the shadow of my life I find I couldn’t be happier and there is no envy in my life. I have nothing but treasured happiness and love.”

“I envy you, but I am happy for you,” Thornton restated. “You deserve every moment of happiness you have.”

“Thank you my friend,” Martin accepted. “Tell us what is going on in the world of Fort Fred Steele’s commanding officer?”

“Washington is putting pressure on me and the Indian agent to get Washakie on the Wind River Reservation,” Thornton responded.

“I’ve arrived just in time for a discussion of politics,” Leigh remarked. In her hands was a tray of three cups. Each cup was filled to the rim with hot apple cider.

“That smells delicious,” Thornton said taking a long intake of breath to relish the aroma. “A touch of brandy as well.”

“Of course,” Leigh beamed giving a cup and saucer first to Martin and then to Thornton. She kept one on the tray for herself.

Martin sipped the hot brew. “Leigh, you are a wonder. Will we be having this at the party?”

“Only a few of us,” Leigh joked. “I don’t think some of the righteous Christians would appreciate it.”

“You’re right,” Martin snorted. “They’d want the brandy and wouldn’t want it diluted with apple cider.”

Leigh and Thornton laughed heartily.

“Martin, Leigh, do you know how I can get to talk to Washakie?” Thornton said seriously. “Some of my men are helping to build Camp Brown as Washakie requested. I have to find out when he intends to move on his reservation in the Wind River region.”

“Washakie isn’t going to move until a fortification is built to withstand attacks from the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe,” Leigh reminded. “Washakie is a wise and careful leader. He will not put his people in jeopardy.”

“Leigh is right. The Sioux are fierce warriors. The Shoshone are a powerful enemy of the Sioux. Since the Sioux have banded with the Cheyenne and Arapahoe they are a might force. Washakie knows he cannot win a battle against those forces without the guns and military power of the Federal government,” Martin supported.

“I understand all of this. That is why the camp is being built,” Thornton commented. “Washakie still will not commit to the reservation. He remains in the Green River Valley even though he wants his people to live in Wind River Reservation. I need to find out exactly what he wants before he moves there. And I want to find out for myself, first hand.”

“I doubt we will see Washakie until spring. You will have to be patient, Thorn,” Martin stated. “Washakie stays close to his family in the cold winter. He is a strong family man devoted to his wife and children.”

“Wives,” Leigh corrected with a little giggle. “He has three of them right now.”

“And more than a dozen children,” Martin added. “That he is devoted to.”

“Washakie holds great commitment to his people and his family,” Leigh uttered thoughtfully. “It is difficult for us to comprehend the responsibility Washakie holds as the supreme Chief. It has to be similar to the pressures of the President of the United States.”

The inner depths of perception Leigh was endowed with amazed Thornton. Would he ever cease to be astounded with her simple wisdom? Of course he was thinking only of his duty. He

wasn't thinking of Washakie's side of the issue. He couldn't wait to speak to the chief now that he understood what they really needed to talk about.

"Thank you, Leigh," Thornton appreciated. "I think you have given me an understanding I needed when I do speak to Washakie."

Leigh blushed at the compliment.

"On to other more imminent challenges," Martin rescued. "We are in need of a lumberjack."

Leigh brightened, "Oh yes, a strong lumberjack that will cut for us the finest balsam pine."

"Do you know of any such able man?" Martin teased looking at Thornton.

Thornton took a sip of the hot cider. "Indeed I do. I shall be off tomorrow to find the fullest tree for the Rawlins lobby."

"We'll be off tomorrow," Leigh laughed. "I merely need you to do the sawing. This is my tree and I shall do the selecting."

"Your wish is my command," Thornton smiled raising his cup in salute. "We'll be off at first light to the mountains and I shall cut the finest tree of my lady's selection."

Thornton dressed in civilian clothes was wearing woolen underclothes, Levi pants, woolen socks under calf length moccasins he traded for with a Shoshone, linen shirt, covered with a checked flannel shirt, and lambs wool lined leather jacket. He wore a woolen muffler about his neck coming up to a flat brimmed hat and rabbit fur lined leather gloves.

Leigh was wearing woolen underwear, her duck pants, a silk blouse under a flannel shirt, calf length rabbit fur lined moccasins, woolen socks, and a rabbit fur lined doeskin jacket that was a gift to her from Long face. She wore a knitted woolen muffler and rabbit fur lined mittens over a pair of hand knitted woolen gloves.

They were on their way to the mountains for a balsam pine right after a big hot breakfast of flapjacks with molasses, eggs, bacon, fresh sliced bread, fresh soft butter, and sweetened mush with milk.

The sun was shining bright after the snow storm, so Leigh and Thornton put lamp black under their eyes so they would not suffer from snow blindness.

Buttermilk, and Comet made excellent time on the fresh snow and a clear trail. They brought along an extra pony with the makings for a travois on it's back. They would use the travois for bringing

back the tree. The pack had extra food, dry wood chips, and a log in case they needed to lunch. Leigh packed a bow saw in the saddlebags. She thought it was funny that Thornton never mentioned bringing a saw. Men were so funny, how would he cut the tree? She couldn't wait until they found the tree and asked him to cut it.

The day was beautiful and today Leigh felt like a young child again. Her life was comfortable, she had everything she needed, and getting the tree brought back the same childhood excitement she had so many years ago. Her mood was light and carefree.

All the way to the mountainside, Leigh and Thornton laughed and joked. They talked of childhood memories. They shared happy childhood experiences. Neither person had a care in the world.

"Over there," Leigh pointed to a large copse of balsam pines. "I think we will find my tree there." She reined Buttermilk toward the copse.

Thornton followed. The copse was near a frozen stream and the balsam pines were healthy and full.

Leigh went in, out, and all about the pines in the copse. She spread out her arms to measure across, and looked at the tops to see how tall. Leigh found three and then scrutinized them for every branch until she decided on the perfect tree. "This one. I want this one."

"You shall have it," Thornton bowed walking to Comet and then stopping short. He blushed down to his toes.

"What is it?" Leigh questioned innocently.

"I'll come back tomorrow," Thornton hesitated. "I seem to have forgotten the saw."

"Fortunately for you, I didn't," Leigh teased. "Look in the saddlebags. You will find a bow saw sufficient to do the job."

Thornton began laughing so hard his sides began to hurt. "You knew all along I'd forgotten. You never said a word."

"Why would a young woman second guess a commanding officer, a Colonel no less," Leigh quipped. "I didn't dare."

Thornton shook his head in mirth. She was wonderful. She was everything his life needed. She was hope and fun. She was responsibility and joy. She was hearth and home. He opened the saddlebag and pulled out the bow saw.

While Thornton was concentrating on cutting the tree, Leigh was creating snowballs and stockpiling them. The impish child she was feeling like this day came out in full power.

When the tree fell to the ground, Thornton looked up with pride of accomplishment. He expected congratulations from Leigh. Instead he was splattered in the chest by snow fragments from a well-aimed snowball. "What the?"

Another snowball hit him in the arm and then the leg. An arsenal of well-aimed snowballs was battering him.

"Some Commander," Leigh teased laughing out loud. "You let your guard down and lo and behold, you are slaughtered by a simple girl!"

"Is that a fact?" Thornton growled playfully. He picked up a handful of snow and packed it. With deadly aim he hurdled it at Leigh and whacked her in the arm.

The next ten minutes were spent in snowball warfare until Leigh ran out of snowballs and began to run down to the horses.

"Coward," Thornton shouted chasing after her. He caught her in a few strides, but his feet slipped out from under him on an icy snow bank.

Leigh fell down next to him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Caught you!” Thornton chortled still holding onto Leigh’s coat. He felt like a little kid again.

“Yes, you did,” Leigh agreed laughing. She felt as happy and carefree as a young child too. “This dent in the snow you helped me create gives me an idea. Let’s make snow angels.”

“What the Sam Hill is a snow angel?”

“You mean you have never made a snow angel?”

Thornton scowled, “Isn’t that obvious since I don’t know what it is?”

“Let go of my coat. Take my hand,” Leigh instructed. “Do what I do.” She spread out her arms and legs wide and moved them up and down.

This was just to wonderfully silly for Thornton. He followed instructions.

“Get up,” Leigh ordered.

Thornton obeyed.

“See the snow angels? There is the head, the wings, and the long flowing robes.”

Thornton looked at Leigh in astonishment. What a delight. “Let’s make some more.”

All over the open space Leigh and Thornton made snow angel imprints.

There was no doubt in Thornton’s mind after this day. He was in love with Leigh. He would climb the highest mountain to attain her love.

Together they pulled the tree toward the horses with ropes Thornton had tied around the branches.

Just before they got to the travois, Leigh slipped on an icy patch.

Thornton saw her fall and leaped to catch her only to slip on the same icy patch. He fell right on top of her.

Leigh’s face looked angelic as he gazed into her silver eyes. Her lashes were sprinkled with sparkles of snowflakes. Her cheeks were rosy pink from the cold. Her auburn hair in contrast to the blanket of snow she lay upon. He saw those lips pucker with laughter. He never felt so alive.

“Aren’t we graceful,” Leigh laughed. “It’s a good thing we had a soft landing.”

“Leigh.”

“Yes?”

“Leigh,” Thornton repeated.

“Yes? What is it?” Leigh questioned seriously. Thornton’s happy sparkling blue eyes disappeared and were replaced by something else. It was as if those happy eyes were revealing to her a deep well of emotion. Her thoughts were wiped away when his warm lips descended gently upon hers.

Thornton lost control of his will and gave way to the avalanche of emotion he felt in his heart. His kiss was supposed to be gentle and inviting. He couldn’t stop the kiss from becoming possessive and longing. He raised his lips to kiss her brows, her eyes, her cheeks, and returned to her lips. He invaded her mouth with a desire he couldn’t control.

Surprise changed quickly to desire and heated to passion for Leigh with Thornton’s kisses. Leigh always felt there was something special when they were together. At this moment she felt it was something wonderfully magical that only the two of them could share. She was lost in her own euphoria and returned his passion.

Thornton’s body completely covered Leigh. His male hardness was pressing against his coat and hers. He didn’t know when Leigh started participating in his passion but he became fevered in desire. He was certain his body would melt the hillside and cause a flood. The more Leigh returned in emotion, the more he demanded. He was fevered. He was starved. He removed his leather glove and unbuttoned her coat allowing his hand to enter and unbutton her shirt and blouse. His hand invaded her chemise and captured her rounded breast. His fingers played with the hardened nub. He removed his mouth from her lips and suckled her breast.

Leigh arched in pleasure when Thornton’s mouth covered her breast and suckled. A strong heat flushed her body and a quickening urgency began between her thighs. Totally inexperienced in copulation, Leigh had no idea about what was happening to her body.

Thornton’s hand boldly unbuttoned her duck pants. His hand found its way to the warm apex of her womanhood. His fingers played in the wet warmth he found there. He was on fire. In a moment he would forget all propriety and take his woman. His mouth released

her breast and he looked into those captivating silver eyes. “Leigh, I love you,” Thornton whispered.

Leigh was so enveloped in emotion her own logic had retreated to oblivion. The words from her mouth were distant and strange. “I love you, Thornton O’Neal.”

Suddenly a near and reverberating howl shook the two back to reality.

Thornton reached for his gun and pulled it from his holster.

Not more than twenty feet away stood a wolf howling for his mate.

Thornton took aim.

Leigh reached for the gun, “Put it away, Thornton. The wolf means us no harm. He could have easily hurt us while we were...were...”

Cold reality had once again gained control. Thornton returned the gun to its holster.

Leigh was sitting upright and returning her clothing to its proper buttoning. Leigh was ashamed. She had let her happy real world become overshadowed by a world of desire she knew she couldn’t have. She was so afraid Thornton would think her a wanton. Leigh said nervously, “We’d better get back.”

Thornton took her hand, “I’m so sorry, Leigh. Don’t be angry with me.”

“I was just as much at fault. It was the moment, the day, the fun,” Leigh replied hoping she could keep her voice from choking in disappointment. “We are only human.”

“No, Leigh,” Thornton countered. “I love you. I want you to remember this moment. I truly love you.”

Leigh didn’t know what to say or how to act. A handsome man like Colonel Thornton O’Neal couldn’t possibly love a simple plain woman like her. Even Martin wouldn’t have given her the time of day if he wasn’t so ill and needed her. All she could do was repeat, “We should be getting back.”

Together they pulled the tree to the travois. Thornton secured the tree and returned to Rawlins.

Leigh made every effort to make the return trip full of laughter and jokes.

Thornton laughed and joked with Leigh. Inside he was eating himself alive for scaring Leigh with his forwardness. He had never

felt such desire with any woman before. He had never behaved so possessively before. For Leigh's sake and their future, he promised himself to maintain his control.

Leigh dismounted Buttermilk in front of the Rawlins Hotel. She ran into the hotel and called Sven from behind the lobby desk. "Hurry, come quickly. We have the tree. We need help to bring it in."

Several small children had quickly surrounded Thornton. Their parents had told them that the Rawlins Hotel was going to have a magnificent Christmas tree. The children were excited scampering about the travois looking at the tree that would be turned into a wonderful sight to behold.

Thornton tied Comet and the extra pony to the rail by the hotel and started untying the some of the ropes around the tree and travois.

Sven put on his jacket and came out to help Colonel O'Neal.

Leigh ran to get Martin from the private quarters and wheeled his chair into the lobby.

"Wait until you see the tree, it is just perfect. It is ever so beautiful."

She placed his wheeled chair where he could get a good view and ran to the kitchen to get a pail of water. She would pour the water into the base of the tree holder the livery had made for her.

Just as Leigh finished pouring in the water, Thornton and Sven brought in the tree. She stayed on her knees until the tree was in its place. Once the tree was upright and Martin concurred that it was straight, she tightened the screws into the tree stump until it was tight.

"It is truly beautiful," Martin applauded clapping loudly.

"A sight to behold," Thornton agreed.

"Ja," Sven added succinctly.

Mary came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of honey sweetened popcorn balls she had made for ornaments. "Just in time to put on the tree."

Martin grabbed for one and Mary slapped his hand gently. "Sorry Mister Boss, these are for the tree. You can have one on Christmas day."

Thornton grabbed one and split in half. He handed one half to Martin. "I'm the tree cutter. I'll take my pay today. I'm starved."

"Oh you men," Mary laughed. "The two of you are worse than little naughty boys."

“Thank you,” Martin chortled. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Leigh took two balls from the tray. “I’ll help you get these up before they are all devoured.”

“I love this tree already,” Martin teased chewing on the half popcorn ball.

Leigh helped Mary put up all the balls on the tray and they stepped back. It’s a wonderful start.

“I’ll get the rest of the popcorn balls. You get those lovely crocheted ornaments you made,” Mary suggested.

Leigh went to the parlor and took the box from the chest. She had filled the box with crocheted bells and snowflakes. She then pulled out a special ornament she had made for the treetop. It was a ceramic angel she purchased from Rawlins Store. The angel was hollow underneath. Leigh sewed a tiny outfit for the angel and glued feathers in the shape of wings.

When she returned to the lobby, Sven was eating a popcorn ball and Mary had finished placing her decorations on the tree. “I’ll go to the storeroom and bring back the box of penny candy ornaments I made for the tree. You put on the bells and snowflakes.”

Leigh put on the crocheted ornaments allowing Martin to supervise. She used the stool Mary left to place all the ornaments uniformly around the tree.

Sven followed Mary to the storeroom and brought out the peppermint sticks and paper chain decorations. He couldn’t help but get involved with the decorating.

Thornton had to be a part of this tree decorating also. He helped Sven loop the chain evenly around the tree and also place the peppermint sticks carefully and evenly around the tree.

Mary and Leigh finished the tree with her penny candy ornaments, the cranberry rope, and some glass ornaments Leigh had ordered from a store in Cheyenne. Thornton and Sven placed the tiny candles and holders on the ends of the tree branches.

Leigh gave her homemade angel topper to Thornton to place on top of the tree.

Thornton stood on the stool and reached to the very top of the 8’ tree. He placed the angel on the top branch carefully. When Thornton finished he picked up the stool, walked to Martin’s side, and stood to admire the Rawlins Hotel Wonderful Christmas tree. “Well Martin, what do you think?”

“I’m spell bound!”

“It’s beautiful,” Mary murmured.

“It’s magnificent,” Leigh whispered humbly.

“Ja,” Sven added.

“It is pretty,” Maggie bubbled clapping her hands in delight. She woke up from her nap and followed her mother into the lobby without her mother noticing.

“Will you look at that,” Thornton directed pointing to the windows of the hotel. “The children are peeking to look at the tree.”

“Let them in,” Martin ordered. “They just can’t eat the ornaments yet.”

“I’ll make them some hot chocolate,” Mary volunteered. “That should warm them a little. It is really cold outside.”

“I’ll help you,” Leigh stated following Mary to the kitchen.

Sven opened the door. “Come in kids, you can see da tree.”

The children swarmed around the tree like honeybees to a hive. They oohed and aahed the tree.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Martin was having the time of his life. The joy such little things brought to children made him feel alive and stronger. What miracle woman did he marry? She gave him a longer life when the doctor had told him he might live only a few more months. His last days on earth were the most fulfilling and rewarding he had ever known in his life, and it was due to the loving and sharing woman he called his wife. All of his fortune would never amount to enough in thanks for what she brought to him for his dying days.

“Are we really invited to Christmas here, Mr. Chandler?” several of the children asked.

“You certainly are,” Martin beamed. “We’ll have turkey, beef, and ham. We’ll have fresh vegetables, muffins, biscuits, and even ice cream and pie. You are all invited.”

“This will be the best Christmas ever,” one little boy crowed.

“I’m gonna make my Ma a special gift, wrap it and put it under the tree for her. Won’t that be a hoot? Is that okay Mr. Chandler?”

“I think that is a wonderful idea,” Martin smiled broadly. “That is what Christmas is all about. We give gifts to the people we love.”

Suddenly the children were making plans for gifts for their families.

One little girl asked Martin, “Will you get any gifts? Cuz if you don’t I’ll make you one for being so nice and making us a Christmas tree.”

Martin took the little girl’s hand, “I’d love a present from you, but you see I have the best present in the world. She gives me her gift of love everyday. She’s right there giving all of you some hot chocolate. So don’t worry your pretty little head. Go to Mrs. Chandler and get some hot chocolate before it is all gone.”

Thornton heard the conversation between Martin and the little girl. His heart did flip-flops. He hadn’t felt this wonderful since he was a child. Just like Martin he was in the wonderful aura of Leigh. How could any man be so fortunate to be in her presence? She did bring light to a dark world. She brought love to a world of emptiness.

Her presence brought happiness to a world of selfishness. “I’ll get us some hot chocolate.”

Thornton approached Leigh. She turned and flashed him a brilliant smile. Leigh handed him two cups of hot apple cider with a flavoring of brandy.

“I thought you might enjoy this more.”

“You are incredible!” Thornton admired. Leigh knew just how to do things and when to do things. She second-guessed his needs. He took the cups and handed one to Martin.

Martin looked up to his friend. “I can see it in your eyes. It is real! Leigh is truly wonderful.”

At last Christmas Eve had arrived. The children had made special gifts for their parents and siblings. Some of the gifts were simple pieces of paper offering to do a special chore on a special day. Leigh and Martin helped the children wrap the presents, label them, and put them under the tree.

Right after supper Leigh and Thornton brought out the special gifts from the storeroom and put them under the tree away from the children’s presents.

Martin wheeled his chair to the tree and placed several gifts toward the back of the tree and away from the other presents before Leigh and Thornton returned. They did end up taking several trips.

When all the gifts were placed under the tree they were amazed. There had to be nearly a hundred or more gifts.

“I feel like I am floating in happiness,” Martin commented taking Leigh’s hand. “I don’t remember who said, it is better to give than receive, but it a true statement.”

“Perhaps we receive so much when we give,” Leigh sighed happily. “I feel like I am receiving a world of joy.”

“I feel all warm and good inside myself,” Thornton added. “Let’s get to bed so the morning comes sooner. I’m going to try and sleep, but I have to admit I am really excited. I can’t wait to share this with... with... with everyone.”

Christmas Day dawned with a brilliant winter sun. Leigh helped Martin from bed and dress before the clock struck eight.

The hotel staff and other employees were already in the lobby with their children. The Wellington cooks and waiters were bringing the breakfast fare on trays to the lobby tables. The children were

flitting about anxiously awaiting not only their presents, but to give their parents the presents they made and Martin had helped to wrap. The excitement was so high no one noticed Martin, Leigh, and Thornton slip into the lobby behind their guests. When the assembly noticed them they all cheered, "Merry Christmas!"

When the tables were filled with food, Leigh, Martin, and Thornton led the line to fill their plates with the Christmas breakfast.

After the last person in line had a plate, Leigh asked Thornton and Sven to light the candles on the tree.

The kerosene lamps were dimmed and everyone stared in awe at the tree. All commented that it was the most beautiful tree they had ever seen.

Leigh announced that it was time to give out the presents.

Martin wheeled his chair to the tree. He picked up each gift one by one for the children or adult to retrieve. Thornton stood by his side and helped hand him each gift.

While breakfast was cleared, they sang old Christmas Carols and some danced. The young children played with new toys. The older children tried on their new clothes or shoes. Martin's employees were surprised when they received \$20 gold coins as a gift from their employer.

The guests left the hotel and many went to church for the Christmas service. The talk after the service was about the wonderful party and tree at the Rawlins Hotel. All that attended asked for special prayers on this holy day for Mr. and Mrs. Chandler.

Claudia bit her tongue in rage. "That outsider no account strumpet had no call to ruin my Christmas," she hissed. "Imagine her, that nobody, being the talk of the town."

"What are you saying?" Elizabeth Stratton, another church ladies society member asked.

"It's just so incredible that Mrs. Chandler is being hailed as such a hostess. Some people simply don't know the things I know about her," Claudia crowed. "If they did, they certainly would have nothing to do with her."

"We can only surmise that she is a fortune hunter," Elizabeth stated. "She has done a lot of charitable work for the town."

"It's a cover up for her sins," Claudia countered. "Why I heard she has gone with Indians and lived with the Savages."

"No!" Elizabeth gasped in shock.

“She’s also been seen with men other than her husband. She flaunts herself like the trash she is,” Claudia condemned.

“What men?” Elizabeth questioned with interest in gossip.

“It’s not for me to tell, but she isn’t with her husband,” Claudia informed. “I would stake my reputation on the fact she doesn’t sleep with her husband. Who knows what men she does sleep with?”

“Do Tell!”

“She is celebrating a Christian Holiday and she and Mr. Chandler don’t even attend church,” Claudia added. “I do believe those two are heathens. The audacity of that woman is incredulous.”

“Incredulous,” Elizabeth repeated.

Claudia was pleased with herself. Elizabeth would spread the gossip all over town. She was certain Elizabeth would embellish the story even more.

The majority of the town went to Rawlins Hotel and participated in the festivities. Everyone left with some kind of gift, plenty to eat, a view of the decorated tree, and lots of songs and good cheer.

During this time Leigh, Thornton, and Martin exchanged their gifts.

Leigh had a special smoking jacket made for Martin. It was deep blue quilted velvet stuffed with down. The lining was gold silk and had a gold silk sash.

Leigh gave Thornton a woolen muffler and gloves in deep blue wool she had knitted herself.

Thornton gave her another blank book for her to write her stories. He gave Martin a warm quilt his mother had made as a special present for Martin.

Martin gave Thornton a silver brandy flask with his initials. He surprised Leigh with not only the most beautiful and fashionable dark forest green velvet dress, but also an emerald choker and matching earrings.

“Martin, this is too much,” Leigh said breathlessly. “I’m not used to such extravagance.”

“You must get used to it, for your pleasure and surprise gives me much joy. Besides, I am sick of seeing you in that silk gray uniform. I want you to wear this for me at least once a month,” Martin scolded. “That is a strong request.”

“You spoil me,” Leigh giggled happily. She was delighted with the gifts and felt really loved.

“You can’t spoil someone as perfect as you are,” Martin contradicted.

Leigh blushed to her toes. She knelt beside Martin’s wheeled chair. They kissed tenderly.

Thornton was a little jealous, but he could not deny his friend the last happiness he would have on earth. He would wait for his Leigh. He would wait patiently. He waited for thirty-two years. He could wait a bit longer. He had wanted to buy Leigh a carved golden locket, but felt it was too intimate for a married woman. Once Leigh was his wife, he could buy her so many things.

Claudia had entered to see the doings she had heard so much about. The tree was beautiful as described. Everyone was having a wonderful time eating, conversing, caroling, and even dancing. She turned as green as the new dress with envy, and the emeralds turned her anger toward Leigh even more. Why would such lower class obtain such jewelry when people like her of Mayflower blood have nothing so fine as those jewels? As quietly as she entered, she left. She would continue to spread her little tidbits about this Leigh woman. It was her only source of revenge.

It was dark when the last guest left. It was another hour later when the lobby was restored to normalcy excluding the decorated tree. The candles were snuffed out. It was quiet and dimly lit.

Leigh and Thornton helped Martin undress for bed. Thornton helped Martin into bed. Leigh covered him. Martin looked healthier and hadn’t lost any more weight, but he was getting weaker.

“Thank you for helping Martin,” Leigh appreciated closing Martin’s bedroom door. “He’s getting weaker. I’m so worried.”

“Has the doctor said anything?” Thornton probed.

“Doctor Farrah told me that Martin has lasted much longer than he expected,” Leigh sighed and choked a sob down her throat. “He doesn’t think Martin will last through spring.” She broke down and cried. “I do love him so!”

Thornton enveloped her in his arms and let her cry on his uniform shirt. “I love him, too! If there were anything we could do, it would have been done,” he comforted. “I can only tell you that this is the happiest I have ever seen Martin. His love for you and your love for him has brought him something precious in his twilight hours. You must believe that you have made him very happy.”

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“I’ve only returned what he has given me,” Leigh sobbed.

“And that is the greatest joy a man can have,” Thornton soothed. Inside he was tearing apart. He loved Martin and it hurt him to see his friend dying. It also reminded him how mortal he was. It hurt the most that they both loved the same woman, and Martin had won her love. He hoped he would win Leigh’s love in the future. “Off to bed with you now. You are very tired. I think Martin wants to see you in that new dress tomorrow. So do I.”

The long winter dragged on. Martin got to see Leigh in her new dress several times. Martin was getting weaker. Soon he would be completely bed ridden. Before the end he would require pain medication from Doctor Farrah.

Thornton visited whenever he could. The three would have wonderful discussions. Everyone seemed cheerful. They were cheerful for Martin’s sake.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Spring finally arrived in Rawlins, but with the sunshine of renewed life a shadow of death hovered over Leigh's loved ones.

Martin was now bed ridden. He was so weak. Leigh spoon-fed him his meals. A strong robust man that used to love thick steaks was reduced to eating mashed foods and broths. His body reduced to atrophied muscles clinging to a skeleton with sagging skin.

Doctor Farrah predicted the end was near for Martin. He warned Leigh that soon he would hemorrhage blood. When that happened he was supposed to be called immediately. Doctor Farrah would give Martin strong doses of morphine to ease the pain. Leigh was also informed that when Martin began hemorrhaging, death would come in a day or two.

"I must look like a monster to you," Martin told Leigh one morning. "You say nothing, but I can see what I've become."

"I see what you are," Leigh corrected. "You are a loving and caring man that this world owes a debt. I see you as the wonderful man I married and nothing will ever change my perception. Not even your nonsense talk."

Martin smiled and returned his head to his pillow. "I'm the luckiest man in the world. I'm glad I stole you from Thornton."

"What silliness is that?" Leigh laughed lifting another spoonful of pudding for Martin to eat.

Martin gently pushed the spoon away from his mouth. "It isn't silliness," he said firmly. "I knew Thornton was in love with you. I knew he would realize it soon enough, but I fell in love with you. I needed you. I was selfish and asked you to become my wife."

"Where on earth did you come up with a notion that Colonel O'Neal was in love with me?" Leigh questioned jokingly. "No more nonsense. Eat your dessert." She pushed the spoon of pudding gently into his mouth.

Martin swallowed the pudding and replied. "It isn't a notion. Thornton even admitted to me he was in love with you after we were married." He raised his hand to silence Leigh. "Sweetheart, when I leave this world I want you to consider Thornton for a husband. He'll

make a good husband. He'll love you, care for you, and you'll have strong healthy children."

Leigh couldn't bear this conversation she evaded the subject. "I will consider whatever you ask of me. It still remains to be seen if that is what Colonel O'Neal would want."

"I adore your stubbornness. I told you the truth. Thornton loves you and stop calling him Colonel O'Neal. It isn't fitting for a wife to call her husband Colonel O'Neal. It would be like you calling me Major Chandler," Martin chuckled. He allowed another spoonful of pudding to be put in his mouth. "Call him Thornton. Or better yet, call him Thorn. He'll remember me when you do."

"Very well. We'll see if Thorn is interested in me when the time comes," Leigh sighed wiping a drip of pudding from Martin's mouth. A tremble reminded her that day they cut down the tree. The day they acted like children. She remembered his kiss. She remembered his fondling. She remembered how much she wanted him. She remembered the fire of passion he created within her.

"I want you to marry Thorn," Martin continued almost seeming to read her mind. "The two of you are suited for each other, but you don't have to marry anyone if you don't want marriage. I'm leaving you everything. You will be a very rich woman. I won't worry about you dealing with fortune hunters. You'll be able to spot one a mile away. I believe you will want children."

"I don't want to discuss this any more!" Leigh lashed out. "I don't want to deal with reality. I have to deal with reality all my life, and then you came along. You have brought me such joy and happiness. I want to stay in this world for every minute I can with you. Stop it! Stop it right now."

"I'm sorry," Martin apologized.

Tears flooded Leigh's face. "I don't know what is got into me. I should be apologizing. I can't deal with you leaving me. I just can't."

"But I'll never leave you," Martin grinned. "I'll always be right there!" He pointed to her mind. "One day you'll write a story about me. I'll always be alive as long as you live."

Leigh continued to cry and lay her head next to Martin's head on the pillow. "Of course you will my darling. You will be alive as long as I live."

A knock on the door startled Leigh. She stood upright, wiped the tears from her face with her apron, and straightened her dress. She

was surprised to see Jefferson Stone, the foreman of The Three Circle Ranch.

“I’m sorry to bother you ma’am, but there are two things I need to say. The first thing is, may I see Mr. Chandler?”

“Of course,” Leigh invited him in the room extending her arm.

Jefferson removed his hat. “Sir, I understand you are building a ranch near Fort Fred Steele.”

Leigh was shocked. Martin kept certain private books with his lawyers. He had never told her about this ranch.

“How did you hear about it?” Martin queried.

“Nothing is a secret with cow pokes,” Jefferson stated. “We all get together now and then, one way or another.”

“It is true. I’m calling it the Shamrock,” Martin shared. “Why are you interested?”

“I’d like to cast my lot with you, sir,” Jefferson hesitated.

“I’ve been ranch foreman for the Strands nigh onto fifteen years. I’ve got experience and I’d like to hire on.”

“I need an experienced ranch foreman. Of course you are hired. Now that my wife knows of my little surprise, we’ll have her draw up the employment papers to send to my lawyers,” Martin accepted. “What I want to know is why you want to hire out?”

“That’s the second thing I need to say,” Jefferson replied. His set his chin and said somberly to Leigh. “I’m sorry to say that your Auntie Ruthie died a few days ago. Your brother wouldn’t let any of us go fetch you.”

Leigh controlled her shock and found a chair to sit down.

“Actually that doesn’t surprise me at all. My brother would think I might interfere with his inheritance. I might steal a locket or something he could sell.”

“I want to tell you everything right up front. Your Auntie Ruthie started getting sick in the winter. Carl started selling off everything when she was bed ridden. The only thing left now is the ranch and cattle. He cut our pay saying the ranch was going broke. We knew better. We knew Jacob and Ruth were good business people.

All the Shoshone hands left before the winter came. A lot of the hands followed them out. The last of us stayed until Ruth died. We all want jobs with the Shamrock. If that’s okay with you?”

Martin smiled. "The ranch is nearly complete. We'll be bringing stock in from Saint Louis soon. It's perfect to have all of you work for me."

"What did Auntie Ruthie die of?" Leigh asked calmly. Aunt Ruth was family, but never close family. The Junge family always favored Carl.

"It's right strange. She died just like your mother, same sickness. Your brother called it the family disease, but your Auntie Ruthie was your father's sister. It made no sense," Jefferson shared.

"It is strange," Leigh agreed. "My grandmother, mother, and Aunt Louise were all of the same blood. Auntie Ruthie is...I mean was my father's sister. Perhaps you might speak to Doctor Farrah about it."

"I'm heading up there right after we sign papers. I ought to let you know two more things," Jefferson added. "I brought Bessie and Rueben with me. They jumped the broom a month ago and with Ruth dead, well she wanted to come work for you, Mrs. Chandler. Bessie told me that you said she could come anytime."

"Of course she can," Leigh jumped from the chair and walked to the door. "Where is she? Why didn't she come in?"

"She and Reuben went to the livery with the buckboard. It'll be awhile before they come in," Jefferson informed. "There's one last thing."

"Do I need to sit down?" Leigh asked. This day was already too much for news and surprise.

"I think you might want to do just that," Jefferson agreed waiting until Leigh returned to the chair. "It seems your sister in law Theresa ran off with one of the no account hands. He was good looking and the two of them turned a lot of hay in the barn. Your brother came to town with his daughters yesterday. He's filing for a divorce. We saw him sitting on the boarding house porch with Mrs. Thatcher."

Martin started laughing.

Leigh looked strangely at her husband and cocked a brow. "What is so funny, husband?"

"Lie with dogs, and sleep with fleas," Martin chuckled. "I can't imagine any two more likely paired vipers. Claudia Thatcher and your brother are two peas in a pod."

Giggles bubbled up from Leigh. "Goodness, you couldn't be more accurate."

“Sweetheart, get some paper and ink. We’ll draw up employment papers for Jefferson and the hands,” Martin ordered. “I needed that laugh. I feel stronger already. Hurry dear, while I’m still feeling so good.”

Leigh complied and swiftly returned with pen and ink.

“I’m really sorry you couldn’t say goodbye to your Auntie Ruthie,” Jefferson offered in conversation while Martin was preparing the employment papers to be sent to his New York Lawyers. “That brother of yours wouldn’t let the hands leave for nothing. I stayed on purpose because I thought your Auntie Ruthie might need me.”

“I’m certain she did need you, but Carl would have never allowed it,” Leigh responded. “I could never get close to my Aunt Ruth. She was too involved with Carl. I don’t think she was ever really interested in seeing me anyway.”

“That Carl is a smooth one all right. He could talk the ears off a hare if he had a mind too,” Jefferson agreed. “We hands knew what he was really all about. None of us could tolerate being with him more than a minute. He’s a real pompous peacock. It’s a shame Ruth never really got to know you. We ranch hands heard all about you and what good things you done.”

“Thank you,” Leigh appreciated. “Thank you for caring to tell me about my Aunt.”

“It’s all finished,” Martin stated giving the paper to Leigh. “Make a copy for Jefferson, and all the hands from the list Jefferson gave you.”

Leigh smiled as she took the paper. “Are you going to tell me why you are building a working cattle spread near Fort Fred Steele?”

“Of course I am,” Martin replied. His eyes were twinkling brightly. “You’ve trained good people to run things here in Rawlins. I want to move to the ranch in the summer and live there away from the city.” He was lying and Leigh would know he was lying. Both of them knew he might not live beyond spring, but it was a way to get her closer to Thorn. The Shamrock was going to be a gift to Thorn in his last will and testament. He wanted to get Leigh away from vipers just like Claudia Thatcher. At the Shamrock ranch she would be sheltered by Thorn’s love and care. They would raise healthy children. City life was not the place to raise healthy children.

“Really?” Leigh questioned raising her brow. “You want to move there in summer? We shall do just that!” Leigh walked out of

the room and returned with more paper. She began making copies at the desk.

"I'll be heading up to Doctor Farrah's place now," Jefferson stated. "I'll be back later for the papers. Thank you Mr. and Mrs. Chandler. Oh, Bessie and Rueben will be here later."

"I'll send Bessie and Rueben to the Shamrock," Leigh quipped. "They can set up the place and make it ready for us."

"That's a wonderful idea," Martin beamed. He pulled out a catalog he hidden under the covers. "You and I need to pick out the furniture. If we order it now, it will be delivered before summer."

"Whatever you say," Leigh said adoringly. "Do you have floor plans of this ranch house?"

"In the last drawer of my desk," Martin answered.

Leigh found the rolled papers and opened them on Martin's bed next to the catalog. "Martin, this isn't a ranch house. This is a mansion! This place is huge."

"And we have to fill it all with furniture," Martin teased. He opened the catalog. "Let's start with the master bedroom."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bessie and Reuben did come to Martin's room. Martin drew a map of the location of the Shamrock and they were given a month's pay in advance along with two hundred dollars to buy seeds, flowers, and food for the completed ranch house. Martin was specific about wanting rose bushes in front and a small well kept lawn and garden in the front of the house. He had even drawn pictures of what he wanted planted and where. A barn was already in place and Rueben would be busy buying horse stock as well as getting the landscaping accomplished. They were told that a bunkhouse had already been built and that Jefferson and the last of The Circle Three Ranch hands would be arriving. Bessie would have to cook for all of them until other arrangements were made. Bessie and Reuben couldn't be happier with the arrangements.

Several hours after Bessie and Reuben left for their room in Rawlins Hotel, Doctor Farrah visited. He removed his hat, handed it to Sven and took Leigh's arm.

"I don't want to alarm you in any way so I'm telling you ahead of time. I need to have a private conversation with your husband. It has nothing to do with his illness. I have some information I want to share with him. This information is assumption and not based on facts. It is something I wish to share only with him," Doctor Farrah said firmly. "Do you understand?"

"I think so," Leigh replied. "If you assure me it has nothing to do with Martin or his illness. I am to be kept informed on that matter."

"I promise you will be," Doctor Farrah vowed. "This has nothing to do with it."

Leigh nodded her acceptance and walked with Doctor Farrah to Martin's bedroom door. She opened it a crack. Martin was smiling as he paged through the catalog. He was enjoying all the purchases they had agreed upon for the Shamrock.

“Doctor Farrah,” Martin grinned. “Do come in.”

“What is all this?” Doctor Farrah asked spreading out his arms around all the papers and catalog pages.”

“It’s for our new house near Fort Fred Steele,” Martin winked.

“Delightful,” Doctor Farrah cheerfully replied looking at the circled furniture. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to have a private word with you.”

“Of course,” Martin agreed. “You don’t mind do you, sweetheart?”

“Not at all,” Leigh answered sweetly. “Just don’t decide to ship a castle here from Ireland brick by brick without telling me first.”

“You have my word,” Martin joked. “No more surprises today.”

“Thank you,” Leigh smiled. She left the room and closed the door gently behind her. In her hand were the papers she needed to finish copying.

“What is it Farrah?” Martin asked seriously as soon as Leigh had closed the door.

“It’s about Ruth Strands and Leigh’s mother,” Doctor Farrah responded grimly. “I don’t think their deaths were natural. I believe the two women were poisoned.”

“With what?”

“Arsenic.”

“How? Why?”

“After Leigh’s mother died I had conversations with two hands. Neither ranch hand liked Carl very much so I was careful about jumping to conclusions. I sent letters of inquiry to my friend in Chicago. He contacted his associates in Milwaukee. Those associates investigated two other deaths, Leigh’s aunts and grandmother. Their conclusions were the same as mine. Although nothing can be proved.”

“Dammit, what conclusions?” Martin demanded.

“All the women had violent painful stomach problems. Their skin was yellow in pallor and had lesions on their feet. These are all symptoms of arsenic poisoning,” Doctor Farrah revealed. “It is the same with Leigh’s mother and Jefferson related the same symptoms regarding Ruth Strand.”

Martin knew immediately what Farrah was referring. “You think Carl poisoned those women to get inheritance. He is the vulture Leigh describes him to be. Who would guess the vulture would kill his victims.”

“We have no proof, but I highly suspect that Carl has murdered for inheritance,” Doctor Farrah warned. “I wanted to tell you privately because I couldn’t face Leigh with such accusations about her own blood.”

“I don’t think she would be surprised, but I’m glad you didn’t and won’t discuss this with her.”

“I wanted to warn you, because I’ve learned that Carl’s wife deserted him. He is filing for divorce and he is living in Claudia Thatcher’s boarding house,” Doctor Farrah continued. “Claudia Thatcher is certain to tell him all about your wealth, your health, and that Leigh is to inherit. Her life would then be in danger.”

Martin saw the danger quickly. “If Leigh is unmarried, has no children or heirs, Carl would be the heir designate. That Bastard!”

“Those were my thoughts,” Doctor Farrah admitted.

“I’ll have to make changes to my will. If Leigh dies without spouse or children, all inheritance will be returned to a trust fund that my lawyers will handle. I will put in a clause that repudiates any claim or right to the fortune by Carl Junge, Leigh’s brother,” Martin planned. “Send a wire for Thornton to come here. I need him to be aware of what is going on. We’ll get this handled as soon as he arrives.”

“I want no harm to come to Leigh,” Doctor Farrah stated. “I’ll do my best to protect her.”

“You just did,” Martin appreciated.

“I’ll kill him!” Thornton roared when he heard Doctor Farrah’s suspicions. “If he comes near Leigh, I’ll kill him.”

“Going to prison for murder won’t help Leigh a bit,” Martin teased. “I wanted you to know our suspicions. I need you to marry Leigh and produce children.”

“That will not be a problem,” Thornton grinned wickedly. “I love Leigh with all my heart. Producing heirs will be a pleasure.”

“Leigh has a hard time believing you could be in love with her,” Martin commented.

“You and Leigh discussed marriage with Colonel O’Neal?” Doctor Farrah gasped.

“I did. I did it in my own way,” Martin replied dryly. He turned to Thornton. “You may have to woo her carefully, Thorn. You see she has been told so much by her family and others that she is a

plain simpleton outsider, she believes it. Why would a handsome Colonel be interested in her?"

"Why?" Thorn scoffed. "She doesn't honestly see how beautiful she is? She doesn't realize how wonderful she is? She can't understand how much happiness she brings?"

"No my friend, she doesn't," Martin sighed. "You will have to make her believe in herself and all the wonderful things we know and see about her."

"There is also bad gossip about her by certain ladies of the upper echelon in this town," Martin shared. "The gossip hurts Leigh deeply. She won't admit to the hurt. She doesn't even want me to know about it."

"Who would dare say anything bad about Leigh?" Doctor Farrah and Thornton chimed in unison.

"Several jealous people," Martin replied angrily. "I've taken care of one of them. Won't she be surprised when the rug is pulled? Still, you should be aware of the gossip and what is said. It is the reason I began building Shamrock Ranch. After I die I want Leigh to live there. I want you to marry Leigh and live there. Live happily there. Keep our Leigh protected there."

"I was wondering what you were doing building that big place so close to the fort," Thornton smiled. "It's beautiful. Leigh and I will be happy there. We'll make enough babies to fill every bedroom."

"How I do envy you," Martin laughed. "I've never been happier with my Leigh, but I could never be a true husband. My only regret is that I couldn't sire a child for us."

"I'll make it up to you," Thornton quipped. "We'll have one boy just for you. We'll call him Chandler."

"Not Martin?"

"I never cared for Martin. Besides, Chandler is your name to be carried on."

"You said you'd have one boy? Are you planning on all girls?" Doctor Farrah teased.

"Yep, we're going to have only girls. I want daughters. I'll have one son just for Martin. He'll be raised right. He'll learn to love the land. I don't want to send my sons to war. We know what that is like don't we, Martin?" Thornton responded. "Chandler will inherit the Shamrock. I'll make sure he's taught properly. My girls will take care of the businesses."

"How many girls?" Martin asked good-naturedly.

“At least three. I’ve already picked out their names,” Thornton bragged.

“The names?” Doctor Farrah asked.

“Regina, Rebecca or Becky, and Rachel,” Thornton answered quickly.

“Land sakes, you have been planning ahead,” Martin laughed.

“I can’t get Leigh off my mind,” Thornton confessed. “While she is married to you, I have to think of other things, like what our pretty little daughters will look like and what their names will be.”

“I’ll be happy to deliver them for you,” Doctor Farrah joked. Then he returned to the matter at hand. “The important thing here is to be aware that Carl must know by now how wealthy his sister is and will be.”

“He’ll be certain to show up here and check up on my health,” Martin snarled. “The vulture is always ready to pick the meat off fresh bones.”

“We could warn Leigh,” Thornton suggested.

“I don’t think that is a good idea,” Martin rebuked. “You have to remember that Leigh is strongly rooted to her family heritage. She may not like her brother, but he is her brother. It wouldn’t be right to accuse him of murder without substantiation. Leigh is a stickler on proving guilt before accusation.”

“Martin is right,” Doctor Farrah agreed. “We have no proof. I have only my suspicions.”

“Accurate suspicions,” Thornton complained. “We all know in our minds that vulture would stop at nothing for a gold piece. Leigh even told me he took her mother’s pin money that she gave her mother before they left for The Three Circle Ranch.”

“When did she tell you that?” Martin queried. “She never told me.”

“She told me at her Aunt’s ranch before we left to return to Rawlins,” Thornton answered. “She didn’t think it was important enough to tell you. Leigh never wanted to upset you over trivial matters.”

“Back to the subject at hand,” Doctor Farrah reminded. “Carl will be coming to call. I also just learned that he is selling the ranch for cash. All the hands quit. No one will work for him. His wife left with a ranch hand. His wife took all their cash with her. He was left with their two girls, no money, and ranch to sell.”

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“The last of hands were hired by me,” Martin informed. “I heard about his wife deserting him. I didn’t know she took everything. He will be desperate.”

“Mrs. Thatcher is seeing to him,” Doctor Farrah enlightened. “The rumor is they will be married as soon as his divorce is final.”

“Two of the same breed,” Thornton snorted. “They’ll devour each other.”

“We can hope. In the mean time I want everyone to keep a watch when he is around. If he offers any food or drink to Leigh, get it away. Knock it down on the floor if you must,” Doctor Farrah suggested.

“Isn’t there some chemical test you can use to prove there is arsenic in something?” Thornton asked. “I thought I heard that somewhere.”

“If we can get the tainted food,” Doctor Thornton agreed. “I can run a test. It’s basic chemistry.”

“Then shouldn’t we try to get the food or drink and get it to you?” Thornton asked.

“Absolutely,” Doctor Farrah concurred.

A knock at the door created a shroud of silence.

“Come in,” Martin invited.

“If you men are finished with your private chat,” Leigh purred sarcastically. “I would like to see my husband get his rest.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The end of spring brought warm weather to Rawlins. Everything was blooming. In the morning Leigh would bring a fresh rose from the rose garden behind the hotel Martin had created and tended before his illness.

Leigh and Martin both knew the end was drawing near.

Martin had lost even more weight. His eyes were sunken into the black sockets of his face. He was so weak he could barely lift his hands.

The mansion built for Shamrock ranch was completed. The furniture they had ordered had arrived. Bessie and Rueben had put everything in order. Rueben had even planted rose bushes around the entire house for Martin. Bessie and Rueben had even selected a family burial plot on the ranch grounds. It was a grassy hill that overlooked most of the ranch expanse. The plot hill looked directly at the mansion and the small town surrounding Fort Fred Steele.

Leigh had only written and oral confirmations of the state of the mansion. She barely left Martin's side. She had even hired a bookkeeper to handle all Martin's holdings.

Stephen McDonald was an excellent bookkeeper and happily had fallen in love with Mary Hayes. They would be married soon.

It was a bright morning on that late spring day when Leigh sat on the bed next to Martin. She was holding different fabrics to select for new draperies that would be custom made for the large windows of Shamrock Mansion.

Martin suddenly laid his head back against the pillow. "I don't feel well."

Leigh dropped the fabric and held back a scream when she saw dark black blood oozing from Martin's tear ducts, ears, and nose. This is what she had been warned about. She had seen the same thing

happen to her sister just before she died. In her mind she denied what was happening. She couldn't lose Martin. She just couldn't give him up just yet. "I'll get a cool cloth." She walked briskly to leave the room. Once she was outside he ran to Sven and hysterically cried out, "Get Doctor Farrah, immediately. Then send a wire to Thornton O'Neal at Fort Fred Steele. Simply put on it 'Come Immediately' Urgent! Leigh!" First find Mary and tell her to bring me cloths and a large cool water bowl.

Her frantic voice was enough to send Sven catapulting over the lobby. He knew Mary was in the storeroom and ran to get her. "Hurry to Mr. Chandler's room. It is time. Ja! Hurry and bring cloths with water. Mrs. Chandler needs ya! Ja! Hurry!"

Mary bolted for the kitchen and nearly ran into Leigh carrying several cloths and a bowl of water. "Good Lord, is it?"

Leigh's face was already streaked with tears. She nodded and ran to Martin's bedroom in the private quarters. She placed the bowl of water on the stand. Carefully she dipped the cloth in the bowl and picked up the empty bowl on the floor. Just in the nick of time she caught Martin's bloody vomit.

"I ruined my shirt," Martin whispered pathetically. "I'm sorry for the mess. I'm sorry for the trouble."

"Shh, my darling," Leigh answered lovingly as she gently wiped the dark stains away from his eyes, ears, and nose. "What trouble are you talking about? I love taking care of you. It brings me happiness. Shh, my darling."

"It hurts bad," Martin croaked out. His breath was heavily labored.

"I'll give you some of the morphine Doctor Farrah left us," Leigh whimpered trying to stop her sobs. "The pain will stop. You'll be better." Leigh carefully left the bed and went to the dressing table. She retrieved the bottle of morphine and a spoon. The morphine had been mixed with water to this point, but Doctor Farrah had told her that when the pain was bad to spoon it directly into Martin's mouth. At the end it would be very painful and it didn't matter if morphine was addictive or not. Leigh put the spoon of morphine into Martin's mouth. "I know this is bitter my darling, but it will take away the pain."

Martin opened and closed his eyes to show understanding. The tear ducts and nose continued to leak dark black blood.

Leigh stayed on the bed and wiped the blood with cool cloths. Mary was with her now. Mary took the soiled cloths and gave her a fresh dampened cloth.

After several minutes that seemed to be hours, Doctor Farrah entered the room. He looked at the soiled cloths, the bowl full of dark blood vomit, and the face of his patient. He listened to the labored breathing. It was the end. Everyone knew it. There was no need to say it. He was there to make certain his patient did not have to die with pain. "Did you give him the morphine?"

Leigh's eyes were filled with tears. "Yes, several minutes ago. I gave him a spoonful. I didn't dilute it."

"Good," Doctor Farrah appreciated. "He'll be more comfortable in a few minutes. I'll stay here with you."

Sven had returned from the telegraph office. He had sent the telegram and in a minute of receiving the wire, Fort Fred Steele had acknowledged the receipt.

Sergeant Harvey was sitting outside Thornton's office and was handed the telegram. He knocked on the door and opened it. "Sir, it's a wire from Rawlins. I believe it was sent urgent."

Thornton bolted from behind the desk and grabbed the paper. He knew it was near the end for his best friend. The wire had to be from Leigh. He opened it, read it, and barked orders. "Sergeant, go to the livery get Comet saddled. Then return to my quarters to help me pack a saddlebag. Wait for my instructions. I might be needing you to prepare a military funeral."

"It's Major Chandler, isn't it?" Sergeant Harvey asked.

"Yes it is," Thornton acknowledged sadly.

Thornton made it to Rawlins in only a few hours. It was barely past noon when he walked briskly into the Rawlins Hotel. He was surprised to see so many people outside the private quarters. Word had spread quickly that Martin was near death. In the lobby several of his friends were standing outside for the deathwatch.

He made his way through many of the people that were his friends and comrades in arms during the war. He entered the parlor and saw Leigh sitting on the bed next to Martin. She had enveloped his frail body in her arms. His head rested comfortably on her breast. As he entered he heard Leigh cooing softly to her husband. She was reassuring him that she was there. She repeated 'I love you.'

As far as Thornton could tell, Martin was sleeping, but his breathing was erratic, heavy, and labored.

Leigh still wiped cool cloths on his eyes, nose, and ears. Her eyes were filled with tears.

Mary stood stoically by the bed waiting for any instructions Leigh would give or any assistance Leigh might need.

Doctor Farrah would use his stethoscope to check on Martin's heartbeat.

Thornton choked back his own tears. He knew Martin would die, but he didn't expect this. His best friend looked as frail as a young child. His body was nearly gone, but his face looked young and childlike somehow. His friend looked at peace.

Martin's eye lashes fluttered open when Thornton entered the room. "You're here. I'm glad. This is the way I wanted to go. I wanted my family here. You are like a brother to me Thorn. My wife, Mary, and Doctor Farrah are like all my family. The pain is gone for awhile."

"Don't exert yourself my darling," Leigh wept. "You'll get better."

"Leigh, I'm dying. You know it. Don't deny it. Embrace it," Martin corrected. "I told you I'd always be with you as long as you live. You have given me everything. I wanted to die in your arms. I'm so happy."

"Martin," Thornton whispered. "Is there much pain?"

"No, Doctor Farrah is seeing that I die comfortably," Martin answered stronger than anyone could believe possible. "Thornton, bury me on the Shamrock like we planned. Take care of my, Leigh. Promise me."

"You have my promise," Thornton choked. He knelt next to the bed and took Martin's hand. "If there was anything I could have done."

"You would have done it," Martin smiled. "All of you that I love so much have done everything you could. I've even lived longer than expected for your care and love. Love does cure everything, Thorn. It even cures a spoiled heart." Martin showed uncommon strength and took Thorn's hand to place it on Leigh's hand. "Take care of my Leigh."

"Darling, please! You are tiring yourself out," Leigh pleaded. "Shhhh, my darling!" She cradled Martin pulling him even closer to

her. She rocked him as if rocking a baby. She didn't notice when he stopped breathing. Leigh kept rocking him.

Doctor Farrah listened for any heartbeat through his stethoscope. Martin was gone. He looked to Thornton for help. His next patient would be Mrs. Martin Chandler. He needed to prepare Martin for the mortuary.

Thornton knew what to do just from Doctor Farrah's look. He rose from the floor and walked around to the other side of the bed. Gently he started pulling Leigh away from Martin. "He's gone, Leigh. You must let go."

"No!" Leigh shouted. "No! I won't let him go. I won't! I love him with all that I am. He's the most wonderful, kind, generous man in the world. I can't let him go! This world is full of evil, selfish, cruel, and mean people. This world needs special men like Martin. I can't let him go! I won't!"

Thornton persisted and eventually pulled Leigh's arms away from Martin. He folded her into his arms.

Doctor Farrah took Martin's body and gently laid it down upon the bed. "I'll prepare Martin for the mortuary."

"I'll help you," Mary volunteered. "Colonel O'Neal. You may want to take Mrs. Chandler to her room. Doctor Farrah, I'll start taking care of Mr. Chandler. I think you may need to give Mrs. Chandler some Laudanum."

Leigh pressed her face against Thornton's dusty jacket.

He hadn't bothered to change or take it off when he entered the room. His face was covered with grime and dust from riding Comet fast and hard to get here in time. He held onto Leigh firmly and gently started walking her to her room. She was sobbing, weeping, and talking at the same time.

Doctor Farrah picked up his bag and followed Thornton and Leigh to her room. He gave her several drops of Laudanum in a glass of water and ordered her to drink.

Leigh was beyond reason or logic. She had lost the light of her life and was desolate. Obediently she took the medicine and continued to weep.

"Stay with her until she sleeps," Doctor Farrah ordered. "It will be a few minutes. I gave her a strong dosage."

Thornton sat on the bed next to Leigh while she cried into the pillow. She was completely distraught. He rubbed her back gently

and with assurance. He spoke to her gently and quietly. "Martin won't suffer any more. He'll always be with us. Hush, my love."

A quarter of an hour later with the help of Laudanum, Leigh had cried herself to sleep. Thornton placed a quilt over her and returned to Martin's room. Mary and Doctor Farrah were about to bathe Martin's body. Thornton handed Mary a saddlebag that contained a Major's uniform. "I have to prepare for the funeral," Thornton announced. "We'll have full military honors for the ceremony. I'll have my troops here tomorrow for the viewing and then a caisson will take the coffin to Shamrock the following morning. Martin and I talked recently about what he wanted for the funeral. He even had a dress made for Leigh. She refused to discuss his death and funeral. She's stubborn that way. He knew Leigh would be a stickler for proper respect, and didn't want her to be worried about anything at the end. He was always thinking ahead of us. I'll miss him. I'll miss him so much." Tears ran down Thornton's cheeks. He went to Martin's body and placed a kiss on the body's forehead. "Leigh's right. I will never understand why someone so good and kind is taken away so early when rotten bastards live forever."

"Perhaps the good people go first so we can appreciate their good works," Mary replied stoically. "This town appreciates Mr. Martin Chandler very much."

"I should go out and tell the deathwatch," Thornton stated somberly.

He delivered the news to the crowd. Martin Chandler had died. There would be a viewing in the private quarters tomorrow. The following day he would be taken to Shamrock Ranch for a military burial.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

After the mortuary took Martin's body for preparation, Thornton went to his old room in the private quarters and bathed. He was filthy with road dust and grime from head to foot. He was grateful that Sergeant Harvey had packed a clean shirt and trousers in his saddlebags. That would give him a clean uniform for tomorrow's viewing and a chance to have his dress uniform brought by the honor guard the following day. He went to the armoire and retrieved a pair of pajama trousers and robe. Martin had always seen to it that when Thornton was visiting his nightclothes would be cleaned and pressed. Once bathed and dressed in his nightclothes, Thornton poured a brandy and sat down on a chair in his room to relax and think.

Thornton had just dozed off from exhaustion when he was wakened by loud voices coming from the parlor. He recognized Mary's voice and a masculine voice that was growing louder and more insistent. That voice was demanding to see Leigh.

Thornton tightened the sash on his robe and went into the parlor. He saw Carl Junge push Mary out of the doorway and enter the parlor area.

"I demand to see my sister," Carl shouted.

"Be quiet, please!" Mary pleaded attempting to pull Carl back and out of the parlor. "Mrs. Chandler is finally resting. She is exhausted from her grieving. She has taken medicine to calm her and help her sleep."

"If you wake her, you will answer to me!" Thornton declared angrily.

Carl stopped cold in his tracks. He observed Colonel O'Neal from the top of his head to the bare toes on his feet. "I am Leigh's only family. It is my duty to be at her side and help her with funeral arrangements." A sneer appeared on Carl's face. "I thought my sister would be alone and need of comfort. I see you have your own method of consolation. I should have known for the slut she is. Good God, man, have you no decency? Her husband's body isn't even warm yet. Are you after her money?"

Thornton couldn't believe what he heard. The denouncement struck him with such rage he couldn't react for a moment. He was stunned.

Carl grinned wickedly. He had the Colonel's neck in a noose. What gossip this would make. He ignored the fact Mary was even in the room.

"How dare you!" Mary screamed in fury. "How dare you soil Mrs. Chandler's good name! I've been with her every moment since Mr. Chandler died. She's grieving and you are contriving lies against your own sister. Get Out! Get Out!" Mary's face was scarlet with rage.

Carl realized his faux pas. "I'm sorry, but what can a brother think when he enters a home of mourning to see a man in nightclothes standing in his sister's parlor?"

Thornton's hands balled into fists. He was ready to pounce on Leigh's brother. He thought better of it when Mary screamed her outrage. "I suggest that if you want to leave this room walking on your own legs, you leave right now."

Carl turned into his charming personality and looked at Mary. "Leigh is sleeping? She's been given medication?"

"Yes!" Mary snapped. "Leave right now before you wake her!"

"I'll return in the morning. Tell Leigh her brother is here to help her with all the arrangements. I've had experience in the matter," Carl boasted.

"You are a damned expert in it," Thornton growled menacingly.

Carl ignored Thornton's remark. "Just tell Leigh her brother is here to help her."

"You really needn't bother," Thornton barked. "All the arrangements have been made. Our family took care of it all."

Carl squared his shoulders. "I am Leigh's only surviving family."

"We are Martin's family," Thornton roared heatedly. He grabbed Carl's arm and pushed him out the door Mary had opened. Once outside the private quarters Thornton snarled, "You've been asked to leave!" He slammed the door in Carl's face and set the lock.

"The gall of that man," Mary stated straightening her dress as if Carl had dirtied it with his touch.

“Where’s Maggie?” Thornton asked remembering he locked Mary in the parlor.

“I’m staying the night by Mrs. Chandler’s side. Maggie is safe and in the care of Mr. McDonald. He agreed that I should stay here. She’ll need my help in the morning.

“I can’t thank you enough for your help, and setting that filthy minded brother straight in his thinking,” Thornton appreciated.

“Imagine him even thinking such a lurid thing about Mrs. Chandler,” Mary said angrily. “Mrs. Chandler is a saint in this town. She is nothing but goodness and kindness. When I think of what he said I get angry all over again.”

“Try to get some sleep. We are all tired. Do you need any help with Leigh?” Thornton queried.

“She woke up rather groggy about an hour ago. I gave her some dinner, helped her undress, and put her back to bed. Doctor Farrah gave her some more Laudanum. Poor thing woke up and thought Martin was still with us. She said she had a horrible nightmare. She dreamed Martin died. When we told her that Martin had left us she cried and cried. Poor thing. She loved Mr. Chandler more than anyone could imagine.”

“She’s sleeping again?” Thornton asked.

“This dose of Laudanum was even stronger than the first. Doctor Farrah said she will sleep soundly until the morning,” Mary shared.

“Then you get some sleep. If you need me I’ll be in that room. Just call me.”

“I’ll sleep on the divan,” Mary announced. “I’ll hear Mrs. Chandler if she gets up and I’ll call you if I need help. I find I am rather tired. Good Night, Colonel O’Neal.”

Thornton returned to his room. He found he couldn’t think straight. His mind was a massive compilation of a thousand thoughts. He closed his eyes, blanked his mind, and fell sound asleep.

“Leigh,” Mary whispered. “Please wake up. We have to ready you for the viewing. I have a breakfast tray for you.”

Leigh struggled to open her eyes. The lids seemed especially heavy and darkness continued to shroud a part of her brain. “Mary? What time is it?”

“It’s seven o’clock in the morning.”

“Why is it so dark in my room?” Leigh asked forcing her body to move. Her limbs felt like lead weight.

“I kept the draperies closed. I wanted you to get a little more sleep.”

“Mary, how much Laudanum did Doctor Farrah give me?”

“A heavy dose,” Mary replied helping Leigh sit straight on the bed. She then lifted Leigh’s legs over the bedside. “He thought it best to get you to sleep. You were grieving frightfully. We were so worried about you.”

Leigh raised her hands to her forehead. “What day is this? I feel so strange. It’s like I’m outside my body looking at it. My body feels like lead weights. Where am I? Where is Martin?”

Mary frowned. Leigh still wasn’t quite right in the head. “Martin left us yesterday. His body is being brought back for the viewing.”

“Yes, I remember,” Leigh responded still holding her hands on her head. I feel so strange.”

“It is the Laudanum. You aren’t used to taking medicine and the dose was strong to help you sleep.”

“I must dress. I have no black dress. I could wear the dark gray,” Leigh began to think. It hurt to concentrate. She felt dizzy.

“Mr. Chandler had a dress made for this day for you,” Mary revealed. “He knew you would refuse to admit this day would come. He knew you would want to be proper. He loved you so much and knew you so well.”

“Yes Martin did,” Leigh whispered. “Help me dress, please.”

Mary helped Leigh to her feet. Mary had all the underclothes, stockings, shoes, and dress ready. The dress was simple black satin day dress. It was made in the simple style of the hotel uniform Leigh usually wore. Mary helped Leigh button the dress.

“Martin always knew my taste. He appreciated the simple things. He was always there thinking for me,” Leigh struggled to say coherently. “What am I going to do without him?”

“We go on,” Mary responded quickly. “We do what we must and go on.”

Leigh remembered Mary was a widow. Mary had survived and done well for herself and her little girl. “We do what we must and go on.”

Mary hugged Leigh. “We’ll do just fine. You’ll see. First you must eat. I’ve brought this tray.”

Leigh sat by the small dressing table in her room where Mary placed the breakfast tray. Although she was hungry she found even eating was a chore. Her body felt very strange.

“Leigh?” Thornton’s voice carried through the door to her room after he knocked.

Mary rushed to open the door. “Mrs. Chandler is still affected by the Laudanum, but she is calmer and ate a small bit of breakfast.”

Thornton walked to Leigh and offered his arm. His heart skipped a beat when he noticed how pale she looked. Her eyes were dull. Her eyelids dropped half way. Her face was swollen from emotional strain and crying.

Leigh strained to raise her hand in acceptance of Thornton’s arm.

Thornton noticed her sluggishness and lifted her to an upright position. He embraced her with an arm for support and a hand holding her elbow to help guide her.

They entered the parlor in the private quarters.

To Leigh’s surprise there were four soldiers in dress uniform surrounding a coffin on a dais in the center of the parlor. The coffin had a federal flag draped over it. The furniture had all been moved to available wall space. In the coffin she saw the body of Martin Chandler, her husband. He was dressed in a federal major’s uniform. A major’s cavalry hat lay beneath one hand.

“A rose,” Leigh whimpered with emotion. “Martin loves his fresh picked rose in the morning. I want to pick one for him. His favorite is white. Take me to pick one for my love. Please?”

Thornton helped Leigh walk to the back of the hotel where Martin had started his rose garden. Leigh found the largest bloom and bent the stem until it broke.

Returning to the parlor Leigh placed the rose bloom under the hand that held the hat. “Your white rose for the morning, my love.”

Thornton helped her to sit on the chair near the coffin. At his nod, Sergeant Harvey opened the private door for visitors to pay their last respects. It was only eight in the morning, but a tenth of the town was already standing outside the Hotel to pay respects to Mr. Chandler.

One of the first to pay respects set Thornton’s teeth grinding. When he saw Carl enter he stood behind Leigh with his hands grasping her shoulder. For her it was reassurance he was there for her. For Carl it was to warn him to watch his behavior.

Carl was all charm and sympathy. He took Leigh's hand. "Dearest sister. I tried so desperately to see you when I heard your husband passed on. I was prohibited to be available and assist you. I want you to know that I care deeply for you and will be there to help in anyway. God is cradling your husband in heaven. I'll take care of my dearest only sister and family for my God. Just call on me any time."

This was the only time Leigh was grateful her mind was fuzzy. Part of her wanted to tell her brother to go away, but the other part stopped her in respect for her husband. She didn't want to make a scene at the viewing. No one needed to know about the rift between her and her brother. She was grateful Thornton was there. Carl would have to behave throughout the viewing. She was grateful when Carl finally stopped talking and went to sit down on a divan.

Chapter Thirty

Thornton kept his eye on Carl. He was not surprised to watch Carl peruse the entire room and its contents. Thornton was certain Carl was checking out all the treasures he could sell if he managed to get on Leigh's good graces. He could hear the cash register ring in Carl's head. The vulture would have a real surprise soon enough.

Behind Carl was Claudia Thatcher. She offered her hand to Leigh and led Carl's children to the bier. Claudia instructed the children to say prayers for the soul of the dearly departed. When prayers were completed they sat next to Carl on the divan. The group stayed there all morning and spoke to other viewers as if they were a part of the family.

Leigh didn't notice. She accepted words and hugs from many of the townspeople of Rawlins. Losing Martin was horrible for her, but she took comfort in all the kind and loving words of their neighbors and friends. Their concern gave her strength.

Thornton closed viewing for the noon meal and allowed the soldiers to change watch while they ate.

It was after the noon meal and some tea that Leigh began to feel normal again. The Laudanum was beginning to wear off. She returned to the bier with her body erect. Her strong and capable reserve returned.

Carl returned to the room without Claudia and his children. He came to stand next to Leigh.

Thornton was already standing to one side of Leigh. Doctor Farrah moved quickly to Leigh's other side before Carl approached. Carl knew he was ousted from being his sister's defender. It was a charade he wished to exhibit, but the fact he couldn't was no matter. Instead he continued to mingle with the townspeople. He introduced himself as Leigh's brother and only surviving family member.

The one thing Carl learned that irritated him was that his sister was well loved by people of Rawlins. Most of them knew and respected Martin Chandler, but they also knew and admired Leigh Chandler. Many of the people that came to pay respects were doing it for Leigh. This was the first and only time in his life that he was not the adored one and center of attention. He gritted his teeth in humiliation knowing his sister was foremost in the thoughts of

Rawlins. He nodded politely when people remarked on Leigh's excellent poise and character. Carl comforted his wounded ego by reminding himself these people of Rawlins were backwoods bumpkins and couldn't possibly recognize the superior class he was all about.

Several times during the afternoon Carl attempted to enter the Chandler's private rooms, including bedrooms, necessary, storerooms, and hotel hallways. Although Carl tried to get a look at potential items for sale in the private quarters, he found he ran into the big Swede at every attempt to snoop. Sven escorted him back to the parlor.

"Ja, dis is da parlor," Sven repeated at each escort back into the parlor.

Carl finally gave up at dusk when everyone was asked to leave and the private quarters were once again closed. If there was one thing Carl prided himself in, it was patience. It wasn't a lot of patience, but he had some patience. He would wait until Thornton returned to Fort Fred Steele and Doctor Farrah was busy with his practice. He would wheedle his way back into his sister's good graces. It wouldn't be hard. Leigh was nothing more than a plebian simpleton in his mind.

At the dinner table the small family discussed the viewing, the large turnout, and Martin.

Leigh was once again in control of her thought process. The Laudanum had finally and completely worn off. She was still living in the mourning process, but handling it quite well.

"Sharing my sorrow with all these wonderful people has given me great strength," Leigh commented. "Martin was so truly loved by so many."

"That is obvious after today," Doctor Farrah agreed. "I believe nearly the entire town turned out to show respect."

"Do you think Martin knew how many people loved him?" Leigh asked wistfully.

"Martin was Martin," Thornton replied. "Martin had a knack for knowing and understanding things about people before they did. He always helped and cared for his fellow man. It didn't matter who or what they were or what people said. I don't think it ever occurred to him to expect anything from another, even love. He just gave love. I think he gave because he felt so good giving."

"The only love he ever asked for or needed was your love, Mrs. Chandler," Mary decreed.

“You certainly gave him love,” Doctor Farrah indicated. “I saw Martin grow happier every day he was with you, Leigh. I believe the love the two of you shared helped him live longer than expected.”

“His last year, months, weeks, and days were the happiest for him. I believe that,” Thornton added.

“I hope I returned the love and happiness he so freely gave to me,” Leigh stated. “This past year was the happiest of my life.”

“So far,” Thornton added. He had every intention of making her happier than Martin. He had pledged Martin to do just that. He also loved and needed Leigh as much as Martin did. It was his turn for a happy and contented life.

The discussions continued on for several more hours. They discussed Martin’s childhood, military career, and his life in general. Each one of the small family added happy and cheerful little anecdotes of experiences with Martin.

In the morning Mary again helped Leigh to dress in the widow’s weeds. Today she would wear the full costume including the bonnet with veil covering her face. She added black silk gloves and a black reticule.

After breakfast the intimate family stood outside the hotel waiting as the soldier’s honor guard carried the closed flag draped coffin to the caisson. In perfect military step they placed the coffin on the caisson and strapped it securely in place.

Leigh, Thornton, Doctor Farrah, and Mary were helped onto a sleek carriage donated by the livery. The honor guard mounted their cavalry horses. A lead soldier led a black stallion in front of the six horse harnessed caisson. The black stallion was regaled with military saddle and saber. The boots turned backward in the stirrups representing the fallen officer. Behind Leigh’s carriage were many townspeople in their carriages, buggies, and wagons. The townspeople would follow the funeral entourage to Martin’s burial site on Shamrock ranch.

Carl rode directly behind Leigh’s carriage on his horse, Hoosier. Next to Carl was the Preacher, Reverend John Harper on his Morgan.

Leigh made no comment about her brother’s positioning. Instead they once again talked about the strength she received from the caring people of Rawlins.

Leigh was amazed so many people of Rawlins came along to the burial, but she was shocked when she saw fifty Shoshone warriors in full regalia waiting on top the hill for burial. Washakie sat on his favorite white pony. Twenty-five warriors were on one side and twenty-five warriors were on the other side. Near the gravesite stood a spiritual tripod of the Shoshone. It was a tribute to a fallen warrior. The tripod was corded in the center with a large feather and buffalo skull. The legs of each tripod were decorated with feathers of many colors. On one side of the warriors stood twenty-one riflemen for a twenty one-gun salute. On the other warrior side stood two drummers and a bugle player.

Washakie greeted the entourage when it came to a stop atop the hill. He helped Leigh down from the carriage and walked her to the gravesite. He stood next to her as a Shoshone medicine man with great puha blessed her husband's spirit and prayed he would enter the ghost trail in peace. Carl then brought Reverend Harper to say a blessing over the grave.

Leigh allowed everyone to contribute what they thought best without malice. Although she and Martin were agnostic, they both believed that whatever happiness or consolation anyone finds in their life is a personal choice. This choice should never be made fun of or condemned.

Thornton went to the other side of Leigh when the honor guard folded the flag. He knew this would be the time Leigh would lose her composure. He was right. When the honor guard folded the flag, the bugle player played Taps, and the rifleman shot off their rounds in the twenty one-gun salute, Leigh folded. She couldn't hold back the tears and sobs. Her legs turned to jelly. Without Washakie and Thornton there to hold her, she would have fallen down.

Thornton held her up with his arm when she accepted the folded flag. He helped her walk back to the carriage and lifted her to sit on it. Quickly he took a seat next to her. Doctor Farrah followed after he helped Mary back up into the carriage.

The carriage took the entourage to Shamrock Ranch. There Bessie, Reuben, and families from the fort had prepared a large reception for the mourners. Tables were hastily built, covered with cloths, and food presented for all the guests.

The wives of the officers and non commissioned officers from Fort Fred Steele provided an elaborate luncheon. Most of their husbands had served under Major Chandler and then Major O'Neal

during the war. It was a special military duty that soldiers' wives took seriously.

Leigh surmised that with the Shoshone, Military representatives and their families, and the townspeople of Rawlins more than two hundred people were present at the gravesite. "Martin would have been humbled by all the people that came to show him respect."

"Martin's memory and touch will live on in Rawlins for some time to come," Thornton marveled. He too had been impressed by the turnout.

When the carriage stopped at the back road to Shamrock Mansion, Chief Washakie greeted Leigh. At his side was Too Many Teeth and Long Face. Behind Long Face was her daughter, Tall Grass.

"You will live in this building," Washakie stated. It was not a question.

Leigh looked to the gravesite and her eyes were filled with the beauty of this place. "Yes. Martin wanted us to take residence in the summer. I will reside here."

"This place is big. You will take Long Face and Tall Grass. Long Face wishes her daughter to be taught the ways of the white woman. She will go to your schools in the east and return a teacher for our people. Too Many Teeth like you. He likes the comfortable cabins. He wants to stay in your lodge like he did at Martin's hotel. The man is soft!"

Leigh smiled at Washakie's jab at Too Many Teeth. "We already have four Shoshone working for the Shamrock as hands. Too Many Teeth, Long Face, and Tall Grass are welcome. Long Face and I will teach Tall Grass. Together we will send her to school to become a teacher."

"These things are good," Washakie grinned. The scar on his cheek was more prominent when he smiled. He turned his attention to Thornton. "You will take Leigh as your woman. She will teach you the way of Shoshone. Already she has softened your hardness. Soon we will talk often and become friends."

"I'd like that very much, Chief Washakie," Thornton appreciated. "I know have much to learn and understand."

"That is the first step," Washakie acknowledged. "When you admit you are stupid you walk to enlightenment. You are open to the mystery of life. I will talk to you before the cold snow comes."

Carl rode up on Hoosier and walked to Leigh. His hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her roughly to him. "I don't think you should be talking to savages, sister. What would people think?"

Leigh pulled away and turned on her brother. "Most people would think that a great chief such as Washakie has honored me with his presence."

Washakie growled menacingly. "This is a bad man. Do not let him call you sister, for that is an insult to your kind and loving heart. Do not trust him. There is bad blood in his body. It is a sickness. It is greed. This man takes without giving. This man is slothful and lazy. He thinks all is his due without work. Stay away my Wolfrunner."

"I will heed your counsel," Leigh replied.

"What? What nonsense is this?" Carl demanded irritably. He had never been put down in public. It was more insulting to be put down by a red savage. He reached once again for his sister.

"Touch her again and I'll break your arm," Thornton threatened as he took Carl's forearm tightening his grip. "It's getting late. I suggest you return to your daughters and Mrs. Thatcher."

"Yes of course," Carl responded hesitantly. He would save face if he left. He also needed time to think of how he would start handling his rich sister. He stayed for the food talking to several townspeople and left in the early afternoon.

Chapter Thirty-One

It was dark when Carl returned to Claudia Thatcher's boarding house. He had taken a slow gait on the return to Rawlins. Carl needed time to think and to plan.

"Are the girls in bed?" Carl asked Claudia entering her bedroom.

"Yes, I put them to bed an hour ago," Claudia responded. "Did you eat?"

"I had plenty to eat at Shamrock," Carl replied as he unbuttoned his shirt. He turned to look at Claudia lying in the bed waiting for him. "You are a temptation you know."

Claudia giggled. She loved it when he talked that way to her. "As you are." She admired Carl's body as he completely disrobed. He had a magnificent physique. He was handsome with a lean body. Carl was more attractive than her first husband. She felt proud that Carl had selected her to be his lover and soon to be wife. He did have many from the church to select from when he came to Rawlins with his daughters after his wife had deserted him. Every Sunday he brought his daughters to church like a good Christian. She was so lucky he chose her.

Carl grinned as he approached the bed. Claudia was so biddable. She was Christian thinking and a pillar of the church. He could tell she worshipped him and understood the male supremacy. She was easier to control and obtain obedience than Teresa ever was. "Lift your gown and spread your legs," Carl commanded. "And you shall be the good wife for her husband. You will please him with your womanhood. You will bring ease and contentment as God commands of a good woman."

"We aren't married yet," Claudia whispered allowing Carl to brace his body over hers and enter her swiftly with force. The initial entry was a little painful because she was never quite prepared for him. The discomfort didn't matter. He chose her and it was a woman's place to be subservient to her husband's needs. They weren't married yet, but in another week or two they would be. Carl had already obtained the marriage license and he was arranging for the boarding house to be titled in both their names. He was right, it was up to the

man to control all the finances. It was the way of the Lord to put men in charge.

Carl pounded into Claudia until at last he expelled his seed and received relief. He rolled to his side and responded to Claudia. "We are married in the eyes of God. For I have known you. It is just a little time to correct my first and only error. The judge will give me a divorce decree by cause of desertion. I shall have it in a week."

Claudia rolled on her side and snuggled next to Carl. She had been curious about the funeral, but knew when Carl needed easing there would be no talk. "How did the funeral go? I was ashamed that no one asked our Reverend Harper to attend and say prayers over the grave. I was so pleased when you asked Reverend Harper to say a prayer. How heathen of those people!"

"More heathen than you can imagine," Carl reported. "They had red skinned savages at the burial. Worse, they let those heathens do some kind of incantation over the grave. It was appalling."

Claudia gasped, "How unholy!"

"I've been thinking," Carl remarked. "I really need to bring my sister back to salvation. It is my duty. She only has me in the family now. I am worried for her soul."

"You are so wonderful, so loving, so kind, and thoughtful," Claudia cooed. She convinced herself instantly that Carl was a true Christian carrying for the soul of his misled sister.

"I shall begin slowly," Carl yawned. "She is surrounded by dark souls and heathen savages. I will lead her to the light."

Claudia believed him.

Carl closed his eyes and fell asleep counting all the money he would inherit as the sole survivor of her sister's dear husband's wealth. After all, a man should have control over such estates. Leaving all of that to a woman? Unheard of! Yet, he did hear talk at the clerk's office that the will provided all of Martin Chandler's vast holdings, properties, and monies would be Leigh's. He had made friends with Max Elder, the local clerk. He was sure he would be able to at least read some of the will once it went through the probate court of Rawlins. Who would believe his ugly stupid sister would marry into such wealth. Wealth that would soon be his! God took care of his sons, not his daughters. Surely she couldn't hope to keep all that wealth? Soon he would be wealthier than he ever believed would be possible. That Colonel always seemed to be in the way. Carl would be patient for a while and let the Colonel drift away now that his friend

was dead. He would wait until Leigh returned to Rawlins and was away from the Colonel. When she returned he would visit her daily and win her over.

"It's time to go into the mansion," Thornton stated taking Leigh's elbow.

"I must clean up," Leigh returned tugging her arm away but not able to break Thorn's hold.

"The women of Fort Steele will handle it. They've done a fine job of it so far," Thornton repudiated. "You've had a long day. I think you should rest."

"I am tired," Leigh admitted and allowed Thornton to escort her into the mansion. When they entered the main hall Leigh was breathless. "This looks like a palace!"

"I've been part of its building, well at least the finishing part. Martin was explicit and meticulous in his instructions. Shamrock was built to these specifications," Thorn shared. "It is beautiful. Martin spared no expense. He brought in the finest woods, plaster, artisans, and builders. Shamrock is to be your haven."

"I once told him my dream," Leigh sighed longingly. "This is my dream, a palace in the country. You see, I grew up in the city and I lived in Rawlins a city. I told Martin of how much I loved the open ranges I watched through the train windows. I fell in love with the grand expanse of the mountains. He gave me both. He gave me the expanse and my palace." Tears began to form in her eyes.

"He wanted to make you happy," Thornton scolded. "Don't cry. That would take away the meaning of his gift."

"I still can't believe I was so honored to know a great man like Martin."

"Remember all this happiness. That is truly Martin's legacy."

"I'll try," Leigh replied forcing a smile. "Goodness. This mansion is so large I shall need a guide to find my room."

"Allow me," Thornton bowed.

"Oh yes, you were part of the building of this monument to happiness," Leigh grinned. "Where is my room?"

"The master suite is this way," Thornton replied taking her arm and leading her up the massive central carved mahogany staircase.

Leigh noticed a study, a dining room, a library, and a parlor on the lower floor as she ascended the stairs. At the top of the stairs the

hall went to the right, the left, and the center. Thornton led her to the right and a set of massive ornately carved white double doors.

"Your suite," Thornton announced opening the door. He was delighted at Leigh's response. Her mouth dropped in wonder just as his did when he walked in to see the final touches added by the furniture Martin had sent only a month before. Thornton also knew that this would be the room he and Leigh would share when they were married. It was beautiful beyond words.

Large glass doors opened to the portico balcony and faced the east. Heavy white and gold brocade draperies were opened to the light of day. In winter they could be closed to keep out the cold winds at night. A large fireplace made of white marble adorned the north wall and on the west wall was a gigantic canopied bed with matching heavy white and gold brocade draperies. On the floors was gold, green, and white Oriental tapestry rugs. There was a door for a closet that led to a dressing room. Next to the dressing room was a door that led to the necessary and bathing room. The bathing room boasted a white marbled tub set in white oak wainscoting. The walls were papered with white and gold-flecked wallpaper. There were several gilded mirrors on different walls set to reflect sunlight and brighten the rooms. On the opposite wall a door led to a private sitting room. Two Victorian gilded chairs in white and gold brocade accented the white oak desk and chair. A fainting couch in gold and white brocade was placed in front of another massive white marble fireplace.

"I can't believe it," Leigh marveled. She entered the room and walked into the closet. There she found several day dresses, some evening gowns, petticoats, corsets, chemises, nightdresses and peignoirs, other undergarments, silk stockings, reticules, and several pairs of shoes. "Thornton, would you believe that Martin even had purchased a new wardrobe for me?"

"I would believe," Thornton chuckled leaning on the doorframe. "The officer's wives were quite busy unpacking all the daily arrivals and marveling about this fortunate Mrs. Chandler. I overheard many daily reports and groaning husbands."

"I shall stay here. Martin meant for this to be home and so it shall," Leigh stated firmly. "I love it already."

"It was built with love and will forever hold love," Thornton predicted. He was thinking of their future together. It was the future Martin had ordained and the reason he built this mansion. He built it for Leigh, Thornton, and their children. Thornton stared at the

canopied bed. It would be there he would create their first daughter. That was his decree. His body reacted to his thoughts. Before he would be embarrassed by his lust he left quickly with an excuse. "I'll get Bessie upstairs to help you change. You must be exhausted."

Leigh responded to Thornton's back. "Yes, I find I am quite worn."

Thornton found Bessie and sent her to Leigh. He found Sergeant Harvey. A hot bath was prepared and Thornton soaked in it until was tepid. Shamrock was his home now. He would take up residence in the room down the hall from Leigh's suite. This was temporary until the time he would take Leigh as his own.

Leigh enjoyed a hot bath and slipped into one of the silken peignoirs Martin had purchased for her. It felt so wonderfully soft. She felt beautiful and feminine. Bessie had turned down the quilt revealing soft Irish Linen sheets. Leigh climbed on to the bed and fell into the down filled top mattress. It was like falling on a cloud. In moments after snuggling under the quilt, Leigh was asleep.

After a brandy and cheroot, Thornton thought to check on Leigh. He hoped she was asleep. The door had been left ajar and with a candle he peeked into the room. Leigh took his breath away. Her head on the white pillow with her dark auburn hair framed a childlike sleeping face. The covers had been kicked off in her sleep revealing the form perfectly beneath the silk peignoir. Once again his body reacted to his lust. This time he didn't have to hide it. He watched her sleeping and ached for her. "It's only a matter of time and you will be mine at last," Thornton vowed. Silently he walked to her bedside and brushed his lips across hers. "Soon!"

Sergeant Harvey woke his charge early. They were at the fort before Leigh even stirred from bed.

Bessie brought up a breakfast tray and opened the draperies.

The sunlight woke Leigh instantly. She stretched like a kitten born to luxury. "Good Morning!"

"I brought breakfast," Bessie announced pointing at the tray.

"Goodness," Leigh said in surprise. "I never expected to be waited on."

"Lordy, I jest thought this one time I'd spoil yo a bit," Bessie laughed. "I'd know yo ain't one to lolly gag like some fine stuffy old lady. I'd help yo git dressed and then I'd showed yo all over this fine house that belong to yo."

“It is a fine house,” Leigh agreed.

After breakfast Leigh chose a simple day dress of dark blue calico with a dark rust apron. She could have worn her black widow’s dress, but she believed Martin wouldn’t approve of her wearing the mourning dress for appearances. He would want her to be herself. The calico day dress represented her comfortable self. Martin had been right. He was alive in her memory and would be alive for as long as she lived.

Bessie proudly showed Leigh several of the upstairs bedrooms including Thornton’s. She failed to mention that Thornton slept there every night and she didn’t take Leigh into the room for a deep inspection. Bessie then took Leigh downstairs and gave her a full tour of every room.

“I will be happy here,” Leigh admitted. “Martin did everything so meticulously.”

“Yas’m, he shorely did,” Bessie agreed proudly. She was an important part of the household and felt like the house was her personal responsibility. “Come see da gardens.”

“Vegetable or Flower?” Leigh teased.

“Da Flower gardens be in front,” Bessie announced. “Da Vegetable gardens be in da back.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Where is Mrs. Chandler?” Thornton asked returning to the mansion for lunch, as was his normal custom.

“She done take a rose to Mr. Chandler’s grave,” Bessie answered. “She be back in time for the noon meal.”

Thornton walked to the front door and looked off to the hill. He saw Leigh walking to the grave with several roses in her hand. He broke several roses off the bushes and walked briskly toward Leigh.

Leigh didn’t hear Thornton approaching. She had placed the roses on Martin’s grave and was talking to his spirit in the wind. “Shamrock is lovelier than I could have ever imagined. You always knew my most secret longings and provided me such happiness. I am grateful for our limited time together. You are a wonderful living memory.”

“And my best friend,” Thornton added placing the roses on Martin’s grave next to the ones Leigh had placed on the grave only a moment before.

Leigh was startled and placed her hand upon her throat. “Goodness, you can sneak up on a person.”

Thornton fell to his knees. “I’m sorry. I saw you walking up here. Bessie told me you took roses with you. I remembered how much Martin loved the rose you brought him every morning when they started to bloom. He loved roses. I love them too!” He inhaled the rose essence Leigh wore. It was the most wonderful aroma.

Leigh smiled. “You heard me talking to Martin. You must think I’m crazy.”

“Not at all,” Thornton replied talking Leigh’s hand in his and brushing his lips across her knuckles. “I would do the same thing if I had something on my mind to say to my friend.”

“What would you say to him right now,” Leigh inquired.

“I guess I would say I’m glad you are not in pain anymore, and I love your wife,” Thornton responded looking directly into Leigh’s eyes for a reaction. He was pleasantly surprised.

“I love you too, Colonel O’Neal,” Leigh stated returning Thornton’s look. “You are my rock of strength.”

Unknown to Leigh, this was the beginning of Thornton's courtship. He would wait no longer to make Leigh his wife. "Let's get back to Shamrock. Bessie has the noon meal ready."

Leigh took Thornton's offered arm. She felt a bit heady knowing Thornton said he loved her. Of course she convinced herself it was a love because of Martin. She wouldn't allow her imagination to run wild and end up being hurt by her own feelings and emotions.

For three weeks the routine had been the same. Leigh received a weekly report from Stephen McDonald and she spent a goodly portion of the next week reviewing all entries and receipts. She studied not only the profit and loss of the stores, livery, and hotels, but also studied the delivered goods to the hospital and school she helped establish. On other days she would work in the vegetable garden with Bessie, cook meals with Bessie, and to Bessie's chagrin, even help clean the mansion and do the wash. Colonel O'Neal would be in attendance for the noon meal and dinner. He would stay until after she excused herself and went to bed.

Leigh had no idea Thornton not only lived in the mansion, but would enter her room every evening just to stare at her in her sleep until one dark night during a storm.

Leigh was a sound sleeper, but a flash of light would always wake her. Thunder, cannon shots, or noise would not arouse her from sleep, but any light flashed across her eyes would wake her instantly.

On this night there was a summer storm at night. A lightening bolt came close to the house. This evening she had simply forgotten to close the draperies. Instantly she awoke and sat up in fright when she saw a shadowed figure in the doorway. Another bolt of lightening flashed to reveal it was Thornton.

"Thornton?" Leigh nearly screamed. "What are you doing here? Did something happen at the fort? Is something wrong?" He walked up to her bed and sat next to her. She noticed he was wearing only his drawers.

"I live here, Leigh," Thornton replied. It had been a secret, but nearly a month was enough. It was time to take Leigh. It was time to make his dreams come true.

"What?"

"I live here. I've lived here for almost three months now. Martin asked me to live here."

"To take care of me?"

“No. To take care of me,” Thornton answered.

“People will talk,” Leigh warned.

“I don’t care,” Thornton scowled. “Do you?”

“People have always thought what they wished about me, true or not,” Leigh enlightened. “It really doesn’t matter at all.”

Thornton took her hand and kissed it tenderly. “Leigh, I love you.” Before she could reply his lips moved to her mouth. Instantly he was lying on top of her. At long last all of Thornton’s desires were about to be fulfilled. How long had he waited for her. He remembered their meeting on the train. He loved her then. Only he denied it. He protected her at the train station and gave him to his friend. His friend was Martin Chandler. He trusted Martin and believed he would help her. Martin did help Leigh. He helped her all to well. Thornton remembered the shock and rage he first felt when he learned Martin married Leigh. How quickly Martin had fallen in love with Leigh. As always, Martin had been correct. Martin loved Leigh and at the time needed her more than Thornton did. Martin knew Thornton loved Leigh even before Thornton finally admitted to it. The wait began then. He waited for his Leigh. At Christmas he almost cuckolded his best friend. He remembered that moment in a flash as he made love to Leigh here and now. Still, it wasn’t cuckolding. Martin had told him that he had been and was incapable of consummating the marriage vow. Martin assured Thornton; Leigh would still be a virgin. He remembered that suddenly. His Leigh was a virgin. Even Chloe had lost her virginity before he had bedded her. The one time he had succumbed to her enticement he learned she was not a virgin. Was it true? Some Union soldiers had raped her? After his experience with her he doubted it. This was Leigh. He would have to go slow. He would have to be tender. He would burn alive holding back his need for her.

At first Leigh had been shocked with Thornton’s kiss. It was like none other she had ever known. Even at Christmas when he brought out feelings in her that surprised even her. This kissing was strong, demanding, and if she could understand passion, these were passionate kisses. Thornton’s hands seemed to be all over her at the same time. She felt his hands untie the top bows of her peignoir and a gentle tugging that revealed her breasts. His one hand moved swiftly to knead and gently tease a hardened nub with one hand while his mouth covered the other breast. He was licking and sucking. Her body started doing crazy things. Her body arched into his and in so

doing felt his hardened male member pushing against her softness. Her breathing became erratic and she heard herself moan in the distance. She arched her back at one point wishing he could devour her entire breast as he suckled. She felt his other hand pull up her peignoir and his fingers begin to gently stroke the feminine apex of her womanhood. Her thighs vibrated with his finger strokes. She felt warmth and moisture between her legs. She felt a desire to be fulfilled. Leigh wanted oneness and unification with Thornton. Propriety is damned. Her body wanted him inside of her.

Thornton held back as long as he could. He touched her, loved her, and caressed her. He wanted every inch of her body to be his alone. He had waited far too long for this moment. His mind was lost in lovemaking. Yes, this was lovemaking. This was not lust. He realized instantly that Chloe had been only lust. He was grateful she dumped him for the general. Now he had Leigh. She was his one and only true love. No man had ever touched her save him. No man ever would. She was his until death parted them. Possessive? Yes, he was possessive. This was love. He must be gentle.

It seemed to be an eternity before Leigh felt Thornton enter her. It was only his satiny tip and then he pulsed slowly entering only a bit. She thought she would go mad with desire. She arched to meet him and felt a tug.

Thornton wanted to burst when Leigh arched into his invasion. He withdrew when he felt her maidenhead. The little skin proving she was indeed a virgin. His virgin. No man had ever touched her. No man would. This had to be done. He hated that she would feel any pain, but he had to do it. "I'm sorry," Thornton whispered bending his head to Leigh's ear. "I am so sorry, but it has to be finished. I can hold off no longer." In his mind he continued. *'Right here and now I am branding you as my wife. I intend to create our first daughter.'*

Sorry? Leigh questioned in her mind. He was sorry? For What? Did he already regret making love to her? Had she hoped he loved her? Was this simple lust? Then he entered with a hard quick thrust and she felt the pain. She remembered other women discussing the breaking of the maidenhead. This was what they were talking about. Would Thornton know she was a virgin? Would it matter to him? Would he understand? She had been married to his best friend. Did he know they could never consummate the marriage? After she bit her lip to prevent from screaming the pain disappeared and the physical reaction turned to wonderment. No, it turned into complete

ecstasy. Thornton moved in and out with such a delectable rhythm. Her body was so pleased she began to shake in excitement. The orgasm so great Leigh wondered if she had an out of body experience.

Thornton knew the moment he broke her barrier. Leigh had tensed beneath him. For him there was no turning back. He couldn't if he tried. He had held back for so long making certain Leigh was prepared for his entry. He wanted to give her the pleasure she deserved from their lovemaking. For him it had to be more than a physical release. He wanted this to be very special. It would be Leigh's first time and he had to make it special. It was already special to him. After Chloe that had actually been a let down physically, he had many whores. Those experiences were simply a physical release. Not with Leigh. He was in ecstasy and agony. Thornton couldn't stop kissing his Leigh as he was driving into her. Somewhere in the back of his mind he hoped he wasn't hurting her. Thornton felt Leigh's muscle spasm when she peaked in her orgasm. It hurled him over the edge. A moment later he expelled his seed directly at the door of her womanhood.

Before Leigh had finished her magnificent orgasm she felt Thornton ejaculating his seed into her. She felt him expel and she felt the warm seed as it was pumped into her. There was absolutely no way to describe the euphoria she experienced.

Thornton collapsed onto Leigh's breasts. He was breathing heavily and erratically. Moist beads of perspiration mingled together from each of their bodies. His heart was thundering. He wondered if Leigh could feel his heart pounding. It was pounding for her. He should move, but he opted not to. Instead he braced his arms along Leigh's side and put most of his weight upon his forearms. He was still inside of her. The consummation of their love was thrilling. He never felt so comfortable. Leigh was a perfect fit and she was his and his alone.

Leigh was still floating in her ethereal dream world. Her body still tingled warmly from the physical experience. She had felt Thornton brace himself to remove his weight and was panicked just for a moment. She didn't want them separated yet and was thrilled when he remained inside of her. Her heart was still racing wildly. She wondered if Thornton felt her heart racing for him.

Together they lay there. Neither of them moved and neither wanted to.

When Leigh began to float down to reality once more, she found herself gently raking her fingers through Thornton's dark brown almost black hair. She wondered if he was sleeping. His breathing was soft and regular once more. She quickly found out he wasn't sleeping when picked up his head and looked directly into her silver eyes.

"You're mine now and forever."

Leigh simply sighed and arched her head up from the pillows to meet his lips. "Is it truly this wonderful?"

"Only with the right people," Thornton replied returning his mouth to her breast.

Leigh felt Thornton swell inside of her. It was a fabulous feeling. Almost instantly Leigh's body responded in like kind.

Once more driving in and out of Leigh, Thornton said huskily, "I can't get enough of you. I've waited so long. I've waited so long."

Leigh didn't really understand why he said those words but she soon faded into her euphoria of sharing bodies with the man she had fell in love with at first sight.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Leigh and Thornton lost count of how many times they copulated that evening.

Thornton finally lay on the bed. He pulled Leigh to his side. Her head rested upon his chest. His arm enveloped her. His hand slowly rubbing her forearm and occasionally allowing his fingers to play with locks of her hair. He thought she was sleeping. Every now and then he would bend over and kiss the top of Leigh's tresses. "I love you, Leigh. You're mine now. You're mine forever!"

Leigh smiled, snuggled closer to Thornton and sighed. "I love you, Thornton. I think I have from the first moment I saw you. I can't believe you love me."

Thornton smiled in return. He lifted her chin with his free hand. "Faker! I thought you were sleeping!"

"Do you still love me? Awake I mean?"

Thornton's face turned serious. "Don't ever doubt my love for you."

"Really?" Leigh still couldn't believe that Colonel Thornton O'Neal, handsome, suave, debonair, and charming military officer could love a simple woman like she was. She was certainly no beauty. She was certainly no aristocratic lady. Leigh returned her head to Thornton's chest. She took her hand and smoothed the curly black brown hair on his abdomen. "You're beautiful you know."

"Really?" Thornton teased.

Leigh laughed. "Really! Really beautiful!"

"So are you," Thornton responded pulling her closer. "Are you all right? I mean, I haven't hurt you have I? I just couldn't stop having you."

"Hurt me?" Leigh questioned raising her brow in confusion.

"This was your first time. I am so afraid I've hurt you. I couldn't stop wanting you," Thornton confessed.

"You know I was a virgin? Can a man truly tell?"

Thornton felt like laughing he was so happy. Leigh was truly an innocent. "Yes, we men can. I tried to hold back, but you drove me insane with need. Are you sore?"

Leigh moved her bottom for the first time. Yes, she was indeed sore. "Actually, yes."

"I'll take care of you in the morning," Thornton promised. It was a good thing he was completely exhausted. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt Leigh. "Go to sleep."

"Isn't it morning?" Leigh chuckled.

"Not quite," Thornton responded with his own chuckle. "I do believe Fort Steele will have to do without me tomorrow morning. We'll be sleeping in. I'll take care of your tenderness tomorrow with some tender loving care."

"We'll be up soon if we leave those draperies open," Leigh advised. "You see light wakes me up. I forgot to close those drapes last night and the lightening woke me up. That's when I saw you standing there."

"Lucky me," Thornton guffawed. "But we'll sleep tomorrow. He rose from the bed and walked to the window to close the drapes.

Leigh could see his form in the darkness. His body was exquisitely built. Some day she would follow behind him and squeeze those tight buns of his. Not tonight. She was tender.

Thornton returned to the bed and pulled her back into his arms. "You are now mine forever. We will spend each night together."

Leigh clucked delightedly. "Whatever would people say if they knew?"

In a tone quite serious that surprised Leigh, Thornton retorted. "They'll think that we are a happily married couple." Thornton yawned, "Go to sleep woman, you've completely worn me out."

Leigh absorbed his words. *'Married'*. He couldn't really be serious. She had been a widow barely a month.

In the late morning Leigh found out how serious Thornton had been. He woke first and prepared a hot fragrant salts bath for Leigh. He lifted her from the bed forbidding her to walk and placed her gently in the tub. When she reached for the hand towel, Thornton grabbed it and put soap on it. Carefully he washed her face, her arms, her legs, her back, her breasts, and then her thatched womanhood. It was crusted with dry blood. She had noticed the dry crusty blood on Thornton's manhood, but made no comment. Thornton then took the soap and washed Leigh's hair. He took a bucket of warm water and rinsed her hair.

Never before had Leigh been treated so reverently or gently.

“You soak for a few minutes and relax. That will help the tenderness go away,” Thornton instructed. He left the room and called to Bessie to change the sheets. He closed the bathing room door, locked it and joined Leigh in the tub. He lifted her up, climbed in and gently placed her on top of his bare body. After he seated her he took the hand towel and soap creating a lather in front of her that allowed his arms to brush against her breasts. He kissed the back of her neck sending goose bumps down her spine. His smile was so large you could drive a platoon through it. He was content. Holding one breast and playing gently he washed his privates allowing the towel to tickle Leigh near her womanhood.

Leigh tossed her head backward laughing delightfully. “You are one fine lover, Colonel O’Neal.”

“Mmm,” Thornton responded as he finished washing the parts of him he was able. “So are you.” He nuzzled her hair and a few minutes later raised her with him and placed her gently on the floor. He wanted that bath to last a long time, but the water was getting cold. He reached for a large drying towel and handed it to Leigh. “Dry yourself, honey. If I do it we’ll never leave this room today. I’ll make your soreness worse and you need a little time to recover. Besides, you and I have a lot to do today.” He grabbed another large towel and dried himself off. When he was dry he wrapped the towel around his waist tucking it in on one corner. He gave Leigh a peck on her cheek and whispered. “Hurry up and dress. We have a lot to do. Wear your prettiest dress for me.”

Leigh grinned. “Of course we do. We nearly slept the day away. I’m a widow remember? Simple black basic dress.”

“Not today. For me? Please?” Thornton peeked through the doorway. There was no doubt in his mind that Bessie knew exactly what happened between them last night because he and Bessie had become friends and she knew his feelings toward Leigh, his love for her, and his intent to marry her. He just didn’t want Bessie to see him in the altogether. He had to return to his room to get dressed. Ah, the angel. Bessie left the room as soon as she changed the sheets.

Thornton walked briskly to his room.

Bessie stood in the hall on the opposite end of the mansion. She heard Thornton and peaked around the corner seeing him walk across the hall and go in his room. A giggle escaped her. She walked to Leigh’s room and knocked on the door. “Yo be needin me yet, Mrs. Chandler?”

“Yes, Bessie! Please come in and help me dress,” Leigh responded happily. “I can’t believe I’ve slept the day away.”

Bessie opened the door with a smile on her lips.

Leigh walked to her closet and looked at all the fine dresses she had. Martin didn’t have but one black dress made. She loved the dark calicos with sprigs of bright colored flower pattern. She also admired the gowns, traveling suits, and day dresses he had made for her. “You scamp!” Leigh clucked to the Martin of her memory. “You never intended for me to follow propriety and wear widow weeds for a year.” She selected a light pastel blue day dress of silk. The dress was a bit daring with its white-laced neckline. However Leigh was feeling a bit daring at the moment. She felt sore, but wonderful at the same time. The blue pastel was so pale it made her eyes look even more silver. Yes, she would wear this today. It was after all one of her best gowns.

With Bessie’s assistance she was dressed in a relatively short time. Thornton was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. He was wearing his full dress uniform. Handsome was an understatement as she looked upon him. When she descended the stairs he offered his arm to the dining room.

“You look ravishing! Just perfect for today!”

The table was already set and hot breakfast awaited them.

Leigh was hungry and savored the hot flapjacks, eggs, bacon, and ham. A cup of hot coffee added to the perfection of breakfast. She noticed Thornton ate a large portion for breakfast as well. He rarely took his eyes from her and he was smiling through breakfast.

Leigh sipped her coffee slowly enjoying the time with her lover. Of course he was her lover. She gave herself to him, didn’t she? She smiled. She didn’t feel like a wanton at all. She felt content, serene, and complete. Her reverie was disrupted when Thornton spoke.

“Are you finished with breakfast, honey?”

‘Honey? He called her honey! How very romantic.’ Leigh put down her coffee. “Yes.” Was that all she could say? Of course! Thornton always took her breath away, but after last night she wondered if she could ever breath again when she looked at those large blue delicious seductive eyes.

Thornton rose and pulled her chair from the table allowing her to rise. He took her arm in his hand and began walking to the front door.

“Are we going somewhere?”

“We are going to the fort,” Thornton replied opening the heavy oak door. “Reuben?”

“Yassir?”

Leigh saw Reuben sitting on the fine carriage Martin had bought for her so many months before. He told her it would her travel carriage when they moved to Shamrock and it would be necessary for her to visit Rawlins.

“Where’s Bessie?”

“Here I is,” Bessie announced from behind them.

“What is going on here?” Leigh demanded curiously. “Bessie is coming with us to the fort? We’ve yet to go to the fort alone much less together and Reuben driving us in the carriage? I could have worn my riding skirt. We could ride to the fort.”

“Not on this special day,” Thornton grinned mischievously. He lifted her to the carriage. He lifted Bessie up behind Leigh and then joined them in the carriage.

“Special day? Is the President of the United States visiting Fort Fred Steele, or is it just some foreign king?” Leigh teased.

“You’ll see soon enough,” Thornton promised. If the truth were known he had just made up his mind about doing this last night. It was as if fate had taken a hand. After watching and wanting Leigh every night since she moved in to Shamrock his dreams had been fulfilled. The probate judge was at the fort going over treaty documents he was forwarding to the new Peace Policy Commission. This was the exact time to make his move.

Fort Fred Steele was close to Shamrock Mansion. The western end of the mansion actually came within a few hundred yards of the fort’s stockade fencing. With the gate facing the eastern end and a large front yard it was a longer distance to the fort’s doors. It could be walked, but a small carriage ride would be nicer. The carriage wound around the small main street of the little village that surrounded Fort Fred Steele. It already had a livery, a bakery, hotel, mercantile, sutler, and several homes where the married men of the fort lived with their wives and children. Martin had given loans to all of the shopkeepers to open their small stores. The people would wave to her or Colonel O’Neal whenever they were out and about.

Once inside the fort the carriage stopped in front of the fort’s offices. Thornton jumped out. He turned to Leigh. “Wait here honey. I have some details to arrange.”

Leigh blushed to her toes. He kept calling her honey in front of everyone. Bessie and Reuben were bad enough for embarrassment, but she blushed beet red when his endearment caused several officers to look at her. She turned her head and spoke to Bessie. "Do you have any idea what is going on? Is there some important dignitary here?"

Bessie lifted her arms. "I shorely don't knows. The Colonel jest told me to dress up and come witch yo alls. He gots Reuben to drive this fancy carriage to da fort. Dats all we knows."

Walking toward the carriage were Long Face, Too Many Teeth, and Tall Grass.

"Goodness!" Leigh exclaimed pointing to her Shoshone friends. "Even they are here. Did Colonel O'Neal ask them to come along?" A thought struck her. "Perhaps Washakie is here visiting. But why wouldn't he just come to Shamrock? I simply do not understand at all."

"It shore do seem strange," Bessie agreed. "Why even da Colonel be dressed in his finest fancy uniform."

"Yes, the Colonel was in his dress uniform," Leigh remembered. She was now confused and a bit worried.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Thornton nearly floated into his office. Judge Porter was seated behind his desk just as he thought he would be. Lieutenant O'Brien scribing for him. "Good morning Judge Porter!"

"Ah, Colonel O'Neal," Robert Porter smiled. "I'm glad to see you before I left. However it is nearly noon. It is hardly morning. I had hoped we could share breakfast."

"There were important things to take care of this morning," Thornton cackled. "Very important things."

Lieutenant O'Brien looked at his superior officer. He had never seen his superior smiling, well at least not while on duty. There was something different about him. His eyes were sparkling. He had never seen sparkling eyes on the Colonel before. They looked cold, rigid, or severe.

"You still carry marriage certificates with you?" Thornton directed to the judge.

"Course I do," Robert laughed. "In country like this a traveling probate judge is called on occasionally to wed a couple for lack of a preacher."

"Good," Thornton grinned taking a chair from the sidewall and sitting down on the opposite side of his desk to face Judge Porter. "Will you take one out so we can get it filled out?"

Robert reached down into his leather valise. He rumbled through some papers and brought up blank marriage certificate. "Here you go. Just fill in the names. Is the couple here for the wedding?"

"Indeed we are," Thornton responded with a smile so wide Lieutenant O'Brien thought the world was coming to an end.

"We? You mean you and some lovely lady nearby?" Judge Porter questioned. "I had believed you to be a stalwart bachelor. I truly believed the army was your mistress." He took the paper after Thornton filled in the names. "By God! Not Leigh Chandler? The widow? Mrs. Martin Chandler?"

"One in the same," Thornton returned. He couldn't wipe the smile from his face.

“But Mr. Chandler has only been deceased for about a month,” Robert informed as if Thornton didn’t realize it. “It’s unheard of. The wait is at least a year between marriages.”

“Truly?” Thornton countered. “Where, who, and when decreed this? Could it be proper society in the East? This is Wyoming territory. Things are different here. Besides, I’ve waited overly long as it is.”

“Sir?” Lieutenant O’Brien asked. He couldn’t help himself. That slip of the tongue about waiting had him curious. He remembered the day Colonel O’Neal returned from Washington City. Leigh was there. He noted a change of attitude that day and several days after that. His old sour faced superior returned when they came back from escorting the politician. Leigh had married Mr. Chandler then.

“The only thing that matters right now, Judge Porter is that you marry Leigh Chandler to me right now,” Thornton responded strongly. “I don’t care about convention. I love her. I have loved her and I’m not about to put any more time between us.”

“As you stated. Wyoming is unconventional. Did you bring your intended?”

“She’s right outside. I’ll bring her in a moment. Can you be ready in two or three minutes?” Thornton replied.

“I’ll be ready,” Robert promised.

“Lieutenant O’Brien if you would like to bring your pretty new wife as a witness? Oh and round up Sergeant Bolt and his wife. I’d like them to be here. Hurry! You only have two minutes.”

The lieutenant ran to his home located in the fort. It had been Colonel O’Neal’s private quarters. The Colonel gave the home to the O’Brien family when his pretty wife accompanied him to the fort only two months ago. Lieutenant O’Brien ran right into John Bolt and told him the news. John bolted for his non-commissioned quarters to fetch his wife.

Leigh was concerned when Lieutenant O’Brien ran from Thorn’s office. He tipped his hat smiling and ran like the dickens until he bumped into Sergeant Bolt. He spoke to the sergeant who looked at Leigh and then bolted in a run like the lieutenant.

“What on earth is going on?” Leigh asked from her position sitting on the carriage.

At last Colonel O’Neal emerged from his offices. The smile he wore all morning was still plastered on his face.

Leigh returned his smile. She had truly never seen him so happy and hoped it was their wonderful night that put him in such high spirits.

Thornton walked directly to Leigh, but spoke to Too Many Teeth, Long Face, Tall Grass, Reuben, and Bessie. He asked them to go in his office that Judge Porter was in. He asked them to go in and wait for him.

The group obeyed without question. It was different for Leigh.

Thornton reached up to help Leigh down from the carriage.

Leigh pushed aside his hands. "I'm not leaving this carriage until you tell me what exactly is going on. I'm not too happy about surprises. I like to be prepared!"

Thornton launched his body into the carriage and took the seat next to Leigh. He took her hands in his and brushed his lips across her gloved knuckles. "It's a wedding."

"A wedding?" Leigh gasped happily. "Why didn't you just say so? I love weddings. I'd love to be a witness. Who is getting married? Is it one of your officers? Do I know him?"

"Love weddings? Wonderful!" Thornton grinned mischievously. "It is an officer. You know him. It's me and you are not a witness. You are a participant. Marry me Leigh!"

The words saturated into Leigh's cognition. "Me? Marry you?" She was breathless. She couldn't believe the bride would be her. She couldn't believe that Thornton wanted to marry her. Yet, Thornton was too serious by half. He did ask her to marry him. She wanted to scream and shout for joy, but surely Thornton didn't want to marry a simple plain looking woman such as she was. She was also a widow. The thought struck her like a bolt of lightening. "Thornton, I'm a widow."

"And my bride," Thornton countered swiftly.

"But Thorn, I've only been a widow for less than a month. Convention requires I mourn for at least a year."

"Convention? If you consider convention then I must demand you marry me. I stole your virginity last night. Convention demands you marry me," Thornton stated logically.

Leigh placed her hand to cup Thornton's chin and whispered softly, "I gave you my virginity. It was my choice. We were....lovers."

"Yes, lovers as a husband and wife should be," Thornton agreed. "It's all arranged. Judge Porter will marry us. Our friends are

here as witnesses. Marry me! I can't take no for an answer. I need you, Leigh. I need you as my wife."

Thornton's declaration was too touching and genuine for Leigh to disbelieve. Perhaps it was possible for the handsome Colonel to love a plain woman. Perhaps the Colonel could love her.

"What gossip would people say about us?" Leigh asked with concern.

"It would be worse gossip if you bore my child in nine months and we weren't married," Thornton replied firmly.

"You couldn't possibly know if I was impregnated," Leigh whispered and blushed beet red right down to her toes.

"I know it. I want our baby to be real. I no longer want to dream of our children, our daughters," Thornton replied huskily. "Marry me today. I'll sit here until you finally agree no matter how long it takes, but it is quite rude to keep our witnesses and the judge waiting."

"Are you really sure you want to marry me?" Leigh asked hesitantly. She still couldn't believe Thorn wanted her as a wife. It was easier to believe Martin wanted her as a wife. Martin was ill and dying. He needed her. Their marriage became true love after they were wed. Perhaps it could happen again. Leigh hoped it could happen again. "I married Martin because he needed me."

"I need you more," Thornton sighed. "I repeat myself. Marry me right now!"

"If you are sure," Leigh hesitated.

"Damnation!" Thornton roared in exasperation. "I couldn't be more certain. I need you. I love you. I want you! Marry me Leigh Junge Chandler!"

There was so much emotion in that declaration that Leigh could no longer resist no matter how much she berated herself and her attributes. "Yes, Colonel Thornton O'Neal. I will marry you."

"Hallelujah!" Thornton cried joyfully. He jumped from the carriage and lifted Leigh gently to the ground. He tucked her arm firmly under his and led her to his private office. Sergeant Bolt, Mrs. Bolt, Lieutenant O'Brien, and his young bride were behind them.

Leigh leaned against Thornton's shoulder before they entered his private office. She whispered softly a warning. "We may have troubles with the righteous people of Rawlins. We are breaking the traditional convention of a widow marrying so soon after her husband's demise."

“Together we can face anything,” Thornton responded. There was love and happiness in those blue eyes.

Leigh had no comeback. She was happy in Thorn’s arms, in his bed, and anyplace else they would be together. This was the West. Things were different here. She told herself not to worry. Leigh believed Thornton had to love her. He wouldn’t be casting aside tradition if he didn’t. Believing Thornton could love her made her very happy.

The wedding ceremony was quite brief. The ceremony seemed surreal to Leigh, but they signed the marriage certificate. They were legally wed.

Leigh looked into Thorn’s eyes. They were bright and dancing. He was happy. He was truly happy.

To their surprise an honor guard stood between them and the carriage. Reuben had already left the office and took his place on the driver’s seat. Bessie sat next to him instead of riding in the carriage with the newly weds.

When the newly married couple walked through the honor guard, the honor guard raised their sabers to form an arch.

Too Many Teeth, Long Face, and Tall Grass nodded approval. Mrs. Bolt and Mrs. O’Brien cried in joy. John Bolt and Lieutenant O’Brien were the first pair in the honor guard. As they walked through the saber archway, the officers and non commissioned officers extended congratulations.

Thornton acknowledged every congratulations with a smile and a ‘Thank you. We’re very happy.’ He had an arm around Leigh’s waist and an arm holding her hand tightly. Arriving at the carriage he lifted Leigh to the seat and followed immediately.

Captain Granger walked to the carriage. “I take it you will be taking personal leave, sir?”

“Indeed I am,” Thornton laughed. “New bride you know. Major Dunbar will take command in my absence.”

“How long sir?” Captain Granger queried.

“Since I do now live so close to the fort I shall only take three days,” Thornton replied. “However, if there is any emergency, you can reach me with a runner.”

Captain Granger saluted his superior officer. “Good day and a better evening.”

Thornton caught his meaning and laughed. “Indeed, Captain Granger. Indeed!”

Chapter Thirty-Four

The next three days were wonderful for Leigh. She couldn't believe how happy she was. Every morning she woke up embraced in Thornton's arms. Every night they made love until they were exhausted and sleep overtook them. During the day they spent nearly each moment together. They talked, they laughed, and shared their thoughts.

Thornton was a hopeless tease with a dry wit that Leigh adored. She teased back and learned a dry remark or two of her own. They were well suited for each other. Leigh couldn't mistake the happiness in Thornton's eyes. He did love her. She believed it at last.

This morning Thornton donned his uniform, mounted Comet, and gave her a saucy salute before he nudged his horse to take him to Fort Fred Steele.

Leigh remained on the portico watching her husband return to his work. She sighed happily. How her life had changed since she came to Wyoming. She and Martin had a loving wonderful marriage. Martin had left her a very wealthy woman. Now she was married again in a wonderful relationship. How could a woman be so fortunate? It was like one of her happy ever after stories. The only difference was there was no villain. "I'm grateful for that," Leigh muttered to herself. "I think I like being happy and blissfully contented," she added thinking of Thornton's love making. Leigh prepared for the day. She would soon return to her normal routine. One of the first things she wanted to do was visit Martin's gravesite and tell him how happy she was. The second thing she wanted to do was work in her garden. She had completely neglected it this past week.

Leigh didn't call for Bessie to help her dress. Today she selected a simple dark dress with beige apron attached. It was a work dress. After she braided her long auburn hair, Leigh wound it on top of her head and tied a scarf around her head to protect her from the sun and dust while working in her garden.

Leigh was returning from Martin's gravesite when she saw the riders. Her light happy mood had turned dark when she noticed that one of the horses was Hoosier. That could only mean her brother had come to call. She really had never wanted to see him again, but he was blood family. She would be polite.

Carl was sitting in the main parlor with Max Elder, Judge Porter's assistant from Rawlins, when she entered the room.

Carl stood when Leigh entered the room and walked to her side. He gave her a brief hug and broad smile. "I simply cannot fathom why you insist upon wearing those ugly work rags when you are currently a lady of means."

"So you've discovered that have you now?" Leigh replied sarcastically. Her brother the vulture would never change. He wanted to be her friend now that she had money.

"I had no idea your Martin was so.. so.." Carl hedged to come up with the proper word.

"Wealthy?" Leigh supplied testily. "I'm certain Mrs. Thatcher appraised you of that situation rather quickly."

Carl smiled sardonically. "You mean, Mrs. Junge. We've married you see."

"Congratulations," Leigh responded dryly. "Is that what you came here to tell me? Hoping for a large wedding present?"

"You wound me with your acerbic tongue sister, dearest," Carl answered sweetly. "I actually was concerned that you have not returned to your home in Rawlins. I was calling to make sure you were all right. Is it true that you intend to live here permanently, in the country away from civilization?" He had hoped he could talk his sister into returning to Rawlins. He could manage his plan there much better if she were closer.

"Civilization is where you find it," Leigh stated calmly taking a seat on the divan facing the great marble fireplace.

"You now own so many properties in Rawlins. Surely you must see the need to be atop all your businesses," Carl attempted in persuasion.

"My, my, but you have been busy learning about all Chandler accounts," Leigh chided. "Have you been assisting my brother in this accounting, Mr. Elder?"

Max blushed with guilt. "He is your brother. I thought it would do no harm to list the sum of Chandler properties."

Leigh raised her brow in anger. How dare this man reveal Chandler investments? It didn't matter if he revealed them to her brother. She would speak to Judge Porter about this and certainly discuss it with Martin's lawyers in New York. "I do not approve, Mr. Elder. Please see to it that there are no more discussions of Chandler interests with anyone."

"I apologize," Max replied nervously. His finger went to his starched collar and pulled at it. He felt he had done nothing wrong since it was her brother that did the asking. Now he knew differently. Martin Chandler had indeed trained Leigh Chandler quite well. He had been nervous around Martin also.

"Could I be of assistance with your holdings, sister dearest," Carl said effortlessly. "I have sold The Three Circle Ranch and now live in Rawlins with my new wife. I help her manage her boarding house and would be happy to help you manage the properties."

"That is most generous of you," Leigh sneered. "It isn't necessary. You see I have the most capable of people already handling the properties."

"They could be stealing you blind," Carl offered lamely.

Leigh almost laughed. Her accountant was meticulous with every penny. If there would ever be anyone to steal her blind it would be her brother. "Highly unlikely."

This was not working out at all. Carl could not understand this new woman before him. Prior to her marriage and wealth he could look down upon her and manage her simply because he was her older well-established and wealthy brother. Now any wealth he previously had was reduced to pennies compared to what Leigh now owned. Theresa had taken all the gold, coin, jewels, and cash leaving him with only the sale of the ranch and the boarding house he married into. If he could only get hold of some of Leigh's money he would invest it and become much wealthier. "My concern was only for my baby sister."

"Highly unlikely," Leigh snorted.

"I do not understand your attitude," Carl snapped losing his patience. He wanted control of her money and property. Why shouldn't he? She was a widow and he was the only man in the family.

Leigh was losing her patience as well. "Mr. Elder, is there a reason you accompanied my brother? Or did Carl accompany you? Whatever the answer, please state your business."

“Actually I have to report to Judge Porter at Fort Fred Steele. We will be returning to Rawlins on the morrow. I had to bring him the last will and testament of Martin Chandler. He wanted to review it tonight. I was also sent to remind you that the reading of the will is set for three days from today at the Rawlins Hotel,” Max replied quickly.

“You didn’t happen to share the will with my brother did you?” Leigh demanded.

“I should say not,” Max responded huffily. “The will is confidential until the reading. Then it becomes probate and filed as public record.”

Carl couldn’t help but smirk. He had already read the will when Max was about his duties in Judge Porter’s office. Claudia had been most helpful when informing Carl of Max’s duties. Max was a boarder in her house and knew the clerk would be advantageous in helping Carl achieve some control of his sister’s wealth. Claudia wanted some of that wealth and power in the same greedy drive her new husband did.

“Thank you for delivering the information,” Leigh dismissed. She rose from the divan and walked to the door. “Please don’t let me keep you from your duty.”

Max Elder rose quickly. He left the room. Carl remained in his chair.

“I’m sure you must want to return to your new wife,” Leigh intimated hoping her brother would understand she did not enjoy his presence.

“I came to stay and chat for awhile,” Carl snickered. “I still hope to convince you to return to Rawlins.”

“I have no desire to return to Rawlins, Carl,” Leigh responded. “Martin built Shamrock Mansion to be my haven. It is.”

“You’ve built up a wall between us, sister dearest,” Carl sighed responding to her cold receptions. “We are the only family we have. We should be close. It’s God’s will.”

“Leigh has other family now!” Thornton boomed entering the room. The fort lookout had sent him word of the two strangers entering Shamrock Ranch. He rode home immediately upon hearing the report. He nearly froze when he heard Carl talking to Leigh. Those suspicions of Carl ate him raw.

“Ah, the ever protective Colonel,” Carl scoffed. “I’m here to protect my sister. You simply aren’t needed anymore. I’ve married Claudia Thatcher you see. I’m living in Rawlins now. Your

protectiveness is no longer required. By God's will I will do my duty for my sister."

"You're not listening," Thornton snarled. "Leigh has other family now. As her husband it is my duty to protect her. I will!"

Carl's mouth dropped. She married him! His plans came crashing down. With another husband it would be more difficult to get control of her money. "You can't be serious! Martin Chandler isn't even dead a month!" He had read the confidential portions of the will including the request that Thornton marry Leigh within three months. Carl believed he could dissuade his sister during that time and take control before Thornton obeyed his best friend's last request. He took his anger out on Leigh. "Pray with me now for God's forgiveness!"

"I've got a better idea," Thornton growled. "Why don't you return to your new wife and the two of you can pray together."

"Leigh, would you have your own flesh and blood treated so rudely?" Carl queried with great flair of hurt feelings.

Leigh almost laughed at the hypocrisy of her brother's reference to family. "He's the head of the household. I must abide by my husband's decree. It's God's will you know." She loved rubbing that into Carl's face. "A man must leave his family and cling unto his wife. I think you've repeated that to me several times. Please feel free to cling to your wife."

"I've come a long way without breakfast," Carl protested. "Certainly you would treat a guest to sustenance."

"No." Thornton stated. He was concerned that anytime Carl had in this house he might use to place the arsenic poison. It would be of no consequence to him who he killed to get hold of Chandler holdings. Hadn't he and Martin discussed this in detail many times before Martin's death?

"We must show hospitality," Leigh requested touching her husband's arm.

Thornton could deny Leigh nothing. "Very well. I'll take you to the kitchen. Leigh, you stay here."

"I let you handle Carl's brunch," Leigh replied wisely. "I have work to do. I'll be in the garden."

Thornton softened immediately. He kissed Leigh lovingly on the forehead. "Run along my love. I will see to your brother."

Leigh whispered a tease, "Don't kill him. You look angry enough to do so."

"I'll refrain this time."

Carl felt uncomfortable as Thornton led him to the kitchen. He was also insulted that he wasn't to be served by staff in the fine dining room they walked through. "Tell me, do you normally eat in the kitchen?"

"Every damn day," Thornton replied cheekily. He knew the curse word would offend the pious bastard.

Carl stiffened at the offending words just as Thornton had hoped.

"Bessie," Thornton addressed entering the kitchen. "Is there any breakfast left?"

"So this is where you ran off!" Carl growled at Bessie.

Bessie ignored Carl. She turned to Thornton, "Yassuh."

Thornton requested, "Would you mind warming the leftovers and giving Mr. Junge some food."

"Yassuh," Bessie answered loudly. When she turned to begin the warming she muttered under her breath, "Don't matter to me which pig yo decide to feed."

"What was that? Carl asked brusquely.

Thornton laughed.

Carl was irritated. "How many other of my staff have you taken?" Carl asked Thornton taking a chair and sitting by the table waiting to be served.

"Nearly all of them," Thornton quipped. "It seems that most of them didn't like working for you at all."

"Lazy bastards wanted too much money. They were robbing my Aunt Ruth blind," Carl repudiated.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Carl ate the food quickly. He was furious that Thornton never left him alone for a minute. He had wanted to wander through the mansion. He had wanted to see exactly what valuables were in the mansion. He could see that the house was luxurious and no expense had been spared on decorating including the furniture and draperies. He could be happy living here for a while. Eventually he wanted to return to civilization and the larger metropolitan cities of Milwaukee and Chicago. With this much money, he might even be able to live in New York.

The fact his sister had married Thornton enraged him. Thornton would inherit the Chandler holdings if Leigh died of the family illness. That would never do. He had one ace up his sleeve. He would use it.

Leigh was in her garden weeding to avoid her brother's presence. She knew Thornton would handle her brother. He always had. Leigh stood up and stretched. She admired her work. The vegetables were coming up nicely. She and Bessie would have wonderful preserves this year. She was humming happily and didn't even hear her husband come up behind her. Instead she was literally lifted from the ground, spun around, and kissed.

Leigh fell into Thornton's kiss. Her arms were around his neck. The headiness of his kisses always made her a little dizzy. She had true happiness and of course in this story she now had a villain.

Finally Thornton pulled away. He rubbed his nose with Leigh's nose and smiled. "He's gone back to Rawlins."

"Thank goodness," Leigh laughed in relief. "He really is an odious man."

"And out for your fortune," Thornton added.

"I think I'll make my own will that excludes him specifically," Leigh stated thoughtfully. "Speaking of which, Max Elder reminded me that Martin's will is to be read in three days. Are you up to visiting Rawlins?"

"I'll go with you to the ends of the world," Thornton replied huskily. He picked Leigh up and headed for the mansion.

"Where are we going now?" Leigh chuckled knowing exactly what her new husband had in mind. She could tell by the passionate look in his brilliant blue eyes.

"Our bed of course."

"But it is mid day!"

"Is it?" Thornton teased. "Hadn't noticed."

"Your duty?"

"I'm doing it."

"Your military duty, darling."

"Oh, that. It can wait a bit," Thornton grinned mounting the steps to their room. "I find this duty much more enjoyable."

Thornton brought along a small patrol for their ride to Rawlins. It was a short ride to town, but there had been trouble with Sioux and Cheyenne attacking small farms and travelers. So far no one had been killed. They were only raids that Thornton had been grateful. He truly wished he could be a part of treaty talks with the Sioux and Cheyenne. His experience at Bear River still haunted him. He understood the pain suffered by such attacks on a peaceful people. He could understand the people fighting to protect their land and family from such devastation. Thornton admitted he loved this land. He loved the beauty and the people of the land. Not only did he respect the indigenous people for their concept of nature and all things natural, he respected the pioneers that came into the strange land to live in it and love it. He did not care for the new settlers and miners. They had no concept of beauty or nature. They only understood greed. Leigh's brother Carl was a leech like that.

Even his short time with Leigh as her husband opened his eyes to many new insights. At night after they made love they would discuss their thoughts on many subjects. It never ceased to amaze him the depth of Leigh's thought process. He began to confide everything he felt with her. Even when he had a bad day and was upset she would soothe him with discussion and logic. "I love you, Leigh!"

After the silence Thornton's words startled her. She bestowed upon him a large smile. "I love you too! Where did that come from?" Much to her surprise Thornton brought Comet in closer to Buttermilk and leaned over to kiss her.

"Forgot to say so this morning."

Leigh threw back her head and laughed. “No you didn’t forget. I seem to have heard it several times this morning.”

How he loved it when Leigh laughed. Her eyes sparkled like polished silver. “In the throes of passion the I love you doesn’t count,” he whispered huskily.

Leigh blushed bright pink. She hoped none of the men had overheard. It was shocking to have a man, much less a Colonel kiss in front of other men. She couldn’t imagine what the men would think if they heard their Colonel speak lustily. “The men could hear you,” Leigh hissed.

Thornton chuckled and took the lead in the patrol once more.

The patrol noticed the Colonel and his lady. They also knew they were on this patrol to protect that lady. All the men smiled when the Colonel kissed his lady. They all liked the new married Colonel much better than the brooding bachelor Colonel.

Arriving in Rawlins at the hotel they were greeted by all the invited parties for the reading of the will.

Mary, now Mrs. Stephan McDonald, was the first to greet Leigh. “We heard you married Colonel O’Neal. We’re so happy for you! Didn’t I tell you long ago that the Colonel loved you?”

Leigh nodded and smiled. “Indeed you did.” Leigh returned Mary’s hug. “I heard you married Stephan. I’m happy for you,” Leigh said quietly, “News certainly travels fast here in Rawlins. Thornton and I were only married less than a week ago.” Leigh whispered into Mary’s ear, “Was the news treated scandalously?”

Mary whispered in return, “Some of the snobby church goers tried to make it scandalous, but the town people love you and loved Martin. The majority of us are thrilled to pieces for you. The others don’t count at all.”

Leigh squeezed Mary’s hand and mouthed a thank you. “Where is Maggie?”

“Right over there,” Mary pointed to the little girl squirming in her stepfather’s hand trying to break away and run to her dearest Aunt Leigh.

Leigh opened her arms. Stephen released Maggie and she ran directly to Leigh.

“You bring me candy, Auntie Leigh?”

“Would I ever forget pumpkin?” Leigh returned bringing out a piece of maple candy that Bessie had made yesterday from her shirt pocket. She put it in the little girl’s hand.

Judge Porter emerged from the private quarters of the hotel. Mary and Stephen McDonald now used them as their living quarters. “Is everyone here?” Judge Porter questioned looking over the hotel lobby finding Colonel and Mrs. O’Neal.

Robert Simms peered out the door calling, “Come in! Come in so we can begin.” He had just arrived yesterday and spent the entire evening at Judge Porter’s house going over the complete will that had been left in his care by Martin Chandler. This will had included some additions and changes that were not in the will Judge Porter had in his care.

Thornton and Leigh were astonished when they saw Reverend Harper, Claudia, and Carl sitting on chairs in the parlor.

In fact, Reverend Harper, Claudia, and Carl were surprised themselves when Max Elder was sent to bring them to the reading of the will.

Leigh noted a smirk on Carl’s face. He must be thinking that Martin would ask him to be executor. He would think that because he was such a pompous egotistical chauvinist. Claudia was beaming also. She most likely was imagining that Martin suddenly found religion and was bequeathing her money since she tried so desperately to get him to become a member of the church. Leigh knew what they were thinking, but she couldn’t imagine what reason they would be called to the reading. She couldn’t begin to imagine just what Martin would leave to them. Reverend Harper looked apprehensive.

The reading took place and Martin had told Leigh of many of his requests. Sven was given money to start his own lumber business, Mary was given a quarter interest in the Rawlins Hotel, Dan Quirk was given a quarter interest in the restaurant. Many of the employees were given monetary endowments. The library, schools, hospital, and other charities Leigh had initiated would be funded by endowments of the Chandler estates. Leigh would inherit the bulk of his estates and be the primary stockholder of all shares in his business. She learned of many other properties Martin and his family owned. She learned she had properties she could live in practically every country of the world. This included a small manor in Fanore, Ireland. She did want to visit there someday.

Doctor Farrah was given \$500,000 to outfit and staff his new hospital that was built with Leigh's assistance. The will also allowed for \$50,000 every year as allotment to assist the hospital's funding a care for impoverished people who could not pay.

Carl was beaming. He learned today just how wealthy his sister had become and he was certain Martin would put him in control.

It was then the boom was lowered. Judge Porter read an addendum to the will.

"I will endow the Episcopalian Church a sum of \$100,000 and \$50,000 to Reverend Harper if he removes Claudia Thatcher, a vicious and un-Christian woman as the matron of his parish. She is never to be re-instated for any reason or the money will be returned by legal suit for violation of will," Judge Porter read clearly. "This request falls to you, Reverend Harper, as the representative of the Episcopalian Church and shepherd of a flock. You need to watch your flock and guide them in Christian ways, not cruel gossip and lies. Should you not accept this request, Reverend Harper, this addendum to my last will and testament will be forwarded to the Bishop of this territory."

The reprimand flattened Reverend Harper. He turned beet red with embarrassment. There was nothing he could do. Claudia would be removed as matron of the Ladies Society. The Bishop would not look kindly at the Reverend's refusal in accepting such an endowment. Truth be known, Martin Chandler was correct. Claudia was a vindictive, selfish, unchristian, and cruel malicious gossip. He looked at Claudia and sighed, "I'm sorry. You must step down."

Claudia was horrified and humiliated. This simply couldn't be.

The Judge continued. "Should the Reverend accept my endowment, an account will be opened in Rawlins Bank in the amount of \$25,000 for Claudia Thatcher."

Carl squeezed Claudia's hand. "It's all right my dear. Don't make a fuss." He was pleased with the sizeable amount of money left for him. After all, Claudia was his wife and therefore her money was his. The sum would do him for a while.

The judge cleared his throat, turned the page and read, "This is a small addendum added just before Martin Chandler's death. Should Claudia Thatcher wed Carl Junge, the monies deposited will only be dispersed in amounts of no more than \$100 per month."

Carl turned scarlet with rage. This had to be his sister's doing. He knew why he was called to the reading. He was called to be humiliated and shamed by his sister. She must have told Martin

Chandler all sorts of lies. This had to be her doing. He would have his revenge. He would turn her from her husband and then see to it that she died of the family disease. Then everyone would see just who had the last humiliation. He had just the information to turn her away from her new husband. His thoughts were interrupted by Judge Porter's next announcements.

"This is the end of the public reading of Martin Chandler's last will and testament. There are addendums that are private. These are to be read in private for Colonel O'Neal only."

Carl knew what was in that part of the will. He had read it before hand when he visited Max Elder many times previously. He smirked and hid his rage. "Come m'dear. We will return to our home."

"But, but," Claudia sputtered angrily. "Aren't you going to do something? I've been humiliated. I've lost my standing in the church."

"I understand," Carl replied haughtily. "We'll simply forgive the heathens and continue our lives."

Thornton rolled his eyes. This pompous ass was impossible.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Leigh had no idea what needed to be said that she couldn't hear, but it didn't matter. She left with Mary who was bubbling with joy.

"Imagine me an owner of the Rawlins Hotel," Mary squealed in delight. She took Leigh's hand and squeezed it. "I can't believe it. I simply cannot believe it. This is too wonderful."

"Believe it, Mary," Leigh laughed sharing Mary's happiness. "You worked hard for it. You've earned it."

Maggie tugged at her mother's skirt. "Does this mean we're rich, Mama?"

"Richer than rich," Mary cried out. "Richer than money. We are rich with friends and family. We are rich with happiness."

Thornton left the MacDonald parlor with Robert Simms and Judge Porter. They remained for nearly two hours after the reading.

"Martin didn't have to do this," Thornton chuckled. "I would have done it without his requests. He knew that."

"He did know that you loved Leigh and wanted to marry her," Simms agreed. "He wanted everything to be legal so there would never be any question about you, Leigh, and the Shamrock Ranch."

"It does legally belong to you now," Judge Porter elucidated. "You've married Leigh and the entire ranch including the mansion will be titled in your name."

"Do you really plan on filling it with children like Martin related in the will?" Simms snorted in humor.

"Absolutely!" Thornton declared instantly. "I've been working on that already."

"Martin has already created endowments for four children to be given on their 18th birthdays," Simms enlightened. "Gave names to them. Regina, Rebecca, Rachel, and Chandler. Do you think you can really do that old boy?"

The smirk on Thornton's face said it all.

“Let’s go find the little lady,” Simms laughed. “We’ll have a fine dinner together.”

Leigh and Thornton stayed for two days at the Rawlins hotel. They stayed in the Presidential Suite that Leigh was first given on her arrival to Rawlins by Martin.

Together they enjoyed company of all their friends for visits.

The return home was a happy occasion. The patrol was out of Rawlins for three hours when Too Many Teeth rode up to Colonel O’Neal.

Leigh had thought it odd that Too Many Teeth rode to meet them. He also galloped his horse. He was not in a full run, but Too Many Teeth rarely galloped unless there was urgency to his riding. When she saw Too Many Teeth’s face she knew something was amiss.

“Take your patrol to that circle of boulders ahead. It will give you cover,” Too Many Teeth ordered. “There is a party of Lakota looking for war prizes and scalps. They have seen your patrol and are readying to attack.”

“Where are they?” Thornton asked. He had no doubt as to the accuracy of Too Many Teeth’s information. Over the past few months he had learned Too Many Teeth was one of the finest scouts the military would ever hire and had used him as one even though he lived and worked primarily on Shamrock ranch.

“Do not look up,” Too Many Teeth warned. “They are on those hills ahead. I saw them and went past them riding to you as if I was coming with you from the town.”

“If we stop in the circle they will be forced to fight us in the open,” Thornton acknowledged with understanding.

Too Many Teeth nodded. “Maybe you are not too stupid.”

“How many are there?” Thornton asked.

“Maybe twice your hands,” Too Many Teeth responded.

“About twenty,” Thornton guessed from the description. They continued to ride together and talk as if nothing were wrong. “That is a small party to attack a well trained and armed patrol.”

“Three Clouds is angry. His brother and wife were killed in an attack on their camp by white miners,” Too Many Teeth explained.

“Damn!” Thornton hissed through his teeth. “I’ll find those miners and have them strung up in front of the Sioux. We need to stop these needless slaughters if we are ever to achieve peace.”

“You speak the truth for tomorrow. This is today. Will you listen to Too Many Teeth? Let me save lives. I will only take scalps of Lakota that fight and fall.”

“I will listen. I prefer to save lives. Especially the lives of my men,” Thornton responded. “You are the best scout in our fort. It would be foolish to pay you and not have trust in you.”

“You are less stupid. This is good. Shoshone have fought for what you white men call many generations. We know how Lakota fight. You do not,” Too Many Teeth admonished.

“Tell me how to fight,” Thornton requested.

“When the Lakota see you have sought the rock shelter they will come upon you and circle shouting. Do not waste your bullets. This will confuse them and some will become bold. They will start firing their weapons and close in. Then you will fire and kill a few,” Too Many Teeth advised. “Then they will act as if they will run away. They will hope to draw you out for an open battle. Do not. Do not waste your bullets. Let them go.”

“Will they continue to run?”

“I do not know. They will run or they will return to attack once again,” Too Many Teeth suggested shrugging his shoulders. “If they return to attack. Do as before. Do not use bullets until they fire and charge with their ponies.”

Thornton called Lieutenant O’Brien and advised him of the intended plan.

Since it was not unusual to see a commander call an officer back and forth during the patrol, Three Clouds did not suspect anything. He and his band stayed upon the hill waiting for the patrol to ride below them. He would have white blood for revenge.

In the meantime Lieutenant O’Brien issued orders that as soon as the patrol neared the boulder circle they would go into a full run and create an inner circle. They would prepare for battle. He also gave the patrol their orders to try to wound and not kill the warriors. He preferred prisoners to bodies. They were to kill if their life was indeed threatened.

Thornton rode Comet next to Leigh on Buttermilk. He explained everything to her and made her promise to stay by Too Many Teeth for protection.

Leigh was frightened, but she tried not to show it.

When they neared the boulders, the patrol and Leigh bolted into a full run to the protection of the circle.

Three Clouds knew immediately they had been warned of their presence. He ordered his band to attack.

The Lakota attacked exactly as Too Many Teeth had predicted.

Thornton ordered his men to hold their fire until the Sioux began to fire and charge.

When the Lakota finally charged and opened fire the patrol returned in like kind.

The noise was ear shattering.

Leigh held her hands over her ears.

Too Many Teeth pushed Leigh down to the ground and lay nearly on top of her.

Although she was nearly crushed to the ground she turned her head and was able to see Thornton returning fire and shouting orders to Lieutenant O'Brien, Sergeant Bolt, and his men.

"Your man not so stupid any more," Too Many Teeth quipped.

"I find that quite comforting at the moment," Leigh replied tongue in cheek.

Again as Too Many Teeth predicted, the Lakota started riding their ponies away from the battle.

Thornton ordered a cease-fire. He then ordered that they maintain their defensive position and not return fire until the Lakota charged once again.

Three Clouds commanded his band to attack once again. This time he led the charge. His pony was shot out from under him. He took three bullets as he charged firing his own rifle. Rage and fury drove adrenalin to come nearly face to face with the young Lieutenant. O'Brien's colt was spent. He needed to reload.

Thornton saw the rage in the warrior's face. He saw him take aim at Lieutenant O'Brien. There was only one thing to do. He leaped toward O'Brien and pushed him out of the way. He took a bullet in his shoulder for his effort to save O'Brien's life.

Sergeant Bolt had also witnessed the attack. He took aim with his rifle and Three Clouds fell with a bullet to the head.

Leigh screamed when she saw Thornton fall. She struggled to break free of Too Many Teeth's grip. He didn't release her. He was much stronger than he looked.

"Hush woman. The battle is not done," Too Many Teeth warned.

With their leader down, the Lakota retreated. It was too late for them. Washakie had a hunting party nearby and had watched the attack. He brought his warriors to enter the battle.

Washakie and his warriors quickly captured the last of Three Clouds band. Their reward would be the Lakota Ponies.

The military would have Lakota prisoners.

"You go now to man," Too Many Teeth said when he released Leigh.

Lieutenant O'Brien was kneeling next to Thornton's body.

Leigh ran and stumbled twice until she was next to Thornton. "Is he..?"

O'Brien shook his head. "I think he took it in the shoulder. He's bleeding heavily, but he is alive."

"We've got to get him to a doctor," Leigh wept. She was frantic, worried, and joyful at the same time. Thornton was wounded, but not dead.

"We'll make a travois and take him to the fort. It's closer, and we have a surgeon at the fort," Lieutenant O'Brien related.

Sergeant Bolt was already chopping down two small trees in a copse near the boulders. Sergeant Harvey was pulling out a heavy blanket to use for the travois.

Thornton stirred. "How many are injured? Are any down? Did we lose any men?"

"We would have lost me, but for your action," Lieutenant O'Brien replied stoically. "You seem to be the only casualty. The Shoshone came in right after the second attack."

"Darling, don't talk. Save your energy," Leigh whimpered next to him.

"Are you going to be my nurse?" Thornton teased.

"All day and all night," Leigh promised allowing a smile to cross her lips. "We're going to take you to the fort. You'll be just fine."

"I'm going to keep you to that promise, woman," Thornton chuckled. "It'll be worth getting wounded just to have you around all day and night."

"Will you stop joking about this," Leigh grouched. "It isn't a joking matter. You're hurt. You could have been killed!"

"Sweetheart, I've been wounded before. Many times as a matter of fact. Three or four during the first two years of the war," Thornton laughed. "It hurts like the dickens, but I'm still here."

Besides, I can't die yet. I haven't made all my daughters and one son yet."

"Well forgive me for worrying then," Leigh grumbled huffily.

"I didn't say that," Thornton continued laughing. "I like you worrying about me. It makes me feel special."

"Oh stop it," Leigh sighed in exasperation.

Suddenly Chief Washakie was towering over Thornton. "Too Many Teeth say you are no longer stupid man. You have grown brains."

"Yes, he said something like that," Thornton snickered. His arm was burning like hot embers, but he wouldn't let anyone know how much pain he was in.

"You wanted prisoners, not bodies," Washakie stated.

"Do I have any?"

"Your hands, plus more," Washakie answered. "We will keep ponies. You will keep men. The Shoshone are big winners."

"Oh, I don't know. The ponies will eat more than men. You'd better consider living on the reservation and starting to learn agriculture."

"You are smarter," Washakie laughed. "You speak with logic. Too bad I can't take my people there yet. Camp does not have enough soldiers. The houses and school are not built. No one teaches us to use these funny tools."

"I've heard rumors of misappropriation of government funds," Thornton stated. "It is being investigated. Your requests will be filled."

"Good," Washakie smiled. "Wind River is good land. Still we need protection from Lakota raiders just as you do."

"We're working on that," Thornton grinned.

Washakie saw his look and laughed. "Some work, you give your blood for it."

"Accident's happen," Thornton excused.

Washakie laughed harder. "You should be more careful."

"I'll try," Thornton replied drolly.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Thornton did take advantage of his wound. He was taken to Shamrock Mansion and the surgeon came to him.

Fortunately the bullet passed through the muscle of Thornton's shoulder. The surgeon did not have to remove any bullet. The only danger was infection, but the wound was cleaned thoroughly.

Thornton took his own sweet time in recovering since Leigh was at his beck and call every minute of the day. This included some lovemaking during the day and night. He taught Leigh a new way to ride. It was a new way to ride him. Their passions took on a whole new meaning.

During the month he used to recover, Carl was continually thwarted to visit with his sister alone. At first he used the excuse that he heard about the attack and was concerned for her husband. Every week he hoped Thornton would return to the Fort to work, but every week Thornton was there by Leigh's side. He wondered if he would ever get Leigh alone to drop his cannon ball.

Leigh laid her head upon Thornton's shoulder. She could tell by Thornton's even breathing he was asleep. She was still euphoric from their lovemaking. She wondered if she should tell Thornton she thought she was pregnant. He had said many times how much he wanted children. She was certain he would be happy about it, but she was also afraid to give him hope when she wasn't quite sure herself yet. She didn't have her menses since they were married and her breasts were becoming more sensitive. Maybe if she waited one more month she would know for certain. She certainly didn't want to go to the fort surgeon, and she didn't want to make another return trip to Rawlins. She didn't want another occurrence like the one she just went through. There was fear there even though she was assured that attack was a fluke.

Thornton was called to Fort Laramie. He had to meet with General Crook and some political dignitaries to discuss the current Indian wars and the Shoshone.

Leigh was left alone for nearly a week and Carl finally had his time with her. She marveled at her brother's change of personality with her. He even mentioned that his divorce from Theresa had made him see things he didn't notice before. Basically he made it seem as if Theresa were the evil influence upon him. He was now beginning to realize how important family was with his two daughters and new wife. She wanted to believe Carl's about face. She hoped he would finally understand family.

Carl and Leigh were enjoying tea in the parlor when he finally had the opportunity to drop the cannon ball.

"This is truly a lovely home Thornton provides for you," Carl commented stirring his sweetened tea. "How kind of him to take you on so he could inherit Shamrock."

Leigh's old insecurities were brought out from her mind. "Take me on?"

"Of course, he inherited the Shamrock Mansion and the ranch the minute he married you. It was all in the will you see."

"Carl, you aren't making any sense," Leigh stated with uneasiness.

"You are sweet to a point, but not a raving beauty. Certainly you didn't believe the Colonel's interest in you was love did you?" Carl oozed smoothly.

Leigh's old fears of being plain reared its ugly head. "Why shouldn't I believe he loves me? He tells me every day." Her hands began to shake. She fisted them and placed them on her lap so her brother wouldn't notice.

"Ah, but Theresa told me she loved me every day. She took all my money and ran off with another," Carl reminded. "And I am a handsome man."

"And she was a beautiful woman," Leigh responded defensively. "I don't see how that relates to me. Martin built Shamrock Mansion for us."

"And promised title and deed to Colonel O'Neal if he married you," Carl triumphed. "It is all in the will."

"You keep saying that," Leigh snapped angrily. She was hurting deeply. "Why would Martin do it?"

“The man bought you a husband,” Carl snickered wickedly. “Martin knew you would need a man to protect you. Why shouldn’t it be his best friend? Your husband was bought.”

“No, it can’t be true,” Leigh choked. Her eyes were welling with tears. How could she be so happy and suddenly have such reality tossed to her by her brother. Should she believe him? “You keep talking about this being in the will. It wasn’t stated in the reading.”

“Of course not,” Carl sympathized. “You don’t think Martin wanted others to know your husband was bought? It would be scandalous to say the least.”

“Then how do you know of it?” Leigh was letting her inner insecurities interfere with reason and logic. Fortunately some logic pushed forward. She never trusted her brother. He was so different from her. She knew he was selfish and egotistical. Everything in the world was about him.

“I must confess that in one of my visits to my friend, Max Elder, I read part of the will.

“He let you read it?” Leigh gasped in surprise.

“Of course not, Max is principled,” Carl retorted quickly. He knew if Max found out he had read the will he would never be allowed in the clerk’s office again. “Judge Porter called him during one of my visits. I became bored and began reading some papers on his desk. Although I knew it was inappropriate, I couldn’t help myself when I realized it was Martin Chandler’s last will and testament.”

“What else did you read?” Leigh demanded. Her logic took over once more.

“Nothing, nothing at all. I dare not disturb any papers,” Carl denied. He didn’t want Leigh to know that fate allowed him only to read that one section before Max Elder returned. He had nearly been caught reading that part of the will. He was thrilled he had because he knew Thornton needed to be removed before he could get his hands on Leigh’s wealth if she married him. Double damn her, she did marry the man. It could be easily remedied. His sister only needed to file for a divorce. He would cajole Leigh into changing her will and then he would simply help her die of the family disease. “I shouldn’t have brought the subject up except I am concerned for your welfare. I had an unhappy first marriage based on lies and falsehoods. Should you ever need me, I wanted to let you know I would be there for you. I realize now how badly I have treated you and our mother. It was Theresa you know. I’ve realized many things since my divorce.”

Leigh's logic wasn't that easily dissuaded. She still mistrusted her brother, but she would be civil. "It is getting late. Are you going to return to Rawlins and Claudia, or do wish to spend the night here?"

"I find I am somewhat tired, and with your current experience I would not like to make the trip so close to sunset," Carl stated.

"Would it be an inconvenience if I spent the night?"

"Not at all," Leigh replied hiding her nervousness. She really didn't feel comfortable having her brother around. She always felt as if he were calculating a sum total of objects to be found in Shamrock Mansion. "I'll ask Reuben to assist you. We'll dine at eight."

"Your wealth becomes you, Leigh," Carl noted. "You've developed several graces you never had. Martin Chandler was good for you." *'and good for me. I can't wait to enjoy all his wealth had to offer in life.'*

Leigh retired after dinner. Carl did not mention the will again. Her mind couldn't stop racing. Her night was restless. How could she condemn a man as wonderful as Thornton to a life of marriage with her? Then there was their child. She was certain she was pregnant. Of course Thornton would remain married to her for the sake of the child. She couldn't do that to him. Could she? She loved Thornton with all her heart. Could she be selfish enough to keep him because she loved him so? Could she remain happy in their marriage knowing that Thornton married her as a duty and obligation to Martin? No, that wouldn't be fair at all to such a wonderful and noble man.

Leigh remembered that Martin had told her she would be wealthy enough not to worry about marriage if it was in her mind and her choice not to marry. She was wealthy. She had properties all over the world. Perhaps it was time to see the world. Yes, that is what she would do. She would leave for Fanore, Ireland. Travel wouldn't be a problem while she was still early in her pregnancy. Their child would be born in Ireland. That would be fitting and an honor to her Irish father that she had adored.

In the still of the night she rose from her bed and wrote a letter to Thornton. The letter was brief.

'My Darling Thorn,

I cannot begin to tell you how happy you have made me, but I cannot hold you to a forced marriage. You are far too wonderful to be held to this marriage of obligation. I am freeing you to obtain a

divorce based on desertion. The divorce should be easy enough for you to obtain.

*With all my love,
Leigh'*

Leigh placed the pen down on the paper. A teardrop blurred a few letters in the note. It hurt to give him up, but give him up she must.

To stop her heartache, Leigh began packing her bags. She took only a few simple traveling outfits and a few gowns that Martin had made for her, but she never wore. She also took several simple pioneer calico work dresses for Ireland. She hoped the manor would be small and she could live simply raising their son or daughter.

Early in the morning Leigh ate her breakfast and watched her brother ride out on Hoosier. She did not inform him of her decision. She still did not trust him. After Carl left she spoke to Bessie.

"Bessie, I would like you and Reuben to accompany me on a visit. We'll be gone for sometime, but I really would like your company."

"I'd love to," Bessie squealed happily. "When is we leavin?"

"Tomorrow in the morning."

Bessie's brow wrinkled. "But Massah O'Neal ain't home yet."

Leigh choked back her emotions. "I've decided to end the marriage. We'll be leaving without the Colonel."

Bessie was really confused. She noted the stressed speech of her mistress. She knew Leigh loved her husband. "Divorce? Don't yo love him no more?"

"Of course I love him, that's why I must leave him," Leigh sighed groping for strength to hold back her tears. "No more questions. I'm already packed, well mostly packed. You and Reuben need to pack and have Reuben ready the buckboard."

"That makes no sense!" Bessie declared. "I sho don't understand, but Reuben and I ain't letting yo leave without us."

Leigh requested that Jefferson and several of his men accompany her to Rawlins. She still hadn't recovered from her scare a few weeks ago.

Carl watched her arrive from the window of his wife's boarding house. He stealthily followed her to the Wild Horse Hotel and grinned wickedly. Of course she didn't want any questions if she

were leaving Thornton. Mary MacDonald would question her if she stayed at the Rawlins Hotel. The Wild Horse was about the only hotel in Rawlins that wasn't previously owned by Martin Chandler. He waited in the alley to watch the hotel.

Leigh emerged from the Wild Horse after her luggage had been off loaded and taken into the hotel.

Jefferson had been totally confused by her orders.

"I won't discuss it, Jefferson," Leigh warned. "You may return to the ranch and your duty."

"I think I'll stick around town for the night," Jefferson excused. "Me and the boys could take on some renegade Sioux, but why tempt fate. We'll leave in the morning."

"I understand," Leigh sighed realizing she didn't want to put Jefferson or the ranch hands in any danger. "I'll see to it that you are put up for the night here."

"Begging your pardon, ma'am," Jefferson grinned. "Don't want to make the boys too soft. We'll camp just outside town. If you need us tonight or in the morning, just send word." He didn't feel good about leaving Leigh O'Neal, but she was the mistress of the ranch and he wouldn't question her orders. He also wanted her to think he would be out of her way so he could watch her on the sly.

Leigh watched as Jefferson gathered his men and the buckboard. She watched him ride out to the edge of Rawlins. She didn't see Jefferson double back. She didn't know another set of eyes was watching her as she departed for the depot.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Carl walked into the boarding house with the four tickets he purchased at the depot right after Leigh left. He found out his sister was headed for New York. Imagine that, New York! Claudia had told him that Chandler owned several properties in New York. He was delighted to know he would soon be living in luxury in the large metropolitan civilized city of New York. "Get packed Claudia!" he bellowed entering the kitchen. "We are going to New York!"

"New York?" Claude questioned breathlessly. She had so wanted to be a real lady in such a city. "How? When?"

"Never mind my dear," Carl grinned. "We are going to New York on the morning train. Pack what you need for yourself and the children. We'll be able to purchase new wardrobes after our arrival."

Already Carl was making plans in his mind. He would settle Claudia and the children in a cheap hotel. Then he would locate his sister's New York residence. He would accidentally run into her. From there he would feign his poverty. He would explain to her what a surprise it was to see her in the city. He would tell her he decided to treat his wife and children for a visit to New York before they settled in at Rawlins and Claudia's boarding house. Then he would relate that they had been robbed in New York and he couldn't even pay for the hotel he had managed to obtain. Of course his sympathetic sister would offer to pay the bill. He would wheedle his way into her residence with some line or another. Once in the residence he would see to it that she died of the family malady. The plan was perfect. He would be in the same train with her, but she would never know it. They had to ride passenger while she rode in a private car, but some inconvenience would be acceptable. Claudia brought his thoughts back to the moment.

"Carl, who will manage the boarding house?"

"Mrs. Biddles can do it for you. She can use the money with that drunken sot for a husband she has," Carl sneered. "We both know how she attempts to cover up the life they lead. We'll help her a little. Besides, if everything goes as planned you and I will have little need of this boarding house anymore."

"What do you mean?" Claudia queried worriedly. The boarding house was her life and her only means of income. It had even been supporting Carl and his brood up to now.

“It means that if my plan works, we will be living in style and quite wealthy in New York,” Carl grinned. “We might travel to Europe occasionally, but we will lead a life of style and elegance as is due to my family and stature.”

“I don’t understand,” Claudia hesitated.

“Never question the will of the Lord, or my commands. Do as you’re told. You will not regret it.”

“I’ll run over to Mrs. Biddles...” Claudia attempted to say.

“I’ll handle that. You pack and prepare the girls,” Carl ordered.

Jefferson watched Leigh enter the depot. When she left, to his chagrin, he watched her brother enter the depot after her. He started to become concerned. Instead of following Leigh O’Neal back to the hotel, he went to the depot clerk and asked if Mrs. O’Neal purchased a ticket and to where.

The clerk gladly obliged him with the information. She had bought a one-way ticket to New York.

Jefferson then asked if Carl Junge had asked after his sister.

“Yup, damndest thing too!” Jeremiah answered. “When he found out she was headed to New York he bought four tickets to New York on the same train.”

Jefferson felt his gut twist. He didn’t normally get these gut feelings, but when he did he listened to his own musings. This didn’t set right. Something was wrong here. He just couldn’t put his finger on it. He decided that he and the men would return to Shamrock, get fresh horses and ride into Laramie to find the master of the ranch, Thornton O’Neal.

The army patrol returned to Shamrock and Fort Fred Steele before Jefferson did. The men were sent to the fort. Thornton was anxious to be near Leigh. He had missed her and couldn’t wait to hold her in his arms.

“Leigh?” Thornton called entering the mansion. It seemed so quiet. Normally Reuben was around tending the roses and Bessie was making noise in the kitchen this time of day preparing for the noon meal. His voice echoed in empty rooms as he searched the mansion. He was about to go outside in the garden when he ran smack into Long Face.

“Where you been?” Long Face demanded. “You gone to damn long!”

“Sorry,” Thornton smiled. It usually brought a smile to Long Face whenever he apologized to her for something he had no idea what he had done. This time she didn’t smile. Immediately fear grabbed at his mind. Had something happened to Leigh? “Where’s my wife?”

“She gone,” Long Face snapped. “You gone to long. You should be here to stop her.”

“Where did she go?”

“She no tell me. I feel it bad. That bad brother of hers here before she left. Took Bessie and Reuben with her. Took too damn many trunks,” Long Face grated out. “If you here she no leave. If you take with, bad brother no get her!”

Thornton’s face paled. So Carl got to her. How could he be so careless? He had to find Leigh before it was too late. “Tell me where she went?” Thornton shouted.

“I told you. I do not know. She rode toward Rawlins. She told me to give you this, stupid man,” Long Face answered angrily. She handed Thornton the note.

Thornton opened the paper. His face paled more. “This doesn’t make any sense.” His first thought was to ride to Rawlins and get her back. He would make her explain this cryptic note. ‘*cannot hold you to a forced marriage.*’ What the hell did she mean by that? Thornton ran to the stables. He called for Jefferson only to be informed by Luke Walker that Jefferson and several of the men had escorted Leigh to Rawlins.

Thornton cursed under his breath and asked Luke to rub Comet down and saddle one of the strongest mustangs the Shamrock owned. He would ride that mustang hard. Something was wrong, Carl had something to do with it, and Thornton was frightened to death he might have already started poisoning Leigh. He turned to run right into Long Face again.

“You go bring back?”

“I bring back,” Thornton replied firmly.

“Good thing,” Long Face said finally smiling. “I take care of baby. I like that.”

“Baby?”

“You are stupid man,” Long Face snarled. “Wolfrunner carry pup. I take care. Bring her back.”

Thornton felt like he had been pole axed. His anger turned to rage and fear to panic. Not only would Carl poison his wife, but his child as well.

Just as Luke brought Rider, the powerful mustang, into the yard for Thornton they noticed a trail of dust. It was obvious the dust trail indicated hard and fast riding. In moments Jefferson dismounted and ran to Thornton.

“Thank heavens you are here,” Jefferson said breathlessly removing his hat and shaking out the dust.

“Where’s Leigh?” Thornton asked hopefully after being told Jefferson had taken her into Rawlins.

“She’s on a train to New York,” Jefferson replied quickly. “Her brother is on the same train. What the devil is going on? It don’t feel right!”

Thornton’s heart stopped beating. Carl could be poisoning his wife and child right now. Why did she leave? What did he say to her? His fear and panic turned into terror. “Get the men fresh mounts. If she’s on the train to New York from Rawlins, we can ride hard and stop the train at Elk Mountain.” He approached Red Maudlin. “Go to the Fort and get ten troopers to boots and saddles. Bring them here. We’ll ride together.”

Red saluted his former commander and rode the short distance to the fort.

In a short time that seemed endless to Thornton, he was ready to stop the train at Elk Mountain.

They rode hard and fast.

Thornton and his men arrived at Elk Mountain in time to stop the slow moving train as it headed the incline of the mountain.

The engineer shouted from the steam engine. He recognized Colonel O’Neal since he lived in Rawlins. “What’s up Colonel?”

“I’ve come to apprehend a thief and perhaps a murderer,” Colonel O’Neal replied icily.

“I’ll be,” the engineer acknowledged a bit frightened from the Colonel’s tone of voice. “The train is yours until you let us proceed. A little delay won’t hurt my schedule. I’ll make it up on the plains.”

Thornton didn’t respond. He went directly for the private cars. There were several of them since wealthy people preferred to travel in luxury and there were plenty of wealthy people now that several miners had indeed struck it rich with gold and silver mines.

Leigh wondered why the train had stopped. She peeked out the window only to catch the eye of a military man riding a mustang. It was Thornton. She jumped back from the window. What on earth was he doing here? Had he seen her? Was he returning from Laramie? She hoped he hadn't seen her. Leigh also hoped there was nothing amiss like a possible Sioux attack. She didn't want to live that nightmare again. What if Thornton were shot again? She couldn't bear to leave him if he were. What was she going to do? Nothing! She would simply wait in her car and hope nothing would happen. Her hope failed.

The door to the private car opened violently shaking the walls as it slammed against the rail car wall. Leigh shook with it. Her eyes opened wide at the man standing in the door. It was Thornton. He had seen her. His eyes were filled with anger and concern. How strange it was.

Bessie had been in bedroom of the car straightening Leigh's bed for the night and preparing her bedclothes. She felt the train stop and looked out the window to see Thornton dismounting and angrily stomping toward the car. She raced to the door only to be stopped a moment when the car shook violently from the door being slammed open.

"Thorn," Leigh uttered questioningly.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" Thornton stormed angrily.

Leigh braced her hands against the back of a chair she had leaned on to look out the window. He had seen her. Did he get her note? Or did he merely see her through the window on his return. What could she say?

"I asked you what the hell are you doing?" Thornton repeated heatedly.

Bessie emerged from the room. "Mrs. O'Neal?"

"Get back in the room," Thornton shouted heatedly. "You've got some explaining yourself, but later."

Bessie backed into the bedroom quickly. She had never seen the Colonel this angry before. Lord, she was scared.

There was only recourse for Leigh, honesty. "Did you read my note?"

"That cryptic message? The one that said nothing? The one that read *cannot hold you to a forced marriage*? Just what the hell is that supposed to mean?" Thornton shouted. He walked toward Leigh.

She braced the chair as if it were a shield between her and Thornton. "I know about the will and Martin's request. You aren't obligated to it. Really you aren't."

"What the Sam Hill are you talking about? Obligated to what?" Thornton snapped in frustration. "You'd better explain yourself before I lose patience. I rode hard to Shamrock to be with you, only to find out you weren't there. Then I'm given this damned note." He pulled it from his coat pocket and waved it angrily. "The note makes no sense. Jefferson rides in to tell me that you have taken a train to New York and that your brother is on board. What the hell am I supposed to think? You'd better explain in detail. You've got five minutes before I take you over my knee, then kiss you madly, then take you off this train, and then go home. The ranch hands are already removing your luggage."

"You can't take me off this train," Leigh protested. It was understandable she missed the words her brother was also on the train. "Don't you understand? I am freeing you from your obligation."

"What obligation? All I know is that I am apprehending a thief," Thornton snarled.

"A thief? Is that what you told the engineer? Is that how you boarded?" Leigh croaked out in shock. What would people think when she left with him. No she couldn't leave with him. He was free.

"You damned right a thief. Not only have you stolen my heart, my very existence, my happiness, but you stole my child as well," Thornton countered.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Leigh was dumbfounded. How did he know about the baby? She had told no one. No one even suggested they knew she was with child.

“Thornton, please leave,” Leigh begged trying to keep her legs from folding up beneath her.

“I will leave with you,” Thornton returned. “You still only have five minutes to explain before I burn your backside, or I don’t. It’s up to you how we leave this train, but be certain *we* are leaving this train.” He emphasized the *we* so she understood his meaning. He leaned against the car’s wall crossing his arms and legs. “I’m waiting.” He pulled out his watch and looked at it. “Four minutes.”

“I was told about Martin’s will. I didn’t believe it at first, but I found our copies of the will in the library and read it for myself. You married me at Martin’s request. He wanted you his best friend to marry and protect me. He used your obligation to him to do so. I know he saved your life in the war. I learned about that from others. Martin was too humble to tell me. I couldn’t force you to remain in a forced marriage. I just couldn’t.” Tears started to stream down Leigh’s cheeks. “I love you and our baby too much for that.”

The tears broke down Thornton’s façade of anger. Inside he was so happy to find Leigh alive and well he wanted to jump up and down for joy. Instantly he was by Leigh and had her in his arms.

“You’ve got it all wrong my love,” Thornton comforted. “Let me explain.” He sat on the chair and pulled Leigh onto his lap. “From the beginning I knew I loved you, but I couldn’t let go of Chloe’s betrayal. I kept that festering in my heart like a painful dagger. I wouldn’t release my heart to love even though I fell in love with you the day I first saw you with the children on the train.”

“Who is Chloe?” Leigh demanded stiffening. She had heard the name on occasion. Martin had used it once and awhile with reference to Thornton, but never explained it.

“That is a woman that broke my heart and faith in life. It is another story to tell later,” Thornton answered. “When I came back from the tour of duty I was livid to find out Martin married you. I had finally broken the chain of pain and fear. I had returned for the purpose of courting you. To find out Martin married you burst my insides with

rage. Martin and I had a quarrel that day. Remember, you tried interfering when our voices were too loud?”

Leigh nodded. She did remember that day.

“Martin explained that I was a fool. He loved you too and if he had done the honorable thing and waited for me to follow my course of courting, other men would have taken you away from both of us.”

Leigh laughed. “That is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. Just who would want an old maid that is plain looking?”

“Just about every single man in the county,” Thornton grunted. “You never did realize how beautiful you are. Not just in pretty looks, but deep down beautiful that every man would give his life for.” Thornton kissed Leigh on the forehead. “Now are you going to listen?”

Leigh nodded once more.

Thornton squeezed Leigh a little tighter. “Martin explained that he couldn’t let you slip through his fingers. He needed you more than I did at the moment and if I had patience he would help me win you back after his death. Martin kept his promise and I couldn’t argue with him that he did indeed need you more at the time. I was green with envy when I saw how wonderful you two were together. My obligation to Martin was filled when I didn’t interfere and waited for us to have our time of love. So you see, the obligation you are talking about was taken care of in my patience. Martin knew it. He was happy in your marriage. I couldn’t take that away. These were his last moments. I contained my jealousy with my hope of our being together. Finally that night it happened. We were together. I’ve been filled with such happiness since. I could have walked on air when we were finally married. I waited a long time for you, Leigh. I won’t easily give you up.”

“Say it! Say you love me,” Leigh choked. She was so full of emotion.

“I say it every day,” Thornton laughed. “Aren’t you listening?”

“But this time I know you mean it,” Leigh countered.

“I’ve always meant it,” Thornton said sternly.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about this gentleman’s agreement?” Leigh questioned.

“I guess because I am a stupid man like Long Face keeps reminding me,” Thornton laughed. “Both Martin and I never wanted to upset you or possibly confuse you with our love for you. Martin

was afraid you might leave him for his trick and he was always afraid you would fall for my handsome virility.”

“I can’t believe Martin would ever feel that way. I did love him. He was a kind and wonderful man,” Leigh protested.

“But Martin was ill and couldn’t provide you with a complete husband that he knew I could be,” Thornton explained. “I understood that fear because I shared with him that I was afraid you wouldn’t love me and loved Martin more because he needed you.”

“It sounds like you and Martin were more confused and at a loss than I would ever be had you explained,” Leigh scolded. She shook her head in disbelief. Men could truly be stupid as Long Face stated.

“Maybe that is true, but Leigh, never doubt for a moment that Martin loved you, and I love you with all my heart,” Thornton confessed.

Leigh looked into those big blue eyes that showed such love. “Let’s go home.”

Thornton light up like a candle.

Then Leigh remembered Thornton’s first attack. “What do you mean you learned Carl was on the same train? The devil he is!”

Before Thornton could respond Carl came through the private car door. “Unhand my sister you beast!”

Thornton rose from the chair slowly and gently pushed Leigh behind him. “I suggest you leave this car and never return to Shamrock again or I will have you hung for murder.”

Leigh heard Thornton’s words and stood in shock. Murder?

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Carl said changing his stance from anger to self-defense, as a naughty child would do denying any wrongdoing.

Leigh noted the change and suddenly she feared she knew the answer to her own question.

“You know precisely what I am talking about,” Thornton growled. “We have no proof, but Doctor Farrah’s suspicions are enough for testimony to have you hanged for the murder of your uncles, aunts, and your own mother.”

“Those are daring words for someone that has no idea what he’s talking about and someone without any evidence,” Carl repudiated covering his own fear at being truly discovered. “The members of my family died of a strange malady that seems to kill our family members.”

“Arsenic poisoning is not a strange malady,” Thornton charged. “It is premeditated murder.”

Carl’s face paled a little but maintained his innocence. No one could know the truth. There really was no evidence to tie him to that accusation.

Leigh’s jaw dropped. A slow anger built into a rage. She had known her brother was only interested in obtaining and then squandering inheritance monies. He was a vulture. How could she forget that? She knew what Thornton was accusing her brother of had to be true. Then she realized what her brother planned for her.

“You thought you could break Thornton and I apart. That was your plan wasn’t it? When we were divorced you would poison me. You thought you would take all of Martin’s wealth and position as the rightful and only family member didn’t you?”

Carl adamantly denied the truth. “You’re my sister. I was worried for you. That’s why I took my family to be with you and watch over you.”

Thornton snorted. “That’s a clanker if I every heard one.”

“You planned this. You used Max Elder to get information on the will. I should have suspected right away that you planned on killing me too!” Leigh laughed with disdain. “Would it surprise you to learn that when Mr. Simms returned to New York I sent with him my own will? I was going to alter it slightly when I learned I was with child and make my child sole heir to the fortune Martin left me.”

“Child?” Carl gasped.

“Oh yes indeed. You would have not only killed me slowly, but my child also,” Leigh replied still laughing covering her rage. “The one part of my will I wouldn’t have changed was that you were never to receive anything but one gold coin. Mr. Simms made me add that so you could not repudiate my will in court claiming to be the sole heir. I had originally intended that all of Martin’s fortune be set into trusts for charities as ordained by Mr. Simms’s legal and financial firm. So you see, Carl, you would have only received a \$20 gold piece for my death.”

“What?” Carl choked in surprise.

“I suggest you continue your visit to New York. I will wire Mr. Simms to meet you at the depot and let you stay at Chandler Townhouse there. Claudia at least deserves that. You will be given a small purse to spend in New York, but be certain that Mr. Simms will account for every thing you spend. He will also see to it that the

Chandler House has every bit of its original contents before you leave,” Leigh stated hotly. “I also suggest that when you return to Rawlins you obey my husband’s order not to step foot on Shamrock ground. I will personally see to it that you are shot as a trespasser.”

“Sister dearest, may God forgive you,” Carl pleaded.

“I think you need your God to forgive you for murdering your family,” Leigh snapped with a rigid stance and glaring eyes. “I am grateful to my husband for stopping you from murdering me.”

“Get out now before I change my mind and shoot you,”

Thornton growled menacingly. “I’ve already told the engineer I came onboard looking for a murderer. No one would think twice if I killed you as that murderer you are.”

Carl needed no more persuasion. He left immediately. All his plans were thwarted. There were no relatives left to pluck. He was stuck in Rawlins living off his wife’s boarding house. This was a fate worse than being shot.

“I be packed and ready to go,” Bessie announced leaving the bedroom with a small valise. “Lordy, I always done suspected that no good Carl kilt yo family.”

Thornton lifted Leigh into his arms. “Let’s go home.” He carried her out the door, to the waiting men, and lifted her onto his horse. He mounted behind her on Rider.

“It’s almost sunset,” Leigh commented. “Will we make it home before dark?”

“No, there is a small town nearby,” Thornton replied. “We’ll camp there tonight.”

Leigh leaned against her husband. She felt happy. She was even happier with Thornton than she had been with Martin, and that had been wonderful happiness.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about Doctor Farrah’s suspicions?”

Thornton tightened his arm around Leigh.

“We couldn’t prove anything and that is a strong accusation. It’s still even hard to believe that a man would kill for inheritance.”

“But you did accuse Carl of it in the rail car.”

“It didn’t seem to matter when I could accuse him to his face. I was also filled with uncontrollable rage when I found out he was on the train with you. I had visions of him feeding you arsenic and killing you and my baby,” Thornton confessed with great emotion of anger and relief. “If you looked even the least ill or pale, I would have killed

your brother.” Thornton nudged Rider and motioned to the engineer to proceed.

The engineer looked at the woman Colonel O’Neal had sitting on the saddle in front of him. He recognized her. “Thief and murderer my ass,” he chuckled to himself. He blew the steam whistle and proceeded on his run.

“He was guilty. I could tell,” Leigh commented sadly. She snuggled into Thorn’s embrace. She was happy, content, and comfortable but she still had many things on her mind and they still had a bit of a ride before they reached the small settler’s camp. “Thorn, how did you know about our baby?”

“Long Face told me about our daughter,” Thornton replied motioning the patrol and the ranch hands to follow. Of course they knew they were to fall in line, but military protocol required his actions.

Leigh snickered. “You are so certain it will be a daughter?”
“Yep!”

“I want to know how Long Face knew when I shared my secret with no one.”

“Don’t know. You’ll have to ask her when we get home.”

“Home,” Leigh sighed happily. “What a beautiful word.”

Chapter Forty

They had ridden nearly half way to the settler's camp when Leigh decided to ask another question she wasn't sure she should, but she had to know.

"Who was Chloe exactly? What happened to sour you against commitment?"

"Do you want the entire story, or just what happened to sour me?" Thornton teased. Chloe didn't matter at all any more. That burden he carried had been lifted completely when Leigh married him. He had everything he could ever want or hope for in a marriage. Well he did if his Leigh didn't doubt herself anymore. He couldn't deal with being so terrified of losing her again.

"The entire story," Leigh requested turning around and look up into Thorn's big blue sensual eyes. "We still have a bit of a ride left."

"It started shortly after the beginning of the war. I was with the army division in the Peninsula campaign of 1862. My commander at the time was Major General George B. McClellan. We had been in battle for two days near the Chickahominy River. General McClellan had commandeered a southern mansion as temporary headquarters. That is where I first saw her. She seemed to float down the steps of the grand staircase. One look at her and you forgot the blood, stench, and horror of the war. She was dressed in a soft peach dress. Her shoulders were exposed and she wore a peach ribbon around her throat. I remember her hair was done up perfectly in soft golden ringlets. I wondered how anyone could look so perfect as a bloody battle raged just a few miles away.

She looked so peaceful and serene. Softness and gentleness seemed to surround her."

"I think I'm getting very jealous," Leigh grumped. She was uneasy at the description of pure perfection she was hearing.

"You said the whole story," Thornton chuckled. He caught the jealousy and was thrilled for it.

"Go on," Leigh gritted out. She was no longer certain she wanted to hear about this paragon of virtue, grace, and elegance.

"Chloe introduced herself to all the officers. We all nearly tripped over our drooling tongues to accept her offered hand."

"I think I despise her."

Thornton laughed heartily. "Let me tell you the story first, love."

"Did she grow horns? Did beeswax melt from her face when she was near the fire and she revealed horrible scars and warts?"

Thornton loved to hear Leigh's jealous remarks. He loved his wife with all that he was. He couldn't wait to tell Leigh the entire story, but he would have to get to the end quickly.

"Actually Chloe introduced herself as the daughter of Squire Henry Hamilton the owner of the Weeping Willow Plantation. She offered the services of the remaining slaves, now hired servants, food, and shelter. Of course her offer didn't matter since General McClellan had already taken the mansion and plantation as a temporary headquarters and bivouac. She ate dinner with us every evening for several months as the Peninsula Campaign continued into September. She conducted her life as if the war was a non-existent entity. She delighted all of us officers with her feminine wiles and conversations."

"Was Martin one of those officers?"

"In the beginning, but a few weeks later he no longer joined her role call of union officer beaux. He started warning me that Chloe was not what she appeared to be. He warned me that she was an opportunist."

"You didn't listen to him?"

"Why would I then? I was really into myself then. I was young, good looking, an officer on the rise. Why Martin and I had just been promoted to Captain."

"Into yourself?"

"Hey, I was gorgeous and obviously much better looking than the other officers. Martin was my only challenger and he begged off."

"I guess I missed that humility of yours when I met you," Leigh teased. "Please continue."

"When Chloe started paying close attention to me I thought I was madly in love. Ego persuaded me that she would only be interested in my handsome self. I never thought for a minute that she even considered another for any reason. Of course at the time I thought I was such a dashing figure in my uniform that I never bothered to let her know how wealthy my family was."

"You are from a wealthy family?"

"Just as wealthy as Martin Chandler and his family. We were close friends and childhood chums. We grew up in the same area. We attended the same school. We even attended the military academy

together. Our parents were good friends. Simms handles my affairs and my parents affairs to this day.”

“You never discussed your family with me. Are your parents still alive? Martin told me his mother and father were killed in an accident when he was young. His grandparents raised him. He told me they both died within a few months of each other right after the war. That is when he let Simms handle all the family accounts and he moved to Rawlins.”

“We both attended his grandparents funerals. After their deaths, Martin resigned from the military and went west to seek adventure. He had read about the west in those nickel novels all the time when we were children. It peaked his interest enough to try it. He loved the west. Many times he wrote to me about the beauty of this land. Finally, I asked for a post near Rawlins when I heard the military was being sent there to protect the railroad and the rail workers.”

“Your parents?”

“Yes, my parents are still alive. When I met you on the train I was returning from a brief visit with them after my promotion ceremony in Washington City.”

“What are their names?” Leigh questioned curiously. How marvelous to know their children would have at least one set of grandparents. She had grown up never knowing any of her grandparents. “Do you have any siblings?”

“Michael and Gabrielle O’Neal. No, I have no other siblings. Martin and I were both the only siblings. That was one of the reasons we were so close. We loved each other as brothers would.”

“I’d like to meet your parents.”

“When I tell them my lovely wife is going to give them a grandchild they will be on the next train to Rawlins. You will meet them.”

“Did you tell them about our marriage?”

“I wrote them a long letter while I was recovering from that rifle shot. They wrote back they were thrilled I was finally married and planned on visiting us next spring. Papa wrote he was in the middle of some precarious business negotiations.”

“I’m excited and a little nervous. I have somehow managed to change the subject at hand. Please continue the story of Chloe.”

“As I was saying, I was so blinded by that southern belle I couldn’t see past her face. She teased, she flattered, she cajoled, and

she hypnotized me. I don't remember how it happened but one evening we took a moonlit walk and found this small comfortable cottage outside the plantation gardens. We kissed, we fondled, and I was making love to her on a soft bed shortly thereafter. I thought it strange she wasn't a virgin since she projected a virgin image. She fooled me well because right after we made love she held me closely and thanked me for making this experience so lovely. She told me a horrible story about being raped by a filthy union soldier. At that time if I had every found this mythical private I would have flogged him and then had him shot."

"She was raped?"

"It was all a story she made up. After I found her with General Pattinger in the same cottage bed we shared only a few days prior, Martin enlightened me with facts and military campaigns. During the time this alleged rape took place, there was not a union soldier within fifty miles of Weeping Willow Plantation. I remember feeling like such a fool."

"You found her with another man?"

"Martin knew what was going on the entire time. She was bedding every officer alternating nights in that little comfortable cottage we all just happened to find on moonlit walks. Martin was one of the few that she didn't mesmerize and he noticed her taking a different officer out for a walk every evening. He followed them down to this cottage and guessed correctly what happened inside by the disarray of the uniforms when they came out sometime later. Including me I might add. Martin knew I wouldn't listen to him. I had already asked Chloe to marry me. She had accepted and I gave her a large diamond and sapphire engagement ring. She did enjoy that engagement gift I must admit. When I told Martin about the engagement he railed on me again that she wasn't what I thought. He warned me she was an opportunist using men for money, jewels, and position."

"You didn't listen."

"Hell no! I was in love. Besides, I had bedded her and as an officer I needed to do the right thing. The right thing was of course to make her my wife."

"I take it Martin did something drastic to save you because he cared for you?"

"He asked me to go for a walk and tell him all about our wedding plans. Like a stupid man that I am, I was thrilled to share

with my friend. He took me on a completely different side path and led me right to the cottage. Lights were on and I heard Chloe's voice. I couldn't imagine what the devil was going on in there. We were engaged. I heard a male voice and charged in there like a mad bull. I found Chloe and General Pattinger lying naked on the bed. It was obvious they had finished copulating. Chloe and General Pattinger were drinking champagne. I couldn't say or do anything. The General was my commanding officer. He raged at me and ordered me out."

"What did you do?"

"I left of course!"

"I mean what did you do about Chloe?"

"The next day I waited for her outside the plantation mansion. We had a terrible fight. She let me know that her interest in me was strictly physical curiosity. Chloe literally laughed at my honorable suit and me. She told me she almost laughed in my face regarding marriage. She would only consider a man of prestige, wealth, and up and coming power. She told me not quite politely that any man she considered had to have enough money to keep her in the lifestyle she was accustomed. I was told a stupid little Captain would never have a chance with her."

"You never told her you were wealthy?"

"At that point I had felt betrayed and played as a fool. I didn't want to win any woman with my wealth. Call me old fashioned, but I wanted to believe in love."

"And that is how you became embittered towards women."

"I truly did. I looked at all women as scheming selfish opportunists. My heart turned as hard as stone after the argument. I used women for only one thing after that."

"You seemed kind and gentle to me when I met you on the train."

"Leigh, the first time I heard you tell your story to the children, you heated me with a longing that melted my stone heart. I was quick silver in your hands to match your eyes of quick silver. I fell in love with you when we talked all night. I've been in love with you ever since."

"And Chloe means nothing to you anymore?"

"After I met you, Chloe isn't even a memory any more."

"What if you ever saw her again?"

"Highly unlikely!" Thornton snorted.

"Why? Whatever happened to her?"

“She actually married General Pattinger. Of course he died at Appomattox. She inherited whatever holdings he had and used them to keep Willows Plantation out of debt during reconstruction. I heard she’s since remarried. It doesn’t matter to me anymore. I’m totally disinterested.”

“But what if you did see her again?”

“I fail to see what importance this has, but I would probably be simply cordial. After all I am married to the most wonderful woman in Wyoming and we are having a baby. By the way, just for your information our first daughter will be named, Regina.”

“Our first daughter?”

“Then there will be Rebecca, or Becky. After her will be Rachel. I promised Martin we would have a son just for him. His name will be Chandler.”

“You’ve got this all planned out?”

“Good grief woman. I had to do something while I waited for you. I planned our children.”

“Why three girls?”

“Don’t you remember? Prince Paul and Princess Catherine had three beautiful daughters. It is my fairytale come true.”

Leigh smiled and looked intensely into her husband’s eyes. “I love you.”

Chapter Forty-One

The settler's camp appeared against the horizon. Just as the sun began to set, the patrol made it's way into the small camp. The temperature was already beginning to drop. It would get quite chilly on September nights in Wyoming.

Thornton dismounted Rider. "You stay right where you are," he ordered. "I'll see if we can find some shelter this evening.

Thornton disappeared into the first frame house on the outskirt of the camp. Behind the house was a larger barn structure.

Upon Thornton's emergence he talked to Lieutenant O'Brien. The men began dismounting. The strung a rope line between trees to billet their horses. Thornton assisted Leigh from Rider and holding her tightly he gave the reins to Sergeant Bolt.

"Do you think I'm going to run away again?" Leigh teased Thornton for his tight grip on her.

"I'm not about to take any chances, sweetheart. I may even shackle you to the bed when we return to Shamrock," Thornton joked in return. "I will make the chain long enough so you can reach the necessary room."

"Thank you," Leigh responded laughing. "Where are we sleeping tonight?"

"The sod buster told us we could use the barn for shelter. Naturally there is no room in his small house for all of us," Thornton explained. "We're going to start a campfire near the barn, eat, and then billet in the barn."

"That sounds cozy," Leigh stated snuggling into Thornton's arm.

"Keep that up and we'll skip dinner," Thornton growled. "I do happen to be hungry however."

"A woman should never come between a man and his stomach."

"Wise woman that you are."

The soldiers and ranch hands shared their food of beef jerky, cornmeal, and beans with coffee. It wasn't much, but it was filling.

The soldiers began to take out their bedrolls and head for the barn.

Thornton took his bedroll and Leigh. He walked to the barn and then used the ladder to take them up to the large loft. He laid out the bedroll. He fell upon the bedroll taking Leigh with him. "I can't make love to you tonight, no privacy. I'll make up for that when we get home tomorrow."

Thornton released Leigh and began removing his boots.

"What a great plan," Leigh said. "These shoes are hurting my feet." She undid the laces, removed her shoes, and then her stockings. "Oh dear, it is cold," Leigh commented feeling the chilly night air on her toes.

Thornton lifted the heavy blanket from the blanket roll and patted the spot next to him. "I'll keep you warm all night even if I can't make love to you."

With a happy smile Leigh snuggled next to Thornton. He put the blanket over them. She was warm.

Thornton held Leigh in his arms and his hand wandered down to undo the buttons of her jacket. He removed it and began working the blouse and skirt off of his wife's body. All that remained after a few minutes was her chemise, drawers, and petticoat. Thornton's hand stroked the slightly rounded tummy. "I can't wait until my little girl is born. I have every intention of spoiling her. Be warned of it in advance."

"Are you really so happy about your baby?"

"Yes I am. You will believe I love you, our child, and all our future children," Thornton said flatly. "I think turnabout is fair play. I need some answers from you."

Leigh moved to look at Thornton. "What questions?"

"Why is it you have so little faith in my love and devotion? I still find it so hard to believe that a small interference from your brother caused you to leave me. You know your brother is liar and a vulture. Yet, you believed him over me," Thornton queried sadly.

"It was never little faith in you. It has and probably will always be little faith in myself," Leigh answered briefly.

"You'll have to explain that one. Indeed you will."

"You see my darling, as a child I grew up in Carl's shadow. He was the adored one. Everyone in the family paid attention to him. I felt insecure my entire life. Even in school it was Carl this and Carl that. Carl was beautiful as a child and handsome as an adult. I was

reminded daily by my family, my peers, my instructors, my friends, well just about everyone that I was plain, a girl, and simply unimportant,” Leigh explained softly. “No matter how hard I worked or tried, I was the outsider looking in. An instructor told me after my sister died that it should have been me to die, not my sister. She was a good child. I was ugly spawn and a troublesome child. Can you imagine what that does to self-confidence of a child? No matter how good I tried to be, it was never good enough. My lot in life was to simply serve my brother and try to take care of my mother.”

“If I ever meet that instructor I shall flail him for that remark.”

“That was only a small part of many things that made me feel inferior. I lost myself in books. I began writing down my own stories. It was a selfish happiness that I found I could share with children. I wrote and told stories. It made my life bearable.”

“But you are wonderful. I am very proud and happy to be your husband. I don’t understand why you didn’t believe that?”

“My insecurities are much stronger than our security.”

“Why?”

“I’ve had several more years to practice insecurity to a perfection. I’ve only enjoyed true love this past year. I need more time,” Leigh confessed. “I need more time and more of your patience. Help me.”

“Oh my love,” Thornton whispered. His breath was caressing her ear. “I swear to you I will give you many more years to practice our love that will long surpass your years practicing insecurity. On that you have my word.”

“Just a little more patience with me,” Leigh sighed burrowing her head into the hard chest of her husband. She gloried in his special scent. He was leather, sandalwood, and witch hazel.

“Do you love me?” Thornton asked quietly as he rested his chin on Leigh’s head.

The question so surprised Leigh she snapped her head back so quickly that Thornton’s lower jaw slammed into his head.

“Ow!” Thornton shouted.

The men below looked up into the hayloft. Their faces filled with question. What could have happened up there?

John Bolt was the bravest of all the men. “Are ye in one piece up there, Colonel?”

“Aye, Sergeant. Just a wee bit clumsy,” Thornton returned in the same brogue as his sergeant and friend.

If Leigh could see herself at the moment she was a large deep red blush from head to toe. “I am so sorry, darling,” she whispered stroking his strong, but bruised jaw. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Honestly I didn’t. Your question just surprised me.”

“Well? Do you love me?” Thornton demanded. “I’ve been thinking myself these past few moments. I’ve got a number of insecurities myself. I was dumped once for money and power. I knew you loved Martin. Can you love me the same?”

Leigh pushed one arm under her husband’s massive chest and placed her other arm on top. She hugged him with all the strength she had. “I’ll never love you in the same way I loved Martin.”

Before she could finish, Thornton sighed heavily. “Oh.”

“No my darling, you do not understand. I’ll love you more, but in a completely different way. I love you more, but in a completely different way. I’m having our baby. Our Baby! Our love joined into one new and exciting life. I love you Thornton with all that I am and will be.”

“You’ll have to remind me every day,” Thornton chuckled. “So you see my love. We all need reassurances every day. Together we’ll break both our insecurity.”

“As long as you don’t mind an outsider for a wife.”

Thornton pulled away upon that comment. He looked fiercely at Leigh and admonished. “Let’s get one thing straight. You are not, nor have you been an outsider. You were born with a gift of being on the inside and looking out to see the vast world and all that is in it. You’ve remained inside looking and perceiving what others cannot or never would understand. The conniving and cruel people are the outsiders. They keep looking in to people like you who have the shelter of peace and serenity. They are deeply envious so they try to hurt you. These people only want to bring you outside so they can have someone in more misery than their own. Never go to the outside ever, Leigh. I love you. I love my beautiful, peaceful, loving, kind, and serene insider. I need you as my wife to continue looking outside to the world and helping me wade my way through it.”

“Thornton, that is so beautiful,” Leigh gasped. She pulled Thornton to her once again. “I think I may sit you down one day and have you write some poetry.”

“Poetry? A missy’s talent! I’d rather go and fight Red Cloud,” Thornton threatened teasingly. “But you continue to write your stories. I’ll be there in the parlor listening to all of them with our children.”

Leigh was so happy at this moment she could have burst. She remained silent for a long time. Soon she heard Thornton's breathing had changed. He was fast asleep. "You poor darling. You rode all day and all day night simply for me. I love you for that Thornton Oscar O'Neal."

Leigh rested her head upon Thornton's shoulder. He didn't release her even in his sleep. *'Imagine that! This dear sweet handsome Colonel has misgivings and insecurities. I would have never guessed. I love you more for that. I'll work at being the most faithful and dutiful wife you could hope for.'* Leigh thought. Soon her eyelids were heavy and she was sleeping soundly in her husband's arms.

At midday they arrived at Shamrock ranch. Long Face stood in the doorway waiting for them to arrive.

Thornton dismissed his troops. They continued on to Fort Fred Steele. The ranch hands returned to their bunkhouse and would prepare for a full day of work on the ranch. Thornton had increased the cattle to 700 head and 100 mustangs. He discussed breeding the mustangs to sell to the army.

Long Face crossed her arms and gave Leigh a rebuking glare.

"What?" Leigh asked her after Thornton dismounted and helped her down from Rider.

"Where you go with my baby? I never give you permission to take my baby," Long Face grumbled. "Why you go with liar bad brother? This is stupid thing you do. You cannot take my baby."

Leigh stood listening to Long Face berating her. She held back chuckles as Long Face scolded her about the baby. Leigh didn't even know Long Face knew about the baby. She had to ask.

"Long Face, how did you know about our baby?"

Long Face stopped her tirade and looked at Leigh silently for a moment. "Not our baby! My baby! I take care when born. Do you understand?"

Thornton broke his silence with a huge guffaw. "I think we have our nanny already selected for us."

Leigh fought her laughter. With the firmest face she could muster she demanded, "Long Face, how did you know about the baby? I told no one my suspicions."

"Don't know sus-pish-ons! I only know you not have woman's time since you married blue coat there," Long Face replied pointing to

Thornton. “With my people that means you carry child. You white people call baby, sus-pish-ons?”

Thornton was laughing uncontrollably and nearly was on his knees as he wiped the tears from his eyes. “Sometimes we call our babies, sus-pish-ons,” Thornton snorted.

“Do stop that!” Leigh implored Thornton. She was trying desperately not to fall into the humor. She lost the battle and folded into her husband’s arms in laughter.

“What so funny?” Long Face asked seriously.

Chapter Forty-Two

During the fall months Thornton paid for a crew to put in the private wire lines from Shamrock Mansion to Rawlins Hotel. He, Leigh, and several ranch hands learned the wireless code. Stephen and Mary MacDonald, and several of their staff learned the wireless code. It was a private connection for the Rawlins Hotel and Shamrock Mansion. In Leigh's condition, he didn't want her to make any trips into town during the winter months, but he understood the need for communication in running the business with Stephen and Mary MacDonald.

Although Leigh had not seen Washakie since Martin's death she received a present for the expected baby from him. It was a pretty handmade doll with beaded dress and moccasins. Long Face gave it to Leigh with his words, "For your daughter to play with." When Leigh asked Long Face how Washakie knew it would be a girl she was told 'I told him.' Leigh knew it would be splitting hairs with Long Face to ask her why she thought it would be a girl, so decided against it. Instead she asked about Washakie's welfare.

"Washakie will move soon to the land of Wind River. He must fight Lakota and Cheyenne with blue coats, but our camp will be safe from them," Long Face answered. She was busy learning to weave on Leigh's loom.

"Then he received all he asked for from the agent," Leigh assumed.

"Agent no understand our people. He brings in more white people. We get cheated, they take and charge again, double pay Washakie say, but he tries to keep peace. Bad men bring strong drink. This make our warriors go crazy. Whiskey bad Washakie say. He warn men not to drink. He try to keep peace. Take, take, take, that all white people do, but Washakie keep peace," Long Face complained. "We do better living with you. We glad we live with you."

"Is Washakie's camp going hungry?" Leigh worried. "I can send supplies from our stores."

"Washakie know bad men cheat. He keeps his camp good," Long Face reassured. "You not worry. It bad for my baby."

For all of Long Face's gruffness, she was very gentle with Leigh and gave her love, affection, and support during her pregnancy.

Bessie doted on Leigh and wouldn't let her in the kitchen unless it was to sit and talk.

Sergeant Bolt had built a small cabin near Shamrock before the mansion had been built. Alice Bolt made regular visits to Shamrock and became fast friends with Leigh, Bessie, and Long Face. Even Melissa O'Brien became part of the intimate group after she and Lieutenant O'Brien had taken possession of Colonel O'Neal's large frame house in Fort Fred D. Steele. Melissa wanted to settle in before she came calling as a regular guest. She was also heavily pregnant and the lieutenant would never allow her to visit without his accompanying her.

It was a day early in December that the women were together at Shamrock Mansion.

"I'm surprised your husband allowed you to visit today," Leigh commented to Melissa after they both returned from the necessary room. Melissa O'Brien was all of four feet 10 inches tall and close to delivery of their first child. Her abdomen looked like a very large rounded watermelon and she had to waddle to walk.

"Edward is extremely protective to be certain," Melissa commented. "I was quite surprised myself, but he believed the short sleigh ride would be safe enough. He really enjoys spending time with the Colonel and Sergeant off duty, since officers and non commissioned are forbidden to socialize."

"Me John is as fond of Edward as he is of our own children," Alice Bolt agreed walking with the two women. "Tis the reason he built our cabin. He wanted a place off and away from the fort. Our son Lucas is expected to join us soon and he won't have the military edict separate us from our child."

"That would be awful," Melissa sighed. "I can't imagine being kept from a child simply because of military protocol."

"We'll not have to worry about it," Leigh gave in riposte. "We have your home and Shamrock as safe havens for all of us to enjoy each other's company. Speaking of which, have you finished refurbishing Thornton's former bachelor residence in the fort, Melissa?"

"Yes, and I can't tell you how grateful we are that the Colonel gave us his house to live in while we are assigned to Fort Fred D.

Steele. It is a large comfortable home. My parents weren't really happy with my choice of husband. They warned me of the dreary little cabins I would be forced to live in as a lieutenant's wife. You can't imagine my delight to write to them and tell them of the large luxurious home I live in and the lovely decorations that I have merely added. We have only just finished the nursery off the master bedroom."

The women entered the parlor to find their husbands engrossed in a mail order catalog.

"Why in the world would you want two cradles and one crib?" John asked his commanding officer.

"Simply because our little Regina needs them. She'll be rocking in the cradle in the parlor with us, or in our room. Of course she may need to sleep in her crib in her nursery when she's a little older," Thornton replied turning the two pages of his interest.

"I should have thought of that before we finished the nursery with a cradle," Edward said thoughtfully.

"Both ye men are daft," John scolded. "A babe needs to sleep with its mother until its suckled."

Thornton raised a brow. "And just how does a father get privacy with a mother at night?"

"Och, ye be to lustful," John reprimanded. "A woman needs her time to heal before ye plant another seed. Ye must learn to do without."

"Impossible," Thornton disputed. "I can't imagine abstaining until Regina is suckled. Leigh is far to sensuous."

"I can't imagine waiting for Melissa, either," Edward agreed.

Melissa and Leigh turned beet red at the men's conversation.

Alice Bolt came to the rescue by clearing her throat. "Excuse me gentlemen, but tis me understanding that the Colonel was looking at furniture for the nursery? Don't ye think the mother should have a say?"

It was the gentlemen's turn to blush. Thornton grabbed at the save Alice Bolt had offered to the men.

"Of course you are right, Mrs. Bolt," Thornton grinned. He rose from the divan to take Leigh's hand. He walked her to the divan where he had been sitting. He seated her near the book. "I thought to buy two cradles and a crib. Which ones would you like?"

"I heard," Leigh chuckled. She wasn't going to let Thornton off too easy for her embarrassment.

Thornton blushed properly.

Leigh studied the pages to determine which pieces of furniture she would approve for the nursery, the parlor, and their bedroom. She agreed with Thornton in that respect. She wanted her baby near her at all times. She felt herself blushing once more when Thornton leaned over to kiss her protruding belly and gently stroke the same with his hand.

“Don’t worry Regina, Mama is just taking her time to determine which one you would really like the most,” Thornton spoke softly to Leigh’s abdomen.

John Bolt laughed loudly. “When are you going to stop talking to the babe like that? The child is not even born!”

Even Edward who was patting Melissa’s belly was surprised at Thornton’s action. He addressed Sergeant Bolt. “Does he talk to it like that a lot?”

Leigh laughed in delight, “Every morning, afternoon, and evening.”

“What makes ye so certain tis a gel?” John continued. “The lovely missus could be given ye a son.”

“I want a girl,” Thornton replied stoically. “Leigh is certain to grant my wish. She loves me. She said so.”

“Och, I’ve never seen an expectant father so daft before,” John griped. “And I thought the lieutenant was bad enough.”

This time Alice arched a brow. “As I recall some twenty two years ago there was a man just a daft.”

“I never spoke to ye belly,” John argued.

“Didn’t ye? Ye cooed and sang lovely little ditties fer yer expected son,” Alice reminded. “It also brings memories of a men determining it was a son I was to be giving.”

John opened his mouth to respond and then shut it quickly. A large grin slid across his mouth.

“I don’t believe it!” Thornton crowed. “I’ve actually seen the sergeant closed mouthed. Will wonders ever cease?”

“Not in yer life,” John repudiated sending a warning glare to his commanding officer.

Attention suddenly turned to Melissa when she released an “Oh dear!”

“I think our baby has determined to come early, Edward,” Melissa whimpered. “Perhaps we should be getting back home.”

Edward shot out of his seat like a ball hurled from a cannon. His face turned pale quite suddenly when he noticed a small puddle of fluid beneath his wife's feet.

"Her waters have broke," Alice remarked knowing exactly what was going on after delivering several children herself. "I don't think it would be a good idea to travel right now even though the fort is so near."

"Of course not," Leigh agreed. "Thornton, send Jefferson or Too Many Teeth to retrieve your surgeon. Alice and I will take Melissa to the west bedroom guest suite."

"Did the pains start?" Alice asked Melissa before she and Leigh helped Melissa up from the divan. "Can you make it up the stairs?"

"You're not going to make her walk are you?" Edward O'Brien shouted suddenly finding his voice. He pushed Leigh and Alice aside and lifted his wife with ease. "Where's the bedroom?"

"Well," Alice responded huffily. She straightened her gown as if thrown into a dustbin. "Me thinks someone has finally topped you, Sergeant Bolt, in creating a fuss over childbirth."

"I never," John began to protest. Instead he shut his mouth and smiled once more. "I guess it be the pain ye women bear and the worry we men be troubled with until our darlings are born and ye are safe."

Thornton wasn't listening. Once he was over the shock of Melissa giving birth imminently, he found his legs, grabbed his winter coat, and went to the stables to find Too Many Teeth.

Leigh watched her suddenly pale husband rush out the door and led Edward with his armful of Melissa up the stairs to the guest suite.

Thornton bumped into Edward once again as they paced back and forth on the parlor carpet.

"Sorry old man," Thornton muttered unthinking. It was already the early hours of the morning. He felt his whisker stubble as he stroked his chin as he paced. How could this be taking so long? It's already been a day, no it felt like an eternity and if he admitted it, it was more like twelve hours. Is this what it was going to be like when Leigh gave birth? Hell no! He wasn't about to be locked out and waiting downstairs. He would be with Leigh every minute. He would be damned if he would be forced to wait it out separated from

his Leigh. This was their baby and they would damn well share the birthing!

Thornton's thoughts were interrupted when Alice Bolt came into the parlor carrying a wrapped bundle of baby.

Edward turned to see Mrs. Bolt. Stopped short and grinned.

"Tis a lovely wee lad ya have," Alice crowed. "He is ever so perfect and a little angel." She took the baby to Edward and opened the blanket.

Edward beamed with joy and frowned instantly. He asked, "Melissa?"

"The lass is exhausted, me boy. She's sleeping soundly. The doctor gave her some sleeping medicine. She did well and will be up and about in now time at all."

"My wife?" Thornton questioned worriedly. Leigh rarely stayed up so late during her pregnancy. He was naturally worried for her.

"Mrs. O'Neal, Bessie, and Long Face are cleaning up the birthing," Alice replied cheerily. She once again concentrated on the new father. "Would ye like to hold yer son?"

"May I? I mean can I? I mean he's so little, so fragile? I might drop him?" Edward stuttered nervously.

"You have as much of a chance dropping him as dropping your rifle in a skirmish," Thornton teased.

Chapter Forty-Three

Spring returned once more to Wyoming. A recent snowstorm was melting over green trying to peek through. The nights were still cold, but the days were warming and flowers were beginning to bloom on Shamrock lands.

Leigh was enjoying sitting next to Thornton on the divan in the parlor. Her body fully embraced in his arms. His one hand was stroking her arm, and the other hand stroking her rounded abdomen.

It was afternoon and as the time for partition neared Thornton would leave the fort early and spend the afternoon and evening with Leigh. Many times they wouldn't even talk, just embrace. Leigh was becoming uncomfortable in the pregnancy and Thornton's tender loving care helped more than she could say.

Leigh gasped with a movement that showed a little fist coming up from her inside.

"Regina is getting cramped in there," Thornton snorted in joy. He felt the strong movement. "I'd say she was punching you for more room."

"Punch is a correct word," Leigh laughed. "The problem is, I don't have much more room to give."

"Hear that, Regina?" Thornton chuckled. "You're going to have to set your mind to being born soon."

Leigh laughed, "I wonder what people would think when they hear you talking to my belly."

"I don't care what they think," Thornton replied gruffly. "I believe Regina can hear me. I think she needs to know just whom her papa is when she's born. Discipline needs to start young you know."

The ringing bell at the front door announced someone was pulling the door sash for entry.

"Strange, who would be visiting?" Leigh questioned attempting to rise from the divan.

"I haven't the slightest idea. I didn't even hear any one ride up," Thornton replied rising from the divan and assisting Leigh to stand up.

Bessie was already answering the door. An older duplicate of Thornton O'Neal stood before her.

"Lordy!" Bessie declared. "Yo must be Colonel O'Neal's pappy! If yo ain't the spittin image!"

"Brian O'Neal at your service, madam," he stated with a thick Irish brogue. "No need ta introduce me self ta ye. Is his self at home? We went directly ta the fort only ta find out our lad had gone ta his home."

"Papa?" Thornton choked.

"Me boy!" Brian chortled and walked briskly to his son surrounding Thornton in his arms and giving him a bear hug.

Thornton returned the embrace. "Papa, when did you get here? Did Mama come with you? Where's the carriage? We didn't hear any horses or carriage?"

"I left yer mother at the fort. She'll be comin in a bit. Irene wanted to take a bath afore she met ya and the little woman," Brian answered. "As fer me getting here. I was a bit tired o' sittin on the train and the carriage ride. I didn't bring me Brandy, so I thought a good walk would do me some good. Here I be!"

"Welcome to Shamrock, Papa," Thornton beamed.

"Tis a fine home ya built, lad," Brian complimented looking around the hall and the open rooms. "Married life suits ya. I knew it would. It suited me quite well. Where is me bonnie daughter in law?"

Leigh waddled out of the parlor. Once on her feet she needed to stretch a bit and prepare her body for walking.

"There she is herself," Thornton bragged picking up the brogue of his father.

"Aye, a bonnie colleen," Brian appreciated. "Can't tell ya how happy yer mother and I are that ye are finally makin us grandparents."

Leigh focused on the gentleman standing in the hall. She looked at Thornton and then back once again to the man. They looked so much alike it was incredible. "Mr. O'Neal?"

"Ye must be Leigh," Brian greeted with smiles. "And there be herself with our grandchild. Tis a glorious blessed day!" He opened his arms and closed in on Leigh for a hug.

Leigh's bulk prohibited a fine and proper Irish hug, but Brian O'Neal made a fine attempt.

"This is a surprise," Leigh managed to say past her shock. No one had told her Thornton's parents would be arriving. Had she

known she would have made preparations. "Unless you knew?" she asked Thornton raising a brow.

Brian O'Neal caught the nuance. "Don't fuss at the lad. Thorn had no idea we were comin. We planned a surprise. Me and me missus wanted to be here for the birth of our grandchild."

Thornton gave Leigh a cocky grin and shrug of his shoulders.

"Where is Mrs. O'Neal?" Leigh asked looking around the two giants.

"Och, don't be calling yer mother in law Mrs. O'Neal, she'll be feeling strange. We call her Margaret Mary, and ye must be callin me, Brian," he ordered. "Margaret Mary is takin a bath at the fort. We didn't know the both of yer selves were livin in this fine home when we passed it. We had sent all letters and wires to the fort so we went there. Margaret Mary was tired and dirty from the train and carriage ride. When the fine Captain offered a bath to me wife, well she jumped at it. She told me she wanted to present herself to her new daughter with only the best of images."

"I'll go to the fort and bring Mama," Thornton volunteered.

"Ye needn't be worryin," Brian responded. "The fine captain said he'd be bringin Margaret Mary herself with our carriage and trunks later."

"I'll see to it that dinner is prepared for our guests," Leigh stated. Suddenly she was extremely nervous. The surprise of Thornton's parents visit left out those insecurities again. What if his parents thought she didn't measure up to their expectations?

"Ye needn't put yerself out," Brian countered. "Thornton can see to it. Ye should be restin afore our grandchild is born."

"Thornton already sees to that. I do very little in the household anymore," Leigh protested. "I'd be delighted to make certain your first meal here will be enjoyable."

"I try," Thornton agreed. "But Leigh still finds things to do she shouldn't, like working in the garden when I'm not home."

Leigh opened her mouth and then closed it. However did he know that after the first melt she hoed and raked the small vegetable garden plot? "I'll only be a minute. Thorn, perhaps your father might like a taste of brandy. He did say he didn't bring his."

Thornton began to laugh.

Leigh arched a brow. What was so funny about offering his father brandy?

“Brandy is me horse,” Brian chuckled. “A good Irishmen doesn’t drink brandy. We would be havin some fine whiskey if ye have some.”

“I’ve got some good Irish whiskey in the study,” Thornton invited. He was very happy his parents had come for the birth.

Leigh found Long Face and Bessie in the kitchen. Bessie had already started working on increasing the supper portions. She believed there would be at least four more people including the captain from the fort. Long Face, Tall Grass, and Bessie prepared enough for eight more people.

Leigh returned to the hall when she heard the carriage approaching the entrance. Opening the door she spotted Captain Granger assisting a dainty petite woman with copper colored hair. She brushed her current fashion traveling dress made of deep emerald green velvet with her black leather gloves. A black bowed hat sat upon her perfectly coiffed hair.

The driver dressed in black frock coat and red vest jumped from the black carriage. He walked to the loaded wagon and helped two maids off the wagon. Two more men were beginning to off load the trunks from the wagon.

Margaret Mary looked to the front door and saw Leigh emerging. She knew immediately it was her daughter in law. She opened her arms and walked briskly to Leigh.

A minute later Leigh found herself being hugged by Margaret Mary O’Neal.

Margaret Mary set her arms straight and looked at Leigh. “If ye ain’t the most darlin lass. Ye look beautiful ye do!” Margaret Mary then rubbed Leigh’s abdomen. “Bless ye lass fer givin us a grandchild. I had nearly lost hope with the lad ever bringin us some lovin grandchildren.”

Leigh was speechless. Thornton’s mother was vivacious and beautiful.

Margaret Mary planted a kiss on Leigh’s cheeks and hugged her once again. “Ye look fine and healthy ye do. Ye make me so happy ye do. Come along and rest. Such a weight ye carry. Ye will bring me a fine healthy grandchild,” Margaret Mary stated. Once again she rubbed Leigh’s abdomen. Entering the hall Margaret Mary shouted. “Thorn? Were is the Thorn in thy mother’s side?”

Thornton bolted from the study. He ran to his mother, picked her up, and twirled her about the hall in a circle.

"Mama!" Thornton exclaimed. He was thrilled to see his parents here. For years they had railed him for moving to the savage west. They had wanted him to be a part of the family businesses. He preferred the military life. They never gave up berating the west and extolling the civilized East and New York. He truly never believed they would ever visit him in Wyoming. "Mama, I can't believe you and Papa came to this wild land!"

"Even the uncivilized land wouldn't keep me from seeing me own grandchild born," Margaret Mary retorted. "Now put me down, ye overgrown Thorn! Ye be mussin me gown."

Leigh could barely believe the love surrounding this family. She had never felt it in her family other than her Irish father.

"Welcome to Shamrock, Mrs..." Leigh hesitated. Thornton's mother raised a brow at the Mrs. "Margaret Mary."

"Tis a fine lass ye've wedded," Margaret Mary chortled to her son. "She's got a lot O' Irish in her blood. I kin tell. Ye did well in gettin her." Margaret Mary then returned to Leigh and took her hand. "I hope me boy didn't threaten ye to wed him. Tis a fact he be a prime piece but a bit on the serious side. I'd hope ye be happy to do it."

Leigh was astounded that Thornton's mother suggested Leigh might not have wanted her son. Leigh had been terrified that she wouldn't measure up to their expectations of what his wife should be. "I am happy and proud to be Mrs. Thornton O'Neal."

"Ye put me worried heart to rest," Margaret Mary chirped. "What are ye standing there gawkin at lad? Give me Tim and Sean a hand. Make certain ye tell Glenda and Maureen where to place our luggage. Ye do have room for the lot of us in this Shamrock don't ye? Although I must admit I expected ta come ta a small shack. Ye did right fine in building this place, Thorn."

Leigh fell immediately in love with Margaret Mary. She could tell instantly that Thorn's mother was not some snobbish wealthy woman that held her nose high above everyone else. "I'll show you to your room," Leigh volunteered.

"Which room might that be, Leigh O'Neal," Thornton quipped. "I have orders to obey and I want to get it right."

Leigh gave her husband a broad smile. "The Yellow Room in the east wing. It has several smaller bedrooms surrounding it for your parents servants."

“Yes Ma’am,” Thornton grinned. He gave his mother and wife a snappy salute and walked outside.

“I kin see ye are happy with me son,” Margaret Mary said seriously as they walked up the stairs. “Thorn had worried me. I thought me son would never marry, or would drive his poor wife ta distraction fer what that evil banshee did to him. And here ye be glowin like mornin radiance and a child growin in yer belly with happiness written upon yer countenance. Tis happy I be. Happy indeed!”

“Tis happy we both be,” a voice joined in from behind. “I worried for me boy as well. I kin see in his eyes when he looks at ye lass, he’s befuddled with happiness.”

Leigh could find no words. She smiled. She opened the door to the Yellow room. All the rooms in Shamrock had a name. The bedrooms were given colors for names and the decorations would match. It was one of the enjoyments she and Martin had shared. Later Thornton and she had finished.

“Och, tis a beautiful room,” Margaret Mary gasped. She looked about and took in the sight. The windows had lace curtains that were covered with heavy yellow brocade. The walls were painted in a light yellow with white ceiling and borders. A large white marble fireplace graced a wall. The bed was canopied and the curtains matched the heavy yellow brocade of the windows. There was a full-length mirror, two dressers, two armoires, a closet, and an open door revealing the necessary room adjoining. “And I thought I might be staying in a dirt floor cabin. Ye’ve done well lass. Really well.” Leigh received another kiss. “I’m happy beyond joy.”

Chapter Forty-Four

The following weeks were a joy for Leigh and Thornton. They thoroughly enjoyed his parents company. The O'Neals were gregarious, vivacious, and a delight of good humor.

Margaret Mary became close to Leigh and loved her as a daughter. Brian and his son enjoyed each other's company immensely. Father and son went out on hunting trips at every opportunity to the delight of Long Face that cooked the rabbit, quail, and fish. At one point the family visited Rawlins and spent several nights at the Rawlins hotel. Stephen and Mary McDonald were overjoyed with the company. Maggie fell in love with Margaret Mary and adopted her as a grandmother to Margaret Mary's delight.

Brian commented again and again on Shamrock mansion and ranch. He was pleased with the domicile his son was living in. Surprising to Thornton, his father quickly fell in love with ranching and was an adept pupil under Jefferson's tutelage. Jefferson pulled out a fine specimen of a mustang and gave it to Brian as his very own. True to form, Brian gave his horse the name 'Whiskey'.

On a mid May Day, Leigh woke to banding around her abdomen. It was an early morning hour and the moon was bright in the black star filled sky. Although it was merely discomfort and not pain, she realized it was the beginning of her partition. She rose from the bed and stood by the large French doors opening out to the portico. She turned her head to watch Thornton sleeping on their large canopied bed. It was amazing to watch him sleep. He slept on his side and his profile was that of a Greek God, but in sleep he looked like an angelic child. "I hope our child takes your exquisite looks," she whispered and was hit by a band.

After spending the day with Melissa during her labor, Leigh knew she would have a long wait and she was not about to disturb her husband's sleep or anyone in the family's for that matter. Instead she paced the floor and occasionally rested on a chair by her dressing table.

By dawn her labor pains had increased in intensity and frequency. One was especially hard and she gasped.

The dawn's light and his wife's gasp caused Thornton to stir from his sleep. He extended his arm to snuggle his wife and woke with a start when he felt the emptiness beneath him. He bolted upright in the bed and found his wife's silhouette standing by the open French door. She was bending and grasping her middle. Alarms went off in his head and jumped from the bed. In an instant he had folded Leigh in his arms. "Is it time?"

Still in the throes of a labor band, Leigh nodded with a grimace.

"How long has this been going on?" Thornton demanded.

"Since early this morning about one o'clock," Leigh replied with heavy breathing. The pain began to ease.

Thornton grasped her shoulders. "Why on earth didn't you wake me? I'll get the surgeon and wake the women."

Leigh found her breath and looked Thornton in the eye.

"Dearest husband, we both know this takes a long time. I am not about to suffer it in bed and worry you. I feel better moving about. I certainly do not want to disturb anyone's rest. Especially because I would rather be near you and ease my own discomfort than be forced to lie in that bed."

Thornton remembered his own promise to himself after going through Melissa's delivery. "I understand your grievance my love, but ..." Thornton turned pale and began to shake when another wave grasped his wife. He concentrated on putting his thoughts together. "But, I think we have waited long enough. It is time to rise. My father is probably already awake taking his breakfast. He loves to ride Whiskey early in the morning. I'm sure he's already disturbed my mother. I'm going to leave you on this chair and rouse the household. Too Many Teeth will fetch our surgeon. Do you understand?"

Leigh nodded, but forced a smile during her travail and quipped as she watched her husband head for the bedroom door, "I understand, but you may create an embarrassing scene if you do not first put some clothes upon your nakedness."

Thornton looked down and realized he was buck-naked. He blushed profusely and grabbed the pair of pants that was laid neatly upon a bedroom chair. Swiftly he donned the pants and left the bedroom wearing only the pants and raced to the kitchen.

In the kitchen Thornton found Bessie and Long Face in a delightful animated conversation with his father as he expected.

The three looked at him upon his entrance and knew immediately it was Leigh's time. The worry on his brow, the

seriousness of his face, and the lack of dressing of his person gave them all the information they needed.

"I'll send Too Many Teeth to fetch the fort surgeon," Long Face announced rising to walk to Too Many Teeth's cabin.

"I'll set the water to boil," Bessie stated wiping her hands on her apron and walking to get the large black pot.

"I'll get your mother, son," Brian said rising from the table. "I'll send her to your room."

Thornton was grateful he didn't need to speak. He was choking on words. Never in his life had he felt so choked on emotions. He felt fear, joy, and jubilation, worry, and love in one lump caught in his throat.

Thornton returned to his room taking the stairs three at a time as he climbed the massive center staircase to the second floor.

Opening the door he watched helplessly as Leigh emerged from the necessary room. She had lifted her gown. "What is it?"

"My waters broke," Leigh managed to say before another hard band caught her breath.

Thornton ran to his wife and lifted her in his arms. Gently he carried her to the bed and placed her upon it. "I think it is time you take to the bed."

"Perhaps," Leigh replied breathing swiftly to alleviate the pain of her banding.

Thornton sat on the bed and let her hold his hand during the labor pain. It seemed an eternity while she squeezed his hand tightly. If he could help his wife beyond this travail he would have given his right arm to do it. "I'm staying by your side my love. I will be here throughout the ordeal."

Several minutes later, Margaret Mary popped into the room. "Bless us, the babe is truly coming."

Leigh looked up and replied, "If this labor pain is any example of true birth, I can guarantee it."

"Och, tis time for us women and you must leave, Thorn," Margaret Mary announced walking to Leigh and observing the labor pain.

"I'm staying," Thornton replied stubbornly.

"Out!" Margaret Mary ordered taking note of the extended labor pain. "The child will be born within a few hours. Be gone with ye! Tis women's time."

"I damn well created the babe, and I damn well will be with Leigh when she's born," Thornton countered heatedly.

Margaret Mary was taken back by the ferocity of her son's words. He had never spoken to her like that in his life. "Fine, ye can hold yer wife on the bed when tis time ta push. I've heard of men helping their wives while the midwives deliver. Just do not blame me if ye pass out fer the blood. We'll ignore yer unconscious body."

"I've seen plenty during the war," Thornton countered with stubbornness.

"Tisn't the same," Margaret Mary objected sassily. "Tis yer own child being born. Stubborn as ye are, from yer father's side, ye may suit yerself."

"And here I thought I inherited the stubborn streak from me mother," Thornton teased nervously. His face paled once more when Leigh squeezed his hand during a pain.

Bessie and Long Face came into the room to hear the conversation. Bessie held clean linens, a scissor, and cord. Long Face carried herbs to give Leigh during the delivery process.

"Stupid man," Long Face sneered. "What you do here? Go away." She walked to Leigh and ordered. "Drink this. Medicine help with pain." She raised the sheets covering Leigh, moved her nightgown, and checked between Leigh's legs. "Baby come soon."

"I'm not going away," Thornton stated stubbornly.

"Stupid man," Long Face sneered. She stood up and put down the sheets. "I keep checking. When time is right you sit on side of bed."

"You sit on Thorn's lap," Margaret Mary added speaking to Leigh. "He can help you when you push. If he doesn't faint."

"Please don't faint on me," Leigh chortled between pains. "I love you for deciding to stay with me."

Thornton grinned and gave her a kiss on her forehead.

About an hour later the fort surgeon arrived. Captain Leonard entered the room with his bag. He found the washstand. He washed his hands with carbolic acid and rinsed them with the water. He raised a brow when he noticed Colonel O'Neal sitting on the bed. "Do you intend to stay here?"

"Indeed I do," Thornton snapped.

Several hours later Leigh gasped with a sudden urge to push. Long Face noticed and checked under the sheet. "I see baby's head. It is time to sit."

Thornton helped Leigh to a sitting position on his lap. Bessie sat on one chair and took Leigh's hand. Margaret Mary sat on the other chair next to Bessie and took Leigh's other hand. Doctor Leonard knelt on the floor between the two chairs. Long Face put a woven basket on the floor beneath Leigh.

Doctor Leonard commanded, "You are ready Mrs. O'Neal. Give us a good push at the next pain."

To Leigh's relief, the medicine concoction Long Face had given her dulled the pain, but allowed her to feel the baby going into the birth canal and feeling the need to push.

After several tries during partition the baby's head emerged.

"That's wonderful," Doctor Leonard encouraged. "Give us another push at the next labor pain."

Leigh complied and felt the shoulders emerge. Another push and she felt the baby slide out.

"It's a girl!" Doctor Leonard announced.

Thornton looked down to see his daughter. She was a bloody mess, but squirming and began to wail at the cold air she was suddenly in. He did feel squeamish but wouldn't give in to the sudden dizziness in his head.

Long Face took the baby after Doctor Leonard severed the umbilical cord and tied the string around it.

"I need you to push again," Doctor Leonard ordered Leigh. "You must push out the afters."

Leigh complied.

Margaret Mary and Bessie cleaned her after the placenta was ejected. They carefully tied her flux rags and helped Thornton put her to bed.

Once that was accomplished Thornton stood up and promptly fainted.

Leigh, Doctor Leonard, Bessie, and Margaret Mary burst out laughing.

Long Face walked in with little Regina and joined the laughter. "Stupid man," she commented. "You fix him up, medicine man."

Doctor Leonard complied and pulled out his smelling salts.

The acrid smell worked and Thornton was awake instantly.

"You fainted, Colonel," Doctor Leonard guffawed.

Thornton looked at Leigh. She looked radiant. He looked at Long Face holding his daughter. He walked to Long Face a bit unsteadily, but took his daughter in his arms. He opened the blanket and stared at his daughter. “You’re beautiful, Regina. You’re just as I pictured you.” It was the first time he held Regina, but not the last. Others in the family would soon find themselves hard pressed to hold the little girl. Thornton monopolized every minute of Regina’s time when he was in the mansion.

“Perhaps you might take your daughter to show her Grandpapa,” Margaret Mary suggested. “Leigh needs to rest.”

“I’d like to hold my little girl first,” Leigh requested.

Thornton brought Regina to the bed.

Leigh held her and smiled proudly. “Hello my daughter. I love you little princess.” Leigh’s eyes fluttered. She was sleepy.

Thornton once again took possession of his girl. “I love you with all I am, Leigh. Thank you for our daughter.” He kissed her on her brow and watched a moment as Leigh’s eyes fluttered and she fell into a sound sleep.

Thornton took Regina to the parlor. He showed her off to his father, Jefferson, and Too Many Teeth. He never released his daughter and took great delight in just staring at her. It wasn’t until nearly suppertime that he finally gave Regina to her mother’s arms. She needed to suckle and obtain nutrition until that time her mother’s milk came in.

The family celebrated Regina’s birth with visitors from the fort, including Melissa, Lieutenant O’Brien and their son, Michael.

Chapter Forty-Five

There had been talk of a congressional investigation of Wind River's Indian Agent for some time now, but since it wouldn't affect Fort Fred Steele, Thornton only followed the news should Chief Washakie visit him. The chief had not shown his presence for several months and although he knew the chief and his tribe camped in the Green River for the winter, he also knew that Washakie hunted to the north and east of the Wind River. Thornton was beginning to become concerned for the Wind River Shoshone.

That beautiful day in early June he certainly didn't expect any visitors from Washington. A freighter had brought Henry Pierce and his wife to Fort Fred Steele for an inspection and conference regarding the Indian Peace Policy. It was information for the congressional investigator, Felix Benton. Henry Pierce was an up and coming lawyer who hoped to be elected as a congressman for Pennsylvania in the next election.

Thornton had paid little notice to the freight wagon that brought Pierce and his wife. When Lieutenant O'Brien informed Colonel O'Neal, Thornton merely ordered an officer's quarters be made available to the congressional investigator and his wife. He also asked the Lieutenant to see to their comfort and necessity since he was on his way back to Shamrock for the noon meal and spend some time with his two-week-old daughter as he did every day since she was born.

John Bolt did pay attention to the visitors and swore beneath his breath when he recognized Pierce's wife. "Tis an ill wind that brought the banshee to this fort."

"What are you talking about?" Sergeant Harvey questioned. He had been standing next to John watching the man and woman dismount from the buckboard.

"Look at her closely and listen to that southern drawl," John ordered.

"All I hear is a complaining shrew," Harvey replied until he remembered the shrew's voice. "It's her! What the hell is she doing here?"

“Henry Pierce is her husband, but I can’t see that one ever leaving her Willows and all her comforts,” John reflected. “He must have something over her to bring her out here to the wilds.”

“Are you going to tell Colonel O’Neal?” Harvey queried. “I’m not. I’m going to pretend I don’t know a thing.”

“So am I,” John agreed. “I think I’ll leave duty early today and check on my family.”

“Wish I had somewhere to run,” Harvey mumbled. “The Colonel will be expecting me to be here when he returns.”

John Bolt gave his friend and fellow sergeant a saucy salute. Like his name he bolted from the premises.

“Henry,” Chloe’s voice shrieked angrily. “You certainly can’t expect me to stay in this hovel! I won’t! It’s bad enough you dragged me from the Willows, but to expect me to live in this squalor is beyond my comprehension!”

“You brought your servants with you,” Henry retorted. “That’s a lot more than most have it out here.” He was at the end of this rope. Chloe had done nothing but nag and complain the moment they boarded the train in Washington City. The day after they were married six years ago, she had turned into a first class shrew. They had started living separate lives a month after the wedding. He lived in Washington City. Chloe lived at the Willows. He paid all the bills and had her stay with him in his townhouse whenever her presence was required for a ball or Washingtonian party. She was the most beautiful and elegant hostess wife in the midst of hopeful politicians and he used her for his benefit.

Things had been going perfectly well for these six years. A mistress he kept in another townhouse nearby satisfied his basic needs. Chloe submitted to his husbandly rights, but clearly left him wanting. His political wants required he start producing a family and he certainly couldn’t afford any gossip regarding his marital status. He had learned that Chloe was so against having children she had been using methods to prevent pregnancy. Those methods were readily available to her in the East. She couldn’t obtain them in the West.

Henry had brought Chloe with him for two reasons. He didn’t want any gossip regarding his leaving her at Willows when he took this assignment, and it was time she produced a child. She was already twenty-nine and soon childbirth would be too dangerous.

Henry must have his family to continue his pursuit of a congressional position.

Henry hadn't realized what a constant nag Chloe would be. There had been times he wanted to slap her to shut her up, but he had never raised a hand to anyone and had no plans to start with his wife. Henry sighed while listening to Chloe's rage. She was beautiful, elegant, and a perfect Washingtonian hostess. She was also selfish, self centered, egotistical, and a nagging shrew.

"Henry!" Chloe screamed. "You are not listening to me!"

"Just what do you want me to do?" Henry snapped. "These quarters are comfortable. We have a parlor, kitchen, bedrooms, and necessary room."

"Comfortable?" Chloe screeched. "Our stables at Willows are better than this! What I expect you to do is let me go back to Willows!"

"You are not going to do that!" Henry snapped angrily. "You are my wife, this is my assignment, and you will stay with me."

"Not in this backwoods squalor I won't!"

"Yes you will! If you want to keep Willows, you will!" Henry threatened. He was angry. He was tired. He was hungry. He didn't need anymore of Chloe's complaining.

Chloe dropped her mouth and then snapped it shut. "What do you mean, keep Willows?"

"I mean, dear wife, that if you do not stay with me on this assignment I will sell Willows and you will live in my town home."

"You wouldn't!" Chloe shouted and clasped her hand to her throat.

"I bailed Willows for you, and I will sell it! Watch me!"

"You'd force me to live in Washington City. You'd make me stay in that tiny home. You'd visit your mistress during my presence there?"

"Yes I would," Henry sneered heatedly. "Let Cora Mae start cooking. The soldiers have brought everything in. I'm hungry. You and Lily can start unpacking our things."

"You are going to make me stay here?" Chloe whimpered. "You know I am claustrophobic."

"You'll live."

Chloe was smart enough to know when to back down. She left the room to find Cora and Lily. After giving them instructions she

returned to Henry. It was time for her playing the part of a dutiful wife again.

Chloe had met Henry seven years ago. Her husband the General had been killed at Appomattox. She had inherited all his fortune, but it was quickly spent on taxes, refurbishment, parties, gowns, and living expenses. She soon found she could not pay the taxes during the reconstruction period. That was when she met the very rich Henry Pierce. When she found out how wealthy he was and his own dream of becoming a politician, she played him like a fine violin. They were married a year later.

Chloe had considered this marriage a better one than the General. Henry preferred Washington City and politics. He paid all the taxes and bills. He even began programs that made Willows profitable once again. She lived in her luxurious Willows and he lived his own life. Chloe had even known about Henry's mistress and didn't care.

Chloe didn't want a pregnancy to ruin her petite girlish figure, and Henry could use his mistress to satiate his carnal needs.

On occasion it was even fun to visit his town home and be a Washingtonian hostess. As long as she could live in Willows, she was content.

This was the first time Henry had ever used such a threat against her. He had never even forced her to do anything prior to this assignment. He rarely made her submit to him until now.

Chloe hadn't found conjugal interaction enjoyable. Henry wanted something from her when they were in bed that she just couldn't give. Chloe had always used her body and looks to get what she wanted. It was strange to her that Henry wanted something from her in the bed. Henry had subjected her to his carnal lust every night since they left Washington City. The worst part of this trip was she could not obtain her sponges out here to prevent pregnancy. Chloe hoped she wouldn't conceive a child. A baby would simply ruin her perfect figure.

Chloe was also faced with another problem. This tiny hovel was simply impossible for her to accept.

Chloe had noticed a beautiful Southern Plantation façade mansion including flower gardens and perfectly manicured lawns when they passed along the road to the fort. She had also seen barns, stables, and cabins near the large mansion. Chloe concluded that servants stayed in all those cabins. She had even witnessed a Negro

emerging from the mansion carrying a basket of laundry to hang on lines to dry.

This mansion was the place she wanted to stay as long as she had to be in this place with Henry.

“Henry,” Chloe addressed softly. She approached her husband demurely. She placed her hands on his bent shoulders as he concentrated on some paperwork he had placed on the table. “Cora Mae is appropriating some food from the sutler. She’ll begin cooking your meal.”

“Good,” Henry responded. He felt his wife’s gentle hands on his shoulders. This act of hers usually preceded a request. “What is it you want, Chloe?”

“I don’t want anything at all,” Chloe murmured sweetly.

Henry nearly snorted in laughter.

“I was just wondering if you noticed that big beautiful mansion we passed on the way to the fort.”

“Yes I did,” Henry responded turning to look at his wife. “It’s bigger than Willows.”

“Yes it is,” Chloe agreed. She sat next to Henry. “I wonder who owns such a place way out here? Do you think it might be a fine Southern gentleman?”

Henry felt his wife place her hand upon his. Another warning bell rang in his head. “I really would have no idea, Chloe.”

“Wouldn’t you like to find out?” Chloe prodded.

“No,” Henry stated flatly. “I’m here on assignment. I’ll be gathering and formulating information for the Peace Policy and reporting to Felix Benton. Once this assignment is completed, we’ll return to Washington City.”

“While you’re doing all this work, I’ll be left to myself in this dreadful place. I’ll be bored and all alone,” Chloe pouted. “Wouldn’t it be grand if that gentleman had a wife. She could be company for me.”

“This fort has many officers, several of them have wives. You’ll have company my dear,” Henry countered.

Chloe was getting irritated. Henry was becoming more and more obstinate. “Wouldn’t it be even nicer if perhaps this gentleman and his wife offered to let us stay with them during your assignment?”

Henry raised his brow. “What you are hinting at is that I should introduce us to the owners of the mansion and invite ourselves as guests?”

“That may be a crude way of putting it,” Chloe purred, “You are after all a prominent Washingtonian politician.”

“These quarters are adequate. I need to stay in the fort and we will do so,” Henry growled. “Do run along and see to it that everything is unpacked. I have my paperwork to get in order.”

Chloe rose and stamped her foot. “You don’t care about my comforts at all!”

“Not really,” Henry chortled. “Run along. I have work to do.”

Chloe stood behind the chair. “Just where is this Colonel of yours? Are you going to allow the man to snub you? You’re working! To what purpose!”

“We’ve only just arrived,” Henry replied impatiently. “He sent word for us to settle in here. I’ll be leaving to find him in his office within the hour. First I am hungry and want to eat!”

“Even Cora Mae can’t create a meal that quickly!” Chloe repudiated defiantly.

A knock at the door stopped the battle. Both looked toward the door. Lily scurried from the bedroom to answer the knock.

Chapter Forty-Six

Corporal Nesbitt stood at parade rest. "Is Mr. Pierce about?"

Lily nodded in the affirmative. She invited the corporal in and walked toward Mr. and Mrs. Pierce.

The corporal stopped in front of Mr. Pierce. "Lieutenant O'Brien sent me here to offer you and Mrs. Pierce an invitation to dine with them for the noon meal."

"Thank you, Corporal," Henry appreciated. He was indeed hungry and really didn't want to wait until Cora Mae was settled into the kitchen. "Will they be expecting us?"

"I'm to bring you back with me," Nesbitt stated crisply. "Mrs. O'Brien reminded the Lieutenant that it takes a day or two to settle in and the two of you must be quite hungry after leaving Rawlins this morning."

"Mrs. O'Brien is quite kind," Chloe cooed. She was skillful in the art of being a political wife. She had already washed herself using a basin and cloth. Chloe had already changed clothes so she was ready to leave immediately and participate in social graces.

"I need a moment to freshen up," Henry said rising from the chair. "We'll go with you in a minute."

The corporal escorted them across the parade grounds, past the offices, the sutler, and to a large wood framed house. He knocked on the door and was greeted by a young woman dressed in a maid's uniform.

Henry removed his hat and entered after his wife. He raised a brow not only that the Lieutenant was occupying such a large home, but also how could a Lieutenant afford servants for it?

The maid led them to the formal dining room. Edward was just seating Melissa.

"Welcome," Edward greeted walking to Mr. and Mrs. Pierce. "We are happy you accepted our invitation."

"It is most kind of you, suh," Chloe smiled extending her hand in greeting.

Edward bowed and brushed his lips across Chloe's hand. He tucked her arm in his and led her to the massive mahogany dining table. The center of the table had a large oil chandelier hang above it. The table could easily seat eight. The room had flocked green wallpaper and golden brocade drapes held in place with golden cords to reveal tatted panels over the windowpanes. The butlery and china cabinet were also matched to the mahogany table with an intricate carved leaf pattern in the Queen Anne style. Beneath their feet laid an expensive oriental carpet.

One of Henry's missives was to seek out information on the swindling of reservation money by unscrupulous Indian agents, employees, and military. He couldn't help but wonder just how a Lieutenant could possibly afford all of this.

An older woman came out with a large porcelain-serving bowl and began to ladle a delicious smelling potato soup into the expensive porcelain bowls. The bowls were white rose patterned and boasted gold rims. The flatware was a silver service.

After everyone had been served the woman left and returned with fresh baked bread and freshly made creamed butter.

Henry used his spoon and tasted the soup. It was as well made as one of the finest restaurants in Washington City could boast. He took a slice of bread and buttered it. His curiosity had to be satisfied.

"I must admit it makes me wonder how a Lieutenant can afford this luxury?"

"I can't," Edward replied smiling.

"A cook, a maid, a large house, and expensive furnishings?" Henry questioned raising his brows.

Chloe remained silent. She was a bit curious herself. After all, a long time ago she rejected a simple Captain for a General because a high ranked officer would afford more luxury.

"My wife's family is quite wealthy. Before our Michael was born and they learned of our large home through letters, they sent Millie and Annie for Melissa. They continue to pay the staff's wages. Annie doubles as a nanny for our Michael," Edward explained.

"The house or its furnishings do not belong to us either," Melissa added shyly. "It is sort of on loan for as long as we are stationed here."

"On loan?" Henry questioned.

"The Colonel is quite wealthy of his own right as well as coming from a wealthy family. He had this house built as his bachelor

quarters. The Colonel paid many of the non commissioned officer's wives to keep the house clean, do laundry, and cook for him. When Mr. Chandler started building the Shamrock, the Colonel moved in there. He gave this house to Melissa and I," Edward explained finishing his soup.

"Is that the mansion close to the fort?" Chloe asked in great interest. "A Mr. Chandler owns it then?"

"Yes, Shamrock is next to the fort, but Mr. Chandler died before it was completed," Edward replied as he buttered a slice of fresh bread.

"Mr. Chandler gave it as a gift to the Colonel," Melissa clarified. "The Colonel and his wife now occupy Shamrock Mansion."

"I seem to have heard a Mr. Chandler's name mentioned often in Rawlins," Henry noted wiping his mouth with a napkin.

Millie brought in vegetables and the main course of baked and breaded stuffed quail.

"Mr. Chandler's holdings in Rawlins were quite substantial. He was a very wealthy man," Melissa stated factually.

"A mansion like the one I noted on our ride is a substantial gift," Chloe uttered. "Especially a gift to a Colonel."

"The Colonel and Mr. Chandler were childhood friends," Edward elucidated. "They went to school, West Point, and even the war together. One of the reasons the Colonel transferred to Wyoming was because Mr. Chandler had already started several businesses here."

Henry was savoring the quail. The food was delicious and he had to admit he did miss the finer dining establishments of Washington City and the cook of Willows. After his last swallow he asked, "I am anxious to meet this Colonel."

"He'll be back around two o'clock," Melissa enlightened. "Since Regina was born, he spends at least two hours with her during the noon meal. He is so proud and happy with his little girl."

"He has children then?" Henry inquired with interest. His own biological clock wanting an heir had begun ticking a year ago.

"Although the Colonel plans on many children, he and his wife have just started," Edward chuckled. "Their first daughter was born only two weeks ago."

"And he adores her so," Melissa repeated. "He clucks like a mother hen over Regina. So take your time and enjoy the meal. You have plenty of time before he returns."

Chloe's interest was peaked. She now knew who owned that beautiful mansion. Perhaps she could persuade the Colonel to share his home with her husband. A Colonel should understand the importance of political friends.

An idea also struck Chloe. If indeed the Colonel's wife just had a baby, it would be only the right thing to do but go over and introduce her person and offer congratulations on the birth of their child.

She would take care of that first thing in the morning when her husband was sequestered in the fort's offices with all of his beloved paperwork.

Henry rose early and left for Colonel O'Neal's offices. He met with the Colonel yesterday afternoon and was given office space in the fort headquarters building. He was taken back by the Colonel's exceptional good looks and ruggedly handsome physique. He was already aware the Colonel was a wealthy man. He decided he would have to watch his wife closely. Chloe would be drawn to a rich man and one that was handsome to boot.

Chloe rose mid morning, ate breakfast, and dressed in one of her best and most fashionable traveling gowns. She sent Henry's valet and driver to the stable to obtain their carriage.

At eleven o'clock her carriage arrived at Shamrock Mansion. Chloe had Thomas help her from the carriage and pranced to the front door. Daintily she used the heavy brass doorknocker. In moments a tall elderly man dressed in formal butler suit answered the door.

"Good day, Miss." Tim greeted. "May I be of service?"

Chloe was impressed to say the least. "I am calling on Mrs. O'Neal. Is she available?"

"Indeed, Miss," Tim replied. He opened the door and extended his arm for entry. "I'll take you to Mrs. O'Neal. She is currently in the library reading."

Chloe took in the wealth of the hall. It was large and grand. A total of five windows brought light from the outside. The windows were draped with white brocade and paneled with tatted lace curtains. The furniture was highly polished mahogany in Queen Anne's style. Fresh roses were placed in vases bringing a delicious scent to her nose. Gilded Mirrors reflected light making the hall brighter and fabulous oil paintings of landscapes decorated the walls. A large staircase

ascended to the upper level. Chloe noted a large dining room, study, and parlor as she passed to with Tim to the library.

Tim entered the library and cleared his throat. "Good Morning, Madam. You have a visitor."

Margaret Mary removed her spectacles and looked up to see the beautiful woman enter.

Chloe was surprised to find a middle aged woman sitting there. She heard the Colonel's wife had just had their first baby. Surely this woman was too old for childbirth. "Mrs. O'Neal?" Chloe asked with a questioning look.

"Call me Margaret Mary. And you are?"

"I am Mrs. Henry Pierce. My husband is an envoy from Washington working with Mr. Felix Benton. It is a congressional investigation regarding the Peace Policy," Chloe announced haughtily as if she receive special deference for the fact she was from Washington City and her husband more than a bureaucrat. Chloe took a chair next to the woman.

"You look at me quite strangely, dear," Margaret Mary observed. "Is something amiss?"

"I guess I'm a bit surprised. I was told you had just given birth," Chloe replied bluntly.

Margaret Mary started laughing. "Did you ask for Mrs. O'Neal?"

"Yes I did. Aren't you Mrs. O'Neal?"

"Of course dear, but there are two Mrs. O'Neals in this house. You are looking for my daughter in law. Poor Tim naturally assumed you meant me since everyone that knows my son's wife calls her, Leigh," Margaret Mary explained. "Is Leigh expecting you?"

"No, this is simply a social visit. I thought it proper to introduce myself," Chloe replied a bit miffed at the faux pas.

"Leigh will be down soon. Our new granddaughter, Regina is quite a handful. Leigh is feeding her at the moment," Margaret Mary informed. "Our Leigh loves to coddle her new baby and none of us can when my son is home. He takes over Regina completely. I cannot get over how happy he is with Leigh and their new daughter."

"That is a lovely name, Regina," Chloe replied robotically. The only subjects that were of interest to her were about her.

"Would you like some tea, dear?" Margaret Mary offered.

"I would love some, thank you," Chloe accepted and looked about the library and its magnificent contents.

Margaret Mary rose to speak to Bessie and request tea and refreshment for their guest. Thornton had already told them at dinner last evening that a bureaucrat from Washington City and his wife were staying at the fort.

Chloe was about to rise and look about the room when she observed a woman dressed in simple calico walked in the room carrying a little baby.

Long Face had told Leigh that Margaret Mary would be waiting for her in the library. She was startled to see the beautiful woman dressed impeccably in the current fashion sitting in her library.

"I beg your pardon," Leigh smiled. "I was looking for Margaret Mary."

Chloe raised her brow and remarked pompously, "Do servants address their betters in such a personal manner out here in this wilderness?"

Chapter Forty-Seven

Leigh stepped back in surprise at the insult. Then she realized she was not dressed as the lady of the manor. She preferred her simple clothes because they were comfortable and practical. The calico dress was especially convenient for feeding Regina with its front button down bodice. She had also planned to work in the Rose garden while Thornton was at the fort. Although it had been two weeks since the birth of their daughter, Thornton wouldn't allow her to do much except feed his little girl.

Leigh thought instead of retaliating against the insult, she would try to understand the misconception and explain. "Margaret Mary is my mother in law. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Leigh O'Neal and this is my daughter, Regina."

Chloe's hackles rose. Her plan had been to convince the current mistress to allow her to stay with them in this beautiful mansion and she had just insulted the woman. How was she to know? Didn't the woman realize the perception she projected? How could she manage servants dressed the way she was? She dressed like one of them. "My apologies, it is just the way you are dressed," Chloe stammered. "I was told the Colonel is wealthy and with the mansion and all, of course I assumed, and the butler you have, well it is all so formal and..."

Leigh grinned. The woman was falling all over herself in apology. That made Leigh immediately suspicious as to the purpose of the woman's visit. "It is an understandable error. The butler and other servants Margaret Mary and Brian brought with them from New York. Normally we don't have such formality here in Wyoming. I also find these dresses are more comfortable for nursing and working."

Chloe raised a brow. "Working? Why would you choose to toil when your husband is wealthy?"

"Why I enjoy it," Leigh smiled in reply. It was obvious that here was another vain woman completely into herself and her feminine attractiveness.

"The Colonel doesn't object?"

“Only a little,” Leigh grinned rocking Regina gently in her arms. “I don’t recall seeing you at the fort before. Are you new to the area?”

“Forgive me again. I am Mrs. Henry Price. My husband has been assigned to Fort Fred Steele as an envoy from our Congress to study infractions regarding the Peace Policy. We were invited to dine with Lieutenant O’Brien and his wife yesterday. She told me about Shamrock and that you had recently given birth. I thought it would be polite to introduce myself. My husband and I will be staying here for awhile.”

“Yes, I do recall the Colonel mentioning your husband’s arrival last night at dinner,” Leigh responded. “Welcome to Fort Fred Steele. I hope you find it comfortable.”

Here was Chloe’s first chance and she grabbed it. “Actually, we are quite uncomfortable. The little quarters we were given are far too small and simply do not have even the most simple of conveniences. It is a price one must pay for traveling through the wilds on business for the government.”

“I’ll speak to my husband,” Leigh volunteered. “Surely there must be some officer’s quarters available. Lieutenant O’Brien and Melissa are living in the Colonel’s old bachelor quarters.”

“We were given some old officer’s quarters, but it is hardly what we are accustomed too. You see, like you, I am accustomed to a fine gracious house like yours.”

It was Leigh’s turn to raise a brow. Leigh was hardly accustomed to such luxury. Until she met Martin Chandler she had lived a hand to mouth existence. “I think I missed your name.” She tried to divert the discussion into the real purpose of the woman’s visit.

“You may call me Chloe, Leigh.”

A shocked gasp choked Leigh causing her to cough. “Would your home be located in Virginia and called the Willows?”

“Why yes, how did you know that?” Chloe queried in her own surprise. Perhaps her husband and her own fame had preceded their arrival.

“I’ve heard about you before,” Leigh replied. She wondered if her husband knew his Chloe was sitting right under his nose. He had said he would never cross paths with his first true love again. A tinge of panic ran through Leigh. Chloe was a beautiful as he described. Could Chloe take him away from her?

Margaret Mary returned to the library holding a tray of biscuits followed by Bessie carrying a silver service tray holding a silver tea pot, silver creamer, silver sugar bowl, and several porcelain teacups.

"I see you've made acquaintance with Leigh," Margaret Mary bubbled to Chloe and then turned her attention to the precious bundle Leigh was holding. "Let me hold my granddaughter before that selfish cut of a man, her father, takes possession once again." Margaret Mary reached for Regina and gently cuddled the baby in her arms.

Margaret Mary took the rocking chair facing the library door. Leigh had taken the chair next to her mother in law. Chloe sat in the large wing chair that virtually swallowed her. Someone entering the library could not see her.

Leigh poured the tea. She wondered if Margaret Mary was aware of just who their visitor really was.

Rocking Regina slowly Margaret Mary took her teacup in one hand and sipped delicately. "So tell me Mrs. Pierce, have you any idea how long you will be residing at Fort Steele?"

"Approximately a full year. It seems Mr. Benton intends to make this a thorough investigation. My husband is going to assist him with all legal questions. Henry will also be going through all the ledgers of the agents," Chloe answered. "I was just explaining to Leigh how much more I would enjoy this assignment if I could live as I am usually accustomed. The dreary little hovel they have assigned to us is quite uncomfortable." Chloe waited a polite moment or two and since an offer was not in the making she became bolder to achieve her goal. "I was wondering if you might let us some room in this fine mansion. Surely you must have plenty of room."

Leigh paled. Invite her husband's old lover into her house? She wouldn't be that crazy. It was also obvious to Leigh that Margaret Mary did not know who Chloe was. "I cannot make such an offer without first discussing it with my husband, Chloe."

"Chloe?" Margaret Mary choked. She quickly put her teacup on the table before she spilled hot tea on the baby. Her hands were trembling. "Chloe of the Willows, Virginia?"

Chloe was really surprised this time. These two women both knew she was from the Willows of Virginia. "You know of my plantation? Have you ever visited there? I would recall seeing you."

Margaret Mary tried to control her trembling voice. "No, I've never been there. My son has. He told me about your plantation and you."

"I don't recall ever meeting a Colonel O'Neal at all," Chloe said. She furrowed her brow as if trying to remember a gnawing fact she seemed to have forgotten. "You must forgive my memory. My husband has so many guests he brings to the plantation. I simply cannot remember them all."

"From the stories I have heard I am certain you couldn't remember all of them," Leigh retorted. This woman was as shallow as her husband had said. The twit couldn't even remember she was once engaged to a Captain O'Neal.

"Thank you for your understanding," Chloe bragged. "The Willows is a famous entertainment haven for tired politicians. It seems Henry and I have a party nearly every month."

"You must be a talented hostess," Margaret Mary meowed. Just once and awhile it was all right for a matron to be a bit catty. "Keeping all those men entertained."

"I do have a talent for that," Chloe replied innocently.

"Do tell us more about you dear," Margaret Mary encouraged. "Was the war difficult for you?"

Chloe began with her childhood growing up in the Willows. She had just gotten to the part of the Yankees taking over her father's plantation when all heard the booming male voice.

"Tim told me my little baby girl was with her Grandmamma in the library. Come to Daddy!"

Thornton entered the library and didn't even see Chloe sitting in the chair. He walked to his mother and reached for Regina. "Give her up, Grandmamma. Daddy must have his time with his precious little girl."

Margaret Mary released her treasure. "We have company, dear."

Thornton cuddled his daughter and turned to see the company.

Leigh watched the surprise in his eyes. Those soft blue eyes she loved so dearly turned cold. Those were the eyes of a hardened officer. Those eyes told her of a man that could shut off his feelings. These eyes were of a trained military man without emotion.

Thornton felt his lips move and in the back recesses of his mind he heard the name, "Chloe."

It took Chloe a few moments to remember his face and it all suddenly came back to her. "Why Captain Thorn O'Neal! I declare! This is certainly a surprise." She wondered if he remembered those brief moments they shared together? Did he remember that night of

lovemaking and then their engagement? Did he remember finding her with her future husband General Pattinger? Did he remember that terrible argument? The answer was yes. Chloe could see it in his eyes. They were cold and unfeeling eyes. But why did it matter? That was long ago. He couldn't hold a grudge against her.

"It's Colonel Thornton O'Neal," Leigh corrected. She was feeling strained at the prolonged quiet.

"Of course it is," Chloe gulped. "I knew the Colonel during the war, Mrs. O'Neal."

"You know the Colonel?" Henry queried his wife. He recognized her voice upon entering the room. "Your stride is quite brisk, Colonel O'Neal. I fear I lost you in the kitchen. Your maid, Bessie was kind enough to show me the library."

The library was filled with silence.

Henry sat on the arm of the chair his wife was sitting in. "I see you wouldn't wait to finagle an invitation. Have you obtained a room in the mansion as yet?"

Chloe's cheeks flamed red. How could her husband embarrass her this way?

Henry was watching Thornton as he spoke to his wife. He noticed a tic in his cheek. Thornton's eyes were cold and he was obviously upset. Henry put the information together swiftly in his mind from what he heard when he walked in. "I take it Captain O'Neal was one of your many conquests during the war, dear?"

Chloe stared into her husband's eyes when he looked down upon her. She blinked in disbelief. Never before had Henry upbraided her before company.

"By the look in your eyes I can see we will not find a welcome here," Henry chortled. He returned his gaze to Thornton. "You were one of Chloe's walking wounded I gather."

Leigh couldn't stand the tension. She had to interfere. "That was then and this is now. We are who we are by our experiences. Before you is the man I love and adore. We are happier for our experiences and love each other more deeply for them. We have traveled our own paths. Sometimes these paths may cross. The result being we are better people. Chloe has Willows and Mr. Pierce. I have my Thorn, Regina, my husband's loving parents, and good friends. This is now."

Thornton's eyes misted. His heart beat for his Leigh and his mind praised her for her great wisdom. The shock of seeing Chloe

made him incapable of thinking. Leigh in her wisdom had set things aright.

“My wife is correct. Before you **is** the happiest man in the territory of Wyoming. I have everything I could ever want or hope for. Leigh is my light and day. My daughter is my joy. Together we are happiness. What is past is gone.” Thornton turned to Leigh. “I love you my darling.” He cuddled Regina and sat next to Leigh on the arm of the chair she was seated.

The room cleared of tension.

“Now perhaps you will show me this little girl you have,” Henry requested. “I do believe she is the little angel you brag about? I do so want a child of my own. I am hoping Chloe will have a change of mind upon seeing your little darling.”

“Of course I did want to see your daughter,” Chloe choked out. What on earth was wrong with Henry? He knew she never wanted to have children. It would ruin her figure.

As if Henry read her mind he commented. “You look radiant Mrs. O’Neal. There you have it, Chloe. A woman doesn’t need to lose her figure for childbirth. Beside the fact you are well over your prime at this point and shouldn’t worry about such things any longer.”

Chloe’s color turned crimson. Was her husband out of his mind?

Chapter Forty-Eight

Henry grinned wickedly. After many years of playing the role of a dutiful husband for Washingtonian Society, he finally had his chance to set things right in his marriage. He did love Chloe. His problem was he had given into her whims far too often. It was time for him to have a child and heir. His parents had bullied him about it for the past four years. He had found out about Chloe's sponges three years ago, but could do nothing. Here in a different time and different place, he could finally take his wife to task. Walking in upon the conversation and learning the good Colonel was one of many caught in Chloe's web he grabbed his chance. At last Chloe could be taken in hand.

"Did my wife wheedle an invitation to stay in this fine and proper mansion of yours, Mrs. O'Neal?" Henry asked.

"Mrs. Pierce did suggest the idea, but I explained this is my husband's home and it would be his decision," Leigh responded. "Under the current situation I would defer to his decision completely." Leigh looked up at her husband and squeezed his hand.

"The man who built Shamrock wanted it to be filled with love. That man Martin Chandler was my best friend. He saved me from a great mistake in my life and gave to me my greatest treasure, my wife," Thornton elucidated. "I only wish I could be close to the kind and intelligent man he was. I will open my house to you for your comfort during your stay. I will however insist that both of you defer to my wife. Leigh is the mistress of this home and I will never allow her to be usurped in any of her rules or decisions. Is that clear?"

Henry looked down upon his wife. "Perfectly clear. We do agree, don't we darling?"

"Of course," Chloe stuttered. "I would expect no less if I extended invitation to Willows." She was chiding herself at the moment for turning down Thornton O'Neal's first proposal. He was a strikingly handsome man and obviously very wealthy. If only she had married him ten years ago.

“When your husband and I return to Fort Fred Steele after the noon meal, I’ll send your things and servants here with some of my soldiers,” Thornton announced. “You will be comfortable in the West wing of the mansion in the Blue room. I’ll have Bessie show it to you Chloe after we eat.”

That night Thornton undressed himself and crawled into bed. Leigh was already in bed dressed in a soft cotton nightgown.

Thornton pulled Leigh into his arms and showered her face with lovingly light butterfly kisses. “You aren’t upset with me for allowing Chloe and Henry to stay in the mansion are you?”

“Of course not,” Leigh replied stroking her husband’s hair with her fingertips. “Chloe was long ago. You are mine now and I’ll scratch her eyes out if she tries to get you back.”

“A little jealous I hope,” Thornton teased happily.

“A lot jealous, so don’t lead her on my love,” Leigh warned teasingly. “I may have to set you in your place.”

“I do want to ask you what you thought when you discovered just who Mrs. Pierce was?” Thornton asked.

“I think numerous emotions flooded me. Of course one was fear. That devil of uncertainty within me reared its ugly head. Chloe is beautiful, you had been engaged to her, she loves wealth, and you are beautiful to boot.”

“Handsome,” Thornton corrected with a laugh.

“Handsome. I was fearful, angry that she hurt you, sad that she is so shallow, I guess all sorts of things. What were you thinking when you saw Chloe?” Leigh asked.

“Worry,” Thornton replied.

“Worry?”

“I was worried you might doubt me and my love. I was worried about what she might have said to you. I was worried about her reason for being with you. You are the only one that is so happy they are afraid some evil would come in and destroy it.”

“We are a sad lot,” Leigh teased stroking her husband’s cheek with her finger. “And yet a happy lot. We have each other and now our baby.”

“Sometimes I think Martin was something beyond human and gave everyone he touched a magic of happiness,” Thornton said wistfully.

"I agree. His touch is deep within us and will live as long as we do. I do believe that a power beyond our capacity to understand was with him and that power still protects us. Every bit of our past has been brought to face us and we are stronger for it. Our love grows in strength for it," Leigh stated thoughtfully.

Thornton took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles. "I've spent some time with Henry Pierce. I do believe that Chloe has met her match in a man. If anyone can make her an honest woman, it will be Henry Pierce. He loves her you know."

"She is a beautiful woman," Leigh reminded.

"Not any where as beautiful as you, my sweet," Thornton stated lovingly. "No where near as beautiful as you."

"When Chloe learned how wealthy you are, I think she regretted turning down your proposal," Leigh noticed.

"How fortunate for me she did. If she had learned about my wealth, I would have never found you and I would never have been so happy," Thornton responded pulling Leigh closer into his arms. "Currently I am delightfully happy."

For the next several nights everything in Shamrock Mansion was functioning smoothly. Chloe respected Leigh's authority and was enjoying Margaret Mary's company. Her servants blended in quickly with Bessie, Reuben, Tim, Sean, Glenda, Maureen, Too Many Teeth, Long Face, and Tall Grass.

Chloe of course was shocked when she learned that Long Face was Regina's nanny and Leigh tutored Tall Grass privately so she could attend an Eastern college. Chloe never had experience with Indians. She remained nervous around them not quite understanding anything beyond her small social circle in Virginia and Washington City. It was an emotion near terror when one day she looked up from the sampler she was working on in the parlor to see a tall, fierce looking, scarred Indian looking down at her.

Leigh and Thornton were playing with Regina in the study when they heard a blood-curdling scream from the parlor.

Thornton picked Regina up in his arms. He and Leigh raced to the parlor. There they found Chloe standing behind a chair holding a needle out like a weapon to defend her person from the tall Indian standing in the parlor.

Chief Washakie's head was bent backwards with an open mouth. It was obvious he was laughing at the woman.

When Thornton and Leigh arrived he turned to look at them with a large smile. "You have a guest. She is woman of beauty with small mind. Funny woman."

Thornton stepped forward. "Greetings Chief Washakie. My wife and I have missed you. I hope all is well with you."

Washakie's face turned grim. "It has been difficult for my people. We are hungry and lack funds. We cannot go to the Wind River in safety for the Sioux and Cheyenne there. Food is scarce and our buffalo dwindle."

"Great Chief," Leigh addressed. "You know all you need do is come to us. We will send food and blankets to your people."

"Yes, I come now for your help," Washakie replied. He was not above asking for favors when his people were hurting. He turned his attention to the bundle in Thornton's arms. "I see you make baby. It is good. Let me hold her."

Leigh laughed. "Only a great Chief would be able to convince my husband to release his daughter."

"His love for his child is good. It is what a father is. It was we expect of the white father in Washington. He is not a good father," Washakie said sadly. "The white father does not take care of his children. Instead we do not receive what is promised and his people cheat us."

Thornton reluctantly let Washakie hold his daughter.

Washakie held the girl as a seasoned father would. He kissed the babe's head. "She is pretty like her mother. I pray she will have a great spirit as her mother." He returned the baby to Thornton.

"I am certain she will," Thornton promised cuddling his daughter in his arms once more. "Chief Washakie, this woman is Chloe Pierce. Her husband has been sent with Felix Benton. They are here to expose the cheating of the Shoshone and make things right again with Shoshone and the reservation. It is time we sit and talk. It is time for you to go to the reservation and live there."

"The camp has soldiers, but I still am not trusting the men who cheat my people," Washakie sighed.

"It is good that you came now," Thornton stated. "We will go to Fort Steele and talk to Henry Pierce. He will listen to your complaint. He will talk to Benton. We will work on this to make it right."

Leigh walked to the great chief and laid her hand upon his arm. "You can always come to me if things are bad. Thornton and I will

help you. You must know this. I know Martin would do the same had he lived and you trusted Martin.”

Chief Washakie nodded. “Come Colonel. We will speak with the empty headed woman’s husband. We will talk of moving to the reservation.”

Thornton kissed his daughter on her forehead and reluctantly returned his baby to her mother. He kissed Leigh and whispered, “I’ll be back for dinner. I will invite Chief Washakie.”

Leigh looked up into her husband’s eyes with adoration. “Regina and I will be waiting.”

When the men had left the room Chloe collapsed into the chair. “Lord, he gave me a start. Do you just allow Indians to come and go in your house?”

Leigh cradled her sleeping daughter in her arms. “This is our home. Shamrock is more than a mansion and more than a house. It is an honor to have a noble and great chief visit our home. It would be similar to the President of the United States calling on you at the Willows.”

Chloe raised an eyebrow. “You aren’t serious? Comparing a red savage to the President of the United States?”

Leigh felt sorrow for the shallow woman. How sad not to see and understand greatness in any form it takes. “I am quite serious. Washakie is a great and wise chief. Some day people will come to know it.”

Epilogue

Regina watched her father walk to the gravesite from her mother's window. Leigh was holding her brand new brother, Chandler O'Neal. "Momma, why do you and Papa go to Mr. Chandler's grave? Why did you name my little brother, Chandler?"

Leigh rocked her son gently in her arms. "As long as your Papa and I live we will keep Martin Chandler alive in our minds. There are few people in life that you will ever meet like him, Regina. When you do meet them, you will treasure their memory. The reason your brother is named for him is because your father made that promise to Martin Chandler before you were born."

Rebecca came into the room holding two-year-old Rachel's hand. "Momma, would you read us the book you wrote. We love hearing it. Rachel wants to hear it. You aren't too tired are you Momma?"

"Not at all my darlings," Leigh chuckled. She placed the sleeping Chandler next to her on the bed and took the book. Regina lifted Rachel onto the bed and crawled up behind her. Becky pulled herself onto the bed and listened eagerly as her mother read the story she wrote about a King, a prince, and a princess. The prince just happened to have three daughters.

It was a hot August afternoon when Thornton sat upon the grass that covered his friend's grave. He placed a single rose upon the mound.

"Well my friend, Leigh gave us our Chandler three days ago. I've kept my promise to you. I have three beautiful daughters and a son for you. Regina is six, Rebecca is four, and Rachel is two. You would love the little imps.

By the way, I've retired from the military as a full general. I want to devote my life to my wife and my family. My daughters are smart and beautiful. I'll have a handful when they are older, but Leigh and I are already training them to handle the businesses.

Jefferson and I will be training Chandler to run Shamrock. So you see my friend, you will still be alive in this heaven you created. Leigh and I will see to it that Chandler learns all about you.

♣The Outsider♣

That won't be too hard, Jefferson liked you and guess what? My mother and father moved out here to live in Shamrock with us. Father retired, sold his properties and put everything in funds for the grandchildren. Mother loves doting on the girls and now Chandler. Father is determined to be a rancher and was trained well by Jefferson.

Our children are spoiled to perfection. Just the way you would want it to be.

Remember when I told you about Chloe coming here? I liked her husband and we've remained in contact. He's a Congressman now. He and Chloe have two sons. I can't believe it, but Henry was and is the only man that could make Chloe an honest woman. He even wrote to me that she is taking an interest in motherhood. Apparently she learned a great deal from Leigh, and would you believe it? Long Face?

Tall grass returned from her education in New York. She is settled in the reservation as a teacher in the Indian School there.

Washakie is still a strong chief. I admire him more than he will ever know. He asks for our help very little, but when he does we give him more than he asked for. Washakie doesn't want the Shoshone children to be sent to the Carlisle Indian School. They come back different and forget the beautiful culture of the Shoshone. I can't say I blame him.

That's all I have to say for now, except thank you for creating this heaven on earth. Thank you for my wife. I love Leigh with all that I am. Our love grows stronger with each day. I couldn't have this life if it hadn't been for you. You live in our hearts my friend.

And you are right. My Leigh is not an outsider. She is inside looking out at all that life can be. I am fortunate to share that with her."