



*Legacy of the
Celtic Brooch*

Tempted Fate



KARYNA
DAROSA

The Wild Rose Press

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Welcome to the Legacy of the Celtic Brooch series. The authors of this series were handpicked by our editors at The Wild Rose Press and asked to write a tale using an heirloom Celtic Brooch as the one constant in each story. Beginning in March, 2007 with English Tea Rose and Tarah's Scott's, The Pendulum and ending sometime in early 2008 with Marly Mathews from the Faery Rose Line we will follow this brooch on its mystical journey from Regency England to modern times. It might show up as part of a dowry or be used to pay a ransom. It might be magical; it might simply be a piece of jewelry. Every author was asked to put her own spin on the brooch's appearance and they have all done a beautiful job.

We welcome your comments on this series and hope that you will enjoy reading the stories as much as our authors enjoyed creating them for you.

Enjoy the journey!

RJ and Rhonda

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Dear Reader:

Thank you for purchasing this electronic copy of the first in our "Legacy of the Celtic Brooch" series. Please send the following code to me along with your first and last name to legacyseries@thewildrosepress.com. You will be entered into a drawing for an actual Celtic Brooch. The winner will be drawn at the end of the series, approximately January 2008. Only one entry per person per story is allowed. If you purchase all 13 stories as they come out this year you will have 13 chances to win this authentic Celtic Brooch.

CODE: LG32307

Dedication

To Rod. For reminding me of what's

really important in life.

Chapter 1

Paradise, New Mexico

Late summer 1884

If he never heard the name *Emma Sarris* again in his life, it wouldn't be too soon.

The grandfather clock chimed another hour in the Sarris parlor. From a wing chair across the way, Luke Reinhardt glanced at it. He blinked to make sure that, yes, the little hand was indeed pointing to the number seven and pinched the space between his eyes. His head hurt. Taking the last sip of his brandy, he reflected on the importance of this meeting. Unfortunately, Mayor Reginald Sarris didn't seem to share the sentiment. He'd much rather talk about his daughter and her upcoming nuptials with Calvin—or was it Melvin—Holloway, the banker's son.

Luke contemplated the bespectacled mayor seated opposite him in a matching chair. He was a tall, attractive man. His long-limbed frame carried the plaid frock suit he wore with grace and comfort. Age had been frugal with Sarris. At sixty, it had cost the man little more than some gray hairs and a few laugh lines.

"My Emma hasn't the slightest idea. She'll be most surprised."

My Emma. The mayor pronounced it as if it were one word. At first, Luke thought it a peculiar name. It was only after Sarris displayed Emma's finishing school certificate—the first of many he would be privy to in the scope of an hour—that he realized his mistake.

Luke leaned forward, trying his best to appear interested in what Sarris said. Every so often, he would steal a glance at the forgotten document on the man's lap. Without the mayor's approval, Southern Pacific Railroad would have to bypass Paradise to connect to the Santa Fe Railway. As assistant chief engineer, Luke had performed a thorough survey of the area. Circumventing the town would require numerous miles of additional track, not to mention the tunnels needed to get through the mountain ranges in between. The cost of construction would more than double, and he simply didn't have the budget for it. For Luke, today's meeting had just one goal: to secure the mayor's signature on The Rights to Build contract.

Sarris seemed to hold his town's interests above his own. A rarity among politicians if Luke ever met one, and in his line of work, he'd met plenty. It took months of negotiation before the man finally agreed to a formal meeting. He'd spent considerable time reviewing the contract upon Luke's arrival and agreed, albeit verbally, to the terms it set forth. But almost two hours later, it remained on the mayor's lap. Unsigned.

"What do you think, Luke? You don't mind if I call you by your Christian name, do you?"

The question pulled Luke from his reverie. He set his empty glass on the parlor table, next to the mayor's fountain pen and inkwell. "Not at all."

"So what do you think?"

Luke straightened in his seat. He met the man's dark, steady gaze. "I'm sorry, sir, I wasn't paying attention."

With a chuckle, Sarris gathered the papers on his lap and pushed the wire-rimmed spectacles up the bridge of his long, patrician nose. "Oh, it wasn't important. I like you, Luke," he said. "You're honest, and that's something I admire in a man."

A glimmer of hope sparked in Luke's chest when Sarris reached for the pen. "Thank you."

"I suppose I do tend to go off when it comes to my Emma." Dipping the point in the inkwell, he signed the first page.

Luke expelled a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "That's all right."

"I like to know the people I do business with." Flipping to the next page, Sarris gave him a wide grin. "I've told you so much about myself. Now, I'd like to know a little about you. Tell me, was your father an engineer as well?"

Luke stiffened and raised his guard. He'd learned the hard way that his background was a topic best avoided. Prejudice had revealed her cruel, haggard face when he was just a boy. He could still smell the stench of horse manure and rotten eggs, how it lingered on his skin for days, even after his mother had scrubbed him raw. But he had to indulge Sarris a bit. At least until the mayor signed every damn page of that contract. Filtering all emotion from his voice, he said, "No. From what my mother told me, he was a mountain man. He passed on when I was little."

The mayor looked at him, his expression somber. "I'm sorry."

Luke shrugged. "I was too young to remember."

"So it was just you and your mother after that?" Sarris signed the subsequent pages.

Three down. One to go. "No. My mother comes from a large family," Luke replied. "We lived with them."

"Whereabouts?"

"Kansas."

The mayor's pen stopped mid-stroke. He looked at Luke. Beneath his walrus mustache, the corners of his mouth kicked up with a smile. "You don't say? My sister lives in Kansas City. She recently widowed, so I visit as often as I can. What part are you from?"

Luke prayed Sarris wasn't familiar with the area. "Franklin County."

The mayor frowned, inclined his head. "Franklin County? Only thing I know of out there is that Indian reserve."

So much for the power of prayer.

"Chippewa and Munseed Reservation," Luke said, a mixture of pride and defiance bled into his tone. "My mother's Chippewa."

A charged silence inhabited the room. For once, the mayor seemed at a loss for words. He sat immobile, jaw cracked open as if on flaccid hinges, dark eyes scouring every inch of Luke's face.

Any ordinary man would've been uncomfortable under such scrutiny. Luke was used to it. The mayor simply searched for a hint of the Red Man, probably wondered how he'd missed it all this time. It's what most people did once they found out. Afterward, well, in his twenty-six years, Luke had learned that was a bit harder to predict.

"Are you all right, Mayor?"

Sarris blinked once, twice, as if emerging from a trance. "Y-yes," he said. "It's just that you don't ... I mean..." he chuckled and scratched his head, "...well, you must have favored your father."

His laughter was a potent elixir. Tension dissipated from the room like water through a sifter. Luke felt his stomach unfurl. "So I've been told."

The mayor studied him a second longer. Luke got the feeling the man wanted to say something, but just didn't know how.

"Y-yes, very well ... where were we..."

Sarris shifted his attention to the contract. He was about to sign the last page when a tall, dark-haired woman appeared at the domed aperture that connected the parlor to the hall.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Reginald. I thought you were done." Her green taffeta dress made a whooshing sound as she walked into the room.

"Almost, dear." Sarris put the papers aside. He stood and placed an arm around her waist. Looking at Luke he said, "This is my wife, Margaret."

About a decade younger than her husband, Margaret Sarris was a handsome woman with a friendly smile that reached her large, coffee-colored eyes.

Luke rose from his seat and nodded. "Ma'am."

"This is Mr. Luke Reinhardt, dear," Sarris said.

"Oh, you're the engineer?" She gave Luke a thorough perusal and smiled as if she approved of him. "A pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure's all mine, Ma'am."

Her eyes slid to the grandfather clock in the corner. She sighed. "It's almost suppertime, Reginald."

"I know," the mayor said. "We're just finishing up."

Folding her hands in front of her, she gave Luke a sympathizing look. "My husband tends to lose track of time," she said. "You're welcome to join us for supper."

"You're too kind, ma'am," he said, never letting his smile falter. He just wanted that signed contract so he could be on his way. "But I'm fine, thank you."

"Mother, I've been looking all over for you."

Luke stared at the russet-haired beauty who entered the room. It took him a moment to catch his breath. His blood ran hot, then cold, then hot again. She was an apparition, with alabaster skin that glowed like polished china, a bow-shaped mouth, and a button nose. Soft curls, fugitives of her loose pompadour, fringed a perfect, heart-shaped face. Her indigo, bustled dress accentuated her perfectly proportioned frame. Next to her swarthy parents, she kindled like a beacon in a sea storm.

The mayor placed both hands on her delicate shoulders. "And this..." his voice dropped a pitch, as if in reverence, "...is my Emma."

She looked at Luke through wide, doe-like eyes, flecks of gold and amber flickered in their emerald depths. "Hello."

The soft sound of her voice, like a whisper of wind over a lily field, broke the spell rendering Luke motionless.

"Hello," he said.

Mrs. Sarris put an arm around her daughter. "Come, my darling. Your father has business to tend to." She looked at Luke. "It was very nice meeting you, Mr. Reinhardt."

He nodded at the women as they departed. "Likewise."

Before rounding the corner, Emma glimpsed at him over her shoulder and smiled. With his heart drumming an unsteady beat, he smiled back.

"Margaret's right," the mayor said.

Luke looked at him, uncertain as to what he meant. "Pardon?"

"I've lost all track of time," he said with a shake of his head. After signing the last page, he handed Luke the contract. "Here you go. I'm sorry to have kept you as long as I did."

Luke collected his valise off the floor and placed the document inside. "That's quite all right, sir. I'll wire you if I need anything further."

With a nod, Sarris escorted him to the front door. "I appreciate your patience, Luke. You have a good evening." He grabbed the bowler hat off the coat rack by the entryway and gave it to Luke.

"Likewise, Mayor, thank you."

Luke put his hat on and descended the porch steps. He strode to his copper bay stallion, tethered to a hitching post just beyond the white picket fence. Once in the saddle, he felt compelled to look at the house over his shoulder. The dual-

story Queen Anne seemed to hunker in the encroaching darkness like a sulking giant. On the front gable, the third floor window glowed with soft candlelight, as did the two parlor windows facing the wraparound porch. He wondered which of the numerous rooms belonged to Emma Sarris.

The thought both surprised and angered him. *He had no right thinking of a woman engaged to another man.*

Chapter 2

From her bedroom window, Emma watched Luke Reinhardt disappear around a bend. *What a striking man.* As in the parlor, she found it difficult to keep from staring at him. His eyes were a blue so crystalline they looked almost white. A loud contrast to his hair, shiny and black as a crow's wings, which he wore rather long and combed back. She found everything about the man, his height, the perfect, long, V-symmetry of his body, his features carved by a rugged hand, quite disconcerting.

"Darling..." Her mother called from behind her, "...what's so interesting out there?"

Emma turned. "Nothing."

Her mother sat in a chaise lounge at the foot of Emma's sleigh bed, a wooden sewing box beside her. On her lap, the satin wedding gown she hemmed shimmered like molten gold beneath the oil lamp's soft light. She snipped a wayward thread with her scissors and held it up. "All done, darling. I told you Mother would fix it."

Emma stared at what would soon be her wedding dress. It was almond colored, with a floor-length skirt and ruffled train. Pearls trimmed the scooped neckline of the fitted bodice and the cuffs of its long sleeves. A shudder rippled through her.

"It's not just the skirt, Mother." Emma cleared her throat. "The waist needs to be let in."

With a sigh, her mother laid the dress upon the mattress and smoothed out the wrinkles with a tender hand. "I never expected my bridal gown to fit you perfectly. You're half the

size I was on my wedding day. But you haven't tried it on since I last altered it." Her voice dropped a stricken octave.

"Don't you like it?"

"Of course. It's beautiful."

Her mother set the sewing box on the floor and patted the empty spot it had occupied on the chaise. "Come, darling. Tell me what's bothering you."

Emma sat down and met her soft, even gaze. "I don't know. I suppose I'm just nervous."

How could she make her mother understand her emotional turmoil? She was engaged to Calvin Holloway, the most sought after bachelor in Paradise. He was smart, handsome, and wealthy. She should be the happiest person in the world. Her parents certainly were, and Emma could never let them down. It was the least she could do. After all, they loved her enough to raise her as their own.

"Well, that's perfectly natural," her mother said. "I was a wreck before I married Reginald. But it'll pass, you'll see."

"I just don't know if I'm ready to marry." Emma blurted the words without thinking. She stared at her mother, her heart struggling to squeeze its way back down her throat. Would she be disappointed in her now?

A worry line creased the smooth space between her mother's eyebrows. "You're nineteen years old, Emma. You must think of your future. I already had your brother at your age."

Emma munched on her bottom lip. "How can I think of starting my own family when I don't even know who my real family is?"

"We are your family, my darling." Her mother's voice held both conviction and sadness. A heartbreaking mix. "We chose you out of all those children at the orphanage. You were so beautiful with your fiery curls."

Emma rubbed a nonexistent spot on her skirt. Her voice was thick with emotion she tried to keep at bay. "I just want to know why they gave me up. What was so wrong with me, that they didn't want me?"

"Absolutely nothing." Her mother took her hand. "I always wanted a daughter, don't you see? After the complications with your brother's labor ... after the surgeons told me I'd never have another child, I wanted to die." Her dark eyes misted with unshed tears. "I was never going to have the perfect, little girl I'd always wanted. Then, Reginald convinced me to adopt. I really didn't want to ... until I saw you." Her face brightened. "I realized it was meant to be."

Emma rested her head against her mother's bosom, concentrating on the rhythmic tempo of her heart. It was a balm on her ragged nerves. There was a knock at her door, and she left the comfort of her mother's embrace with some reluctance.

"Come in."

"Supper's ready," her father said, poking his head inside.

"We'll be right down, dear," her mother said.

"William and I will be waiting." He winked at Emma before closing the door.

"I don't know about you..." Her mother grabbed her sewing box, "...but I'm famished."

Emma nodded. "So am I."

With sewing kit in hand, her mother strode to the door. "I'm going to freshen up first, darling. Let your father and brother know I won't be long."

"All right." Her provisional smile died the moment she was alone. Emma stood and walked to the cherry vanity on the opposite side of the room. Adjusting its beveled mirror, she stared at her reflection. Copper ringlets framed a small face with big green eyes. *If only I looked more like them.* Her adoptive family was of Greek descent, and their Mediterranean heritage was evident in their smooth, olive complexion, dark hair, and strong, chiseled features. Next to them, Emma stood out like a rabbit in a wolf's den. She figured that was the reason her parents told her she was adopted as soon as she was old enough to understand what it meant.

Emma laid a hand on the wooden jewelry box sitting below the mirror and closed her eyes. She knew every detail, every contour, of the silver brooch inside: the decorative swirled engraving along the perimeter of its open ring design, the long, hinged pin dissecting its center down to the smooth pointed edge.

She drew back the lid and stared at her only connection to the parents who had abandoned her. She had been just three years old, and the memories, what few she had, deteriorated through the years. But the brooch remained. Durable and resplendent, it was the only tangible link to her past, to who she was. Her adoptive mother once had the brooch appraised. It turned out to be quite valuable, despite the scratch it bore on the back. Emma was certain it would prove indispensable

in helping locate her real family. Although, she wasn't ready to take that step just yet. She was afraid. Afraid of the answers to all those questions that, up until now, she could rationalize to ease the hurt. Why had they given her up? Had they missed her since, or worried about her at all? Even worse, what if she discovered she had siblings, whom they hadn't abandoned like a stray who overstayed her welcome? She slammed the lid shut.

From outside her bedroom door, the soft, distinct sound of her mother's footsteps echoed. Emma smoothed her pompadour with both hands, and turned toward the door. With the knob in hand, she slid a glance at the jewelry box over her shoulder, then stepped into the hall.

"Oh, I thought you were already at the table," her mother said when Emma reached her at the bottom.

"I needed to freshen up a bit, too."

Her mother gave her a loving grin. "You don't need any extra help. Wait until you get to be my age."

Together, they entered the formal dining room where the maid, Molly Jones, a pretty mulatto with skin that reminded Emma of the smoothest caramel and sparkling hazel eyes, placed a tray of warm biscuits on the tabletop. White damask linen covered the rectangular oak table, and a bouquet of hand picked yellow and pink roses provided a splash of color in the center. Emma took her seat, her mouth watering from the buttery smell the biscuits wafted her way.

"It's about time," her brother, William, said as he buttered a flaky roll.

Taking her own seat, her mother gave him an affectionate slap on the shoulder. "Oh hush, you."

As customary, Emma's father sat at the head of the table, her mother to his right. She and William sat to his left, with her brother occupying the immediate seat beside their father. Tall and handsome, at twenty-one, William was a young replica of their father. They shared the same deep-set eyes, long, straight nose, and square jaw. But the similarities ended there. Emma had yet to meet a father and son so ... at odds with one another.

"Everything looks delicious, Molly," her father said to the woman as she placed a roasted chicken breast on his plate. "As always, you've done a wonderful job."

"Much obliged, Mayor." There was a hint of pride in her voice. She turned to Emma next. "Miss Emma, some green beans with your chicken?"

Emma looked at the silver serving dish Molly held out to her. She took a delicate whiff of the vegetables. "Are they sautéed?"

"Oh, good Lord!" her brother interjected with a roll of his eyes.

"William Reginald Sarris," her mother said in a clipped tone. "You mind your manners at the table."

"What did I do now?"

His father shot him a warning look. "Mind your mother, William."

"She just told me to mind my manners." William brought a forkful of chicken to his mouth. "So, what you're saying is that I should mind my mother who's telling me to mind my

manners," he said between bites. "Doesn't that, in essence, mean the same thing?"

"Must you be so argumentative?" His father's face clouded with frustration.

William gave him an innocent look. "I thought you wanted me to be a lawyer? Well, that's what they teach me at law school."

Mealtimes were never a quiet affair when Emma's brother was home from college. For as long as she could recall, he'd always derived great pleasure from antagonizing their parents, in particular, their father. Emma sought to ease the escalating tension in the room. "Yes, Molly, I would love some green beans, thank you."

After serving everyone, Molly disappeared through the swinging door that led to the kitchen. As customary, Emma's mother began the dinnertime conversation.

"Are you looking forward to going back to school next week?" she asked William.

Emma braced herself for his reply, which could range from amiable to churlish without preamble or provocation. She slid a glance toward her brother, trying to gauge his mood. It was difficult to tell with him. To her relief, he merely nodded.

Her mother seemed to take that as her cue to move on. Looking at her husband, she asked, "And how was your day, dear?"

"It went wonderfully," he said with a broad, satisfied grin. "I got those clauses added to the contract."

"So you signed it?" William asked, pouring himself a glass of water.

"That's right, son. I don't want Paradise to be left in the dust. I've seen it happen before. We have to think of the future."

Emma's mother shook her head. "Well, you certainly kept that poor man here long enough."

"Luke?" Her father blotted his mustache with a damask serviette. "Smart young man. Dedicated, honest..."

Something fluttered in Emma's stomach. A piece of chicken caught in her throat. She reached for her glass and washed it down with several gulps of water.

"Assistant chief engineer is he?" her mother remarked. "He seems rather young for such a prestigious charge."

"I thought so as well," her father said. "But he's sharp as a whip, and devoted. I got a good feeling about him."

William leaned toward Emma and whispered in her ear, "Can he walk on water, too?"

She muffled her laugh behind her napkin and gave him a good, swift kick beneath the table.

"Something quite interesting about that young man," her father said to everyone. "His mother's Indian."

Emma's fork stopped midway to her mouth. "Indian?"

"Well, I certainly never would've guessed it looking at him," her mother said, her surprise evident in her wide, round gaze.

William erupted with laughter. "A breed?" he managed between broken chuckles. "The assistant chief engineer of Southern Pacific Railroad is a ... a ... *breed*?"

He used the term with such derision that Emma cringed. "I don't see why that should be held against him," she said. "He had no say in choosing his parents."

"Emma's right." A scowl darkened her father's face as he glared at William. "Your mother and I have never condoned bigotry, and we're not going to start now."

"We are all equal in the eyes of the Lord," her mother chimed in.

Pushing his chair back, William rose and tossed his napkin on his half-eaten plate.

"Where do you think you're going, young man?" Her father said to her brother's departing back. "You've not been excused."

"I'm excusing myself, Father," William said over his shoulder. "I've had all the lecturing I can take for one evening."

"You are not to go near the gentleman's club, you hear me?" Emma's father shouted.

There was no reply except for the sound of the front door as it slammed shut. A thick, heavy silence settled over the dinner table. Emma stared at her food, chauffeuring it around her plate with her fork.

"He's been gambling at the club every night." Her father removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes with the pads of his thumb and middle finger. "I'm sick of covering his losses. Where did we go wrong with that boy?" He looked at his wife. "Were we too indulgent?"

"No," she said. "We've reared both our children equally, and just look at our Emma."

"Yes, you make a good point, dear."

Emma wished her parents didn't talk about her as if she weren't sitting in the same room. She smiled at them, but kept quiet.

There was an air of nostalgia in her mother's voice. "To think our baby girl will be leaving us very soon to start her own family, Reginald."

A phantom hand squeezed Emma's throat. She rose from her seat. "I'm finished, Mother. May I be excused?"

"You've barely eaten," her mother said, inspecting Emma's plate.

"You didn't have much of an appetite while we were engaged, either." Her father reached for her mother's hand. "Remember, dear?"

Her mother blushed and giggled in a way that hinted at the innocent girl she once was. The loving way she looked at her husband stilled Emma's breath. Would she ever look at Calvin that way? *Perhaps with time...*

Chapter 3

The Paradise Gentleman's Club was a dual story brick building on the corner of Maple Avenue, a block away from Luke's hotel. It wasn't open to the public. A man could only enter through its double oak doors if he was one of the town's elite, or with a formal invite. Luke held the latter, compliments of Mayor Sarris.

Due to their prolonged meeting, Luke had missed the stage out of Paradise. The next one wasn't scheduled to arrive until Friday. That gave him two days to spare. At the post office, he'd wired his boss in San Francisco about the delay and bumped into the mayor on his way out. Sarris was so remorseful upon hearing Luke's predicament that he insisted on paying his additional hotel charges, and gave him a written invitation to the Gentleman's Club. Luke had frequented enough of the privileged male enclaves in San Francisco to know that oftentimes wealth and class were mutually exclusive.

Paradise was proving no exception.

"Are you in or out? Dammit, Calvin, stop wasting our time." William Sarris pounded a strong fist on the tabletop.

Sitting at the round, poker table, Luke reached for the half-empty whiskey bottle before it tipped over. He looked at the inebriated young man. No wonder Sarris hadn't mentioned anything about a son.

Calvin Holloway left his cards facedown on the table. "Gentlemen, I believe I am out," he announced, rising from his seat. He waved a thin hand in the air. "Best of luck to you

all." He nodded at the men gathered at the table and turned on his heel.

Luke watched him disappear into the adjacent billiard room. A pasty-skinned, slender fellow with pin straight blond hair and gray eyes. Despite the expensive suit and regal airs, there was nothing particularly compelling about Calvin Holloway. Luke tried to imagine the man beside his bride-to-be. What an odd pair those two would make. But a smart man knows when to fold. Luke had to give him that much.

"Sore loser," William said.

The words tumbled from his mouth in a fog of whiskey that reached Luke across the table. He averted his face. The mayor's son was as bad a drunk as he was a poker player. He'd lost five consecutive hands in a row. The last three to Luke. All out of gold coins, his current ante consisted of a silver brooch and gold pocket watch. The latter could very well be his. The brooch, however, was clearly feminine.

"I take it this is your last hand, William?"

The question came from the silver-bearded Dr. Zachary Mortimer sitting beside Luke.

William's dark eyes, so like his father's down to the thick, almost feminine lashes, settled on the brooch. "Yes."

"It's your turn," Dr. Mortimer reminded him.

"I know," William said. An insolent grin cracked along his face as he splayed his cards on the table. "Feast your eyes on this lovely hand, gentlemen."

Three kings and a pair of threes. *A full house*. The mayor's son finally got a good hand, Luke thought. But not quite good enough.

Dr. Mortimer blinked with marked surprise. "Well, you got me, my boy," he said with a chuckle. "I fold."

William was already reaching for the winnings in the center, when Luke placed a hand over the coveted items. "Not so fast, Mr. Sarris." He displayed his cards. Four queens and a ten. "Four of a kind. That beats your full house."

The mayor's son stared at Luke's cards with mouth ajar. His face took on a sickly pallor. Luke collected the brooch, pocket watch, and gold coins amassed on the tabletop. With a smile, he rose from his chair and grabbed his sac coat draped over the back. "Gentlemen, I've a stage to catch tomorrow," he said, shrugging into his jacket. "It's been a pleasure."

William looked at him. "You have to give me a chance to win it back."

Luke wasn't certain which of the two items he meant. "I do apologize, Mr. Sarris, but I must be going. Good evening, gentlemen." With a departing nod, he headed toward the corridor leading to the front entrance.

"I have to win it back!"

The desperation in William's voice almost caused Luke pause. He didn't know whom he pitied more, the son, or the father. Choosing not to acknowledge him, he continued down the hall.

"I'm talking to you, breed."

A hush spread over the room like a sudden plague. Time seemed to stand still for Luke. He felt his heart quicken, his blood roared in his ears, his curled fists tingled with the promise of violence.

"William! You forget yourself."

Dr. Mortimer's voice prompted Luke to action. He pulled his knife from his waistband, turned and threw it in a single fluid movement. His aim was accurate, calculated in some primitive part of his mind, perfected by years of practice. The blade's tip pinned William's arm to the tabletop by his sleeve.

Luke walked up to him with slow, deliberate steps. "You're drunk, Mr. Sarris," he told him. A vein drummed an agitated pulse at the young man's throat. "That is the only reason I didn't skewer you through the heart. I suggest you go home and sleep it off."

Retrieving his knife, he sheathed it, and walked out of the room amid a humming silence he feared would choke him. Outside, the evening air was a welcome reprieve. He leaned against the boardwalk's wooden post and took a long, deep breath.

"Impressive."

Luke turned at the unexpected voice. Puffing on a cigar, Calvin Holloway approached him. "You're quite good with that knife."

Luke said nothing. Expecting an ambush, he scanned the deserted street. He calculated his next move.

Calvin seemed to perceive his unease. He chuckled. "You can relax, Mr. Reinhardt. I am not as..." his gray eyes sized Luke up, "...*impetuous* as Mr. Sarris, Jr. You have the build of a pugilist in his prime, sir, and I am, shall we say, opposed to violence of any sort."

"Is there something you want?"

Calvin's eyes studied him. "No. I always come out here to think." He finally looked away. "You know he is to be my brother-in-law."

He said it as if he were resigned to that fact. Emma's image floated in Luke's mind, so perfect, so unattainable.

Clenching his jaw, he stepped onto the street. "My condolences."

"Indeed," Calvin said.

His laughter trailed Luke all the way back to the hotel.

Chapter 4

"Isn't it grand, my dear?"

From beneath her parasol, Emma stared at the lavender Italianate-style house. It was a massive, two-story rectangular structure occupying the entire corner. Plum colored gingerbread trimmed the body, as well as the wraparound porch and square cupola.

"It's quite ... big," she said.

"It's more than just grand, Calvin," her mother said, a hand on her heart. "It's absolutely gorgeous. Reginald told me about it, but this is more than I could've ever imagined."

Calvin chuckled as he reached for Emma's gloved hand. He looped it around his elbow. "Only the best will do for my future wife."

He patted her hand as if she were a child. Emma bristled, but remained quiet as they strolled down the street toward his fringe-top surrey.

"You're very quiet this morning, dear," he said, looking at her. "Are you all right?"

Emma returned his stare. He was so ... *perfect*. His expensive, tailor-made walking suit, his spit-shine shoes, not a single thread of blond hair misplaced. Calvin was the quintessential gentleman. Yet, there was nothing that drew her, nothing that stirred her emotions. "It's this heat," she said. "And the sun. I'm a bit fatigued."

"Yes, my darling," her mother agreed. "We shouldn't be out in this dreadful heat for too long. You know how sensitive

you are to the sun." She looked at Calvin. "We should head back home."

"Of course."

Calvin assisted them into his surrey. Emma was grateful the ride was short, and that her mother kept Calvin engaged in conversation the entire way. Once home, he escorted them to the front door.

"Brunch tomorrow as well?" he asked Emma.

"Most certainly."

Must her mother always answer for her? "That would be lovely," Emma said, managing a smile.

"Wonderful. Then I shall see you two ladies bright and early tomorrow," he said as he descended the porch steps.

"I'm going to change into something more comfortable," Emma said to her mother.

"That's a good idea, darling."

As her mother waved Calvin farewell from the porch, Emma hurried to her room. Inside, she changed from her bustled dress into a white, short-sleeved shirtwaist with a scooped neckline and navy ruffled skirt. At the vanity, she powdered her nose and brushed her unruly curls into submission. Reaching for the hairpins she kept in her jewelry box, she noticed its top compartment.

Empty.

A cold, wet finger trailed down her spine. *Where is it?* Emma took the jewelry box and upended it on her bed. She spread all of its contents out on the mattress.

Nothing. The brooch wasn't there. She ran out of her room. "Mother! Mother!"

From the opposite end of the hall, her mother rushed toward her. "What is it, my darling?"

"It's gone." Emma tried to keep the panic from spilling into her voice.

"What is?"

"My brooch. It's gone."

"Gone?" Her mother frowned. "Are you sure you didn't misplace it?"

"No," Emma insisted with a shake of her head. "I always keep it in my jewelry box. *Always*."

"Come. Let us have a look,"

Back in her room, Emma watched as her mother grabbed the jewelry box tipped over upon the mattress. "When was the last time you saw it, darling? I know you wore it to church last Sunday."

"Yes, and I put it right back in its place. I know because I..." She chewed her bottom lip. How could she explain what she was doing with it just two days ago? "...I cleaned it a couple of days ago, and I put it right back. I am certain of it."

An expression Emma had never seen before darkened her mother's face. "Come, darling. We'll get to the bottom of this."

Anticipation mauled Emma's insides as she followed her mother to William's room. Without knocking, her mother opened the door and marched inside.

"William," she said, both hands on her hips. "Emma is missing her brooch. Her *silver* brooch. What do you know of this?"

At his writing desk, William's startled gaze shifted from his mother to his sister. "I'm going to win it back," he said to Emma. "I promise."

"Gambling again were you?" Her mother seethed. "How dare you take your sister's brooch?"

"How could you, William?" Emma's voice cracked with emotion. "You had no right."

"Don't worry, Emma," he said. "I'm going to get it back."

"And just whom did you lose it to?" her mother demanded.

He swallowed hard. "Reinhardt." He looked at Emma, his tone as desolate as a barren field. "I'm sorry."

"I will never forgive you for this," she said. Fearing she'd lose her threadbare composure, Emma hurried from the room.

"Darling," her mother called behind her. "Wait."

She stopped and faced her mother. "I have to get it back."

"I know, darling. But just calm down, and wait until your father gets home. He has a good relationship with Mr. Reinhardt. He'll get your brooch back."

Emma looked at her mother. Mr. Reinhardt was going to give it back all right. And she wasn't going to wait around for her father, either. "All right."

"I knew you'd understand," her mother said. She brought a hand to Emma's cheek. "Oh darling, you're all flushed. Go get some rest. Your father will take care of everything, you'll see."

Emma nodded, even though resting was the last thing on her mind. She knew exactly where Mr. Reinhardt was staying, thanks to her father who continually talked about the man.

Returning to her room, she grabbed her reticule off the dresser and left the house without making a sound.

The Grand Hotel was a four-story, clapboard building on Main Street. As Emma approached it, she saw the red stagecoach and four-horse team by the entrance. The driver, a stout, beefy man wearing gloves and a greatcoat, tossed a pair of carpetbags into the back boot. Sitting inside, a heavysset, old woman with an ostrich plumed hat struggled to unroll the black leather curtain over her window. Emma saw Mr. Reinhardt emerge from the hotel entrance. It was difficult *not* to notice a man like him, she thought. His black duster flapped around his long, denim-clad legs; the Stetson he wore cast a shadow over the upper half of his face. Emma felt her pulse quicken. Gone was the gentleman in the expensive sac suit she'd met earlier in the week. The man handing the driver his leather valise looked as if he'd just stepped out of a wanted poster. He was part beauty, part beast. A thrill rippled through her.

Wiping her clammy palms on her skirt, she walked up to him. "Mr. Reinhardt?"

He turned. Beneath the wide brim of his hat, crystalline, azure eyes assessed her. "Miss Sarris."

The fact that he remembered her made her feel a little giddy. Sweat trickled down the valley of her spine. "Do you have a moment?"

One corner of his mouth lifted. "Doesn't appear that way, now does it?"

Was he mocking her? Emma struggled to control her flaring temper. She couldn't very well get her brooch back if

she angered him. "No, it does not. But it won't take very long. Just a word, please." She gave him the sweetest smile she could manage.

He contemplated her for a quiet moment, and Emma found it difficult to hold his gaze. A handsome devil is what her mother had recently called him. She had fallen short in her appraisal.

"Very well," he said.

Emma cleared her throat. "You have something of mine, sir. Something that is very dear to me."

"I can't imagine that I do, Miss Sarris," he said, a sparkle in his eyes.

"You do, sir. It's a silver brooch ... William took it from me without my knowledge or consent. He had no right to gamble it away."

"That is something you need to take up with your brother, then." There was a menacing quality behind his ice-blue gaze. Emma didn't understand the change in him.

"I already have, Mr. Reinhardt. That is why I'm here. I need you to return it to me. I'll pay you whatever sum you deem just."

"Miss Sarris, keep your money. Your brother gambled and lost. That is the end of it."

He entered the stage and closed the door behind him. Emma remained staring at the empty space he'd occupied. He'd just shrugged her off as he would an annoying gnat. It took a moment for her initial shock to convert to anger. With fists curled, she marched to the stage and opened the door. The woman with the plumed hat gave her an irritated look.

Beside her, a wiry man close to her father's age, wiped sweat from his reddened neck. Emma realized the woman's uncompromising rotundity had blocked him from view earlier. Mr. Reinhardt sat on the leather-upholstered seat facing the disparate couple. Apparently engrossed by the newspaper in his hand, he failed to glance in Emma's direction.

"Mr. Reinhardt, I assure you, you will be adequately compensated."

He raised the paper higher to conceal his face. "It's not for sale, Miss Sarris."

"Young lady, we need to be going," the old woman said with a cluck of her tongue.

Nibbling her bottom lip, Emma saw the driver emerge from the hotel and climb into the driver's seat. Panic mushroomed in her belly. In a matter of minutes, her brooch would be lost to her. She couldn't just stand there and do nothing. Without a second thought, she ran to the front of the coach. "Sir, I'll just be a moment," she told the driver.

"You gettin' on little lady?" he asked between bites of tobacco.

Emma nodded and dashed into the hotel. The clerk at the counter informed her the stage was headed to Santa Fe. That gave her plenty of time to talk Mr. Reinhardt into returning her brooch. After purchasing roundtrip tickets, she ran back outside.

The driver looked at her over his shoulder. "No bags?"

"No."

Gathering her flouncing skirts, she entered the stagecoach and took a seat beside Mr. Reinhardt.

"Miss Sarris, what do you think you're doing?" he asked, a mixture of surprise and amusement glimmered in his blue eyes.

"What does it look like, sir?" Emma arranged her skirts, ran a hand over her hair. "I will not leave your side, Mr. Reinhardt, until you return what belongs to me."

Chapter 5

She couldn't be serious. Luke stared at Emma. "Miss Sarris, this stage is headed to Santa Fe. I suggest you get off now."

She lifted her button nose. "Return what belongs to me and I will."

"It doesn't *belong* to you any longer." He battled the urge to shake some sense into her.

The stage lurched into motion and she toppled against him. As gently as he could, he grabbed hold of her upper arms and pushed her back. She was lighter than a tree leaf.

She swatted his hands away. "What could you possibly want with it?"

Nothing. Luke met her angry gaze. He was just having some fun with her. Since the brooch obviously meant a great deal to Emma, he knew the mayor would wire him about it without a moment's hesitation. Of course, he planned to return it. But having her close, her green eyes alight with an inner fire proved difficult to resist. That smile she'd given him earlier had suspended his heartbeat on a string. Perhaps he'd wanted an excuse to keep her around.

"It's the principle of it all, Miss Sarris."

She wrinkled her brow. "Principle? Don't be absurd, Mr. Reinhardt. Whatever my brother owes you, my father will cover."

He smirked. "Hence, why your brother will never change his ways."

"Wickedness is what it is," said the old woman sitting by the window.

The unexpected comment drew both Emma and Luke's attention. They looked at her. "Gambling, of course. No good will ever come of it." She elbowed her companion in the ribs. "Isn't that right, Milton?"

"Yes, dear."

"My husband..." she cast a disapproving glance at the old man beside her, "...had a similar affliction once. But the good Lord was able to rid him of it. Isn't that right, Milton."

The man yawned, and rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palm. "Yes, dear."

"Only our Lord can liberate your brother of his wicked ways," she said to Emma.

"I'll be sure to tell him, ma'am. Thank you."

Emma's crisp tone caught Luke by surprise, and evidently insulted the old woman who turned her head with a loud 'hmpf' and stared out the window.

"The brooch has great sentimental value, Mr. Reinhardt."

He looked at her. "How so?"

"That is none of your concern."

Given the stubborn set of her jaw, he decided not to press the issue. With a shrug, he reached for the newspaper. But the coach's unsteady rhythm made it difficult to read. He put the paper back on the seat, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at the passing scenery, trying hard to ignore Emma. The smell of lavender tickled his nostrils like an invisible feather. He ran a finger underneath the choking confines of his collar, wishing he could just as easily loosen

the tightening in his crotch. Damn, the woman was going to make his trip a living hell.

The driver suddenly picked up speed. The carriage rocked on its hinges, groaned and creaked along the corduroy road. Milton fell to the floor at one point while dozing. With his wife glaring at him and his sunken cheeks turning a bright red, the old man returned to his seat. A few times, Luke had to grab Emma to prevent her from falling over. Not that he minded, of course. He bit back a smile as she sought to regain her balance. Her pretty face scrunched up into a scowl.

Milton's wife bumped her head against the side of the coach. "Oh, this is just awful!"

"Yes, dear," her husband said.

"Driver!" the fat woman shrieked through the open window.

Milton tugged on her sleeve. "Bernice, there's nothing the man can do about the road."

"He could try another one."

"They're all the same out here," Luke said.

She rolled her eyes. "They can't *all* be the same."

Luke wasn't about to argue with the ill-tempered woman. He looked at Emma. "Tell me why the brooch means so much to you."

"It just does."

"Was it a gift from Melvin?"

"*Calvin*," she corrected with an exasperated glare.

Luke bit back a smile. "Whatever."

The coach veered forward and backward suddenly. Luke grabbed the window's ledge for stability. Emma landed against him with a muffled groan.

"Are you all right?" he asked, reaching for her.

She scooted away before he could touch her. The apples of her cheeks dotted pink. "Yes," she said as she rubbed her hip.

She had grit, too. "Does your father know you're on this little escapade?"

"No, but I'll wire him from Santa Fe." Those emerald eyes cut him like shards of glass. "As soon as you return my brooch, of course."

"Just look at my hat!" Bernice shook the plumed monstrosity in the air. "It's ruined."

"I'll get you a new one, dear."

"I don't want a new one!" she yelled at her husband. "I'd much rather walk and take my chances with the red savages out there."

Luke clenched his jaw. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Emma staring at him. *So she knew as well. Had the mayor made an official announcement about town?*

The stagecoach came to an abrupt stop. Luke fell to the floor. Emma, Milton, and Bernice landed on top of him.

"Oh for goodness sake!" Bernice got back onto her seat and slapped dust from her dress. "What is wrong with that driver?"

"Why have we stopped?" her husband asked, taking his spot beside her.

Luke was acutely aware of Emma's soft contours on his back as she reached for the seat and dragged herself off him.

He sat up just as a burly, dark-haired man with a red bandana pulled over his nose opened the stagecoach door. He cocked the six-shooters he held in each hand.

"Everybody out!"

Emma gasped. Her large, frightened eyes looked at Luke as if he could provide some solace. He took her hand and kept his voice low. "Just do as he says."

"Come on, hurry it up!" the gunman said as Bernice struggled with her large bustle.

Turning sideways, the old woman sucked in her breath and squeezed her way through the door. Pulling Emma with him, Luke exited after Milton. Outside, she let his hand go, but remained standing by his side. Luke glanced from the man who held them at gunpoint, to another at the front of the stage aiming a rifle at the driver. Another pair rummaged through the luggage in the back. All four men hid their faces behind red bandanas. *Too risky*. Luke couldn't afford to be a hero and leave Emma alone and unprotected.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this here's a stick up." Their captor's voice was nonchalant, almost bored, like a man who'd done this many times and had gotten away with it. "Now if you'd all be so kind as to relieve yourselves of any material burdens and toss them here at my feet, then everybody's happy and nobody gets hurt."

Luke wasted no time pulling his billfold from the inside pocket of his duster and throwing it to the ground. Emma eyes met his for the briefest moment before she tossed her reticule over. Milton added a wallet, his wedding band, and a gold pocket watch to the fray. His wife, quiet for once, was

the last to relinquish her reticule along with a cameo, wedding band, and diamond earrings.

Holstering one of his guns, their assailant kept the other trained on them as he collected the spoils at his feet. "Much obliged. Things always work out when everyone does as they're told."

One of the men going through the luggage shouted a 'yee-haw!' and all attention diverted to him. Like a looking glass, sunlight glinted off the silver brooch he held up in his gloved hand. "Look what I got."

Emma's fingers dug into Luke's arm. "My brooch..."

Her voice was a ragged whisper of pain and despair. He looked at her, shook his head in silent warning.

"No, please. Don't take it," she shouted to the robber. "I can pay you for it. Just don't take it."

Luke ground his teeth. He wanted to strangle her.

"Well, well..." their captor approached, "...what's your name, little lady."

Luke shoved Emma behind him. "She's with me."

"I was talking to the lady," the gunman said, his eyes narrowed into gleaming black fissures.

Luke looked down at the man. A quick stab to the liver would suffice. He could take his gun after that...

At that moment, a shout, an angry one, came from the front of the stage. "Stop!"

From behind him, Luke heard Emma say, "Look..."

"He's leaving us!" Bernice shrieked.

Luke spun his head and saw the stagecoach driver running away. The gunman at the front shot his rifle, and the driver fell in a dusty heap.

Luke closed his eyes. *Bloody fool.*

"Waddya shoot him for, Joe?" the one with the brooch demanded.

"I told ya not to call me by my name," the other snarled.

The men broke into a shouting match. Luke picked up the names 'Billy' and 'Hog'. It was the one guarding them that appeared to be the leader. He backed away from Luke.

"Let the horses go," he commanded.

Anger slithered in Luke's gut as the one called Joe released the four-horse team. With a hard slap in the rear, the man sent the animals galloping. Luke stared at the spiral of dust left in their wake.

After the trio had climbed into their respective saddles, they brought a spotted appaloosa around to their leader. He mounted it and gave his captives an exaggerated tip of his hat.

"It's been a pleasure, folks."

With a slap of the reins, he led his posse away.

Next to Luke, Emma dropped to her knees. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks. "My brooch."

"Brooch?" Bernice blotted sweat from her face. "My dear girl, we could've all ended up like our unfortunate driver."

"Most unfortunate, indeed," Milton said.

Luke crouched beside Emma and put a hand on her shoulder. She didn't respond, just sat there, her empty,

broken gaze on the horizon. "You should've given it back. You don't know what it means to me."

The stricken sound of her voice tore at his heart with claws of steel. "I'll get it back for you."

"Sure you will."

Cupping her chin, he turned her face to look at him. "I'll get it back," he repeated with fierce determination. "Count on it."

Chapter 6

"The man deserves a Christian burial!"

Standing at the back of the stagecoach, Emma looked at Milton's wife. The fat, old woman was on the verge of hysterics.

"Milton, it's bad enough that you and Mr. Reinhardt rifled through the man's pockets," she continued with arms flailing.

"Those crooks never got the chance to steal from the driver, Bernice," her husband said in a weary tone. "We're fortunate he had those gold coins on him. How else are we going to pay for a room at ... at..." he looked at Luke, "...what's the nearest town you said?"

Luke was rummaging through the discarded bags on the ground. "Barton Junction," he said without looking up.

"Yes, at Barton Junction."

"Well, we would've figured something out!"

Turning her back on the squabbling pair, Emma watched Luke pull a straw hat from one of the bags. He handed it to her. "You're going to need this."

"That's mine!" Bernice rushed toward them, both hands on her large, round hips. "Young man, how dare you give my things away?"

Emma didn't want to cause Luke any more problems. She already felt guilty about her reckless outburst earlier. That bandit could've shot them both. "I don't need it."

Luke grabbed her extended arm. "Yes, you do." He stood up and glowered at the flustered old woman. "Ma'am, we've got a couple of days *on foot* between here and Barton

Junction." Emma's stomach churned at the 'on foot' part.

"We've agreed to take what we need."

"Yes, but those are *my* things."

"You don't even like that hat," Milton said with a shake of his head.

"You brought enough hats to outfit a cavalry," Luke said.

"Miss Sarris brought nothing with her, and she needs protection from the sun."

The old woman looked at Emma and fingered her high, lace-trimmed collar. "Well, yes, I can understand that. I, too, have such creamy, delicate skin."

Luke looked up at the sky. "Let's get moving while it's still light out. We can cut through the canyon. It's not steep, and there's a creek about twelve miles out. Stick to the shade whenever possible."

The man was a born leader, Emma thought as she put the straw hat on. It was a bit large for her and rested below her eyes. She pushed it back on her head. "All right."

Milton approached. "Here," he said, handing Emma a water canteen. From its weight, she could tell it was full.

"What about you and your wife?"

The old man held up a spare. He looked over his shoulder where the driver laid facedown on the ground. "Poor fellow. He certainly came prepared."

Emma refrained from looking at the lifeless body. She hadn't been able to watch when Luke and Milton searched the man for anything they could use on their journey. She understood that necessity warranted it. Even so, she'd said an extra prayer for forgiveness.

"Thank you."

"You're quite welcome," Milton said.

Strapping the canteen over her shoulder, Emma followed Luke as he led the way through the canyon. Each hour that passed felt like an eternity. The sun beat down on them with cruel force. Emma felt the weight of it bearing down on her shoulders like a bag of burning bricks. She also had a difficult time sustaining Luke's pace, since his legs were twice as long as hers. From behind her, Bernice and her husband bickered. The woman's voice was like a buzzard picking at Emma's last nerve.

"Mr. Reinhardt, are you sure this is the right way?"

"Bernice, can you please be quiet!"

"Don't tell me to be quiet, Milton. We've been following this young man for hours. I don't think he knows where he's going."

At the front, Luke stopped. He turned to glare at the woman. "Would you like to lead the way?" he asked her.

"Don't be ridiculous." She fanned her face with her hand. "I certainly don't know my way around here."

Emma's patience had run out. With a hand on her hat to keep it from falling over her eyes, she rounded on the old woman. "Mr. Reinhardt is the assistant chief engineer for Southern Pacific Railroad," she said. "He has surveyed the area extensively. Rest assured if anyone knows the way, it is him. Now I think we'd all be grateful if you kept your mouth shut the rest of the way."

"Amen!" Milton said.

Bernice's gaped at her husband in mute shock, her mouth a perfect 'O'.

Emma turned to find Luke staring at her in an odd manner, as if he were both amused and surprised. Her cheeks heated like coals put to a fire. "How much longer, Mr. Reinhardt?"

"At this pace, I'd say another three hours until we reach the creek." He cast a glance heavenward. "It won't be long until sundown. We can camp there for tonight."

"What?" Bernice shrieked. "Have you lost your mind? I am not sleeping out here in this..."

"Shut up, Bernice," her husband said.

Inside her pointy boots, Emma's blistered toes curled in agony. "I think we should try to cover as much ground as possible," she told Luke.

He gave her a roguish grin. "I agree, Miss Sarris."

They set off again. This time, Luke slowed his pace. Emma wondered if he'd noticed her discomfort. She'd tried not to show it, but she knew her cheeks were flushed and her skin beginning to sunburn. By the time they reached the creek, it was dark, and her feet were numb.

"Let's stop here," Luke said.

Emma almost groaned with relief. She sat on the ground and untied her shoelaces. "Thank goodness."

"What do you mean stop?" Bernice looked all around. "You can't really intend for us to sleep out here?"

Luke claimed his own grassy spot close to Emma. "I intend to," he said. "You can do whatever you wish."

"Good-night, dear," Milton said.

Using the canteen as a makeshift pillow, he stretched out on a strip of grass. Almost immediately, his snores echoed around them. Emma watched the old woman anxiously pace the ground. It took her a while, but she eventually curled up beside her husband. Before long, her snores mingled with his.

"I thought she'd never shut up," Emma said, massaging her stocking-clad feet.

Luke sat Indian style on the ground, just an arms-length from her. "Me either." His gaze shifted from Emma's feet to the high-heeled boots she'd tossed aside. "Why do women insist on wearing such uncomfortable shoes?"

"I didn't exactly plan on walking as much as I did today, Mr. Reinhardt," she said with a smirk.

"Your parents must be worried about you."

Emma stared at the moon's reflection on the water. Her parents must be downright frantic by now. She should've told her mother where she was going. "Yes."

"The brooch meant that much to you?"

"I'm adopted, Mr. Reinhardt." She took a deep breath. "The brooch ... it belonged to my real family. They left it with me at the orphanage."

"You've never met them?"

Emma swallowed hard and shook her head. "I was barely three years old when they gave me up."

"Then your definition of a *real* parent conflicts with mine, Miss Sarris."

She looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Your parents, the mayor and his wife, the ones that *raised* you," he said. There was an edge to his voice, as if he were

reining in his temper. "They love you. Maybe too much. Is that not enough for you?"

"Of course it is," she said. "I love my adoptive parents."

"So why must you classify them as adoptive?"

She stared at him. What did he know? He could never understand how she felt. How the pain of rejection gnawed at her insides like a hungry rodent. Thanks to him, her brooch was lost, perhaps forever. "And you," she said, anger added a stinging chill to her tone. "What do you classify yourself as?"

He gave her a crooked grin. "Just a man, Miss Sarris. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Yes, but you're a ... a..."

"A breed?"

She looked away. "I would never use that horrible word. I meant to say you're half Indian."

"Chippewa," he clarified.

"But you don't look it."

"So?"

"It's easier for you to blend in. It's quite obvious I do *not* belong to my family."

He expelled a deep breath. "Miss Sarris, my first day of school went well until my mother picked me up that afternoon. The next day, I was pelted with rotten eggs and horse manure and told never to return." He looked straight into her eyes. "By the teacher."

"I'm sorry," Emma said. Her heart pained her. She imagined him as a little boy, the shock of black hair, the big, wet blue eyes filled with hurt. At the same time, she was appalled, angered by the actions of his bigoted teacher. What

kind of person, a grown person at that, could do such a cruel, heartless thing to a child? "That teacher should've been dismissed."

He continued in the same flat, empty voice only prolonged, immeasurable pain could sire. "What difference would that have made? Believe me, Miss Sarris, prejudice is the norm, not the exception. And *blending in*, as you say, had nothing to do with it. I found acceptance among those I looked like the least when my mother moved us to the reserve."

Emma frowned. Perhaps he did understand her after all. "It was better for you among your mother's people, then?"

"Yes. Although, I was mostly a curiosity at first." His smile was nostalgic. Emma found it made him all the more handsome. "But once the novelty wore off, I was just another part of the family."

"At least you know who your real family is."

"So do you," he said.

Emma's throat closed up. "I'm sorry about before. I shouldn't have said anything to that gunman about the brooch. I could've gotten us both killed."

"Yes, that wasn't the brightest thing to do."

His tone was light, teasing. She looked at him. "Thank you for trying to protect me," she said, grateful the dark concealed her flaming face.

His voice was soft, rich. "You're welcome."

A cool, evening breeze raised the hair on Emma's forearms. She shivered and hugged her knees to her chest.

"Are you cold?"

"A little," she said, rubbing her exposed arms.

He removed his duster. Emma swallowed hard, her pulse spiked as he placed it around her shoulders. "But you'll be cold."

He sat back. "I'm fine."

A clean, musky scent enveloped her. She sniffed the coat's collar, and realized it was *his* smell.

"What's wrong?" he asked as she took another deep whiff of it.

"It smells like you," she said. "I like it."

Chapter 7

It was too late to take it back. Emma certainly hadn't meant to voice the thought. What had come over her? Even with the cover of darkness, she could tell Luke was as taken aback as she was. Something in his direct gaze ignited every nerve in her body. He looked at her in a way no man had ever looked at her before. Not even Calvin. Her instincts rang a warning bell.

"I should get some sleep, Mr. Reinhardt," she said, using the opportunity to turn on her side.

She felt his eyes on her back, but didn't dare confirm it. After a tense, thick silence, she heard him say. "Good night, Miss Sarris."

Emma mumbled a 'night', but found it difficult to sleep. Being so close to him was like trying to sleep with the sun in her eyes. Only the heat wasn't confined to her face. It spread through her entire body, and pooled at the juncture of her thighs. She squirmed like a hooked worm. What were these strange feelings the man invoked in her?

Silence behind her, no hint of movement, or even the slightest breath reached her ears. Emma wondered if he'd gone to sleep. She begrudged him the ability to do so with such apparent ease. Her resentment, however, was short-lived. In the ensuing silence, exhaustion prevailed. Her eyelids drooped beneath their sudden weight. She yawned and fell asleep. By the time she awakened, it was daybreak, and she was in a tangle of limbs.

Emma blinked and stared into a set of clear blue eyes. Mortified, she rolled away. "What are you doing, Mr. Reinhardt?"

"Me?" He propped himself up on his elbows. "You're on my side of the grass."

With mute horror, Emma realized he was correct. Had she curled up next to him all night? "Well you should've awakened me or pushed me back to my spot."

A rakish lift of his brow made her knees go wobbly. "Now why would I go and do a foolish thing like that?"

"Because that is what a gentleman is supposed to do," Emma said.

She turned her head at the sound of Milton and his wife bickering in the background. Grateful for the distraction, she nonetheless wondered whether they did anything other than argue.

"Mr. Reinhardt." Bernice marched right up to him, both hands on her hips. "What are your plans for today."

Emma couldn't keep her eyes from Luke as he stood and stretched. The image reminded her of a mountain lion. "Same as yesterday, ma'am. We walk."

"And how long before we reach Barton Junction?"

"If we leave now, we should get there by sundown."

"*Sundown?*" She looked at her husband who was filling the canteen at the creek. "Did you hear that Milton?"

"Yes, dear."

She looked back at Luke. "Mr. Reinhardt, you expect us to walk all day without any nourishment?"

"A couple of days without food never killed anyone," he said. "Just make sure you have plenty of water."

With a huff, the old woman stomped back to her husband.

Emma handed Luke his duster. "We'll get there today, won't we?"

Their fingers brushed as he took it. He stared at her. Emma's stomach twisted into a tight ball.

"If we head out early enough, yes," he said with a nod. "We will get there today."

She found some respite in his aplomb. "All right."

They were back on the road after everyone had washed up. Emma didn't know how long they traveled or how far. Heat made the landscape shimmer in rippled waves before her eyes. They stopped to rest at different intervals in their journey, whenever a creek or a shaded spot presented itself. After a while, every tree, every boulder, every patch of grass, looked the same to Emma. Despite the hat she wore, her face burned as if someone held a torch to it. Her feet felt as if she walked on a bed of nails, and her empty stomach growled a fierce orchestra.

"Heavens, Milton, I need to eat something. I think I'm going to faint!" Bernice cried out behind her.

"Yes, dear."

"Are you listening to me, Milton? I think I'm going to faint."

"We'll rest here," Luke said when they reached a small, shaded knoll.

"Oh, thank heavens!" Bernice dropped to the ground like a sack of flour.

Her husband took a few gulps of water from his canteen and then sprawled on his back. "Yes, indeed."

Sitting on the ground, Emma stretched out her legs. She wanted to take her boots off. Of course, then she'd have to put them back on. The mere thought was enough to make her cringe.

"Are you all right?" Luke asked, sitting down next to her.

"Well, my feet are killing me," she said. "And I know I'm about as red as a turnip, which I'd gladly eat a bushel of right about now. Other than that, I'm fine."

He smiled and relieved her of the canteen strapped over her shoulder. "Let me take that."

"What are you doing?"

Emma watched as he pulled a black kerchief from his back pocket and doused it with water from the canteen.

"You need to cool off," he said, placing the damp cloth on the inside of her wrists. Emma sighed with relief. After wetting it a couple more times, he rubbed the kerchief along her arms. "Make sure you keep the hat low on your head. I've seen you pushing it back."

"It's big on me, and it keeps getting into my eyes."

"I know. But you need to keep covered as much as possible." He blotted the kerchief against her neck. "Don't worry, we're almost there."

Cool rivulets trailed along the skin of her chest and disappeared behind the scooped neckline of her shirtwaist. His fingers trailed, then lingered over her clavicle, every digit a heated, throbbing brand. Emma's breath caught in her throat. She looked at him, mesmerized by the swirls of blue

and indigo in the bottomless depth of his eyes. Her nerves tingled with anticipation. He was so close, his lips a whisper away. She wondered if he'd be so bold as to kiss her. Not the dry, chaste brush of lips Calvin always gave her. No, she wanted Luke to kiss her, long and deep. She wanted to know what he tasted like. Emma leaned toward him, but stopped when someone cleared their throat.

"I certainly hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Emma jerked away. "Of course not," she said, mortified by her brazen behavior.

Bernice gave her a long, knowing look before turning her eyes to Luke. "Shouldn't we be going, Mr. Reinhardt?"

Emma felt his eyes on her. She didn't dare look at him. "How do you feel?"

Like a fool! Tears stung her eyes. "Better now, thank you," she said, blinking them back.

He rose. "Let's head out. It won't be much longer now."

"You heard that, Milton?" the old woman shouted as she walked back to her husband. "Mr. Reinhardt says it won't be much longer now."

"Yes, dear."

Emma stood and grimaced with pain. Inside her shoes, she wiggled her cramped toes. The thought of having to take another step almost set her to tears. But she'd come this far, she could make it the rest of the way. Luke had said they were almost there. With that solace, she fell in line behind him.

After they'd walked several more miles, Emma wished she'd asked him to be more specific. She was exhausted.

Even the squabbling couple seemed too tired to resume their usual quarreling. Emma envied Luke's boundless energy reserve. He led the way with the same long, even strides as if he'd just set off on some grand adventure. The sun was low in the cloudless sky as they traversed a particularly rocky path. Twice Emma stumbled. She managed to regain her footing before anyone noticed. As she limped behind the old couple, she slipped on a patch of loose rocks and fell flat on her backside.

A gasp from Bernice alerted everyone to Emma's embarrassing predicament. "Good heavens, child, are you all right?"

Emma groped for her hat on the ground and put it on. "Yes, I'm fine."

Luke hurried toward her. Putting both hands beneath her armpits, he lifted her as if she weighed no more than a feather. "You should've said something. I would've stopped," he whispered in her ear.

"I'm all right, really."

He winged a dark brow. "Those shoes have to go."

"Mr. Reinhardt ... wait..."

Amid her protests, he bent to untie her bootlaces. Emma leaned a hand on his shoulder and winced when he slipped the first boot off.

"Does that hurt?"

Biting her lip, she could only manage a weak nod. With a muttered curse, he carefully untied her other shoe. As he removed it, his hand holding her leg steady inched up her calf. An unfamiliar, heated pain settled at the core of her,

throbbing like a second heartbeat. She squeezed his shoulder, felt the ball of hard muscle beneath his shirt. He looked up at her, his knowing grin came quick. She gulped. "Thank you."

Holding her gaze, his hand blazed a trail from her calf to the sole of her foot. She felt lightheaded and struggled for breath as he massaged her aching insole.

"Y-you..." Emma closed her eyes, waves of pleasure lapped against her belly. She dug her fingers into his shoulder, "...you don't expect me to walk without any shoes?"

"No."

"Oh!" she cried as he swept her off her feet. She threw her arms around his neck. "You can't carry me the rest of the way!"

"I can and I will."

"Young man, we need you to guide us. No sense in straining yourself," Bernice told him.

"The town's straight ahead," Luke said.

"It is?" Emma asked, her heart beat faster.

He returned her smile. "Yes."

"Oh thank heavens!" Bernice pulled her husband by his shirtsleeve. "Come, Milton. We're almost there."

"I thought we'd never make it," Emma said beneath her breath.

"You didn't trust me?" He lifted a dark brow as he glanced at her.

She felt as if she could dive into the clear, blue pool of his eyes. Heat swirled in her belly. The muscles of his arms rolled beneath her rump. He was hard man. Emma wondered how his skin felt underneath his clothes. She felt flushed,

exhilarated. "Yes," she said, looking at his generous mouth. "I trust you."

He stopped and looked at her. Emma stared, transfixed as his tongue flickered over his lips. She trembled. God, if only he'd kiss her.

"Is that it?"

Emma snapped her head at the sound of Bernice's voice.

"Yes," Luke shouted to her.

Emma looked where the old woman pointed and saw a cluster of wooden buildings just over the ridge. As Luke headed in that direction, she tightened her arms around his neck. She inhaled his sweet, musky scent. A sinking feeling pulled at her stomach. She didn't want to let him go.

"Milton, hurry!" Pulling her husband's arm, Bernice made a beeline for the hotel, which was also a restaurant.

Following the old woman inside, Luke gently put Emma down. She was grateful her long skirt concealed her bare feet. "Thank you," she said as a warm blush crept into her cheeks.

His lips curved with a slow grin filled with a promise she dared not think about. A small dagger pierced her heart.

"Anytime." He gestured toward a table by the window where the old couple was already seated. "After you."

Emma took a seat in one of the ladder-back chairs, and smiled at Luke when he sat across from her. Her stomach growled. It was torture of the worst kind to smell the delicious aromas coming from other tables. She'd never been so hungry before in her life. When their attendant arrived, a tall, skinny man with greasy hair parted to one side, they ordered

enough food to stuff a hibernating bear. Hunger usurped decorum when he placed the first dish on the tabletop.

"This is the most delicious chicken I've ever had." Bernice licked her fingers. "Pass the gravy, child."

Taking a bite out of the drumstick in her right hand, Emma used her free one to hand over the gravy bowl.

Their waiter placed a second dish of mash potatoes on the table. "Is there anything else I can get you folks?"

"No," Luke said around an ear of corn.

"Just don't go too far." Bernice waved her fork at him.

The waiter nodded and disappeared into the kitchen.

Emma scooped several spoonfuls of mash potatoes onto her plate and licked the serving spoon clean.

"Emma, darling!"

Her drumstick fell from her open mouth to the floor.

"Father?" Certain her eyes were playing tricks on her, Emma rubbed them. Then she saw her mother appear beside him.

"My baby!" her mother cried, arms outstretched.

Before Emma could get a word out, her parents trapped her in their combined embrace. "We were so worried," her father said, kissing the top of her head.

From over her mother's shoulder, Emma saw the greasy haired waiter approach. "Is she the one you were looking for, sir?" he asked her father.

"Yes, thank you for coming to get us."

With another nod, the waiter turned away.

"Oh my darling, look at your delicate skin." Caressing her sunburned cheek, her mother looked over Emma's sullied attire. "And heavens, where are your shoes?"

"I lost them," she said with a shrug. "How did you know where to find me?"

"Nothing happens in Paradise without my knowledge," her father explained. "I was alerted the moment you bought that stagecoach ticket. I wired the marshal. He and his deputy accompanied your mother and I on the trail. That's where we found your stage ... and the driver." Her parents looked at one another, their eyes watered. "We thought the worst."

"The marshal found some tracks heading into the canyon," her mother said as a tear rolled down her smooth cheek. "It was too steep for the horses to follow. He said it was a shortcut to town. So we've been waiting for you ever since."

"A most horrific experience, indeed," Bernice said, turning in her chair. She dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "I thought those bandits would surely kill us. Isn't that right, Milton?"

Her husband was busy working on his third drumstick. "Yes, dear."

"They left us afoot," the old woman continued. "Thankfully, Mr. Reinhardt knew the way."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to worry you," Emma told her parents. "It's just..." she cast a stricken glance at Luke, "...my brooch..."

Her father's face sobered as he looked at him. "Yes, about that ... Luke, I want to apologize for my son. How much does he owe you?"

"Forget it," Luke said.

"No, please. I owe you Emma's life as well."

Luke captured and held Emma's gaze. Her heart palpitated. "And I owe her a brooch. I'd say we can call it even."

The mayor nodded and addressed everyone at the table. "Folks, the marshal will be coming by later. He'll need a statement from all of you so he can find those miscreants and bring them to justice."

"But, of course, Mayor," Bernice said. "Anything to help."

"Thank you." He put a protective arm around Emma. "Now darling, you must be exhausted after such an ordeal. You can take a bath in our room and rest. We're going home first thing in the morning."

"Yes, your father's right, my darling, let's go," her mother said.

As her parents ushered her away, Emma looked at Luke over her shoulder. She mouthed 'good-bye' at him. He gave her a bittersweet smile in return, and her heart fluttered in her chest like a wounded bird.

* * * *

"Yoo-hoo, Mr. Reinhardt!"

Luke took a deep breath, then turned. Bernice waved an arm in the air. She shouldered her way through the crowd gathered at the train platform, her husband at her heels. They'd ridden the stage with him from Barton Junction to Santa Fe, arguing the entire time. *Please don't tell me they're on my train.*

"Milton and I wanted to thank you for all you did for us," she said as she approached.

"Yes, we are ever so grateful, young man," her husband said.

Luke smiled politely. "I was glad to help."

"Our train to Boston doesn't leave until tomorrow," Bernice continued. "I'm so glad Milton saw you getting on board before you left. We wanted to wish you a safe journey."

"Thank you. I wish you both the same."

Smiling at Luke, Bernice jabbed her husband with her elbow. "Aren't you forgetting something, Milton?"

Milton rubbed his ribs and scowled at her. "I was just getting to that." He pulled a piece of paper from his front shirt pocket and handed it to Luke. "That's our address."

"If you're ever in our neck of the woods, please stop by to see us," Bernice said.

Luke folded the paper and placed it in his back pocket. "That's very kind, thank you."

"Miss Sarris is welcome as well."

Luke said nothing as he looked at the old woman, his stomach clenched like a tight fist.

"We missed the mayor and his family this morning," she told him. Luke swallowed hard. So had he. "But you'll be sure to let Miss Sarris know next time you see her, won't you?"

"I'm not sure when that'll be, ma'am." Luke ached inside. How he wished that weren't true.

Bernice gave him a wide, knowing grin. "Well, whenever it is that you do, make sure to tell her for us."

"All right," he said, forging a smile.

The train whistle blew. A masculine voice drifted over the platform like a thick fog. "All aboard!"

"I must be going," he told them.

The old couple smiled and waved him farewell.

With a departing nod, Luke stepped inside the vestibule, then made his way through the narrow aisle of the first passenger car. Through the window, he saw Bernice shove several people out of her way as she left the platform. She pulled her husband along by his shirtsleeve. With a shake of his head, Luke continued down the aisle. He grabbed the back of each seat for support as the train lurched into motion. His title came with certain benefits, like riding in the luxurious Pullman Sleeping Car. He welcomed the solitude it afforded.

Sprawled out in the double bed, he thought of Emma. What was she doing at this very moment? Was she thinking of him? Emma's beautiful face floated before him. He closed his eyes. A whisper of lavender tickled his nostrils. He prayed time would mollify his longing.

Luke knew he'd see her again. He still had to get her brooch back. According to the marshal, the notorious O'Doyle brothers had robbed the stagecoach. He now had a name, and that was a start. He didn't care what it took, he was going to find that brooch.

The moment the train arrived in San Francisco, Luke took a cable car to the Western Union office. There, he wired his friend, John McKenna, an agent with the Pinkerton Detective Agency. If anyone could track down the O'Doyles, it was McKenna.

Afterward, Luke headed toward his house on Nob Hill. As he strolled along Powell Street, he tried to envision the look on Emma's face when he handed her the brooch, how her

beautiful eyes would light up. Of course, by then she could very well be Mrs. Calvin Holloway. A bitter taste coated his mouth. He was about to cross the street when something in one of the shop windows caught his eye.

Luke's heart sped up like a locomotive as he approached the small jewelry store. There, on display beside a gold locket and a pocket watch, was Emma's brooch. Well, not *the* brooch, of course. But what could be its replica in necklace form. Luke entered the store.

"Good day, sir," he said to the white-haired shopkeeper behind the counter. "I'd like to see that silver necklace in the window. The one next to the gold pocket watch."

"Of course." The man walked to the display and unlocked it with a key from his front shirt pocket. He returned with the necklace and handed it to Luke. "That's a lovely piece."

"I've seen this before, but in brooch form."

The old man chuckled and rested both elbows on the wooden countertop. "It's the Tara Brooch you speak of, young man."

"Tara Brooch?" Luke looked at the man.

"That's right," he said with a nod. "It's a very old Celtic design. Dates back to the Dark Ages. Many brooches of that period were formed in what is called the penannular shape you see there." He outlined the necklace with an arthritic finger. "It means a circle that is open. It's called the Tara Brooch because an original piece was discovered a little over thirty years ago not far from Tara, which was the ancient seat of the kings of Ireland. There have been many reproductions since."

Tempted Fate [Legacy of the Celtic Brooch Book 3]
by Karyna DaRosa

"This is Irish then?"

"Indeed."

Luke smiled. "I'll take it."

Chapter 8

Back home, Emma's brother greeted her with a bear hug unlike any he'd given her before. "I'm sorry," he whispered in her ear.

She hugged him back, tears welled in her eyes. "I know."

Calvin pried Emma from her brother's arms. "Dear, I am so glad you're safe!" His embrace was light, restrained.

"Thank you." She was quick to pull away.

"It was quite an ordeal," her mother said.

Emma's father looked at his pocket watch. He snapped it shut and rubbed a hand over his flat stomach. "I'm famished!"

"Yes, I'm sure we all are," her mother said. "I'll go see how Molly's faring with dinner." She looked at Calvin. "Will you be joining us?"

"I'd love to, Mrs. Sarris," he said.

Emma's stomach sank like a rock in an empty well. She excused herself and went to her room, her beleaguered mind consumed by thoughts of Luke. She felt a longing she'd never known before. Her heart felt ... bruised.

At supper a while later, as her mother and Calvin discussed the wedding, Emma forced food down her compressed throat. She remained quiet the entire time and was grateful her parents were present when Calvin left. He never kissed her in front of them.

She retired earlier than usual, ignoring the worried glances her parents exchanged. Standing at her bedroom window, she stared at the moon hanging low in the night sky.

Luke.

A smile spread along her face. *It certainly had been an adventure.* She could still feel his touch, warm and gentle, his eyes filled with promise. If she closed her eyes, she could smell his clean, masculine scent. With him, she felt alive. With him, she felt ... happy. In retrospect, she had her brother to thank. Had he not gambled her brooch away...

Emma looked at the jewelry box on her vanity. *The brooch.* Her shoulders slumped with renewed longing. She didn't want to think of the filthy hands it might be in at this very moment. Rubbing her arms, she consoled herself with the knowledge that Luke would find it. He was a man of his word. Of course, she could always write him to check on his progress. She grinned from ear to ear. *Yes, that's exactly what I should do.*

From her dresser drawer, she gathered paper, a pen, and an inkwell. She took a seat at the vanity and lit the oil lamp beside the jewelry box. At first, she just stared at the blank page, not certain how to start. Dear Luke was too ... familiar. Dear Mr. Reinhardt? Too stuffy. Emma chewed her bottom lip. She finally decided on the latter. After that, the words came easily. Another debate ensued over how to sign her name, Emma versus Miss Sarris. She figured it should match the salutation. Waiting for the ink to dry on the letter, Emma turned her attention to the envelope. She didn't know his home address. No matter, her father probably did. She would ask him for it at breakfast. With a contended smile, Emma lowered the wick on the oil lamp and returned to bed. She slept peacefully for the remainder of the night.

Upon awakening, after her morning ministrations, she folded the letter and placed it inside the envelope. She stuffed it into her front skirt pocket and headed downstairs for breakfast.

Already at the table, her parents looked at her when she entered the dining room. "Good morning, darling," her mother said.

"How did you sleep?" her father asked.

"Good morning." Emma took her seat. "I slept very well, thank you." She scooped oatmeal from the serving bowl in the center onto her plate. She looked at the empty chair beside her. "Where's William?"

As if on cue, her brother walked into the room. "Good morning."

"Good morning," her parents said.

"Good morning, William," Emma said as he sat beside her.

"Are you all packed, darling?" her mother asked him.

"Yes," he said.

With a frown, Emma looked at her brother. "Where are you going?"

"Back to school, little sister," he said, making a funny face at her. "Did you forget?"

"I'm sorry, William." Ashamed and embarrassed at the oversight, she shook her head. "I suppose I did."

"After all you've been through, darling," her father said as he poured sugar over his oatmeal. "I don't think your brother's going to hold that against you."

"That's more than enough, Reginald." Her mother took the sugar bowl away from him.

Emma's father chuckled and shook his head. "See how your mother fusses over this old man?" he said to her.

"Well, since you don't take care of yourself, I have to do it for you," her mother said, resting a hand on his forearm.

There was an intimate quality to that slight touch, powerful and lasting. Emma knew then, with startling clarity, she would never experience that level of commitment with Calvin. No matter how many years they spent together. Her fingers caressed the letter in her pocket.

"Father, do you have Mr. Reinhardt's home address?"

A line creased her father's brow. "Yes, I do. Why?"

"I've written him," she said, swallowing a spoonful of her oatmeal.

Her parents exchanged glances. "Whatever for, darling?" her mother asked.

"He's promised to find my brooch, Mother," Emma said with a smile. "I'm merely writing to see if he's made any progress."

"Darling, who knows what those men did with it, or whom they sold it to," her father said. "It may take years to find."

Emma could tell by the tone of his voice that he didn't think her brooch would ever be recovered. She lifted her chin. "I have full faith in Mr. Reinhardt."

Again, her parents swapped glances, but said nothing more of the matter. As soon as breakfast was over, they gathered inside the buggy and headed to the post office. Emma's family waited as she went inside to mail Luke's letter. Their next stop was the Grand Hotel where passengers were already boarding the stage parked out front. Memories

deluged Emma. She imagined Luke in his Stetson smiling down at her from inside the coach. A phantom knife cut away a strip of her soul.

"Have a safe trip, son." Her father hugged William and gave him several strong pats in the back.

"You make sure to write us as soon as you get there," her mother told him.

"I will, Mother."

Tears welled in her eyes. "Oh, my boy," she sniffled, kissing both his cheeks.

Emma walked up to her brother. She gave him a shy smile. "Well, I supposed this is good-bye."

"I'm glad you're all right," he said. "If anything had happened to you, I never would've forgiven myself."

Emma looked into his eyes. "You take care."

"You too, little sister." He hugged her. The top of her head reached his mid-chest. Emma could hear his steady heartbeat. "Next time you write Mr. Reinhardt, tell him that I'm sorry," he said when he drew away.

She watched him board the stage. "For what?"

The driver slapped the reins just as William took a seat by the open window. The double horse team pulled the coach in motion. "He'll know!" William shouted over the rumble of hooves and wooden wheels.

Once he was no longer in their sights, Emma's father said, "I've got some work to finish up." He looked at his wife. "Shall I drop my two favorite ladies off at home?"

"Oh, it's such a lovely day," her mother said. "We'll do some shopping first. Will you be home for supper?"

"Yes." He gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Enjoy your day, dear."

"See you later, Father," Emma said as he hugged her.

After he'd departed, she walked with her mother along the boardwalk. "Now where would you like to go first, darling, the dress shop?"

Emma had other plans. "I want to see Calvin."

Chapter 9

Calvin hadn't taken the break up well. He feared how the scandal would affect his political aspirations. Emma didn't even know he had such pursuits. Then again, there was a lot she didn't know about her former betrothed. Proud man that he was, in the end, Calvin accepted her decision with the same lack of emotion that would've made their marriage an empty, vacuous tomb. She was more convinced than ever her decision to call off their engagement had been the right one. Her parents, however, had yet to warm up to the idea.

"Reginald, talk some sense into her."

Sitting in a parlor chair, Emma watched her mother pace the same spot on the floor. "Mother, why can't you accept my decision?"

Leaning against the fireplace mantle, both arms folded across his chest, Emma's father shook his head. "Your mother just wants what's best for you, darling. We both do."

Emma looked at him. "You don't think I'm capable of knowing what's best for me?"

Her mother stopped pacing. "Of course we do. But you're young. I would hate to see you regret this decision later."

"My only regret was not doing it sooner." Emma rose from her seat, her hands curled at her side. "I didn't love Calvin, Mother, and I seriously doubt he loved me."

"That shouldn't be your only deciding factor, Emma," her father said.

She looked at him. "I want someone to look at me the way you still look at Mother. I want his eyes to light up the way yours do, even when I'm old and gray."

Her father's face softened, he looked at her mother and smiled. "I'm a lucky man."

"I've never heard you speak this way before, darling." Her mother gazed at her as if she were a perfect stranger.

Tears clogged Emma's throat. "I'm just telling you how I feel, Mother. How I *really* feel. I never wanted to marry Calvin."

"Your mother and I would never force you to do anything you didn't want to do," her father said.

"We had no idea you felt like this." Her mother cupped her cheek. "Why didn't you tell us sooner?"

"I was afraid."

"Of your father and I?"

Emma nodded. "I didn't want to disappoint you. I wanted to make you both happy."

"Darling, *your* happiness is what matters most to us," her mother said. "And you could never be a disappointment."

"Never in a million years." Her father put an arm around her. "And call me selfish, but I'm glad I get to keep my baby girl a while longer."

"Me too," Emma said.

"Of course," her mother added with a shake of her head, "the gossip mill's probably rolling as we speak."

Emma rolled a shoulder. "Until they find something else to talk about." *Like the mayor's daughter and a half-breed.*

Chapter 10

At home, sitting at his writing desk, Luke refolded Emma's letter after having read it for the third time. He slid it back in its envelope, then opened the mahogany correspondence box and gently laid it on top of the others. How many times since receiving that first letter, had he gone to the train depot and stood there with tickets in hand, only to turn back? He even made it on board once, but the thought of arriving to the sight of Emma next to Calvin had proven too much.

He refocused on the letters. In the beginning, they had been informal with the obligatory question regarding his well-being, and of course, the brooch. He'd written her back immediately, and her quick response, where she'd included an apology on behalf of her brother, had left him both winded and elated. After that, Luke waited for the postman like a drunkard awaits a barkeep.

Gradually, her letters took on a different tone. Looking at the box, he knew exactly which letter was the one where she first greeted him as 'Luke' instead of 'Mr. Reinhardt'. It had been the same letter where she'd closed with "Yours truly, Emma." The letters were thicker now, and involved more topics of conversation than just the status of the brooch. She never once mentioned her engagement. He'd never asked, either.

Taking a sip of his brandy, he strode to the front bay window and pushed the lace curtains aside. He stared at the tree-lined cobblestone street. It would be callous of him to write Emma that her brooch was lost forever.

After months of searching, McKenna had tracked the O'Doyles to Virginia City where they attempted to rob a bank. It was there that the gang's luck had run out. The local townsfolk, armed to the teeth, cornered them as they tried to escape. After the gun battle, only Joe O'Doyle survived, and only for a couple of hours. He died before McKenna got the chance to interrogate him.

Luke drained his glass and returned to his desk. The least he could do was tell Emma in person. He opened the center drawer and reached for the small, black velvet box inside. Opening it, he stared at the silver necklace he'd purchased months ago. An impulsive act on his part, really. He never meant for it to replace her brooch. Back then, he was certain he'd still find it. But the necklace offered a glimpse to her past, a piece of her heritage. And he'd wanted to be the one to give that to her. Luke pocketed the box and went to his room. He packed a small travel bag with some bare necessities. After all, he wouldn't be staying in Paradise long. He left his house and took a cable car to the train depot, his stomach a tight ball of anticipation. Once on the train, he thought of a million different ways to break the news to Emma. Nothing seemed right.

When he arrived at Barton Junction, Luke took the stagecoach to Paradise. Still at a loss for words, he figured he'd just have to tell her exactly what happened, as McKenna had done with him.

Luke stepped off the stagecoach at Paradise. After checking into the hotel, he walked to the Sarris residence. He stood outside the front door for a moment, his stomach rising

and falling in beat with his breath. Ten months and three days, that's how long it'd been since he last saw Emma. Now, she was just on the other side of the door. His heart pounded like a mallet in his chest. What if she was already married? No, he wouldn't think about that. Regardless, his visit was strictly platonic. After taking a moment to straighten his sac coat and smooth back his hair, he knocked.

Emma's mother opened the door. "Mr. Reinhardt?" The tone of her voice matched the startled look on her face.

"Hello, Mrs. Sarris."

"What a lovely surprise. Won't you come in?"

Removing his hat, Luke followed her into the parlor. "I apologize for my unexpected visit."

"That's quite all right. Please sit." She gestured toward the pair of wing chairs by the fireplace.

Luke took the same chair he'd had during his meeting with the mayor. It felt like ages since then.

"It's just that my husband won't be home for another two hours," Mrs. Sarris said, taking the seat opposite him.

"I'm not here to see the mayor, ma'am," he said.

"Oh?"

"I'm here to speak with your daughter about her brooch."

Her face lit up. "You found it?"

Luke swallowed hard. "Yes and no, ma'am. The Pinkerton agent I hired located the O'Doyles. Unfortunately, they died in a gun battle before he could interrogate them. I wanted to tell your daughter personally."

Mrs. Sarris smiled at him. "That's very thoughtful of you, Mr. Reinhardt." She stood up. "I know she'll appreciate it. Please, wait here, I'll get her for you."

* * * *

Emma perched on the edge of her bed. A knock at her door pulled her attention from the book in her lap. "Come in."

Her mother held the door ajar, but didn't step inside. "Come darling, you have a visitor."

"A visitor?" Emma left her book on the mattress and joined her mother in the hall. She certainly wasn't expecting anyone. "Who is it?"

"Better if you see for yourself, my darling." Her mother gestured behind her. "In the parlor."

"All right," Emma said with a frown. She descended the stairs and went to the parlor. At the threshold, she stopped.

"Luke?"

He rose. "Hello, Emma."

Her heart pounded an uneven crescendo in her ears. Her mouth went dry. Goodness, but he was even more handsome than she remembered. His presence overwhelmed her. The entire room seemed too small with him in it.

"Hello," she said, running a nervous hand over her hair.

He gave her a small smile. "Shall we sit?"

Emma blinked, her face heated up. "Oh, yes." *You ninny, snap out of it!* "Yes, of course," she said taking a seat.

Luke reclaimed his chair. The smile he gave her turned her knees to mush. "I apologize. I know you weren't expecting me."

"That's all right," she said, unable to keep from looking over every inch of him. "It's nice to see you again."

His smile died. "You may not think so after what I've come to say."

Realization struck. Her stomach shriveled like a pumpkin left out in the sun. Her brooch. Of course, he'd come about her brooch. "You weren't able to find it, were you?"

His crystalline eyes darkened as they probed hers. "I'm sorry, Emma. The detective I hired located the O'Doyles. Unfortunately, they tried to rob a bank in Virginia City and were killed before he could question them. The local sheriff let him search all their belongings." Luke shook his head. "Nothing."

The news saddened her for reasons other than she'd anticipated. Nothing tied Luke to her any longer. He could walk out of her life forever. Just as the brooch had. She wouldn't let it happen a second time. "You tried, and that's all that matters."

"There's something I want to give you." Emma's heart stopped when she saw the small black box he pulled from his pocket. He held it out to her. "Open it."

She swallowed hard and met his clear gaze. A delicious tremor raced down her spine. Steeling her nerves, she took the box and pushed back its hinged lid. Tears watered her vision of the necklace inside. It was her brooch, in miniature form, hanging from a delicate silver chain. She brought a tremulous finger to it. "Oh, Luke, it's beautiful."

"It's not meant to replace your brooch," he said in a solemn tone. "I know nothing ever will. But the design..." He looked at her. "Do you know where it's from?"

Emma wiped her tears with the back of her hand. "No."

"It's very old. It's called the Tara Brooch." Luke smiled. "It was worn by Ireland's high kings."

"Irish?" Emma looked at him, her heart did a little happy dance. "So, my family ... I'm Irish?"

"Probably."

Emma pulled the necklace from the box. "Help me put it on?"

He hesitated. For one gut-cramping moment, she feared he'd say no. "All right," he finally said, taking it from her.

His breath, warm at the nape of her neck sent goose pimples sprouting all over her body. She shivered. He came around her to admire his handiwork. "All set."

Emma glanced down at the necklace. It rested over her heart. "It's perfect, Luke. Thank you."

He stood before her, Adonis in the flesh. "You're welcome."

"There's one thing that bothers me."

"What?" he asked, a worry line creased his brow.

Though Emma rose from her seat, she still had to tilt her head to look into his eyes. "What excuse can I use to write you now?"

A muscle rolled along the strong line of his jaw. His voice dropped a stricken pitch. "I don't think Calvin would appreciate that."

"Oh, him?" She waved a hand in the air. "Trust me, he won't mind."

"He won't?"

"Uh-uh," she said, unable to hold her smile back any longer. "And neither will his new fiancée."

Luke stared at her. The hungry look in his eyes unraveled her insides. He reached for her, coiled an arm around her waist, and brought her smack against him. "I should've done this a long time ago."

Through the hard wall of his chest, Emma felt the wild pounding of his heart. It matched her own. She gulped, her body a taut chord of anticipation. She'd waited for so long, wanted him for so long. "Yes, you should've," she said, her husky voice alien to her own ears.

His hands, warm and strong, traveled over her shoulders, up her neck to cup her face. Emma trembled, her legs felt like wet noodles. He dipped his head and kissed her. At first, softly, as if unsure of her response. She lifted herself on her tiptoes and curled her fingers in his hair. She pressed her body against his, her breasts flattened against his chest. He groaned into her mouth and deepened the kiss. Pleasure rippled through her when his tongue met hers. His taste was sweet, musky. A narcotic blend that left her dizzy and yearning for more. It took every morsel of willpower to break the kiss. She reared back to look at him.

"I love you, Luke," she managed between breaths.

He smiled, traced the curve of her mouth with the pad of his thumb. "I love you, too."

She twined her arms around his neck. "You know, I've always wanted to visit San Francisco."

"So you shall, *my Emma*," he said as he kissed her again.
"So you shall."

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