

Brocton Chronicles

**Book II
A Shotgun
Wedding**

**By
Brandy Golden**

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Chapter One

Deputy Matthew McCracken reached for the back of Cecil's waistband as he ducked under the kitchen table to evade him. Grabbing a hold of the lad, he hauled him back out, kicking and thrashing. "Now, you hold on there, Cecil," he demanded, trying to keep his squirming captive from getting away again. "I just want to talk to you!"

Cecil stared stonily at his captor, his breath coming in ragged gasps, his light green eyes very wary. He did not acknowledge the words of the man holding him other than to stop struggling for the moment.

Matt inspected the boy closely. Those eyes were an unusual color, not one he had seen before. The lad couldn't be more than thirteen at the most. His hat had flown off in the chase, and the boy's hair was black as Kentucky coal and lay finely against his head. He had a stubborn cowlick that stood up at the back of his head and the clean smooth face of a boy not yet gone through the change to a young man.

However, he was as dirty as a lad could get and smelled to high heaven! There was ground-in dirt beneath his fingernails, and the ragged looking clothes he wore didn't look like they had ever seen a washboard. He suspected they hadn't. Old man Rivers... "Pappy"...as Matt knew him...hadn't cottoned much to baths or any form of housekeeping as far as he knew.

"When is the last time you had a bath, boy?" Matt began cautiously, keeping a firm grip on Cecil's arm.

Cecil stared mutely at him, not answering him.

Matt shook his arm a little bit. "Answer me, son. When is the last time you had a bath?"

Cecil shrugged, indicating he didn't know. Nor did he care, Matt suspected.

"Well, boy, you smell worse than a hibernating bear fresh from the cave, and you are as dirty as anyone I've ever seen. And those clothes need tending to." He smiled at Cecil as if he just knew he was going to go along with him this time. "All I want you to do is get a bath. I've got some clean clothes you can put on and some lye soap in my saddlebag. I can't take you home looking and smelling like that. My house would never be the same." *Not to mention his nose.*

He looked at the pot of water boiling on the old piece of a cook stove that Pappy must have drug up into the mountains by mule and then at the metal tub he had set in the middle of the floor. "The water is hot, and I'll get some cold water from the stream to cool it down, and then I want you to strip and get in it."

Cecil grunted and shook his head vigorously from side to side. The message was clear. Cecil was NOT interested in getting a bath.

Matt tried to curb his impatience. It was getting late in the morning, and he had already been gone overnight. The sheriff would be wondering what had happened to him. He hadn't expected to be stuck with Pappy's nephew when he had come up yesterday afternoon to check on him, but Pappy had been adamant. He tried not to think nasty thoughts like...*just his luck! Pappy had to die when he was here and leave him Cecil!*

Pappy had lived in the mountains near Brocton for a long time, as long as Matt could remember in his twenty-two years, anyway. Matt had come into Pappy's territory hunting one day when he was about fourteen. He had a bead on a rabbit and was getting ready to shoot it when a shot had rang out,

and a heavy object had dropped on him from the outcrop above. Shoving it off and scrambling to his feet, he had stared in shock at the mountain lion lying dead.

That was the first time he had met the decrepit old mountain man. He had come shuffling from the forest, toothless and cackling and slapped him on the back. "Ye'd best watch what yer doin' in the woods, son," he had said, his faded blue eyes twinkling. "You was a huntin' the rabbit, and he was a huntin' you!" He pointed a gnarled finger towards the dead cat.

Matt had stuttered and stammered his thanks, but Pappy had waved it off. "You jest be more careful, son, the wood is full of all kinds of critters, some good, some bad."

It had been the first time he had ever seen Cecil too. The small lad had hung back, his eyes huge in his thin, pale face, a hat stuffed down on his forehead. "Who's that?" he had asked curiously.

"Oh that's Cecil," Pappy had replied. "He don't talk. My sister's kid. She up and died not long ago, and I inherited him since I'm his only kin." He cackled again. "He don't eat much, and he works hard, so I keep him."

That was all Pappy had ever said about Cecil, and Cecil had never had anything to say, so Matt had just gotten used to him...kind of like a stray dog that always hung around. He'd come to check on Pappy now and then through the years, but Cecil was always in the background, and he had never paid him any attention.

It was only when Pappy hadn't been into town for a couple of months that Matt got worried and wondered why he hadn't seen him. Usually, he came to town for a few supplies once a month that

he packed back in on mules, but Matt suddenly realized he hadn't seen him lately.

While saddling Daisy yesterday, he had impulsively decided to head into the mountains and check on his old friend. After telling the Sheriff where he was headed, he had gone. Picking his way along the mountain stream near Pappy's old log cabin, he hadn't been able to shake the feeling that something was wrong.

He approached cautiously, looking about for signs of activity. He didn't see anyone anywhere. There was smoke curling out of the chimney, so he figured someone must be inside. He took his gun from his holster and checked the shells. As a lawman, he knew it always paid to be cautious.

With pistol in hand, he had approached the old steps carefully, his senses on alert. The door was open, and it looked quiet, but he moved the door aside the rest of the way and stepped inside. Off to the right he saw them.

Pappy was lying on an old feather tick, and Cecil was sitting beside him, his head in his hands. He jumped up when Matt entered and a flash of relief came across his face as he moved out of the way.

Quickly, Matt crossed the floor, holstering his gun and knelt beside Pappy, feeling his forehead. It was raging hot, and his breath was raspy. When he felt Matt's cool touch, he opened his faded blue eyes and grinned weakly.

"Knew you'd come, boy," he whispered.

"How long you been like this, Pappy," Matt had demanded, alarmed at the paper thinness of the skin on his face and the hot flesh.

He had coughed weakly, a gargled strangling sound and then spoke. "Not much time...waited for you, boy...take care of Cecil fer me...promise me!"

He had grabbed Matt's hand with trembling fingers, his grasp almost too weak to feel.

"I'm going for the doctor, Pappy," Matt had said quickly, starting to rise.

Pappy had quickly gasped, "NO! No time for that, boy...just promise me.... you'll look after Cecil...promise me!"

"Of course, Pappy," Matt had replied. "You know I will, but let me go get the doctor now, you just lie back and rest."

Pappy had lain back then, but his eyes had closed, and a raspy breath had escaped his feeble old body...and not returned. Pappy was gone.

Matt had stood up and looked at Cecil. The boy's eyes had been huge in his face, and his lower lip was trembling, but he stoically stuffed his hands into his pockets and eyed Matt cautiously. It was the first time Matt had ever really looked at him.

After burying Pappy, Matt had told Cecil to go to the stream and get cleaned up and pack up what he wanted to take with him. They would be heading back to Brocton.

Cecil had gathered up his things and tied them into a sack, but he hadn't gotten a bath. Matt had no intention of taking Cecil up behind him on Daisy with him looking and smelling the way he did, so he had insisted. Cecil had never answered him, just stared guardedly at him.

"All right," Matt had said grimly. "We'll do this the hard way then. I'll just toss you in the stream, at least you're bound to come out cleaner than when you went in." He had lunged for the boy, but Cecil had dodged him and run into the woods. "Come back here, boy!" Matt had yelled, but, of course, Cecil hadn't. Matt had gone looking for him, but he had gotten the impression the boy was hiding and laughing at his attempts to find him.

Finally, it had started to get dark, and Matt had given up. He had slept with his ear attuned to the boy's return, but he never heard anything. At dawn, he had gotten up and decided to outfox him.

Going out back and into the old barn Pappy had built out of logs, he found a metal tub that hadn't seen use for many a year he figured. The metal was dented and tarnished. He cleaned it up and brought it back inside and then put a kettle of water on to boil. Having done that, he decided to fix the "bait."

Matt figured the boy must be hungry about now, so he rummaged around and found some ham hanging from the cellar ceiling and brought it up. Slicing off some thick slabs, he dumped them into a frying pan, and soon, the smell of ham sizzling was permeating the air. He made sure the window was open so the smell could drift out. It wasn't long before he spied a movement alongside the window, but he ignored it for the moment.

"Time for run to the privy," he had announced to no one and clomped his boots toward the back door and made a big deal of slamming the door as if he had gone out, then he slipped out of his boots and snuck back behind the door and waited.

It was only a minute before Cecil had warily slunk through the door, headed for the pan of hot ham sitting on the table. That was when Matt had sprung. Which brought him to the present moment. What to do with the boy!

"Now, look here, Cecil, it's not like I'm asking you to do anything against your religion you know," he snapped. "It's just a bath. Haven't you ever had a bath before?"

Cecil just continued to stare at him warily, like a trapped animal. Matt hated to be too harsh with the boy after just losing his only relative, but his patience was being sorely tried. He looked

down...bare feet. Well, that made it easier to get his pants off anyway. He reckoned he'd just have to strip the lad and dunk him himself. But first, he had to keep him from running off again.

Looking around, he saw some rope hanging on the back of one of the two log chairs. Grabbing it, he sat Cecil down in the chair and quickly wrapped the rope around his middle, tying him to the chair back. For good measure, he tied his ankles to the chair legs. "There," he panted, "all trussed up. You won't be going anywhere for awhile, so you might as well eat." He pushed the pan of ham towards the boy, and Cecil glared at him, but reached for the ham and began to eat, stuffing his mouth with the meat. Grease ran down the sides of his thin dirty arms and down the side of his mouth as he ate. All the time he watched Matt warily.

Good grief, thought Matt. The boy's little better than an animal! He really began to wonder what he had let himself in for. Sighing, he grimly poured the hot water into the tub and then headed out the door to the stream for a bucket of cold water. He was walking in the kitchen door when he saw Cecil headed towards the back door. "Oh no you don't," he yelled running after him. They were halfway across the yard when Matt tackled him.

Cecil thrashed furiously, but Matt held onto him and yanked the dirty jeans down the boy's legs. Then he sat on him. "You're not going to keep running from me Cecil," he yelled furiously. "I'm not going to chase you all over hell and back just to make you take a bath, you're going to learn to mind me!" He quickly took off his heavy leather belt and turned so he was facing Cecil's wiggling backside in the long red underwear. Whew...the stench was almost unbearable!

Matt was on his knees and sitting back on his haunches, Cecil between his legs. The boy's hands were scrabbling uselessly at his powerful thighs, making no impression whatsoever. He folded his belt in half and raised his arm, then brought it down with a resounding *thwack* across the rump in front him.

Cecil kicked vigorously, his legs throwing the pants off.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

Cecil bucked beneath Matt's body, his legs thrashing wildly, but no sound except a high keening noise came from him. "You going to mind me, boy?"

There was no answer, and Matt looked around, but all he could see was the back of Cecil's head. The boy's fists were clenched, but he didn't say anything. "Well, you let me know when you've had enough, Cecil. You may not talk, but I know damn well you can shake that head of yours!" With that, he raised his arm again and brought the belt down sharply across the bucking backside.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

He paused and looked around again. "Had enough, now?" Cecil's head bobbed up and down furiously. Matt threaded his belt through his pants and got up, still holding onto his charge. Cecil stared at him, his eyes huge in his pale face. His lower lip trembled, and Matt felt a little sorry for him, but not enough to keep him from dragging him back to the cabin and marching him to the tub. He pointed at the water. "Now, strip and get in there and don't make me have to tell you again, or I'll take Pappy's razor strap to your rear end!"

Cecil looked terrified at his words, his gaze sliding to the heavy strap hanging by the door. He slowly took off his jacket, glancing from Matt to the

strap. Matt folded his arms and watched sternly. He would brook no more nonsense.

Cecil's trembling fingers had begun to undo the buttons on his shirt when he hesitated and stopped. Matt was instantly alert. His hand shot out just as the boy made another break for it, and Matt's patience snapped. Snarling, he grabbed the boy.

"All right, we'll do this the hard way!" He quickly swept his hand down the front of Cecil's shirt and ripped it off his body. Then he put his hand in the buttons at the top of the one-piece red underwear set and yanked the stretchy material down off his shoulders and to his waist. He was dumbfounded when Cecil gasped and put his hands over his breasts, trying to hide them from his view. Cecil was a girl!

"What in tarnation is goin' on here?" roared a voice from behind him.

Matt swung around and saw three mountain men coming through the doorway, their shotguns trained on him.

"Cover yerself, gel," thundered the one who appeared to be in charge.

Matt's gaze swung back to Cecil who was rapidly pulling the red underwear back up, her face as red as a beet. She wrapped her arms around her waist and hung her head, her thin body trembling.

"Well, do you have anythin' to say fer yerself before we shoot you?" growled the huge mountainous man from somewhere in the middle of a bushy black beard.

"And whut have you done with Pappy?" growled the short fat one, looking around the cabin.

"We don't cotton to a man forcing hisself on a woman," added the tall lanky one, his black eyes peering at Matt.

They were all surprised when Cecil stepped in front of Matt, shaking her head vigorously as if to refute their statements.

"The little gel is takin' up fer you," said the giant. "Guess it ain't force then is it?" He looked at the other two.

"In that case," piped up tall and lanky, "it's time to git the preacher."

Short and fat nodded his head in agreement. "Ayah, it be time fer the preacher all right. You best go get him, Slim."

Slim had turned and was heading out the door when Matt finally found his voice. "Now hold on a minute! What do you mean, get the preacher?" He was still trying to assimilate the fact that Cecil was a she. He moved her aside and walked over to the three men.

Bearded giant grinned. Or at least what passed for a grin. He had so much hair on his face it was hard for Matt to tell. Could have been a grimace for all he knew, except the blue eye's appeared to be amused. "I don't know whar you come from, mister, but here in the hills, when a man sees a woman nekkid, it's cause they're married." He broke off a hunk of chew and stuck it in his jaw. "Reckon you two done jumped the gun a bit, but it's nothin' that cain't be fixed." He began to chew on the huge knot that puffed out his cheek.

Matt gaped at him. "You can't be serious. Me? Marry this child? I was only trying to get her to take a bath, not attack her." He said it distastefully as if it had a bad flavor.

Cecil stared at him. Was that hurt he saw in her eyes, or was it his imagination? She quickly looked away and ran into the room behind the old blanket. Apparently, it was a bedroom, he didn't know. He had never asked.

Slim had stopped outside the door, staring in the direction of the wooden cross Matt had staked out over Pappy's grave, not far from the cabin. "Pappy's daid ain't he?" He turned back to Matt inquiringly.

"Yes," Matt replied heavily. "I came up to check on him yesterday and found him dying. He asked me to look after Cecil, so I agreed. I just wanted him...err...her...to get a bath before I took her back to town with me. I didn't know he was a girl. Pappy never told me."

Bearded giant aimed at the nasty metal pail that sat by the door. It was stained and dented, the fluids inside it looking like something a bear would throw up. He missed...naturally...or partially missed. Either way, the nasty dark spittle went half in the pail and the other half slid down the sides to join the stains of countless misses before it. "Well, now, that's a shame then ain't it? We didn't know it neither. No matter, though...she's still gonna be yer wife. Pappy done gave her to you, so she's yorn by right, anyway. The fact you didn't wait 'til the weddin' nite don't make no differunce. Go on, Slim. Go git the preacher. We is gonna have a weddin'!"

"But you can't do that," protested Matt as Slim disappeared from sight.

"You married aready?" asked Short and Fat suspiciously.

"No, but..."

"How old are you?" asked Bearded Giant.

"I'm twenty-two, but..."

"And you got a job!" added Short and Fat.

"So whut's yer problem?" said Bearded Giant angrily. "You must like the little gel, or you wouldna undressed her."

"She's just a child to start with," objected Matt. "Children don't get married!"

"She may be little, but she ain't no chile," returned Short and Fat. "The gel is sixteen years old, that much I did know. Plenty old enough fer marryin'."

Matt ran his hand through his dark blonde hair, and then tugged at his moustache. "Look, boys, you can't just go forcing a wedding on me...or on Cecil...it wouldn't be fair to either of us."

He looked towards the room Cecil had disappeared into and called briskly as if the matter had just been settled. "Cecil! You get dressed and get on out here now. We're going back to town."

When he turned to face the men again, he was looking down the muzzles of two double-barreled shotguns!

Heath was sitting at his desk in the parish office when he heard the door open. Looking up, he found himself staring at a tall lanky man with a patch over one eye and a double-barreled shotgun under his arm.

The man's molasses colored hair hung to his shoulders, but he seemed neat and presentable. When he smiled, he was missing several teeth, but then mountain people didn't cotton much to dentists or doctors, preferring to use the old fashioned methods of a piece of twine to yank out the offending tooth.

"Mornin', Preacher," he stated politely, taking off his dusty black hat with the rawhide string around the brim.

Heath stood up and cleared his throat. He nodded politely back. "How can I help you, Sir?" he inquired.

"Name's Shanks, but folks jest calls me Slim," he responded. "I come to bring you back with me to perform a weddin. The fella and his little gal done

gone ahead of the weddin vows, and we got to get 'em hitched right away."

Heath walked around the desk; his curiosity peaked. "What fella...err...fellow?"

"Don't know his name, Preacher, but he done had that little Cecil gel stripped to the waist...ain't supposed to do that lessen they are married. Now, iffen you won't come back with me...reckon me and the boys will jest have to shoot him."

"Oh, Heath, what's with this bill for..." Maddie stopped dead still at the sight of the tall man with the shotgun. "Am I interrupting something?" she asked curiously. She smiled when he doffed his hat at her.

"No, come in, Maddie," said Heath. "This man wants me to perform a wedding."

"Oh, how wonderful! I love weddings!" Maddie's eyes shone with pleasure. "Who's getting married? I didn't know anyone was engaged in Brocton."

"Err...I don't know...exactly. A couple that Slim here knows."

"Pappy's little fella, who is a little gel, done mixed up with a young fella, ma'am," responded Slim courteously. "It's only right that he be marryin her now that he's had her clothes off and all. You git my drift, right?"

"Pappy?" echoed Heath and Maddie.

"Our friend, Pappy," Slim answered, getting a bit impatient. "Git yer Bible Preacher and let's go, I don't wanna keep the boys waitin."

Maddie looked at Heath, and Heath looked at Maddie.

"Err...how far does this Pappy live?" Heath asked.

"I reckon it's about an hour's ride into the mountains. But Pappy ain't livin no more, he done died yesterday."

"You need someone to witness the ceremony," piped up Maddie. "I'll go along on Cecil's behalf."

"Maddie!" Heath sent her a warning glance. He was beginning to figure out what was going on here. Some poor hapless fellow had gotten into a compromising situation and was now being forced to marry the girl in question. Shotgun weddings didn't take place all that often anymore, but in the hill country, anything could happen.

"Slim, is the couple in question willing to get married?" Heath inquired politely.

Slim shot Heath a hard stare and shifted his shotgun. "It don't matter whether they be willin or not. They were willin when he took her clothes off, so they're willin far as me and the boys are figurin. You comin now, or do I have to shoot him like I said?"

"Give my wife and I a moment please," Heath replied and took Maddie by the arm to pull her aside.

"I'll jest wait right outside here," Slim replied and stepped outside the door.

Heath spoke softly to Maddie. "Honey, you go and tell the Sheriff what's going on. I have little choice but to go with Slim. I can't let a man be shot because I refused to do anything."

"But, Heath," protested Maddie. "What will I tell him? We don't even know where you are going?"

"I'm willing to bet the Sheriff knows where the mountain folks live and may even know this Pappy. You skedaddle on into town now, and I'll try to stall Slim as long as I can, so our trail will be as fresh as possible."

"All right, Heath, but be careful." She hugged him close and then turned and left by the back door.

Heath walked over to the door and opened it. "I've told my wife to stay here and see after...uh...things while I go with you. Just let me get my Bible and the papers we need to make it all legal, and I'll be right with you."

"Fine, Preacher," agreed Slim. "Jest hurry up, I ain't getting no younger."

Chapter Two

Maddie unhitched Eggs from the buckboard out back of the church and hopped up on her. Heath would need Bacon to ride out with Slim.

Once again, she fumed at the inability to wear pants. Maybe she'd check on the order she had given Angelina a few weeks ago. She really wanted to try them very badly. She hadn't approached the subject with Heath yet, or asked if she could order them, she had just done it. Adjusting her skirts so they covered her legs to the top of her boots, she whirled Eggs around and headed her the quarter mile into town.

She rode hard and pulled Eggs up abruptly before the Sheriff's office just as Sheriff Crockett was coming out to see what her hurry was. "Is something wrong, Maddie?" he asked with concern.

"Yes," said Maddie breathlessly. "There is a mountain man at the church, taking Heath into the mountains with him to marry a couple. The man's name is Slim, and he doesn't know the name of the fellow, but the girl's name is Cecil. Apparently, she belongs...or belonged...to someone named Pappy?" Maddie's brow furrowed questioningly. "They are planning on forcing the couple to get married. Do you have any idea who Pappy or Cecil is? If Heath doesn't go, they are going to shoot the boy."

The Sheriff turned and hurried to open the door of the jail, yelling for Abraham. "Abe! Round up a couple of men to deputize and meet me out front in 15 minutes. Matt's got his ass...err...I mean his butt caught up in the mountains with one of the mountain girls. We have to go get him before he winds up shot or married!" He touched his finger to his hat. "Sorry, Maddie," he grinned at her.

"Sheriff, how do you know it's Deputy McCracken?" she asked curiously.

"Because Matt told me he was going up to check on Pappy yesterday, and he hasn't come back yet. I was just getting ready to mosey up that way and see if he just stayed the night or whatever, but it looks like he got himself in real trouble." He couldn't help chuckling. Matt must be furious. Marriage was the last thing to figure in that boy's plans.

"Well, who is Cecil?"

Sheriff Crockett scratched his dark head. "Now, you got me on that one. The only Cecil I know of is Pappy's mute nephew. Never saw the kid myself, but Matt said he was around. Never said a word and stayed in the background, you hardly knew he was there."

"This Slim fellow said that Pappy was dead." Maddie added.

"Well, that might explain why Matt hasn't returned yet. But I'll be darned if I know what the rest of this is about. But we'll find out." He patted Maddie's shoulder. "Now don't you go worrying about Heath, Maddie. Slim and his brothers are rough, but they don't kill without a good reason. Heath will be perfectly safe with Slim."

"Just the same, I'm going with you, Sheriff," Maddie decided. "Whoever this poor girl is, she might need another female in her corner."

Sheriff Crockett considered the suggestion. "I really don't think you should go, Maddie. It could get a little rough. Not really a place for a woman."

"There is a woman there already, Sheriff, so one more isn't going to matter now. I'm going."

"No, Maddie, if it gets ugly, I don't want to have to worry about you." He stated flatly. Giving Maddie Danvers a hint never worked, she always made you have to just tell it like it is.

"But you just assured me that it wouldn't," cooed Maddie sweetly. "So there is nothing to worry about is there?"

"Dammit, Maddie," grumbled the Sheriff. "Why can't you just listen and do as you're told?" He hitched up his pants over his slightly rounded stomach and glared at her. "I said you're not going, and that's final!"

"Here's Sam and Tom," panted the Deputy, hurrying up to them with Sam Decker and Tom Grouse in tow. "They said they'd be willing to go."

Ignoring Maddie's fuming look Sheriff Crockett quickly deputized them, and the rescue party mounted their horses and headed out of town towards the church.

Maddie's stormy blue eyes watched them, and then she made her decision. Whirling Eggs around, she set off at an angle to the church and soon slipped into the tree cover along the ridge. There was a good chance they would come this way, and when they did, she would fall in behind them. It was her husband at risk as well as the feelings of a young girl. She didn't intend to let the Sheriff tell her what to do!

Back at the cabin, Cecil stared in the cracked hand mirror her mama had given her eight years ago. She ran her slim fingers over the smooth creamy skin of her cheek and wondered if she was pretty. She didn't feel pretty. She felt ugly and boyish, but then no one had ever required her to be anything else after her mama had died. She picked up the small Bible her mother had given her, leafing through the pages.

She stared at the pages, but saw herself and her mother, a lifetime ago it seemed.

"We have to make you into a boy, Cece," her mother had said. "We have to get away and never return, and we can't let him find us.

"Why not, mama?" the childish young voice had asked. "Why do we have to hide from Papa? And why do I have to be a boy? Can't I be a girl and hide?"

"Shush now," her mama had replied as she cut off all Cece's raven tresses and dressed her in boy's breeches with white stockings and black leather shoes. "I'll explain someday, when you are older. But for now, remember, you are a boy, and your name is Cecil. Cecilia doesn't exist right now."

Mama had put a few belongings into Cece's cloth bag and tied it up for her to carry. Then she made up a pack with cheese and bread and water, and they had slipped silently out at night on a horse they took from the stables.

They had traveled for days and days, and it seemed they would never stop. Cece was tired of traveling. It had been nighttime when Papa had caught up to them. He had charged into their camp, and he and Mama had fought. When Pappy had stepped out of the shadows with a gun and commanded him to stop hitting her Mama, he had charged Pappy. Pappy had shot him. Then he knelt beside her Mama, and she talked to him. When he had stood up, her Mama was dead, and Pappy had taken her hand.

"Come, boy, you're my nephew now, and I'll be lookin after you. You kin call me Pappy." He had taken her mother and buried her beneath the earth, her Papa too. Then he had taken her with him, a long way away from where her Mama had died. All she had left of her were a few belongings.

Cecil had never spoken again. She had been a boy for so long now, that it seemed she had always

been so. But, whenever Matt visited, she didn't feel like a boy for a while. He made her feel strange, kinda breathless, like, and she knew she didn't want him to see her without her clothes.

She had been shocked when he ordered her to take a bath yesterday, and she had run away. She also knew Pappy had given her to Matt to see after, but she didn't really need anybody. She could hunt and shoot as well as Pappy, and Pappy never took regular baths, why should she? The only time she ever took a bath was the bleeding time. The first time it had happened she had been very scared. But, it didn't hurt, and after awhile, it stopped, so she didn't worry about it. She had got used to it coming and going and figured it must be a part of life.

When she had smelled the enticing odor of ham frying, her stomach had growled, and she had decided to snatch some. Matt had said he wanted to take her to town, but she didn't want to go there. She didn't want to get a bath either, so she'd just avoid him until he gave up and left.

Returning to the present, her fingers trembled on the pages of the Bible. Now those brother's were here that came by to see Pappy every once in awhile. She knew they had found out she was a girl, and she knew she didn't like it. They'd been coming for years though, almost as long as Matt. Now Matt knew she was a girl too...she didn't like that, either.

And they were talking about getting married. She knew what that was. Pappy had taken her to see some of his mountain folks get married. They did look happy and excited to be marrying with each other, but she didn't want to marry with Matt, although the thought did make her excited. She knew Matt wasn't happy or excited, though. Why did she wish he were? These things were very

confusing to her. Matt had always ignored her when he visited Pappy, why would he want to be happy and excited with her? And, if it meant you had to get a bath in front of him, then she was sure didn't want marry up with him! She sighed.

Cecil looked critically at herself in the mirror again. Once people found out she didn't talk, no one ever paid attention to her again, and that was just fine with her. She preferred staying away from people. But she remembered her Mama telling her how pretty she was. "You're such a pretty girl, Cece. No child was ever as pretty and sweet as you are." But that had been when she was still a girl. Now she was a boy. Boys weren't pretty.

She frowned at her face in the mirror and ran a finger over her arched eyebrow. She didn't look like the boys. She had never grown hair on her face like boys do. She wondered if she should try to go back to being a girl again now that Pappy was gone, and the boys were calling her Pappy's girl. She didn't have any girl clothes, so she supposed she couldn't. She sighed again and shrugged her slender shoulders.

Disgruntled, she sat on the bed, and then winced. Standing up again, she felt the small ridges along the skin beneath her underwear. Pappy had welted her backside a few times with his razor strap, and she hadn't liked it at all. But she had been careful not to repeat what it was that had made him mad with her. Now, it looked like Matt was going to be like Pappy, only he wanted her to get a bath. She might, if it meant he wouldn't strap her again...and only if he left her alone to do it. She'd try not to run away anymore and to do like Matt said. She didn't want to be bad.

Walking to the hanging blanket, she peeked around the edge of it, her eyes searching for Matt.

She saw him sitting at the table looking very angry. She bit her lip and wondered if she should come out. She didn't want him madder with her. She looked at the other two men. They were sitting on chairs, holding their shotguns on their laps and watching Matt.

Hesitantly, she glided over to the table, staying out of Matt's reach. She reached out and grabbed the lye soap he had set there and glanced at him. He was watching her intently, his hazel eyes pinning her. She felt breathless again for some reason, and for a minute she froze in place, returning his stare with her wide seagreen gaze. Then she quickly whirled and left the cabin by the back door.

Matt was very angry. These men had no right to do this to him! When the Preacher got here, he'd explain what was going on and maybe he could talk some sense into these ignorant louts.

While he was musing, Cecil came out, watching him warily. She went to the other side of the table and snatched the lye soap. She looked like a startled fawn when she looked directly at him, and he studied her intently. He wondered how come he had never noticed what beautiful eyes she had. The lashes were long and dark, matching the almond shaped brows that in no way looked like a boys now that he had seen her up close. He wondered if Pappy had known she was a girl. How could he not? He shook his head angrily. This was the damnedest mess he had ever seen! How could you have a sixteen-year-old girl around and nobody know it?

She had taken the soap...he thought that odd. He felt some of his anger towards her dissipate. Obviously, she understood what he had said and had taken her spanking seriously. The thought

pleased him. Looking towards the window, he saw her hurrying towards the stream, and he watched her until she was out of sight.

His thoughts wandered back to the moment when he had ripped her underwear down. Neither clothes nor hands had fettered her breasts for a few seconds. The nipples had been small, but full, and were a beautiful rosy color, the aureole around them pink against the whiteness of her breasts. They had been ample enough to jiggle when the cloth ripped over them, and they had accented the long length of her slender neck. In fact, they were just about perfect as far as Matt was concerned. Not that he had a lot to compare them with, but they had certainly pleased him.

She had put her shirt back on in the bedroom, and Matt now watched her backside as she hurried away from the house. It was hard to see anything in those baggy men's clothes, but now that he knew she was a girl, the slender hips certainly had a bounce to them that was pleasing to the eye as well. The only problem... what was he going to do with her?

He signed and considered his options. Marrying her was out...wasn't it? Yes...yes...of course, it was out! But then what would happen to her? He had promised Pappy he would take care of her. He wondered again if Pappy had known she was a girl. Maybe the old man had gotten a perverse pleasure out of giving her to him, knowing he didn't plan on getting married anytime soon.

The problem was, he lived alone in a house in town, and it would be impossible for a girl to stay with him. The gossip would ruin him and her both. God, what a mess! Maybe the preacher could help. Might as well settle down and wait for him. He

placed his hands behind his head and stretched his legs out. It was going to be a long hot day!

Maddie was following the posse at a discreet distance. It wasn't hard to follow their trail, four horses left their mark in the soft soil, and they weren't that far ahead of her. She didn't know how long they had been riding, but Slim had said it was about an hour away. They should be getting there soon.

The trees were beginning to thin out, and the sound of gurgling water caught her attention. She was delighted when she came into the clearing and saw the stream coming down the hillside, the fresh water splashing and gurgling. Looking upstream, Maddie saw a curve in the stream that disappeared into the woods, and she realized the men before her had stopped here and then continued on downstream. She took the scarf from around her neck and dipped it in the water, then wrung it out to apply to her cheeks and forehead. When she looked up again, she was staring into a pair of sea green eyes from the other side of the stream, and she froze.

Cecil had finished her bath, and she put her dripping wet clothes back on. She had waded into the stream pool with her long underwear on and quickly soaped them up. That's how she always took a bath. The mountain stream was too cold for anything else, even in the hot summertime. In the winter, she either skipped the bath or washed off in a pan of warm water in her room during the bleeding times.

She had quickly rinsed the soap and came out of the water gasping and hopping up and down. Then she had dipped her pants and shirt into the water

and soaped them up. Again, she rinsed the clothes out. Dipping her head into the water, she rubbed the lye soap around her short hair and made quick work of the rinse.

Standing up, she shook off like a wet dog. There, she was clean, and hopefully Matt would be happy with her.

The sound of horse's hooves pricked her sharp ears, and she slid silently back into the wooded covering. She padded on quiet feet among the leaves and brushed the branches aside to see two men watering their horses at the stream. It was the one they called Slim, and he had another man with him. Was this the preacher they spoke of? She sat back on her haunches and thought about the other wedding she had been to with Pappy. Yes, he did sort of look like that kind of man. She went back to her pool to gather up the lye soap, and on her way back, she heard the sound of horses again.

Quickly, she made her way back to the same spot in time to see four more horses and riders disappearing along the path downstream. She wondered what that was all about. Were they coming for the wedding? There had been people at that other wedding, but how did anyone know there was going to be a wedding?

She was considering these thoughts when she heard another horse approaching. Peeking out through the leaves she saw another person dismounting from a golden palomino. Startled, she got to her feet. It was a woman! Wistfully, she stared at her, her eyes drinking in the blonde curls tied back at her neck and the soft flush of her face. She crept closer as the woman dipped her scarf in the rushing stream. Sitting on her haunches she stared as the woman raised her head and froze.

Cecil studied her closely; she had wonderful blue eyes like the sky. She remembered her mother had had green eyes, like her own, only darker. She started when the woman suddenly smiled at her. "Hello," she said softly, her voice carrying across the stream and above the gurgling waters. It was a musical sound; unlike the men's voices she heard all the time. She rarely saw a woman, and certainly not one like this one, up close. Instinctively, she knew this one was "pretty."

Cecil opened her mouth, but no words would come out. It was always like that. She closed it again. For the first time in years, she felt some frustration with her inability to speak.

"What's your name?" Maddie asked quietly, trying not to spook the young girl. For she was sure she was a girl. No boy had eyes like that. Her fresh young skin glowed, and Maddie realized she must have been bathing or fell in. The scent of lye soap was on the breeze, and her clothes were dripping wet, so probably bathing.

The young girl didn't answer her, but she crooked her finger, motioning Maddie to follow her. Maddie looked around uneasily. She didn't know what the girl was doing out here alone, but she must not be far from whatever she called home to be bathing. She decided to follow her.

Grabbing Eggs' reins, she jumped on his back and waded across the shallow, pebbly bottom of the stream, staying where the rocks were like gravel. She followed the girl beyond the flat bank on the other side and into the cool forest. They were on a path, and the girl jogged along about one hundred yards and came out above a slope that went down on one side and rounded down into a valley that stretched beyond the stream again. In front of a crude cabin, Maddie could see Heath's horse tied up

at the railing alongside some other horses. Off to the left, she could see the Sheriff and his Deputy with Sam and Tom coming up the other side of the stream.

So, this must be the girl Slim was talking about, decided Maddie, following her down the hillside. Again, the girl splashed across the stream at a shallow place and motioned Maddie to follow her. Maddie urged Eggs across the stream and was at the cabin before the Sheriff and the others, which made her grin broadly.

Heath followed Slim up the steps and across the porch, where they were met at the open doorway to the little cabin.

"This the Preacher?" asked Bearded Giant. Short and Fat stared curiously at Heath.

"I'm Reverend Danvers," replied Heath.

"Thank God, Preacher, a voice of reason," growled a voice from somewhere inside, and Heath immediately recognized Deputy McCracken's voice. His face appeared a few seconds later behind the shoulders of the two men blocking the doorway.

"These here boys are my brothers, Samson and Jacob," said Slim, pointing to Bearded Giant and Short and Fat respectively. Heath smiled at the two men, and they smiled toothily back, obviously pleased to see him.

"What's going on here?" Heath asked curiously, addressing Matt.

Matt explained the circumstances of Pappy and Cecil and how the "boys" had come upon him trying to make Cecil take a bath. "That was before I knew she was a girl," explained Matt, scowling at the three men. "Now they think I need to marry her."

"Well, this is strange," mused Heath, trying to figure a way around the wedding. "Where is this Cecil?"

"She went to get a bath," Matt replied disgustedly. "It's too bad she had to wait until all this happened to finally do as she was told."

They heard the sound of horses whinnying, and they all turned to walk out on the porch. It was Eggs, crossing the stream with Maddie on his back, and Bacon was responding. Heath saw the slim figure in front of Eggs and realized this must be Cecil. His eyes narrowed. How had Maddie gotten up here? And where was the Sheriff?

"There's Sheriff Crockett," exclaimed Matt. Sure enough, there were four riders coming up the stream path from the right.

Maddie waved and smiled at Heath, and he nodded to her. Uh oh, thought Maddie as she pulled up and stopped. Doesn't look like Heath is too happy to see me. She tossed her bright head. Oh well, she wasn't sorry she came. She smiled down encouragingly at Cecil who seemed to have become glued to her stirrup.

No one said anything until the other four riders pulled up. "What are you doing here, Maddie, I told you to stay in town," growled Sheriff Crockett, looking exasperated.

Maddie flushed slightly, but she lifted her chin defiantly. "I have as much right to come to a wedding as anyone," she replied. "Especially if Heath is conducting it."

He grunted as he dismounted. Then he walked up the porch to face the three men who stood chewing and watching. "All right, just what's going on here?" He glanced at Matt who had come out of the cabin and was standing by Heath.

Once more, Matt explained the circumstances and how they had come to this point. The Sheriff rubbed his chin and tried to think. The boy had sure got himself in a pickle this time. He didn't know if he could do anything to help him or not!

Progress might be coming to the modern world, but here in Brocton, things still moved slowly...and even more so back in the hills!

He knew how he'd feel if Cecil were his daughter. He scratched his head. These boys did have a point, and it didn't look like they planned on changing their mind any time soon, either! They were all three standing there in a row with their shotguns hanging over their arms. He couldn't go drawing on them. It would start a bloodbath, and innocent people would get hurt! He glanced over at Heath inquiringly, wondering if he had any inspiration, perhaps from another source?

Heath cleared his throat and loosened his collar a bit. He was well aware of the Sheriff's dilemma, as were the Deputy and Tom and Sam. And with two women here...well...they'd just have to see if they could talk these boys out of their plans...or Deputy MacCracken into them!

He looked consideringly at the three men. Their faces might as well have been etched in stone. He turned to Matt instead. "Err...Deputy McCracken...have you given any thought to what you will do with Cecil after you get to town with her? That is, if you don't marry her," he added.

Matt looked at the Preacher as if to say, "Whose side are you on?"

Chapter Three

"He's marryin her," stated Samson flatly in reply to Heath's question as to what Matt would do with Cecil in town if he didn't marry her. "Iffen he don't marry up with her now, the little gel's reputation will be ruined, and no one will want her."

"Just because I saw part of her...uh...body?" protested Matt. "I was trying to do a favor for her, not attack her! I didn't even know she was a girl!"

He looked down at Cecil and thought for an instant that a flash of hurt had appeared in her eyes, but she dropped her head and wouldn't look at him again.

"Yer missin the fact that you done spent the night with the little gel." Samson replied, spitting off the side of the porch.

"Spent the night?" echoed Matt in outrage. "She didn't even come into the cabin, she was hiding...from getting a bath!"

"That don't matter none...you know how folks is," Jacob said piously. "They all believe the worst, no matter whut a body says."

"He has a point," added Maddie helpfully.

Heath and Matt looked icily at her. Maddie decided it would be best if she didn't say anything else.

Matt glared at the brothers. "Do any of you even know Cecil's name? How do I know who the devil I'd be marrying?"

The brothers looked at each other. "It don't matter, she kin take Pappy's name. She were his nephew," Slim replied. "I mean...niece."

"So what was Pappy's name? I only knew him by Pappy."

They looked at each other once again. Matt grunted. Obviously, they didn't either.

"Did you go through Pappy's things?" asked Maddie helpfully.

"I looked around last night, but didn't find anything like that," replied Matt. "All I found was a picture of a woman in an old Bible in the trunk under his bed. Had the name of Amelia written on the back. Didn't say who it was, but I suppose it must have been some of his kin."

"So who do we notify that Pappy's died?" Heath asked curiously.

"In cases like these, if we don't have anyone to notify, it goes to whoever lays a claim on it," answered Sheriff Crockett. "But, in this particular case, everything Pappy had would go to Cecil."

"How do you know what all is his?" Maddie asked. "Did he have land?"

Sam snapped his fingers. "We can check the lot sales at the courthouse. That will tell us who bought this land and how much was purchased. It will also give us Pappy's name and whether he ever bought or sold any more land hereabouts."

Matt looked pleased. "So we can't get married until we find out who Cecil is then."

Three shotguns were suddenly cocked and at the ready.

Everyone's head swiveled to look at the brothers. "You ain't leavin here 'till you and that little gel is hitched. You kin call her whatever you want after yer married, but fer now...it's you and Cecil, you understand me?" declared Samson, his dark eyes flashing. "Iffen I let you, you'll soon be talking yerself right out of it, and that wouldn't be fair to Cecil."

"Besides," drawled Slim, "it's the only way you kin keep yer promise to Pappy, and you know it!"

Matt looked thoroughly frustrated. "Have any of you even thought about how Cecil feels? Maybe she doesn't want to marry me!"

Cecil looked up at Matt with huge scared eyes. He looked mad with her when he looked at her. She didn't want to make him mad with her. She flushed and dropped her gaze, staring at her feet.

Maddie stepped over to Cecil and lifted her chin. "Cecil, do you know what it means to get married?" she asked her softly.

Cecil looked up at Maddie and then at Matt. She nodded yes and smiled tentatively at Maddie.

"You know you would be living with Matt from now on?"

Again, Cecil nodded, and her gaze dropped shyly to the ground again, and she scuffed her bare foot against the dirt.

"Would you like to be married to Matt?" Maddie asked gently, glancing at Matt's grim face.

Cecil looked at the expectant faces staring at her and then she blushed and nodded yes. Cecil decided she would like to be married with Matt. She would like him to be happy and excited to be with her, just like she would feel that way to be with him, she decided. She could always take a bath when he wasn't looking.

"You are NOT helping, Mrs. Danvers," ground out Matt in frustration. "Surely, none of you can really believe Cecil knows what it means to be married!"

"It looks like she trusts ya, Matt," chimed in Tom helpfully. "She's a right pretty little thing, if you don't mind my sayin so."

Cecil's head shot up, and she smiled big at Tom. He had called her pretty!

Sheriff Crockett chuckled. "She may have been a boy for years, but the girl side of her can

recognize a compliment when she hears it." They all chuckled at that one except Matt.

He glowered at Cecil. "I am NOT marrying that girl! I'm not ready to get married yet and neither is she! This whole charade needs to stop right now!"

Cecil stared at Matt with a stricken look. Tears welled up in her eyes as she whirled and ran down the bank and along the streambed before disappearing into the forest. Maddie glared reproachfully at Matt and took off after her.

Matt felt bad instantly. He hadn't meant to hurt her. But the whole situation was ludicrous!

"Now, look whut you did!" declared Slim, bringing his shotgun up at Matt. "You done went and hurt her feelins!"

"I reckon we better jest shoot him and have done with it," added Jacob, training his shotgun on Matt as well. "Then we kin tell folks that Cecil done got her satisfaction for his ruinin her."

"Hold it," demanded Heath, stepping between Matt and the brothers. "I have an idea, if you will all listen please?"

"Go ahead, Preacher," ordered Samson, "but make it quick. The woman's got beans on the fire, and I aim to get back to them fer supper."

"How about if Matt agrees to be engaged to marry Cecil? Maddie and I can take Cecil with us. We have a spare room where she can stay until the wedding. In the meantime, Matt can check out the property information at the county seat and take a bit of time to find out who he is marrying."

The Sheriff and his posse were relieved at the Preacher's suggestion and all nodded and agreed that it sounded good to them.

The brother's looked at each other and conferred amongst themselves until finally Samson spoke, "all right, but mind this...we'll be checkin on the little

gel...and we expect to be to the weddin. After all, she's one of us, right boys?"

"That's debatable," muttered Matt.

Samson scowled at Matt. "Course, if you jest wants us to shoot you and have done with it, why, we're right willin!"

Matt held up his hands in the air. "Fine...I'm engaged...is everyone happy now?" The others all nodded and agreed and even congratulated him. "Oh, brother," he muttered.

Maddie followed Cecil, looking around for her as she walked along the woodland trail. They were heading back towards the stream where she had first seen her. She stopped to listen for a minute at the fork in the path and was rewarded with the sound of soft sniffles coming from the left. A few yards further and she came upon Cecil, kneeling by a pool, not unlike the one she and Heath had on their farm. She had her face in her hands and was crying. At least as much as a person who couldn't speak could cry.

Maddie's soft heart went out to her, and she knelt and put her arms around the weeping girl.

Cecil started when Maddie touched her, and then she pulled away from her, wiping the tears with her hands. She wasn't used to crying and didn't want the pretty lady to see her.

"Hey, it's okay, Cecil," said Maddie softly. "We girls tend to cry sometimes, don't feel bad."

Cecil nodded and looked away from her, still embarrassed.

"Do you understand everything I say, honey?" Maddie was curious.

Cecil smiled tremulously and nodded affirmative.

"Do you know why you don't talk?"

The girl quickly shook her head no and opened her mouth to try to speak. When she couldn't, she gave a frustrated sigh and shrugged her shoulders.

"Have you ever talked?" Maddie ask.

She nodded her head vigorously at that question and smiled. Then she held up all the fingers of her left hand and two on her right and showed them to Maddie.

"You could talk when you were seven!" Maddie exclaimed excitedly.

Cecil nodded, smiling brightly. Her tear washed eyes were shining.

"Did Pappy know you were a girl?"

She shook her head negatively.

Maddie was amazed. How in the world could someone not know they were living with a female? Why, it didn't bear thinking about! Cecil must have been pretty ignored. What a shame...and she seemed intelligent too. She needed schooling and a doctor to determine why she couldn't speak. Maddie was getting further outraged, the more questions she asked.

"Can you write?"

Cecil looked at her, her head cocked inquisitively.

Maddie looked around for a sharp stick, then she reached out and wrote her name in the dirt. "That's my name," she told Cecil, pointing to the words.

She understood what Maddie had done. She had done some of that with a stick too, only it was smaller and on paper.... a pencil it had been called. Her brow furrowed as she tried to think. Her mother had been teaching her to write her name. She reached out and took the stick from Maddie. With the pink tip of her tongue sticking from between her lips, she tried to remember how to form the letters of her name. It took her a few minutes, and the

letters were crude, but she finally finished and stared at Maddie in triumph.

Maddie looked over her shoulder and read it...Cecilia. She clapped her hands and cried out, "Cecilia! Your name is Cecilia!"

Cecil nodded, glowing with pride. Then she picked up the stick and wrote again. C A T

"Cat!" exclaimed Maddie. "You wrote cat!"

Again Cecil nodded. She grinned at Maddie. She really liked this pretty lady. No one had talked to her this much in years. Well, people talked to her, but no one ever asked her questions like this. They asked her things she couldn't answer, and she would just look at them or nod yes or no. No one had been interested enough to go beyond that. But then almost no one ever visited Pappy. And if they did, it was only once in a great while, mostly they lived alone. Pappy talked to her, but he never expected her to answer anything. So she had just tried doing what she understood he wanted, and they had gotten by.

She really liked Matt. He came to visit more than most, but he always ignored her too. She would watch him sometimes from the cover of the forest when he didn't know it, or sometimes when he was visiting with Pappy, but her gaze always slid away if he looked in her direction.

"Come on, Cecilia, let's go tell Matt your name!" Maddie stood up excitedly and took Cecil's hand.

But, Cecil hung back, shaking her head no. Matt was mad with her, he had yelled at her and told her he didn't want to marry with her. He might use the strap on her if he was still mad. She pulled away, her hands clasping her bottom cheeks, still shaking her head.

"What's wrong, Cecilia?" Maddie asked, watching the girl. Cecilia just shrugged. She couldn't answer

that. She rubbed the back of her pants and grimaced.

The light went on in Maddie's head.

"You think Matt is mad at you don't you?"

Cecilia quickly nodded yes, bobbing her head up and down.

"Do you think he will spank you?"

She cocked her head questioningly.

"Do you think he will spank you?" she repeated, swinging her arm down and through in a swatting motion.

Cecilia nodded again, her green eyes looking apprehensive.

"Has he spanked you before?" Maddie asked angrily.

She nodded yes again and rubbed her bottom.

Maddie could guess how it went after putting the pieces together. Cecilia hadn't wanted to take a bath in front of Matt, so she had run away. Matt had spanked her when he caught her, and then not knowing she was a girl, had tried to take her clothes off and make her bathe. Her lips tightened. All of it could probably have been avoided if he had just taken the time to get to know Cecilia a little bit better.

"He won't spank you. He's not mad like that," she assured Cecilia. "He is just upset right now, but he is not mad at you." She took Cecilia's hand and led her back towards the cabin. The girl allowed herself to be led along, her feet dragging.

When the girls returned, the brothers were just leaving, and the posse was mounting up as well. She marched Cecilia up the stairs and straight over to Heath and Matt.

"Shame on you," she snapped at Matt, her blue eyes angry. "You didn't take the time to find out

anything about this poor girl and spanked her on top of it. You should be ashamed of yourself!"

Matt gaped at her. "How do you know?"

"There's quite a lot I know," returned Maddie. "Her name is Cecilia. She could talk when she was seven, and she thinks you are mad at her and going to spank her again, which is why she ran away. She can also write her name and cat with a stick."

Matt stared at Cecilia in shock. "You can talk?"

"No, she can't talk! But it doesn't take a genius to figure out how to communicate with her, if you're willing to try, anyway. She is not stupid, and she understands everything we say. She just can't talk back; not like we do."

Matt was speechless.

"She ran away from you the first time because you wanted her to take a bath, and she didn't want to undress in front of you, knowing she was a girl. But you just spanked her instead and ripped her clothes off. No wonder she is afraid of you. What did you do, threaten her with another spanking if she didn't take a bath?" Maddie was scornful now.

"Maddie," Heath began warningly.

But Matt flushed and held up his hand to Heath. "No, it's all right, Preacher, Mrs. Danvers is right. I guess I wasn't very thoughtful. He stepped closer to Cecilia and lifted her downcast face up to look into her apprehensive eyes. "Cecilia? Are you afraid of me?"

Cecilia flushed and put her hands on her bottom, then dropped her gaze again.

"You're afraid I'll spank you?"

She nodded her head yes.

"Well, I'm not going to, okay? And, I'm sorry I did before. I didn't know you were a girl. Will you forgive me?" He wasn't sure why it was important to

apologize, but he felt it was. There was something compelling about the girl, in spite of everything.

Cecilia nodded and smiled, and Matt's breath caught in his throat. How could he have missed that smile before?

Heath cleared his throat and stepped in. "Cecilia, you are going to come and stay with me and Maddie for awhile, is that okay with you?"

Maddie started. When had they decided that?

But Cecilia looked scared. She shook her head no and grabbed Matt's arm. She was supposed to be with Matt, Pappy had said so.

Matt put his arm around her to soothe her, feeling protective suddenly. "It's okay, Cecilia. I'll be in town too. I'll come and visit you."

Cecilia shook her head no again, the tears spurting to her eyes. She was supposed to marry with Matt! She wanted to stay with Matt.

Maddie took Cecilia's hand. "Cecilia, look at me, honey."

Cecilia looked at Maddie, her eyes blurring with tears.

"This is Heath, Cecilia," she said, pointing to Heath. "We are married, me and Heath. You understand?"

Cecilia bobbed her head yes.

"We live in town together...and Matt lives in town too. You can't live together with Matt until you are married...so until you get married to Matt, you can stay with us...okay?"

Cecilia hesitated, then bobbed her head yes.

"Good girl," Matt replied hugging her around the shoulders.

Cecilia blushed and looked proudly up at him. Matt was happy with her; that's all that mattered for the moment. Maddie was nice, she would make sure Matt and her got married.

Heath cleared his throat. "You know, Matt, it's kind of hard for me to believe that Pappy didn't have anything around here that would give us a clue to his identity. Did you look everywhere?"

"Well, I have to admit, I was in a hurry. I was irritated because Cecil...er...Cecilia ran off last night, and I had wanted to get back to town."

"Why don't we all look around?" Maddie said enthusiastically. Maybe we'll find something that you missed."

Cecilia watched as the other's went through the little cabin, but there wasn't much there. She knew they were searching, but she had no idea what they were searching for.

Puzzled, she tugged on Maddie's arm and looked inquisitively at her.

Maddie stopped and stared at her, an idea suddenly occurring. "Cecilia, did Pappy hide anything that you know of? A box? Or a bag? You know...hide? Hide something?"

Cecilia smiled brightly and turned towards the barn. The others followed her out. Once there, she moved swiftly to the corner and moved the straw and hay aside, revealing a square piece of wood imbedded in the floor. She pointed to it.

Matt quickly grabbed a baling hook and inserted it in the crack and pulled the board up. Inside was a stone box down in the ground, and a metal box about three feet long and two feet wide was inside of that. Matt and Heath hauled it out and set it down. There was a lock on it, but no key anywhere.

Cecilia knelt down and surprisingly enough opened the box. It hadn't been locked at all! There was an old confederate uniform, complete with a sword and Major's stripes on the sleeves. There was another metal box with some rust on it, a much

smaller one, and a cloth bag that was tied with a cord.

"Looks like Pappy was in the military," said Matt. "He never said a word about it."

"Maybe he wanted to forget it," replied Maddie. She lifted the metal box out and unlatched the old hook on it. Inside were papers...a medal for valor...and discharge papers from the Confederate army, signed by General Lee.

Matt unfolded the papers, and then whistled. "Would you look at that?" He handed the papers to Heath.

"Good grief," exclaimed Heath.

"What...what is it?" Maddie asked excitedly. She peered over his shoulder.

"It's the deed to his property," replied Heath. "All 5000 acres of it! Deeded to Marcus Peyton Whitehead on April 24th, 1876. Its all here, the property description, everything."

"Look!" whispered Maddie, picking up a hardback booklet. "It's a bankbook, for the United Bank of Boston." She opened the book. "Look at the balance," she squealed.

Heath took the book and gaped. It was in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, "What's the date on this?" he wondered, looking at it closer. The last entry was a withdrawal dated April 4th, 1876 in the amount of 110,000.00 dollars.

"Looks like Pappy was holding out on all of us," murmured Matt. "This is hard to imagine." He shuffled through what looked like newspaper clippings. "Look at this."

The others crowded around to look at an old yellowed newspaper article describing how Marcus Peyton Whitehead, after the death of his wife, had stepped down as President of the United Bank of Boston and turned all rights and responsibilities

over to his only living relative, his brother. There were other articles saying how Whitehead had disappeared, and no one knew where he had gone. Eventually, the search for him had been abandoned, and everyone presumed him dead.

Maddie picked up the cloth sack and unknotted the yellowing cord around the neck. "I wonder what's in here," she muttered. "Ties to the President himself?"

Matt and Heath smiled at her and chuckled. The first thing out of the bag was a white shawl that had yellowed with age and was made of hand-tatted lace. She looked up when she heard the gasp from Cecilia.

Cecilia stared at the shawl in Maddie's hands, her face going ashen. Her fingers trembled as she tentatively reached out and touched it. "Do you know this shawl, Cecilia?" Maddie asked in concern.

Cecilia bobbed her head yes.

"Was it yours?" she asked gently.

The headshake was negative. She reached out and slowly took the shawl from Maddie's hands and held it up to her cheek.

"Your mother's?" Maddie guessed.

The headshake was positive this time, and the other three all looked at one another. Perhaps the mystery of Cecil would be solved here as well.

Maddie reached into the bag and took out a pair of boys black slippers, then a pair of small boy's pantaloons, and white socks. Everything was yellowed with age and wrinkled, but otherwise in fairly good condition.

Cecilia reached out and touched the items and then touched her breast, indicating they had been hers. "So this is what you were wearing when you met Pappy," she guessed again.

Again, Cecilia nodded yes, her eyes swimming in tears. She was remembering that night. The night her Mama and Papa had died. It had been awful, to see her Papa hurting her Mama. And then Pappy had shot Papa...and then she had lost her voice.

Maddie reached down inside the bag and pulled out a leather pouch. Opening it, she poured the contents into her hand. She gasped as the light hit the stones in the rings. There was a simple gold band that looked like a man's ring and then a diamond ring that looked like a single quarter carat. There was also a woman's gold band and another ring...a ring that was set with a diamond in the center and two sapphires and two rubies on either side of it. It was plain to see it was a man's ring, and it had a snake coiled around the diamond and a sword on either side of the snake, like a crest.

"Interesting," Heath mused. "I wonder if it's a family ring or something?"

"Do you suppose Pappy got it from Cecilia's mother? This jewelry bag is in the same bag with the clothes," remarked Maddie.

"Is there anything else in the big bag, Mrs. Danvers?" asked Matt.

Maddie opened the bag wide and peered down inside it, then reached in and felt around...nothing.

"No, I'm sorry. There aren't any papers or anything in here."

"Great," muttered Matt. "So we still don't know who Cecilia is."

"Is that everything in the box?" Maddie ask. "We haven't looked under the uniform."

Matt reached in and took out the sword and the neatly folded uniform pants and shirt. "Nope, I don't see anything else...wait!" He picked at the corner of the wood bottom where a half moon shape was visible. It gave beneath his fingernail, and he pulled

the bottom of the box up and out. It was lined with money! Stacks of bills---wrapped in brown paper.

Matt whistled. "Boy, I wonder why Pappy kept his money out here? Why not in a bank?"

"Obviously, he didn't want anyone to trace him in any way or know anything about it," replied Heath thoughtfully. If he bought five thousand acres at \$20.00 an acre, that would be \$100,000. His last withdrawal appears to have been \$110,000. Perhaps he bought the property and took \$10,000 extra to pay taxes and such on it so he wouldn't ever have to go back again."

"I wonder what happened to his wife that he cut all ties with his family?" Maddie asked wonderingly.

"I suppose we can find out if we notify his family that he is gone," said Matt.

"If we do that, though, then the property won't go to Cecilia," Heath replied.

"Well, that's not as important as finding out who Cecilia is. And I bet this ring has something to do with it," said Maddie, holding the ring up to the dwindling light.

"Perhaps so," said Heath getting up. "But, for now, its time to get back to town."

"You're right," agreed Matt, standing up. He looked at Cecilia. "Get your things again, little girl, we're going to town."

Cecilia looked backward at the cabin she had spent the last 8 years in as she held onto Matt's waist. He felt warm and solid and shielded her from the night breezes off the mountain as they picked their way down alongside the gurgling stream.

She was happy that Pappy had given her to Matt and happy that she would be staying with Maddie until she could marry with him. She tried to put thoughts of her mother and father out of her mind, and she felt a little sad at leaving the man who at

least had given her a place to live and tried to be good to her. But it was time to move on. . Bye, Pappy, she thought. If she could have spoken it, she would have whispered it into the night.

Chapter Four

"I've got a bone to pick with you, honey," Heath said as he and Maddie prepared for bed. They had just come in from the mountains after all the excitement of the shotgun wedding that had almost happened. Maddie had gotten Cecilia settled in the spare bedroom, and Heath had finished taking care of the horses.

"What's wrong, Heath?" Maddie asked. She was sitting at her little dresser brushing her hair. She loved this dresser. It was made of cherry and had drawers on either side of the leaf in the middle with a huge oval mirror attached. The little cushioned bench that went with it fit inside the space between the drawers. Maddie stared at Heath in the mirror, her heart beating faster.

Heath walked over to her and pulled her up from the padded bench, then took the seat himself. Then he reached for Maddie and began to pull her over his lap.

"Wait, why are you doing this, Heath?" she squeaked in alarm. She placed her hands on his thighs and stiffened them at the elbow, trying to resist him.

"On over, Maddie. Don't make it worse than it has to be." Heath replied enigmatically.

Maddie only debated a moment. Should she get angry with Heath for his highhandedness, or should she go over willingly, hoping he was playing? She looked at his face. He looked about half-and-half. Gulping, she opted for going willingly and hoping he was playing. She lay on down on her tummy, one arm reaching towards the floor and her right hand gripping his pant leg. Her bare feet were off the floor, and her small bottom perched right at his right arm's disposal.

"What have I done, Heath?" she asked plaintively.

Heath rubbed her cheeks through the thin summer gown, loving the feel of the perky mounds, bare beneath her nightie. "Well," he drawled, "I believe I heard the Sheriff say he told you to stay home. Is that true?"

Maddie was caught by surprise. "Uhh...well..." she stammered.

SWAT!

"Ouch!" yelped Maddie. Her right cheek felt the burn from his hard palm an instant after delivery.

"You're stalling, Maddie," Heath said mildly.

"Well...I...I believe he may have mentioned something like that...OUCH!" Maddie's legs shot straight out as she realized he had picked up her hairbrush and applied it to her left cheek. "That hurt, Heath!" she protested.

SMACK! SMACK! The hairbrush landed on Maddie's cheeks once again, one smack on each side.

"OW! OH! Okay! Yes...yes he did tell me that!"

"Why did he tell you that, Maddie?" Heath was rubbing her cheeks with the back of the heavy wooden brush warningly.

Maddie gulped; with her rear already burning she didn't want to stall anymore. "Because he thought it might get dangerous, and he said he didn't want to have to watch out for me," she spoke quickly.

"I see," replied Heath. "Thank you for telling me that, Maddie. He was right; it could have gotten dangerous. Luckily enough, it didn't."

"But, Heath, I was worried for you, and I knew there was another girl up there, and I thought she might need my support...honest! I wasn't trying to be deliberately disobedient, and the Sheriff is not

you...I mean, he has no right to really tell me what to do!"

"Wrong, Maddie, he does have the right to do as he sees fit in the enforcement of the law. You should have obeyed him."

"But, Heath," Maddie wailed, knowing a spanking was coming then, "I was scared for you; I wanted to help!"

"And I appreciate that, honey," Heath replied. "And because you've been truthful and honest with me, and I know you were sincere in your motives, I'm only going to give you ten swats with your hairbrush. If I'd thought you were just disobeying for the heck of it, I'd be angry."

"Ten," yelled Maddie. "Noooooo...Heathhh...not ten!"

But Heath was already pulling up her nightie and baring her rounded bottom. "I could add more, Maddie," offered Heath helpfully, pinning the gown under his arm and adjusting her bottom a little higher over his lap. "After all, putting yourself in possible danger should be quite an offense."

Maddie quickly backpedaled. "No...no...ten is fine...honest!"

"I thought it was fair," he replied smoothly, lifting his arm.

Maddie yelped and squirmed as Heath began to spank her with the hairbrush. He spanked with a measured rhythm, making sure each swat was felt fully before the next one was applied.

He was at number eight when the tears began overflowing her eyes, and she began to sob, her cries of pain getting louder and higher.

They were both surprised when the door slammed open, and Cecilia stood there on bare feet, her eyes wild, her breast heaving. Heath looked at her and realized she was shocked. He quickly pulled

Maddie's nightie down and spoke. "What's wrong, Cecilia?" Maddie scrambled to get up, and Heath allowed her to, standing up with her.

They were doubly surprised when Cecilia whirled around and ran back into her own room, slamming the door behind her.

Maddie wiped her eyes with trembling hands. "M...maybe I better go see if she is o...okay," she hiccuped.

"No, I'll go," replied Heath. "I think she thought I was hurting you for some reason. She got the wrong impression, and I need to straighten this out." He kissed Maddie gently on the forehead, and then left the room.

Heath thought back about what they knew of Cecilia, which wasn't much. They didn't even know how Pappy had met her. Obviously, though, Heath spanking Maddie had scared her. Although she knew what a spanking was because Matt had spanked her.

Realizing that all Cecilia would have heard would be smacks and cries of pain, perhaps she had misinterpreted it...and perhaps it had happened before...her parent's maybe? Or someone she loved being hurt?

Heath knocked lightly on the door and then opened it. He could see from the moonlight in the window that Cecilia was curled in a ball in the bed beneath the covers. He walked over and lit the gas lamp, then turned to uncover her.

Cecilia bit her fist as she jammed it into her mouth in a tight ball. Maddie was crying! She was crying out in pain...Heath must be hurting her! She could hear the sound of something hitting flesh...was Heath hitting her? Her Papa had hit her

Mama. Many, many times before they ever ran away!

The night he found them, he had hit her and kept on hitting her over and over. Her Mama had screamed, but he didn't stop. She had hated it...it scared her, and her Mama had died.

She couldn't stand it anymore...she had to know. She had to help. She got up and ran into the next bedroom and realized that Heath wasn't hitting Maddie the same way Papa had hit her mother. He was spanking her! Then she was embarrassed and ran back to her own room to hide.

Cecilia started when the covers were pulled back, and she looked up to see Heath staring kindly down at her. She was embarrassed once again at having disturbed them.

Heath looked down at the flushed cheeks and the bright eyes and wondered what she was thinking. She sat up quickly, pulling her gown down around her knees and hugging them, not willing to look him in the face.

He talked softly to her. "I wasn't hurting Maddie, Cecilia. I love her. I would never hurt her. But I do spank her when she deserves it. That is different...do you understand?"

Cecilia bobbed her head up and down, but still wouldn't look at him.

"I don't like it when Maddie does things that could get her hurt...that scares me and makes me upset with her. I spank her so she won't do those things again." He lifted her chin to look in her eyes. "Do you understand?"

Again, Cecilia bobbed her head.

Heath decided to play a hunch. "Cecilia, did someone you knew before get hurt?"

She bobbed her head vigorously this time.

"Was it...your mother maybe?"

The girl before him looked stricken, and her lips trembled as if she would speak, but no sound came out. Then she slowly nodded her head up and down.

Once again, Heath spoke hesitantly, not wanting to cause her any more pain. "Did your father hurt your mother, Cecilia?"

Tears spurted into her eyes then, and she hid her face in her hands, and Heath knew he was right. Something bad had happened to this young girl, something that happened when she was small. Grimly, he decided he would find out!

He reached out and drew her into his arms, holding her gently. Silent sobs shook her slender shoulders, and he rubbed her back soothingly. Finally, her shaking subsided, and Heath lay her back on her pillow. "You get some rest now, honey," he said quietly. "No one is going to hurt you. You're safe here."

Cecelia smiled as he tucked the covers up under her chin. He smiled at her and then stood up. He walked over and turned out the gas lamp and once again the room was bathed only in silver moonlight. He watched as she turned over to her side and pulled the covers up around her ear. Then he let himself out.

Matt lay with an arm propped behind his head, the ring with the snake crest in his hand, studying it. It might be a clue to Cecilia's past...then again...it might not. He had asked Heath to let him take it to a jeweler's over in Panier Flats and see if it meant anything to him. A nice ring, very expensive and it looked fairly old.... like an antique maybe.

He slipped it into the drawer on his nightstand and lay back, thinking about the girl. He allowed himself to mentally appraise the glimpse of her

body, this time slowly so he could savor it. She was a little on the thin side, but she was a pretty girl, and he felt attracted to her in spite of himself. It was clear that she considered herself as belonging to him. He was surprised to find that felt good.

Marriage was not high on his list of priorities, but at twenty- two, he knew he should be thinking about it. Children were important to him, and he had always wanted a big happy family. He had never had that growing up. His parents had fought a lot, and he only had one brother. They had moved back to Louisville to make his mother happy, taking his younger brother with them. He had stayed in Brocton.

Sheriff Crockett always gave him a hard time about the girls chasing him, but the truth was, Matt was rather shy on the inside. He had an athletic body that he kept in good shape with ranchwork on the side, and women seemed to like him, but he didn't care much about looks. He liked women very much...it didn't matter much what they looked like...he just liked them, and they liked him back.

There was something about Cecilia, though, that appealed to him. He felt protective of her and wanted to take care of her and keep her safe. Was it because she couldn't speak, and he could feel her innocence? Or was there more to it than that? He didn't really know, and he sighed deeply. He supposed he could get out of it if he really wanted to, but did he want to? He was wondering how her soft rosy lips would feel if he kissed them when he finally fell asleep.

That day Matt was up at sunrise, eager to get on his way. At the train station, he had just purchased a ticket to Panier Flats when the Sheriff came in.

"Morning, Matt, I saw you come in here. Heath's already been in and told me what you all found last

night up at Pappy's." Sheriff Crockett touched the brim of his hat in greeting and smiled at the young man. "I sent a telegram to the Boston police department to see if we get any response to Pappy's death announcement. I'll let you know what's going on as soon as I hear something."

"Sure thing, Sheriff." Matt grinned lazily, a blonde curl dangling on the side of his forehead. "I'm headed to Pannier flats to the jewelers to see if they can shed any light on this ring." He opened his palm and showed it to the Sheriff.

"I figured you were. Heath told me he gave it to you. Seeing as how this is your regular day off, I won't dock you for not letting me know where you were going." He grinned. "Although I should dock you a day's pay for yesterday. Had to round up deputies and pay them to get your ass out of a sling."

"If you had gotten it out of the sling, I wouldn't mind," snorted Matt. "But, as you may recall, I'm engaged. You even congratulated me yourself."

The Sheriff's eyes twinkled. "There's worse things than getting married you know."

"What...death?"

Sheriff Crockett chuckled and shook his head. "Get out of here, you faker. You kind of like that little girl; you're not fooling me none."

Matt just grinned and saluted two fingers to the Sheriff as he turned and headed for the train.

Heath gaped in astonishment.

"You like her?" asked Maddie excitedly.

"That's an understatement, Maddie," he replied, unable to take her eyes off Cecilia. "You've done wonders, honey, I'm proud of you."

Cecilia smiled at Heath and blushed as she stood there in the dress Maddie had let her borrow. She fingered the lace on the bodice in wonder. She hadn't seen anything this fine.

Maddie was thrilled. She had done a complete changeover of Cecilia from Cecil. The effect was stunning. She had washed and cut her hair, clipping off all the spiky ends and evening it out until it lay in soft shining curls against her well-shaped head. Her ears were small and delicate, and she had a long slender neck that would enable her to wear anything.

Then she had lent her a pretty dress in buttercup yellow with puffy sleeves and a square neckline. The bodice was covered in lace, and the sleeves were gathered just below the puff with matching yellow ribbons and eyelet lace peeking out from under the edges. It fitted snugly around her waist, and a long vee of an inset lace panel ran down the front of the dress. It was dainty and feminine, and the color enhanced the creaminess of Cecilia's skin and the raven darkness of her hair. Her feet were bare, but the change was amazing.

"You look beautiful, Cecilia," said Heath, smiling at her.

Cecilia just smiled.

"You are so pretty, Cecilia," enthused Maddie.

Cecilia really smiled then and blushed. She looked almost embarrassed at Maddie's words.

"She must like that word pretty," Heath commented. "That's the second time she has reacted to it. It must mean something to her."

"Do you like the word pretty?" Maddie asked her curiously.

Cecilia bobbed her head up and down. Her eyes glowed.

"I can't wait for Matt to see her."

"I don't think he will be here today," Heath replied. "I believe he was going to Pannier Flats."

Cecilia's face fell at the news. She picked at the lace panel.

"Now, don't you worry, we have plenty to do to keep us busy until tomorrow," Maddie said encouragingly.

Cecilia smiled weakly and bobbed her head. She was trying not to be too disappointed. She really wanted to see Matt. She missed him already.

"I know, let's go bake him some cookies," Maddie enthused. "Then you'll have a present for him when he gets here tomorrow!"

Cecilia smiled eagerly at that and followed Maddie into the kitchen. It soon became apparent that Cecilia didn't know a lot about baking. Small wonder, Maddie thought. Living in the mountains with that old piece of a stove, she doubted the girl had ever done any at all. Well, she had lots of things to teach her...like how to write, cook, and sew...all those womanly things she had never learned. This was going to be so much fun!

"HMMMM..." came the musings of the jeweler as he perused the stones through his little glass. "Yes, certainly authentic...very old. Where did you get this?"

"It belongs to a friend of mine," Matt replied cautiously, not willing to give out any more information than he had too. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, because the crest is very familiar."

"How so?" Matt asked.

"I seem to remember a bulletin that came out about 8 or 9 years ago, with a picture that resembles this one if I'm remembering correctly."

"A bulletin...you mean a police bulletin?"

"No...no...this was from a family in England. It seems a family heirloom had disappeared, and they had suspicions that it might turn up in America, so they sent notices out to the major jewelers to be on the lookout should it come up to be sold." He squinted up at Matt. "They wanted it back I believe."

"Do you have a copy of this bulletin? I'd like to see the picture."

"Are you in law enforcement?"

"Yes, I'm the deputy in Brocton." Matt flipped his vest over and showed the jeweler his badge.

"Okay, just a minute." He reached beneath the counter and pulled out a large dusty ledger with paper ends sticking out here and there. "I'm not saying this is it, mind you, just that it looked similar to that."

He flipped open the heavy square ledger book and leafed through a couple of inches of records. "Let me see...1901...1902...1906." He took out a stack of papers and began to leaf through them. It took a couple of minutes, but finally the jeweler exclaimed, "Ah, here it is!" He handed Matt a piece of paper that was old and faded, but you could see the picture of the ring on it.

Matt took it and peered closely at the ring. The jeweler was right! It did look surprisingly like the ring they had found in the leather bag. The message on the leaflet was very generic. Just stated that anyone with any information regarding this ring should report it to the address listed below. It did state that it was a family heirloom that had been in the family for generations, and the family wanted it back. Nothing about how it came to be lost or who it belonged to. "I believe this could be the same ring," murmured Matt. "Can I take this with me?"

"You'll have to sign for it," replied the small balding man. "I keep all those bulletins like that in case stuff ever shows up."

Matt figured it was more like he kept it for the reward money listed for its return, but he merely nodded and signed the paper, keeping his opinion to himself. Then he went to the local sheriff's office and had the secretary prepare a letter to send to the address listed on the bulletin. After personally seeing that it was mailed, he decided to go to the bank and put the ring in a safe deposit box for safekeeping. Something odd was going on. He wondered how Pappy figured into all this. Was it Pappy's family that wanted the ring back? And, if so, why was the address in London rather than in Boston?

He decided to go back to the police station. He spent the afternoon going through old newspapers from Boston, but could come up with nothing except the article about Pappy disappearing and being presumed dead.

Another odd thing struck his mind. Maddie had told him that Pappy had never known Cecilia was a girl. That could only mean one thing. He hadn't known her before he met her. Was it possible the only connection between Cecilia and Pappy was mere chance? If so, Pappy had either been using her, or was extremely charitable, he didn't know which. And he had said Cecilia was his sister's child. A lie? He sighed heavily...so many unanswered questions.

Matt supposed he might as well go back to Brocton and wait. If they didn't hear something about the ring in a few weeks, maybe he would go to Boston and try to find out more about Pappy's family. Maybe there was a tie in there somehow, anyway. It was late in the evening when he finally

arrived back in Brocton, wondering if he should try to go see Cecilia tonight. It was already getting dark and going on 9:00pm. Folks were starting to turn in by that time. He found himself surprisingly eager to see her again, but he decided he better wait. He was surprised when he looked up and saw Sheriff Crockett standing inside the train station.

"I've got some news for you," he said, when Matt walked in. "It's about Pappy."

The two men sat at a table in the back of the little bar and the Sheriff began. "I got a telephone call from the Chief of Police in Boston, right after he got that telegram. It seems that the family wants more proof that Pappy's dead. His brother is coming out here to collect his things and inspect them for himself."

"Wasn't his brother the only one left in his family?" Matt asked.

"Yes, he was. And, apparently, there are matters of estate that can't be solved until proof of death is established.

"I thought he had no other family?" Matt was perplexed.

"He didn't, until he was presumed dead. Apparently, he has a woman claiming to be his wife and a son by that woman who wants a piece of Pappy's estate. The paperwork has been held up for years now due to lack of evidence of Pappy's demise." He chuckled.

"They couldn't get him declared legally dead?" Matt asked curiously.

"Not until he'd be 100 years old," grinned the Sheriff. "Then the proof is no longer required."

"How old was he?"

"Don't rightly know." Sheriff Crockett drained the last of his beer and stood up. "Time for me to call it a night." He picked up his hat and placed it on

his iron gray waves. Hitching up his pants once again, he thought as how he might need to go on a diet or something. This job was making him soft.

At fifty-five, Sheriff Dan Crockett was a big rawboned man with smile wrinkles around his face and mouth. He was generally in a good humor, and the people in Brocton liked him well enough that he had been Sheriff for twenty years now, deputy before that. His dark wavy hair had turned silvery gray by the time he was 40, often earning him the nickname of "the Eagle". His sharp brown eyes had not dimmed with age, however, and he was as alert as he had ever been.

"Me too," agreed Matt, unfolding his long legs to get up. He picked up his brown leather jacket and slung it over his shoulder after leaving a tip on the table for Angie.

Looking at the two men, it was easy to see that Matt was the taller, standing at 6ft 2 inches, but the Sheriff wasn't far behind, just a little heavier around his belly.

"Night, fellas," called Angie from behind the bar. Her twinkling blue eyes and ready smile made her a favorite, and Matt had dated her a few times himself.

"Night, Angie," they chorused, and they turned to leave.

"I wonder when Samson and the boys will be coming in to check on you?" Sheriff Crockett asked slyly. His amused eyes slid sideways to get Matt's reaction to his question.

"You really think they will?" Matt was skeptical. He figured once out of the hills, they would leave him alone. They had had their day, blustering and threatening, but here among normal folks, they didn't have a chance of enforcing their ridiculous mandate.

"Oh I KNOW they will! That Samson is like a bloodhound on a day old trail...he never lets go of something once his mind is made up. Oh yeah, they'll be back all right, you can take that to the bank."

Matt stopped and stared. "You can't be serious."

"I'm dead serious, boy!" The Sheriff's eyes were still twinkling, but his voice did sound serious.

"You don't really think they'd shoot me if I didn't get married!" Matt was scornful.

"Lets put it this way, son. About eight years ago, one of the Johnson boys got to hankering after a little mountain girl name of Susan. Course, he wasn't interested in marrying her, he just liked the cut of her jibe so to speak. Well, she came up pregnant. Samson and his brother's chased that boy all the way to Panier Flats and hijacked him, brought him back here and married her to him right under the shotguns."

"And you let that happen?" Matt asked in amazement.

"The way I figured it, the girl was willing...the preacher was willing...and by the time the boys brought him back from Panier Flats, he was willing too." Sheriff Crockett chuckled. "I didn't ask what means they used to make him willing, but believe me, son, those mountain boys can be mighty persuasive when they want to be." The Sheriff looked at Matt, a hint of steel in those amiable eyes. "The way I see it, a man shouldn't be messing with a young girl like that if he don't intend to marry her."

Matt bristled. "But I didn't!"

"All right, I believe you. But, if that little gal was to come up pregnant or something, I wouldn't stand in Samson's way, you get my drift?" He laughed and clapped Matt on the shoulder.

Matt wasn't fooled by the Sheriff's friendly laughter. He had delivered the message he intended to, and Matt understood him perfectly. They parted company, and Matt rode home. Who would have thought one little girl could cause him so much trouble...and no one had even known she was a girl less than 48 hours ago!

Chapter Five

It had been almost a month since Cecilia had been brought from the mountains to stay with Maddie and Heath. Samson and his brothers had been to town twice now to check on the progress of finding out just who Cecilia was.

Matt had made a trip to Boston and talked extensively with Pappy's...or rather Marcus Peyton Whitehead's brother and could find no link to Cecilia whatsoever. Andrew Whitehead said that Amelia and Marcus had never had any children. That had explained the woman's photo in Pappy's Bible. It had been his wife. Shortly after Marcus had come home from the war, Amelia had died of polio.

Marcus had then left suddenly, reappearing two months later to withdraw the \$110,000.00 from the bank and to sign power of attorney over to his brother. He had said he was taking an extended vacation around the world and didn't know when he would be back. They had said goodbye on a beautiful day in Boston in the month of April, and Andrew had never heard from him again.

As time had gone by, he had searched for him. He had exhausted all means possible of finding him and came up empty...until the telegram from Sheriff Crockett some forty years later, informing him of his brother's death. But nowhere in Pappy's past had a boy named Cecil ever figured in, and Andrew was at a loss to know anything about it. Andrew had never imagined that his only brother would disappear into the mountains of Kentucky to live the life of an uneducated hermit.

Matt wondered what circumstances would be so distasteful, or sorrow so deep that it would lead a man like Marcus Whitehead to cut all ties with

family and friends. He guessed they would never know.

He had thought he knew Pappy...at least a little bit. He realized now as he thought back on it, that he and Pappy had never discussed anything intimate. Their conversations had always been very general, and he had never stayed very long. Just making sure the man who had saved his life was okay and that he didn't need anything. Of course, Pappy had always said he had all he needed. Matt felt regret that he hadn't tried harder to get to know him.

It was Sunday afternoon, and Maddie had invited Matt to supper that evening. He was on his way out to their farm, looking forward to being with Cecilia again. His heart beat fast as her image in the white dress at church this morning drifted across his mind. She seemed to grow more beautiful each time he saw her, her soft green eyes lighting up with pleasure when he came to visit.

The first time he had gone to see her at the Preacher's house, and she had been wearing that yellow dress, he had simply stared in fascination. He had thought her thin, but that was not the case. With the soft material clinging to her narrow waist, she had a very womanly form, full and well shaped. She was just a small person, graceful as a deer, and he felt like he had been stomach punched when she ran out to meet him.

She had stopped abruptly, her hands behind her back, blushing as he had dismounted and faced her, but her eyes were eagerly seeking his, and he had smiled at her. When he did, her smile had flashed back again, and it was like the sun coming out on a cloudy day. He had been mesmerized.

Maddie kept him apprised of her progress, insisting that Cecilia was very intelligent and

learned quickly. They had taken her to Doctor Addison in town, and he had examined her, but could find no physical reason as to why she couldn't talk. He concluded something must have shocked her so badly that it had traumatized her at some point in time. When asked if she would ever be able to talk again, he had replied that it would depend on Cecilia. It was his professional opinion that she had a mental block and until she wanted to speak badly enough, most likely she never would.

However, she had taken quickly to learning all that Maddie could teach her and was making great progress in cooking and sewing and was practicing her writing. They had worked out a system to teach her words, and Cecilia was picking it up fast. Maddie predicted it wouldn't be long until she could at least make people understand her in the written form; she already could write many of the words they used daily.

Matt pulled up in front of the house and was slightly disappointed that she didn't come flying out the door to greet him as she usually did. Looping the reins around the hitching post, he knocked on the door.

Cecilia opened it and grabbed his arm, pulling him inside. She was excited, her usual state it seemed these days, and Matt laughed at her as she pulled him along to the kitchen and picked up the paper she had been working on at the kitchen table. On it were printed the words, "I love Matt." She showed it to him and waited expectantly for his reaction.

Matt looked quizzically at Maddie, and she grinned and shrugged her shoulders. Then he looked back at Cecilia, not certain what to say. Finally, he spoke enthusiastically. "This is great, Cecilia, your printing is getting much better, and

you're learning new words." He knew immediately that wasn't what she wanted to hear, just as he had expected, and he felt like a heel when her face fell. He felt even worse when she took the paper and laid it back on the table, her fingers playing with the edges, and avoided looking at him.

He took her shoulders and pulled her around to face him. "Hey, what's this sad look all about, huh?" He tipped her chin up and silently cursed himself when he saw the mistiness in her eyes. He knew she wanted him to say he loved her, but he couldn't make the words come. He had never said that to a woman in his life, and he wasn't sure he did love her. It would be better not to say it if he didn't mean it...wouldn't it?

They were interrupted when Heath opened the front door and called, "Matt, you better come out here."

Matt turned and walked towards Heath, almost relieved at the reprieve.

"Deputy Matthew McCracken?" asked a deep voice as he stepped out on the porch. The man asking was of medium build, dark hair laced with silver and a pair of clear green eyes. A small well-clipped mustache adorned his upper lip, and he had a British accent.

"Yes, I'm Matt McCracken," responded Matt. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm sorry to intrude on your supper hour, but the Sheriff said I could find you here. I've come over a thousand miles to see you, and I found I didn't want to wait a minute longer once I got here." He stopped, his face draining of all color when Cecilia stepped out on the porch. "My God," he whispered. "Cecilia?"

Cecilia looked warily at the man. How did he know her name? He seemed vaguely familiar, and

images of a man tossing her above his shoulders flashed through her mind. She was laughing and happy, but that was before Mama and her had left home. She stepped closer to Matt, feeling insecure suddenly.

Matt slipped an arm protectively about her shoulders. "Do you know this girl?" he asked cautiously.

The man continued to stare at Cecilia, his eyes drinking her in hungrily as if starved to death for the sight of her. "She is the image of my sister Amanda," he finally croaked. "Amanda and Cecilia disappeared off the face of the earth eight years ago, along with her bloody brute of a husband. No one has seen or heard from any of them since. Until this." He held out the telegram from the police station in Pannier Flats that Matt had sent to the address for information about the ring. "Instead of replying, I came directly to America, and then on here from Pannier Flats, to find you." He turned to face Matt, his face twisted in pain. "Where is Amanda?"

"I think you better come inside," Heath inserted. "Come in and have some supper with us. There is a lot to talk about."

"Thank you," replied the man. "My name is Adam Wentworth." He held his hand out to Heath and Matt for a handshake.

"I'm afraid we don't know where Amanda is," replied Heath to Adam's question as they seated themselves around Maddie's dining room table. He went on to explain how Cecilia had suddenly appeared at Pappy's place as Cecil, and no one knew where she had come from except that Pappy had said she was his sister's child. It wasn't until Pappy had died that the fact that Cecilia was even a girl had come to light.

"I can't get over it," Adam replied, shaking his head in amazement. "My niece, living like a boy in the mountains and no sign of Amanda. Could this Pappy have done something to her and stolen Cecilia?"

At that statement, Cecilia began to vigorously shake her head no.

Heath had left the room and returned at that point with the leather pouch containing the man's wedding band and the woman's wedding set. "This was in the box with Pappy's things," he explained, handing it to Adam. "Since the family ring was in this bag, I'm assuming these rings must have belonged to your sister and her husband."

"What's wrong, Cecilia," asked Adam gently, taking the bag and setting it aside for the moment. "Are you saying Pappy never harmed your mother?"

Cecilia bobbed her head up and down. She looked shaken at the conversation, her face going pale.

Adam leaned forward in his chair, staring intently at her. "Do you know who I am, Cecilia?"

She shook her head no.

"I am your mother's brother. I visited you in Scotland once, when you were five years old, remember? I threw you up in the air, and we had tea. I stayed for a couple of days and then had to go back home to England. You showed me your doll named Haddie, remember?"

Cecilia tentatively nodded her head up and down as if trying to remember. He faced her across the dining room table. "May I ask you some questions, Cecilia? Do you think you are up to answering them?"

She hesitated, and then nodded yes.

"Did you leave Scotland with your Mama and Papa?"

She shook her head no.

Adam stared at her for a moment, looking perplexed, and then he leaned forward again as if another thought had occurred to him. "Did you and your mother leave Scotland alone?"

At this she smiled and bobbed yes.

"What are you getting at, Mr. Wentworth," Matt asked suspiciously.

"If I'm right, Sir, I believe that Michael McCormick was mistreating his wife. When I visited my sister at their Scotland home, I noticed bruises on her jaw line that were just disappearing. She said she fell down the stairs, but she seemed nervous and apprehensive every time the huge brute was in the room. I never found him very likeable myself, but she had decided to marry him against our father's wishes, and they made a hurried affair of it before it could become a big society wedding. I never did know what the big rush was. My father had said she made her bed, let her lie in it. Being so far away, we didn't visit her often; he and my father did not get along, so they didn't visit us either. My mother and I missed her, however, and so I went to see her when Cecelia was about five. I haven't seen her since."

Cecilia cocked her head as if she were listening intently, which indeed, she was. She was remembering this man now, and she was getting excited.

"You do know that perhaps all these questions might upset Cecilia badly, don't you?" Matt frowned. "Something traumatic has happened to her to cause of her to lose her voice, and, if you hit on it, it may be extremely painful to her."

"Has a doctor examined her?" Adam asked.

"Yes," Matt replied. "And he feels it's a trauma induced cause. That she may never speak again, unless something happens that makes her desire it so badly she can overcome the block."

"I understand your concern, and while I have no wish to cause her further pain, I've come thousands of miles to find out what happened to my sister."

Cecilia impulsively reached out and grabbed Adam's hand and shook her head yes, as if she wanted him to go on.

"Since Cecilia seems okay with it, you can continue," Matt said reluctantly.

Adam cleared his throat. "Very well then." He looked at Cecilia and watched her carefully. "Cecilia, I'm going to ask you a very hard question, are you ready?"

She nodded her head...yes.

"All right then...is your mother...dead?" He held his breath as he awaited her reply. It wasn't long in coming.

Cecilia nodded her head up and down slowly, her eyes wide and frightened.

Adam dropped his head into his hands and groaned. He had been afraid of that. Finally, he looked up, his face a mask of pain. "Did your Papa have anything to do with it?"

Cecilia nodded again, tears coming to her eyes, and she hung her head.

Matt put his arm around the girl, and felt her trembling. A sudden inspiration hit him. "Cecilia, honey, was Pappy there when your mother died?"

Her face pale, Cecilia nodded again.

"So that's it," Matt murmured. "One more question, Cecilia, did Pappy try to stop your Papa from hurting your Mama?"

Cecilia nodded a stricken look on her face. She brought her hand up as if she was shooting a gun

and made the shooting motion. The message was clear. Pappy had shot her father.

The others looked at each other grimly. They were all thinking the same thing. Pappy had come upon the couple fighting and had tried to interfere and killed Michael McCormick. McCormick must have killed Cecilia's mother, or was trying to when Pappy had found them. So Pappy had taken the wedding rings and the valuable ring from her mother and kept them...presumably for Cecil one day. He had been left with the youngster and not knowing what to do with him because he was in hiding himself, he had just taken him with him.

"Well, it all fits," murmured Adam painfully. "Amanda must have run away from McCormick and come to America, hoping to start over where he couldn't find her. He must have followed her."

"And she dressed Cecilia as a boy to make her less noticeable should her husband come looking for her," added Maddie.

"Why didn't she just return home?" Heath asked.

"You didn't know my father," replied Adam bitterly. "She may have asked to, and he wouldn't let her for all I know. I know my mother wasn't happy with him after Amanda's disappearance, but she never disagreed with him to my knowledge. He was very upset with the disappearance of the ring, however, and did make an extended search for it, but until your telegram, nothing had come of it."

Adam sighed. "Being too old and feeble to travel, he showed your letter to me and insisted I come looking for the ring. Of course, my mother and I wanted to know what happened to Amanda and Cecilia, so I agreed. It pains me greatly to find my sister is gone. I don't even know where she died or if she was even buried."

Cecilia reached out and touched his hand and nodded her head yes.

"Do you mean she was buried?" Adam asked gruffly.

She nodded yes again.

"By Pappy?"

Again...the nod yes.

"But you have no idea where I bet or couldn't tell me if you did," Adam finished.

She shook her head no at that one, her eyes sad.

"Well, all that remains then is for me to take you home with me," Adam said heavily. "Mother will want to see you, of course, you are her granddaughter. I have a daughter as well now, a bit younger than you are...." He stopped as he realized Cecilia looked upset. She was shaking her head no and holding her hand out as if to ward him off.

Matt felt alarmed at the idea of Cecilia leaving. When she threw herself in his arms, they closed protectively around her.

"You don't want to meet the rest of your family?" he asked, dismayed.

"Cecilia and I are engaged," Matt blurted out, and then flushed.

Adam arched an eyebrow in query. "Oh? Well, that could complicate things, I must say! How did this happen? I thought she was a boy until a short while ago!"

So they went on to explain the shotgun wedding, the subsequent engagement and all that had happened thus far with Cecilia. They talked well into the evening, had dinner and Matt finally asked Adam if he would like to stay at his home until decisions were made, and he was ready to travel back to London.

Matt took a short walk with Cecelia in the moonlight before he left. They stopped by the corral, and he placed an arm on the railing, facing her in the moonlight where he could see her expressive face. "I'd like you to think about returning to London with your Uncle, Cecilia." He saw the hurt in her eyes and quickly went on. "It doesn't mean that we won't be engaged. We are." He smiled at her, and she smiled back tentatively, looking relieved. "However, I think it would be a good experience for you to meet your family and learn a little more about them and about life before we get married."

He was unprepared for what happened next. Cecilia pouted. It was one expression he had not seen from her yet. She folded her arms, her bottom lip dropped, and she stood there looking defiantly at him and shaking her head no. She was so irresistible he couldn't help dropping a kiss on her lower lip. The softness of that lip did strange things to him, but he lifted his head and whispered. "No defiance from you, young lady, remember what happens when you disobey me?"

Cecelia remembered, and her face fell. She didn't want Matt to be mad with her and maybe spank her again. But she didn't want to go away from him either! Confused and angry, she turned and stalked towards the barn, intent on getting away from him for the moment.

Matt didn't like her attitude of turning her back on him and stalking off, so he started after her and grabbed her arm to whirl her around to face him.

Reacting angrily at this treatment, Cecilia quickly stomped on his foot with her booted heel, and when he yelped and hopped on one foot, she turned and ran into the barn.

Matt swore softly and limped after her.

The other three had been watching from the porch, and Adam chuckled. "I don't know what he said to her, but it looks like she has her mother's temper. Amanda always was a little spitfire."

"I hope he's not planning on treating her harshly," snapped Maddie, like a mother hen worried over her chick.

"Matt doesn't strike me as that sort of man," Adam replied puzzled at Maddie's words. "A spanking, perhaps, but I can't see him abusing her...can you?" He looked worriedly at the barn too.

Heath chuckled at Maddie's indignant huff. "No, Adam, Matt's not like that. But Maddie doesn't think spanking is good either."

Adam's green eyes gleamed in understanding. "Ah, now I understand. I'm afraid I'd have to disagree with you on that, Mrs. Danvers."

Maddie humphed indignantly and started towards the barn, but Heath grabbed her arm. "Let them work it out, Maddie."

Matt had just stepped inside the barn when he was met with a curry brush bouncing off his chest. "Cecilia, you stop that right now," he ordered softly, looking around for her in the dimness. He turned up the gas lantern hanging inside the door, so he could see better and spied her by Egg's stall. He picked up the brush by its handle and started towards her.

Cecilia picked up another brush and flung it at the advancing man. So he wanted to get rid of her did he? Her mind had worked it all out very quickly. He didn't want to marry her at all; he wanted her to go to England just so he could get rid of her. Furiously, she looked around for something else to throw at him!

"Cecilia! Stop throwing things, little girl, or I *AM* going to spank your butt," ground out Matt, knocking aside the second brush before it hit him. It

still stung the bone in the side of his arm and only served to make him mad.

Cecilia ignored his threats, her anger at his callous treatment of her making her careless. She grabbed a bridal hanging in front of Bacon's stall and threw it as hard as she could. Her green eyes glowed appreciatively as the bridal reins snapped Matt in the face when he grabbed it in midair.

"That does it," snapped Matt, "you just earned yourself a good paddling." He threw down the bridle and advanced menacingly on her, the curry brush in his left hand.

Cecilia backed up until her back was against the barn wall, her fingers scrabbling for something else to throw. She looked above her at the wall and saw the different tools hanging there. She was reaching for one when Matt caught her.

He grabbed her by the arm and began to drag her towards the hay bales stacked in the spare stalls and spilling out and around the left side of the barn. She resisted, but her strength was no match for Matt's work hardened muscles, and he brought her easily over his lap when he sat down.

Cecilia was kicking and thrashing for all she was worth, and Matt had to drop the curry brush to get a good hold on her, but he was determined to teach her a lesson.

Cecilia panicked suddenly, realizing she had pushed him too far. Even if he didn't want her, apparently he was ready to blister her rear end. She tried hard to get away from him, but she soon found herself with her nose down towards the barn floor and her legs being pinned under Matt's heavy calf. She bucked frantically and tried to push up, but she couldn't get any real leverage. Her left arm was supporting her on the floor, and her right arm flew back to cover her bottom. It was soon pinned

at the small of her back by Matt's left hand, and she felt helpless, finally, well and truly caught! Pain and fire suddenly exploded in her backside when Matt brought the curry brush down on her wriggling cheeks!

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

Several times Matt applied the brush to the rounded bottom displayed so nicely beneath the white cotton dress. He was careful not to spank too hard because he couldn't see the effect he was having. If not for the trio standing on the porch, Matt would have bared her bottom, but he did not want to be walked in on. "Are you ready to stop throwing things at me?" he asked, watching her head.

When she bobbed quickly to the affirmative, he picked her up and sat her on his knee, looking for further defiance in her green eyes. Instead of defiance he saw accusation along with the tears sliding down her cheeks and trembling lips. He tried to think what could have made her so angry with him. He cupped the side of her face with his hand. "Cecilia, I just asked you to think about it because I thought you might like it. You don't have to go if you don't want to."

She just stared at him, her expression not changing. Tentatively, he offered, "Would you like me to go with you?"

Her eyes lit up, and she nodded yes, then she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him fiercely.

He chuckled and hugged her back. He held her tightly, her small breasts against his chest making his breathing increase. Gently, he disengaged her arms and pushed her back slightly. When she looked up at him, he couldn't help but drop his head and kiss her gently on those full trembling lips.

Once started, he couldn't stop himself, and his hand stole to the back of her head, his lips plundering hers more deeply as he held her in place to receive him.

Cecilia didn't even try to pull away; she leaned into the kiss, savoring the feeling of his firm lips on hers, his touch making her stomach leap. Dizziness filled her senses, and she wanted to melt into him and stay there.

At last, he pulled away from her, his breathing erratic. "Come on," he said thickly. "We better get back inside, or your Uncle will be having a shotgun wedding tonight."

Chapter Six

Adam Wentworth scowled at the three mountain men standing in front of him. "Now see here, chaps, Cecilia is MY niece, and I'll decide what is best for her. And, right now, being forced into a wedding is NOT the best thing for her."

"If yer really her Uncle, then you should be hankering fer her to git married!" Samson replied, scowling back at him through the black beard that covered most of his face.

"Where you been all these years?" asked Jacob suspiciously, hitching his pants up around his bouncing belly.

"We're jest looking out fer the little gel," added Slim. "She done spent the night with the deputy, so by rights, they need to git hitched...the sooner the better."

"They are engaged to be married, and Matt has agreed to come to England with us, so she can visit her family. None of us have seen her for years, and her grandmother would like to see her." Adam refused to be daunted by these uncivilized men.

He turned to Jacob. "As for where I've been, I've been in England, of course. When my sister disappeared with Cecilia, no one knew where she had gone, and all attempts to find her finally had to cease. But we never gave up hope."

His green eyes gleamed scornfully. "Perhaps your friend, Pappy, should have tried a little harder to find her family, and then we wouldn't be in this situation!"

"Now hold on thar," roared Jacob. "You ain't got no call to be bad mouthin Pappy!"

"Gentlemen," admonished Heath as he stepped between them. "I'm sure we can settle this reasonably, can't we?"

Heath and Adam had come into the church that morning and been surprised by a visit from the mountain brothers coming to check up on Cecilia's wedding plans. They hadn't been happy to find out the wedding was on hold---indefinitely!

"If Cecilia and Matt choose to do so, I'm sure Mother would be more than happy to arrange their wedding while they are in London," insisted Adam. "In the meantime, it's really none of your business, gentlemen...and I use the term lightly."

Samson eyed him fiercely. "I reckon yer just one of them city slickers that our Pappy used to string to a tree whenever they was fixin to nose in his business. Got any plans to visit the mountains soon?" The other two guffawed at Samson's question.

"Civilized people do not act that way," stated Adam.

Heath didn't bother to mention the obvious, and again, he tried to interject a note of reason. He tried another tact.

"Gentlemen, just what exactly is your interest in seeing Cecilia married? Her family has been located, she is engaged, and we can take it from here now. After all, you are not related to her in any way, and we all understand the situation, and are doing our best to rectify it. We also know the night was innocent and no harm was done, so why are you pursuing it so rigorously?" He eyed the men curiously.

Samson, Jacob and Slim all looked at one another, rather sheepishly, Heath thought.

Finally Slim scratched his balding head and sighed. "I reckon we jest wanted to see justice done, Preacher. That, and the fact that we are just plain stubborn as mules and hate to give up something once we git started on it."

He grinned good-naturedly. "Besides, we mountain folk love weddings, and we was looking forward to it."

"Yeah, he's right, Preacher," added Jacob. "I reckon we can let you folks take over---bein her Uncle and all, right, Samson?" He was looking at Adam.

Adam nodded, slightly sarcastic. "Indeed."

Samson chewed on the wad in his jaw carefully as he pondered on it for a moment. "I suppose so," he agreed reluctantly. "But, iffen she does get married here, we want to be there to see it!"

"Now that sounds like a fair compromise," beamed Heath. "What do you say, Adam?"

"Fair enough," Adam agreed, nodding his dark head. "How do we get a message to you?"

"Don't worry about that none, if there's goin to be a weddin, we'll know." The three men turned as if on hidden cue from each other, and Samson led the way out of the church, his two brothers following him down the center aisle.

"Right curious blokes," remarked Adam as he watched them go.

Heath chuckled. "They are indeed, still a law unto themselves these mountain folks."

Cecilia stood leaning against the fence, watching the chickens running around the pen. They reminded her of her animal friends in the woods that she had left behind, and she found herself missing them sorely. She wondered if Maddie would mind if she borrowed Eggs to go check on them? But how to ask her!

She found herself wishing more and more that she could speak again. There was so much she wanted to say! She was trying really hard to learn

the alphabet, as Maddie had instructed, and she was learning more and more each day about putting words together, but it was still hard for her to write. And there were so many words she wanted to write but didn't know how.

She also found herself missing the mountains, the beauty up there, the wildness and especially, the animals. And she missed Pappy. She had grown to love the gruff old man, and she considered the cabin hers now.

After all, he had said it would always be hers. Those last few days, when he had been so ill, he had told her that it was all hers. Everything.

She had puzzled over those words---Pappy had seemed so adamant that she had just smiled and nodded her head in agreement. She didn't want him to be so anxious when he was ill, so she had just agreed to everything he said by nodding her head yes.

She had taken the papers he had given her and tucked them in her mother's Bible. His hands had trembled so as he shoved them into hers, insisting she take them and keep them always. Don't ever throw them away he had said, so she hadn't.

Someday, she hoped to be able to read it...the Bible AND the papers. But, for now, they were tucked inside the cloth bag she had brought with her, along with her mirror and a few other trinkets.

Matt had given her the shawl of her mother's and the old clothing she had worn, along with the bag, and she now used it to keep her treasures in. It was inside the bottom drawer of the dresser, in the room Maddie and Heath let her stay in.

She reflected on the idea of going to England. It had been a week now since Matt had brought up the idea, and she still wasn't happy about it. Even with Matt going with her, she didn't want to go.

Cecilia remembered when she and her mother had run away and the endless days of rocking waves and water all around them. She had been terrified and ill on the ship, and she had never wanted to do that again! More than ever, she felt frustrated that she could not explain all this to Matt.

The warm sun beat down on her shoulders through the white cotton dress. There was a slight nip in the air; it was getting on towards fall. Soon, the mountains would have snow in them, and you wouldn't be able to get in to the cabin very easily. By January, the cabin would be snowed in until the March sunshine began to melt it off.

Maddie stood watching Cecilia through the window, wondering what was wrong with the girl today. She seemed restless and frustrated and unable to concentrate very well on the chores Maddie had assigned her. She was gazing at the mountains almost longingly, and Maddie wondered if she might be homesick.

It was just a thought. Hard to imagine being homesick for that little two room cabin, but she supposed Cecilia had probably formed a bond for Pappy and the place she had spent the last eight years.

When Cecilia didn't show any signs of coming in for her writing lesson, Maddie wiped her hands on a dishtowel and walked outside to talk to her.

The morning air was crisp around her, and the leaves were already beginning to change colors. She loved this time of year; autumn was one of her favorite seasons.

"You not coming in for lessons, Cecilia? Are you okay?" Maddie put her hand on the young girl's shoulder, and Cecilia turned to face her.

Mutely, she stared at Maddie, then shrugged her slender shoulders and turned away again. How could she tell her what was on her mind and what she wanted?

"Are you missing Matt?" came the soft query.

Cecilia's eye's lit up, but then she shook her head no. She knew Matt was working, and he came by faithfully every evening to visit her. Her heart raced faster at the thought of the few tender kisses he had placed on her soft lips. He always left her yearning and eager for more, but that wasn't what was wrong.

"Is it Pappy then?" Maddie asked gently.

Cecilia nodded hesitatingly. That was partly right. Suddenly, she pointed at the chickens in the pen.

"You had chickens?"

She sighed and shook her head negatively. Without words, how could she explain the banded thief that visited her, or that he and his raccoon mate had babies that had grown into almost adults over the summer? Or the deer that came to the back door for the corn that Pappy stocked especially for them? And the tree squirrels and chipmunks that scolded when you shook their trees, and then hurried down for a treat? She loved animals and spent many hours in the woods studying them. Pappy wouldn't let her keep any critters in the house. He had said it was an invitation to a hungry bobcat or cougar to come hunting.

Pappy had kept some chickens for fresh eggs, but invariably, the foxes got them all sooner or later. She hadn't left any behind when Matt brought her out of the mountains because Pappy had fallen ill and hadn't been able to get any more.

Maddie looked puzzled and tried to understand. When Cecilia tugged on her arm, she followed her.

She led her to where Eggs was grazing in the pasture, and she pointed to the horse, then to herself and then pointed towards the mountains.

"You want to go to the mountains?" Maddie was guessing.

Cecilia nodded, her eyes shining.

"Do you know how to ride a horse?"

She nodded yes. She had ridden Pappy's mules; she could surely ride a horse! Mat had told her he had brought the mules down, and they were pastured behind his home in town. But they were slow.

With Maddie's horse, she could travel a lot faster. The more she thought about it, the more determined she became. She was very disappointed when Maddie shook her head no. She stared at her and then looked at the ground.

"I can't let you do that, Cecilia," Maddie said gently. "The mountains are no place for a young girl alone." Impulsively, she placed her hand on the girls' shoulder. "I'll tell Matt you want to go, and he can take you on his next day off. How's that?" She smiled encouragingly at her.

Cecilia didn't look too happy, and she cocked her head at Maddie. She knew Matt had to work until Sunday, and today was only Wednesday. She didn't want to wait that long. Again, she pointed to Eggs and back to herself and then to toward the mountains.

Maddie hated to see her young charge so obviously upset, but she shook her head again. "No, Cecilia, you will have to wait, I'm sorry."

Cecilia turned away, her face looking defiant and stubborn.

Maddie took her arm. "Come on, honey, don't be upset. Come help me inside." She was relieved

when the girl allowed her to lead her inside in spite of her distress.

Matt found himself checking his watch regularly, waiting for the day to be over so he could meet Cecilia for supper at Maddie and Heath's.

"She isn't going anywhere, Matt," chuckled Sheriff Crockett. He tipped his hat back and grinned a knowing grin. "You got it bad don't you, boy?"

They were riding side by side along the river, checking out the complaint about a possible cougar in the area.

Matt snorted. "Mind your own business, you old coot," he replied fondly.

The Sheriff laughed outright, knowing Matt meant no offense at all. He loved getting the kid's goat every now and then. "I notice you ain't denying it," he chortled gleefully.

"Not confirming either," responded Matt silkily. He brought Daisy up short when she began snorting and sidestepping, not wanting to continue.

Quickly, both men drew their rifles from the scabbards on the sides of their horses. Carefully, they urged their mounts forward, on the alert for anything unusual.

Cautiously, they came around the rocky outcropping along the riverbank and stopped.

Just ahead of them was a cow lying on her side, the blood still draining from her ripped throat.

The horses whinnied and danced nervously, and the men looked warily about. "That's a fresh kill," stated the Sheriff flatly.

"It looks like the complaint was valid," replied Matt. "They said it looked like the work of a mountain lion."

"Well, I'd have to agree with that, and it looks like we scared it away from its supper."

Matt frowned. "Track it or bait it?" he finally asked.

"Let's track it for awhile and see if it's stupid."

Two hours later, they were looking at the same cow; large chunks of flesh torn out of its haunches, and they grimly concluded it wasn't stupid. The big cat had doubled back and enjoyed its supper while waiting for the men to realize that and follow it around. Now it was gone again, and judging by the buzzards, it was long gone from the area.

"It's starting to get dark, no point in tracking it now. Tomorrow we'll set up some bait for it and see how smart it is then," said the Sheriff, watching the slowly sinking sun.

"Damn, I missed supper for nothing," Matt groused. "Guess I'll head on out to Heath's and see if Cecilia's saved me any."

"Kinda late ain't it," drawled the Sheriff. "Might be bad manners to show up for supper an hour and a half late." His brown eyes twinkled as they headed back towards town.

"Cecilia won't mind," replied Matt with a lazy grim. "Neither will Maddie I'm sure."

The Sheriff laughed outright. "No, I don't reckon Heath will either. You go on then, and don't be late for work tomorrow, or I might have to fire you."

Matt snorted. "Like anybody else would work for a cantankerous old codger like you!" He took the left fork towards Heath's place.

Amused, the Sheriff watched him for a minute, and then headed on. If he was lucky, his own supper was still waiting for him.

Adam and Heath came into the kitchen where the girls were fixing to put supper on the table.

While Heath kissed Maddie, Adam spoke jovially to Cecilia. "Well, young lady, I got the passage booked on the Clipper Rose today. We'll be leaving for England within the fortnight, all three of us. Are you excited?" He turned Cecilia round to smile down at her. Concern filled him at the sadness in her lovely green eyes.

"What's the matter my dear? Why so sad?"

Cecilia smiled weakly and then shrugged her shoulders. Another one of those questions she couldn't answer. She turned away thinking how tired she was of that. She hated it more and more! Strong feelings of homesickness washed over her.

How she wished she were back in the mountains, feeding the deer and her raccoons and watching the sunset over the mountaintops; listening to her stream gurgling along the rocks outside. Her discontent grew by the minute---she wanted to go home!

Adam looked questioningly at Maddie, but Maddie just smiled and shrugged. Cecilia would have to get over it sooner or later. Life was full of changes. She couldn't help feeling sorry for her, though, watching her out of the corner of her eye. The girls' shoulders seemed more drooped than ever, and the spring was gone from her step.

Maybe Matt could cheer her up, she decided. She certainly hoped so! She'd have a word with him later.

"Well, I'm starved," declared Heath into the growing silence. The men began carrying food to the big table in the kitchen, anything to break the awkward silence.

They, too, were used to Cecilia running around wide-eyed and excited, and they didn't understand what was going on, but for a person who didn't speak anyway, the silence was deafening!

Cecilia only picked at her food. She listened to the conversation going on around her. As usual, she could not contribute, and she began to feel out of place more than ever.

When it became painfully obvious that Matt was not coming, it was the final straw. Picking up her plate, she scraped her leftover food into a dish for the outside animals, and then set her plate in the sink. Silently, she slipped outside and headed for the barn.

"Is something wrong with Cecilia?" asked Adam. "She doesn't seem to be her normal self." That was an understatement, and they all knew it.

"As far as I can tell, she's homesick," confessed Maddie. "I think she wanted to borrow Eggs and go back to the cabin, but I told her she would have to wait for Matt to take her on his day off. I'm sure it must seem forever since he is not off until Sunday."

"Perhaps, I could take her," offered Adam. "Unless you think Samson and his brothers were serious about stringing me up." He grinned at Heath.

"No, I'm sure they were only HALF serious," replied Heath. "Although you might not want to stumble across one of their stills, then they would be all serious."

"Are you joshing me?" Adam asked, half amused. "You mean to say those blokes really make this mountain moonshine I have heard about?"

"Oh yes," Maddie assured him. "They certainly do, and you don't want to tangle with them over it. There is quite a headache going on between the revenueurs and the moonshine stills. I suppose it will all be settled one day, but for now, it still exists."

Adam just shook his head.

"Actually, Adam, it might be best if you waited until Sunday. If you don't know where you are

going, you can get lost up there. Matt knows where Pappy's place is, but I would be hard pressed to find it again I'm sure."

Heath looked at the sun through the window in the kitchen. It was already at half-mast in the sky, the orange and red hues beginning to finger across the horizon. "Speaking of Matt, I wonder where he is tonight?"

"I don't know," replied Maddie, starting to clear the table. "But it's getting late. I guess I'll put a plate back for him in case he just got tied up. I can't imagine him not coming at all without sending word."

"Wouldn't Cecilia know how to get there?" asked Adam, standing up to help her and changing the subject back to his niece. It bothered him that she seemed so unhappy suddenly.

"Well, I really don't know," answered Heath honestly. "But I think it might be better if you did wait for Matt. If something were to happen, Cecilia could not warn you, and I take it you are not familiar with wild terrain?"

"Not like this, no," replied Adam thoughtfully. "Perhaps you are right."

Maddie served coffee and sliced some chocolate cake for the men, and they all chatted for a while longer, then Heath stood up. "I'm going to get Eggs and Bacon and put them in the barn for the night, Maddie." He reached for his hat.

"I'll help you," volunteered Adam as he followed him out the door.

Maddie let herself out the front door and looked around for Cecilia. Not seeing her anywhere, she went back inside and knocked on her bedroom door. Maybe she had come in the front while they had been in the kitchen. Getting no answer, she opened the door.

Puzzled, she saw the bottom drawer hanging open. She walked into the room to close it, wondering why it was empty. If she remembered correctly, Cecilia had stored a bag in there. The bag Heath had given her of her mother's.

Feeling uneasy, she left the bedroom and went out the back door towards the barn to see if she was out there with the animals. She did like to spend time out there with the barn cats and the dogs.

Heath and Adam were striding towards the back door, their faces grim and concerned.

"What's wrong?" Maddie asked urgently. She had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Eggs is gone," announced Heath. "Cecilia must have taken him after all. If Matt comes by here, tell him what happened and that we are going to try to catch her before she gets too far."

"All right, Heath," agreed Maddie as the two men turned back towards the barn to saddle their horses. She quickly ran inside the house and threw some bread and cheese and leftover ham slices into some sandwiches and stuffed them into a knapsack for them to carry on their horses. If they got caught out overnight, they would get hungry. Running towards the front door, she stepped outside just as Matt was swinging down from Daisy.

"Evening, Maddie, hope Cecilia saved me some supper, I'm starved." He was grinning, but stopped when he saw Maddie's concerned face. "What's wrong? Is it Cecilia?"

"Yes," she replied. She handed him the bag. "There are some sandwiches in there, you can eat on the trail. Heath will explain, there's not a moment to lose." She glanced at Heath and Adam riding around to the front of the house.

"What happened?" demanded Matt, looking from Maddie to Heath.

"We think Cecilia has gone back to the cabin," explained Heath grimly. "Eggs is gone, and Maddie said she thought Cecilia was trying to ask her to borrow him to go up there. She was told to wait for you to take her on Sunday, but we don't think she did."

Matt's face went grimmer. "Damn...and there's a mountain lion on the prowl along that ridge. The Sheriff and I just came from the river that runs along those foothills. A cow had just been killed there when we came upon it. The cat doubled back and ate its supper while we were chasing it for 2 hours. Damn thing's a smart one, which makes it all the more dangerous."

He pulled himself into the saddle. "It's a big one too, we saw its prints...at least five or six inches across the pads."

"Bring my rifle, Maddie," ordered Heath, going pale at Matt's words.

"Bring an extra one for me if you have it, please," added Adam brusquely.

Maddie hurried to do their bidding while Heath explained about Cecilia.

"She should have listened to Maddie." Matt's face was foreboding and worried. "When I catch up to her..." He didn't finish the sentence, but turned Daisy and headed west, towards the mountain ridge.

"You stay inside, Maddie, that cat could come this way. I don't want you outside alone," Heath told her as he took the rifles from her.

Heath and Adam whirled and followed Matt, leaving behind a very worried Maddie.

Cecilia was feeling better already. Just being up in the fresh smelling pine scents and the wild critters scurrying here and there had cheered her up immensely.

She knew the way to Pappy's. Of course, no one would believe she would, but she did. Knew it by heart.

She had come to town with Pappy every time he came; she had just stayed out of sight until he returned to the wooded area.

Other people had made her uncomfortable very quickly, and she had felt like an oddity, so she had learned to be inconspicuous. No one seemed to care, so it had never been a problem.

She felt a little regretful at having borrowed Eggs, knowing Maddie hadn't wanted her to. But it's not like she was stealing him or anything. Maddie just didn't think she could take care of herself, but she knew she could.

She did wonder why Matt hadn't come to supper though. Was he getting tired of her already?

She didn't blame him. Who would want to be stuck with a woman who couldn't talk for the rest of her life? And it looked like she was destined to be silent forever she thought glumly.

All things considered, Matt would probably be happy she was gone. That way he wouldn't have to deal with her anymore.

Her thoughts had just turned to Adam and the grandmother she would never see when the horrible sound of a woman's scream split the evening air.

Chapter Seven

Cecilia froze in place as she reined Eggs in and sat there, her heart beating fast, the dreaded knowledge flooding her mind.

That was no woman screaming, that was a mountain lion on the prowl! She had heard it before!

To the uneducated ear, it could very well be a woman, but Cecilia was used to the mountains, and she knew the cry of the wild cat when she heard it.

Eggs nickered softly and danced backwards. He didn't want to continue on this path, he recognized that sound as well!

Cecelia turned him around and headed back towards the upper ridge cutoff. It was a steeper climb, but you could see the canyon below you as well as the rocky outcroppings along the way. Cougars were fond of those areas, and she didn't intend to cross under any of them if she could help it. Better to be above the cat if possible.

Eggs seemed to agree with her and was only too willing to take the steeper incline and walk along the narrower upper path, and they continued on their way. They weren't far from the cabin now, maybe 20 minutes. Once there, she could bolt the door and be safe from any predators. She urged Eggs forward.

"What in the bloody hell is that?" Adam choked out, as his horse danced sideways. The woman's scream had torn through the night air, causing goose bumps down the backs of all three men and the hair on the back of their necks to stand on end.

"That, is the scream of the mountain lion," replied Matt grimly. "It's out there all right, and it's

on the prowl." He thought about Cecilia out there alone, and his heart skipped a beat. He prayed the big cat didn't have her cornered; she wouldn't stand a chance against it.

Of course, she might wish the cat had gotten her by the time he was finished with her. She wasn't going to sit for a month of Sundays for this stunt!

He urged Daisy forward, pushing her as hard as he could on the uneven trail.

The idea of Cecilia alone against the lion made him feel like he was suffocating, and he wanted to get to her as quickly as possible.

Still, it wouldn't do to harm Daisy though; it would just slow him down more if she were to throw a shoe or come up lame.

The three men pushed on as fast as they dared, each listening with strained ears for any noise or indication as to where the cat might be.

Cecilia crossed the stream in front of the cabin and urged Eggs on up the slight incline towards the porch. The fact that he was dancing all over the place and snorting in fear did nothing to make her feel comfortable. She knew without a doubt the cat was around, if not stalking her.

She quickly leaped off the horse and pulled him up the wide cabin steps and opened the door, leading him inside. She slammed the door and brought the bar slamming down into place to hold the door locked against the outside.

Running to the fireplace, she took down Pappy's hunting rifle and fished for the box under his cot that held the shells.

With shaking fingers, she loaded the rifle and ran to the window. Looking through the glass, she didn't see anything moving in the moonlit night. The stark brightness of the landscape made the

shadows seem like garish black slices across the landscape, and she carefully searched for any movement.

Heaving a sigh of relief at no signs of the cat, she finally set the rifle down and checked the kitchen door to see that it was secure and made sure the windows were latched---there were only two in the little cabin. Then she looked through the cabinets for some oats for Eggs.

She grinned at the horse being inside the cabin. He took up almost half the space, but he didn't seem to mind. She guessed he felt safer inside than out. She just hoped he didn't have to use the privy while inside!

Being on a knoll like the cabin was, you could see down the incline towards the stream and down along the bank coming towards the cabin. It was a strategic advantage, and it was difficult to get to the cabin without being seen.

She was watching from the window and chewing on a piece of jerky when she saw the riders coming alongside the river. She stood up, recognizing them immediately. She ran to the door to open it and stepped onto the moonlit porch---it was then she saw it.

About a hundred yards to the right, over the rocky outcropping along this side of the riverbank, she saw the movement. Focusing on that spot, she realized it was a huge mountain lion, lying crouched along the rock surface, watching the riders, apparently waiting for them to come within reach.

Cecilia's heart leapt into her throat. Matt was the first rider, and he was out in front of the other two. He would pass under the lion first!

Instinctively, she tried to scream, to call out his name, to warn him. Her throat convulsed, and she tried as hard as she could to force it out. When

nothing happened, she desperately tried again and brought her rifle up.

"MATT!"

Matt was coming up along the riverbank when the movement on the porch caught his eye! Cecilia! He couldn't make out her features from here, but he was sure it was she.

He was shocked when his name was screamed from her lips, and she pointed her rifle towards the rocks above him and to the left.

Instinctively, he brought his rifle up just as the big cat leapt towards him in a snarl of teeth and claws. He fired, and the big cat yowled in the air and landed with a thump just to the left of his stirrup. Daisy whinnied and danced sideways.

Heath quickly sent a second shot into the mountain lion as it sprang to its feet, and then it slowly sank to the ground.

Matt quickly fired a third shot into its heart and it fell over dead. Getting Daisy under control, he looked up to see Cecilia flying along the bank, coming towards him.

He quickly dismounted and swept her into his arms as she threw her arms around his neck, smothering his face with kisses, the tears streaming down hers.

He held her tightly, and he realized how scared he had been for her all the way up here and how relieved he was to see her safe.

With that relief, came anger. "How could you run off like that, young lady?" he asked sternly. "Do you see what could have happened to you? You could have been killed, Cecilia!" He hugged her tighter still.

Cecilia was weeping with joy and relief. She had spoken! She had screamed, and Matt's name had

come out. She was overcome with her emotions, and Matt's scolding sounded very dear to her.

"Maaatt," she breathed, holding her head back to look up at him. Her green eyes were shimmering with tears in the moonlight, and she laughed aloud for the sheer joy of being able to say his name at last. "Maatttt," she said again.

Matt stared at her then, finally realizing she was making sound. "Say that again," he demanded.

"Mattt!" she announced triumphantly.

Heath and Adam had dismounted and were gathering around her. "Cecilia," Adam boomed, "you can talk!"

"That's wonderful, Cecilia," Heath added excitedly.

"I...can...talk," she said hesitantly, trying out the words.

Cecilia was trembling from head to toe. From the scare of the mountain lion, or the excitement of being able to talk, Matt wasn't sure which, but either way, she could talk! He was thrilled, his anger forgotten.

"Say Uncle," demanded Adam, his green eyes, so much like hers, gleaming in the moonlight.

"Un...cle A...dam," she said hesitantly, trying out the sounds. She looked at Heath. "Heaaaath and Madddieee." She was delighted with herself and clapped her hands.

"This is wonderful," Heath said fervently. "Maddie will be so pleased!"

"This is indeed wonderful," echoed Adam. "In spite of still being angry with you for coming up here, Cecilia, I'm also thrilled that you now have back your ability to speak. The shock of seeing Matt in danger must have allowed you to overcome your mental block."

Cecilia's face fell. "I...am...sorry. I just...wanted...to...come...home," she replied hesitantly, trying out the words as they appeared in her mind. She knew how they all sounded; she just hadn't pronounced any of them for a long time.

Matt ran his thumb down the side of her face. "This is not your home anymore, Cecilia, your home is with us."

Cecilia noted that he did not say...with me. Sadly, she figured he must not feel the same way about her that she did about him.

She looked up at him, suddenly feeling older and wiser and seeing things she hadn't seen before. Not once had he shown the same enthusiasm towards her that she had for him. She was beginning to feel foolish.

He was the one who had stopped their kisses, and he was the one who had been forced into an engagement with her after Pappy had given her to him. It hadn't been his choice at all.

Well, she would not be a burden to him or anyone else! She was home now...and she was staying here! Her chin jutted defiantly.

"This...is...my...home. Pappy...gave...it...to me," she said decisively.

Matt's face softened. "No, your home is with us. This land belongs to Pappy's brother, according to the law."

"It...is mine!" declared Cecilia fiercely. "MY...home!" She whirled around and stomped off towards the cabin, indignation in every step.

The three men stared at each other in consternation, and then they took their horses reins and followed Cecilia to the cabin.

She drew Eggs out the door and down the steps, and then took him to the barn in the back, her stiff back saying it all.

The men followed, and no words were spoken as everyone put their mounts up for the night. It was plain they were all staying until morning!

Matt followed her back from the barn, his eyes glued to her swaying backside. His palm itched to connect with those sassy buttocks and then lay down the law, but he couldn't. Not with Heath and Adam around. Besides, he wasn't quite sure how to proceed just yet.

He scowled at the clothes Cecilia had on. She had traded in her pretty dress for the boys' clothes she had worn to Maddie's. And what was this nonsense about this being her home?

Adam had told him he had their passage to London. Didn't she still want to go? And why was she so angry with him? She had just saved his life, and now she wouldn't even look at him!

He wasn't quite sure how he and Heath and Adam had ended up in the doghouse when Cecilia was the one in the wrong, but somehow it was so. Grimly, he determined to get to the bottom of it, one way or another.

Maddie paced the floor restlessly, knowing she would have a hard time sleeping. It wasn't likely that they would return tonight, not with the big cat on the prowl. Once they were at the cabin, they would be staying there until morning.

Finally, she decided to read for a while, and she sat in her rocking chair, rocking gently back and forth. Soon, she decided it was too hot to read, and she opened the window, in spite of Heath's objections.

She just had to have a bit of fresh air, besides, the cat wouldn't be coming near the house, and they generally didn't bother people.

However, she knew renegades were often unpredictable, so she was careful to watch around her while she enjoyed the fresh evening air. It must be well after midnight, she thought, wishing she could rest.

When she heard the scream of the mountain lion echo on the night breezes she shivered. That sounded entirely too close! She wondered if Heath had put Maize in the barn!

Maize was their milk cow, and Maddie didn't want anything to happen to her! When she heard Maize's mournful cry of fear, she knew he hadn't.

Quickly, she dressed and took the shotgun off the fireplace, checking to make sure it was loaded.

Her heart beating fast, she stepped outside the back door and headed for Maize's pasture, glancing swiftly around at every shadow that danced across the ground.

Buster fell in step with her, a low growl in his throat as he shadowed her right leg like he was glued to her. The young pup had just appeared about three weeks ago, lean and gaunt and Maddie had fed him, so he had stayed. They had judged him to be around a year old, maybe a little more.

Soon, his black coat had filled out, and he became quite a handsome dog, smart too. Heath had allowed him to stay because Maddie was there alone much of the time, and Buster had become protective of her.

Tonight, his ears were laid back, and he slunk along, his nose testing the wind every few feet.

Maddie quickly unlocked the paddock and took Maize's halter and led her into the barn, then closed and barred the door. Turning around, she placed her hand on Buster's neck.

The hackles along the back of his neck were stiff and high, and she tried to hurry along to the house,

her heart beating like a trip hammer. If the cougar was not out there, something was!

She sighed in relief when she stepped inside the house. She turned and called softly to Buster, but he bolted with a fierce growl and ran around the corner. Maddie quickly shut the door.

Buster had many places he could hide where the cat couldn't get to him; she wasn't really worried about him. That is...if it should come within range of the house. She was sure Buster was smart enough not to take on a mountain lion just to play.

She decided to keep the shotgun with her, however, because she couldn't shake the uneasy feelings that were keeping her unsettled.

She was just stepping into her bedroom when growls and catlike screams and yowls reverberated outside her bedroom window.

Fear shot through her as she realized she had left it open! For moment, she was paralyzed, and then she sprang into action and whipped the shotgun up, running swiftly towards the window.

Just outside her window, Buster was barking and growling frantically at one of the biggest mountain lions she had ever seen, crouched about 10 feet from the frantic dog.

"Buster!" she commanded. "Come inside...hurry!"

Looking back, the dog saw her at the window, so did the cat and its evil yellow glare fixed on her, and Maddie knew it was going to spring.

Instinctively, she brought the shotgun up and hit the big cat in mid spring, not 5 feet from her window. The blast from the shotgun reverberated inside the bedroom and made her ears ring, but the cat took the blast in the chest, and it fell to the ground.

Buster raced around it, barking furiously, dancing in and then back out as if daring it to rise up and come after him.

Shaking, Maddie called to the dog, and he ran and jumped in the window, and Maddie slammed it shut and locked it. She stood there for a few minutes, watching the cat through the glass, but it didn't move, and she hoped she had killed it. At least it wouldn't bother Heath and the others.

She licked her dry lips as the thought occurred to her that Heath would be less than pleased that she had gone out to bring the cow in. She pictured herself arguing with him in her mind. "But, Heath, we couldn't afford to lose Maize!"

She could also see Heath's dark expression and was sorely afraid he would not be concerned about the cow as much as the fact that she went outside after he told her to stay inside.

Humph, she said to herself, as she got ready for bed again. Men! They think they know everything! I couldn't let Maize get killed---we need her!

Her thoughts chased each other around as she glanced out the window to assure herself the big cat was still there. Yes, there it was, the blood pooling beneath it, and Buster was standing guard at the window as if might jump up at any minute.

Sighing, she lay down on the bed. Maybe if she got up and buried it in the morning, or tied a rope to it and hauled it off, she could hide it from Heath.

Shame on you, Maddie, her conscience pricked her. You aren't really planning on hiding anything from Heath are you?

You aren't the one whose backside is in danger, Maddie argued back with her conscience.

Brother! It was going to be a long night!

Cecilia lay on her bed behind the blanket. The men had left her alone when she stormed into the room, and they were sitting out front on the cabin porch.

She could hear the soft rumble of their deep tones through the open doorway.

She got up and padded silently across the open room in the cabin and paused just inside the door.

"It's late, so I'll leave her alone tonight," Adam said resignedly, "but in the morning, I intend to talk to that young lady. What makes her think she could live up here on her own anyway, or that I would allow that?"

They all agreed that something would need to be done. Heath spoke up. "When are you planning on getting married Matt?"

"Hell, I don't know, Heath," Matt replied in frustration. "I never planned on getting married!" He ran his hand through his blonde hair and rubbed his jaw.

Inside the doorway, Cecilia's heart sank to her feet. She whirled around and sped on bare feet back to the security of her room, the sobs choking in her throat. The last small glimmer of hope that he might want to marry her disappeared, and she felt like her heart had been sliced in two.

Matt didn't plan on marrying her at all, he never had! He had been lying all along about their engagement. Cecilia was devastated.

Matt looked at Heath. "Right now, I guess I'm in TOO big a hurry, I'd marry her right now, right here if I thought it was the right thing to do!"

"She is not ready for marriage," objected Adam strenuously. "She needs to learn more about the world and what marriage is all about. She is not your average sixteen year old; she is little more

than a child! Her lack of exposure to the world makes her a complete innocent."

Matt turned and peered inside the cabin door, thinking he had heard something. Seeing nothing, he relaxed again.

"Well, I disagree somewhat with you, Adam" replied Heath thoughtfully. "It's quite obvious Cecilia loves Matt, and he seems to love her. That's really all you need to start with. Marriages have begun with less than that before."

He glanced at Matt. "I reckon they would find their way all right. Matt is more than capable of taking care of Cecilia, and I see no reason why they shouldn't marry before you go to England, if Cecilia is agreeable of course. I know waiting for the marriage vows can sometimes create problems, and it might be best if they were married while they are traveling together. That way, Matt can keep a close eye on her as well."

Matt nodded his agreement, but Adam was still reluctant. "Now that Cecilia has the ability to speak, perhaps it will be easier to find out what she wants. I can only say that if she is adamant in marrying you, Matt, I will not stand in your way. However, I think it is a mistake to marry her so young."

Cecilia had heard it from Matt's very own lips... "Hell, I never wanted to get married!"

The phrase kept dancing across her mind, the very bluntness of the statement undeniable. Matt didn't want to marry with her, he was not excited and happy to be with her, not the same way she was with him.

All things considered, he must just feel sorry for her, and Cecilia did not want his pity. She would not let him fool her anymore into thinking he cared

about her as anything other than a responsibility. She would not hold him to his engagement; she would not force him to marry her.

Cecilia didn't know what she would do, but she knew she had to do something. It was a long time before she finally sank into a troubled sleep.

Matt was just waking up when the silent figure of Cecilia glided past him and out the door. He gave her a few minutes, and then headed after her. As he stepped out onto the front porch of the cabin, the air was very brisk, and he shivered slightly.

The sun was already sparkling off the splashing water in the river as it gurgled and bubbled among the rocks.

The light sent dancing prisms across the surface of the river here and there in the small rapids, and a trout leaped for its morning supply of gnats.

The autumn colors were already abundant, and the shrill cry of a hawk on the wing wafted across the morning breeze, and he breathed deeply, inhaling the fresh morning scents. It was a beautiful piece of land, and he could see why Pappy and Cecilia loved it up here.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cecilia disappear along the path down this side of the river. She must be going to look at the cougar he thought. He decided to follow her.

Cecilia stared at the big cat lying along the bank beneath the rocks. It was a big one, no doubt about that. She squatted on her haunches and picked up one of the massive paws and examined its claws. They were long enough to cause quite a gash in a man, and she wondered why it had been stalking them?

They sometimes got cougars in the late fall when the deer moved down from the mountains and

towards the valley where the grasses and leaves were still green.

And, sometimes, they liked to come after the deer that came to the back door for corn in the fall. Most of the time, they stayed away from people, Pappy had said, but you would get an ornery one now and then.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Matt approaching. Her heart felt like someone had reached out and squeezed it, and she looked away, willing herself to be strong.

Matt caught the flash of hurt in Cecilia's eyes and wondered what had caused it.

Seeing the dead cat again reminded him of how close they had come to someone being killed by it. It could just as easily have been Cecilia, regardless of the fact that she had warned him and saved him from serious injury or even death.

"We need to talk, young lady," he stated decisively, reaching for her arm and pulling her upright.

"NO!" she answered explosively, quite surprised suddenly at how good that sounded. She didn't have to just shake her head anymore; she could speak it... "NO!"

Matt was flummoxed. "Don't tell me no, little girl, I said we are going to talk!" His dark blonde eyebrows drew together in a frown.

Cecilia's green eyes flashed. "NO!" "No...talk...to you!" She tested it experimentally, rolling the "no" off her tongue again and again. "No...No...No...No!"

She realized suddenly that it was giving her a lot of pleasure to deepen the scowl on his face. "No...No...No...NO!" she exclaimed exultantly, watching his scowl grow.

Matt rolled his eyes and growled. "Why does being bratty and defiant have to be the first thing

you learn? I swear you sound like a one year old with her first word!"

"I...hate...you!" Cecilia announced defiantly. "Go...way!" She turned her back on him, caught between her feelings of excitement at being able to converse, and her anger at him for the pain he was causing her.

Matt couldn't help it; he reached out and landed a sharp spank on the saucy backside that faced him.

Cecilia yelped and turned around again, her hands on her buttocks and stared accusingly at him. "Stop...it!" She ordered, her lips trembling.

"You will either talk to me face to face, or I'll bare your butt and talk to you, my hand to your bottom!"

"NO!" she hissed defiantly, liking the sound of that word more and more. She kept her hands protectively over her bottom cheeks, daring him to do his worst.

"You are really pushing it, little girl," Matt bit out tersely. "You already have a spanking coming for stealing Eggs and coming up here alone, you want to add to it with your mouthy new attitude?"

"Not...steal...Eggs!" protested Cecilia. "Borrowed!"

"You were told to wait for me!" Matt snapped back. "Taking without permission is stealing!"

"NO!"

"You do like that word, don't you?" Matt ground out, losing patience fast.

"YES," she replied emphatically, her green eyes rebellious.

"Well, you can yell it all you want...while I'm blistering your butt," he promised determinedly, and he reached for her.

Chapter Eight

"NO...NO...NO!" Cecilia yelled furiously, as Matt pulled her towards the big log along the riverbank. "NO...SPANK...NO!" She tugged uselessly against him, no match for his hard strength.

"I warned you, little girl, and you wouldn't listen, now we talk MY way!" Matt seated himself on the log and pulled her kicking and thrashing across his broad lap.

Cecilia fought furiously, and Matt grunted at the few kicks she got in, but with her feet bare, she couldn't do much damage.

He had her over his hard thighs in short order and began to set fire to the seat of her britches with well-aimed strokes of his right arm.

Cecilia kept yelling no and fighting him with all her wiry strength until he finally yanked the men's pants down her narrow hips and pulled down the red flap of her long johns.

Once he lit into the bare rounded buttocks, she began to wail earnestly in pain and pleas to stop, stop! He didn't stop, though, until she finally began to sob and howl, kicking desperately to get away from the burning punishment.

"Now then, little girl, are you ready to talk?" He added a few more heartfelt spanks when she didn't answer fast enough to suit him.

"YES...YES!" sobbed Cecilia, ready to give in. Anything to stop the painful chastisement! "I...talk!"

"What's going on here?" demanded an outraged voice.

Cecilia looked up through her tears into the astonished face of her Uncle.

Matt looked up at Adam and Heath and quickly pulled the flap of Cecilia's underwear up to cover her naked bottom. "Cecilia and I are having a

discussion," he said, matter of factly. He kept her in position, however, with his hand resting on her squirming bottom.

Heath frowned. "You are not married yet, Matt, this is highly inappropriate."

"I should say so!" huffed Adam. "Most unacceptable. Now, you shall have to be married. I daresay the mountain boys had the right idea in the first place!"

"Fine with me," Matt replied smugly, refusing to let his wiggling captive up. "Now, if you gentlemen will excuse us, we have a discussion to continue."

After Heath and Adam rounded the boulder, Matt once again unbuttoned the flap on the long underwear, grinning in elation.

"NOOOO," moaned Cecilia tearfully, "No...more...spank...please Matt!"

"We are not finished yet, young lady," replied Matt sternly. "Stealing a horse is a serious offense, people have been hung for that you know!"

"I...sorry," responded Cecilia plaintively. "I...no do...it...again."

"I'm sure you won't, after I'm finished with you," promised Matt. "However, that will wait until we get back to town. I want you to be able to ride this morning. After all, I'm not a hard man to deal with. I just wanted you to talk to me this morning, but you had to be defiant and rude."

Cecilia just sobbed, her heart sinking at his promise of more retribution.

Instead of the burning spanks she was expecting, Cecilia was surprised when Matt began to caress the smooth warm redness of her stinging bottom. She lay still then, savoring the feeling of his hard palm against her soft flesh. It felt surprisingly good and did funny things to her tummy.

Matt had intended to land a few more spanks to the now tenderized firm cheeks beneath his hand, but he hadn't been able to resist touching her instead.

Feeling his shaft throbbing to life, he regretfully pulled the flap back up and sat her up on his knee. He held her against his broad chest for a few moments, and she lay her head against his shoulder. They enjoyed the peacefulness of the scene around them and the comfort of each other.

Cecilia's heart beat fast as she considered her Uncle and Heath's words; that Matt would have to marry her; and then his answer. She didn't understand. Last night he had sounded forced into it, and then this morning, he sounded like he wanted it. What was going on, she was confused.

"All right, what's this business about staying up here? You must know that's not possible, Cecilia. It doesn't belong to you; it belongs to Pappy's brother because he is his only living relative. Can you understand that?" He asked the questions gently, not wanting to make her angry with him again.

She sat up and looked earnestly into his face. "Pappy...gave...it...to me," she said slowly. "He said...he said...it." Her brow furrowed as she tried to put into the sound all the words she knew by ear.

Matt tipped her chin up to gaze searchingly into her eyes. "It takes more than just saying it, honey," he said gently. "It takes a will. We never found a will in Pappy's things."

Cecilia's brow creased. "What is...will?"

"A will is something in writing," explained Matt. "Papers, his last wishes written down on a piece of paper and notarized...that's a will."

"Papers?" Her eyes lit up. She had papers.

Quickly, she hopped off Matt's lap and yanked her britches up, pulling the belt in tighter.

"Whoa, hold on there." Matt grabbed her arm. "Where are you going?"

"Papers," she said excitedly. "Papers!" She pulled away from Matt and began running towards the cabin.

Matt followed at a more sedate pace, wondering what she was up to now.

Maddie stared down at the big cat, wondering what in the world she was going to do with it? Eggs and Bacon were both gone and she doubted she could get the cow to let her tie a rope around her, much less drag a dead mountain lion behind her.

Buster was running in circles around the cougar and dancing in and out, growling and pouncing as if he were going to tear it to pieces.

It was during this commotion that Sheriff Crockett rode up and circled around the veranda to see what was going on. Spying Maddie and the large dead cat, he quickly dismounted. "What's going on here Maddie, where's Heath?"

"Heath and Adam and Matt went into the mountains last night after Cecilia. She took Eggs and went back to the cabin, and they were afraid she might get attacked by the cougar roaming around, but as you can see, it's dead now." She pointed proudly to the dead animal.

The Sheriff took off his hat and scratched his head. "If the men are all gone, how did the cat wind up dead?" He eyed Maddie suspiciously. He just knew she had been up to no good while Heath was gone and gotten lucky, most likely.

"It tried to come in my window last night, and I shot it with the shotgun," replied Maddie airily. Let the Sheriff think what he wanted to, she was not giving him any information she didn't have to!

"Well, I came looking for Matt, since he wasn't at home early this morning. I wanted to get a head start on tracking this critter; it's been attacking cattle along the ridge."

"You wouldn't happen to want to move it or anything would you?" Maddie looked innocently up at him. "Just having it here is making the dog crazy."

"Well, I suppose I could. But won't Heath be back shortly? He could move it for you then."

Maddie looked around uneasily. "Well, I would kind of like to get it out of here. It's making Maize uneasy." They both looked at the cow placidly eating grass in the pasture.

"I see what you mean," chuckled the Sheriff, his brown eyes twinkling. He could recognize a woman that wanted to hide something from her husband a mile away. He hadn't lived with his own wife for the last twenty years for nothing.

Maddie flushed and looked away from his knowing grin.

"Why, Maddie, I think you should keep it and have it stuffed and mounted. It's not everyday a woman gets the best of a fierce cougar you know. I'm sure Heath will be right proud of you."

"That's not necessary Sheriff," replied Maddie frostily. Her baby blue eyes glared at him, knowing he was baiting her. "You can have the pelt to sell if you like," she added generously.

He guffawed outright. Shaking his head he replied, "Now you know you can't hide this from Heath, Maddie, and why would you want to? I'd think he would be proud of you for defending yourself so admirably." He waited for her to answer.

"I'm not hiding anything!" Maddie drew herself up to her full height. At least not yet, she thought.

Heath and Adam looked up as Cecilia flew into the cabin and on into her bedroom. Matt followed her shortly, and they looked from him to the blanket. He grinned and shrugged.

Cecilia came rushing back out with the bag in her hand and dropped to the floor. Opening the bag, she took out her mother's Bible and flipped through the pages. Finding the sheets of paper she had folded long ago, she took them out and handed them to Matt.

"See? Papers...from Pappy." Her face was animated and she was alive with excitement.

Adam and Heath gathered around Matt, puzzled as to what was going on.

"Well, I'll be darned," exclaimed Matt. "Will you look at this!"

"Why, it's a will," responded Heath, his eyes narrowing.

"May I see this?" asked Adam, taking the papers from Matt. Adam perused the first paper, noting the signature of Marcus Peyton Whitehead declaring his cabin, his earthly belongings in Brocton, and his 5000 acres to one Cecil Whitehead, his adopted son!

"Son?" He looked at the other two men and pulled out the second page. It was a paper of legal adoption of Cecil, changing his name from "unknown" to Whitehead. Also included was the lawyer's receipt for \$1000.00 to draw up the papers.

"Is this legal?" asked Heath, astonished. "I mean, how can you adopt someone you don't even know? He wasn't even adopting a boy! Cecil is Cecilia!"

Matt took the papers and studied them. "From what I can see, it's all legal, provided of course the

lawyer is a real lawyer and not a shyster. The papers were drawn up in Panier Flats 6 years ago. That means Cecilia would have been nine years old."

"We need to have Pappy's brother get to the bottom of this," added Heath.

"Mine!"

The men's heads all swiveled to look at pair of flashing green eyes. The owner of those eyes spoke again. "Mine!"

She waved her arms expressively as if to include everything you could see, which would have been correct if the will was legal. "Pappy...told me!"

Matt walked over to her and took her hands in his. "All right, honey, we'll see if these papers are legal, okay? If they are legal, then yes...it is yours. If not, it belongs to Pappy's brother, okay?"

Cecilia's face turned mutinous. "It...is mine," she reiterated once again.

Clearing his throat, Adam stepped forward. "Cecilia dear, by the time we come back from England, I'm sure Mr. Whitehead will have the legalities all worked out, and we will know for sure if it's yours or not. So be a good girl now and pay attention to what we are telling you."

Cecilia stared at her Uncle, her face clouding over. "I...not ...go...to England...not want to go."

"What?" Three voices replied at once.

"Water...lots of water...no like water," she replied hesitantly.

"You mean the ocean?" Adam asked shrewdly.

"Ocean...water?"

"Yes, the ocean, or the sea, is a very large, very big body of water. You can't see all the way across it." Adam continued to explain.

"Yes!" Cecilia exclaimed. "Water...large water. Sick!" Her brow furrowed as she tried to remember the sounds of the words and express herself.

"It made you sick when you were crossing it with your mother," supplied Heath helpfully.

Again, she nodded. "Yes."

"May I?" Adam asked Matt, and he stepped forward and took Cecilia's hands. "Cecilia, dear, your grandmother is too old to make this journey. She loved your mother, Amanda, very, very much, and has long missed her.

I have written to her to tell her I have found her granddaughter, you, and that I am bringing you home to visit her. Would you please reconsider? It will break her heart if you don't come, now that she knows you exist."

Cecilia bit her lip, her tender heart touched at the thought of her mother. She looked at Matt, and he smiled encouragingly at her.

"If it helps, you will have more comfortable accommodations than when you and Amanda came over. The ship is bigger, and you will feel the waves less. You will have a private room as well and all the luxuries the ship can provide, I promise you." He smiled at her.

"And you and Matt can be married before you go," Heath added helpfully.

At those words, Cecilia's expressive face closed up. "No...not marry with Matt," she said.

It was Matt's turn to look flummoxed. "What? What do you mean?"

She drew herself up proudly. "I...don't...want to." She bent down and gathered her things into her bag and avoided looking him in the eye.

Matt stared after her as she headed towards the barn to get Eggs. "Now what's going on in that little head of hers," he muttered.

"I'd say she is growing up fast," chuckled Heath, amused at Matt's face.

Thus far, Cecilia had fallen all over herself to please him, now it looked like the shoe might be on the other foot.

Clearing his throat, he added. "We'd best head back, I need to get home to Maddie." He started after Cecilia.

Adam followed him out, and Matt came behind them, closing the doors to the cabin up behind him. What did she mean she didn't want to, he thought, out of sorts at the change in the relationship? She wanted to before? What had changed her mind?

Maddie worked in the kitchen, making Heath's favorite, blackberry pie. She eyed the razor strap hanging on the wall with distaste.

So far, Heath had never used it on her, but he said if she ever lied to him, he would. She didn't intend to lie to him, just neglect to mention she had gone out and put the cow in the barn. After all, he would never know, right?

So, the big cat had been prowling around the house, and she had gotten the shotgun and shot it from inside the house; that was all obvious. He might be a little upset that the window had been open, but he didn't have to know she had actually gone outside, did he?

She fought with herself, knowing she would get a spanking for sure if she told him, and probably only a scolding for having the window open if she didn't. But, if he ever found out she hadn't told him about being outside---she glanced at the hateful strap again.

Maddie hated being spanked, hated it something fierce. The idea of that heavy strap against her

tender bottom made her wince. Heath's belt had been bad enough as it was. But knowing the hairbrush would probably be used for sure for going outside...well...that made her wince too.

Back and forth, she weighed the choices as she worked in the kitchen, hating herself for really considering not telling him.

She was no closer to a decision when she heard the horses whinnying and Buster barking. Drying her hands on her apron, she flew out the front door.

"Heath!" she cried joyfully, throwing herself in his arms.

"Hello, Maddie," chuckled Heath, drawing her close for a kiss and a hug.

Cecilia watched them enviously, wishing Matt would greet her like that. But he had always been very aloof, and now she knew why. He didn't love her, not like Heath loved Maddie.

Maddie excitedly dragged them around the side of the house to view the carcass of the mountain lion, since she had told the Sheriff to just leave it to prove she wasn't hiding anything.

Heath stared at the big cat. "My gosh, Maddie, I can't believe it! After we killed the one in the mountains I wasn't worried about you anymore because I thought we had the one that was killing the cattle. And here this one tried to get in your bedroom window?" He pulled her close, her brush with death making his insides quake.

"If not for Buster, I wouldn't have known it was there," Maddie assured him.

"Well, Buster just earned himself a permanent home!" Heath declared, reaching down to pat the dog's head.

Buster wagged his doggy tail and managed to look quite proud of himself.

"Odd that it would come after you," interjected Matt thoughtfully. "Especially when Maize is standing right there in the pasture, an easy target."

"Yes, that is rather odd," added Adam.

Maddie flushed. "The Sheriff was here looking for you Matt." She tried to ignore Heath's speculative eye on her.

"Yes, we were suppose to set traps for the cougar this morning."

"Well, now you won't have to," Maddie replied brightly. She wasn't intending to keep her actions a secret, but she didn't want to blurt it out in front of everyone else, too.

"Maddie," interjected Cecilia softly, immediately drawing Maddie's shocked attention to her.

"Cecilia...you spoke!"

Cecilia nodded shyly.

It was a hectic hour while everyone sorted themselves out, and Maddie served them hot blackberry cobbler and coffee while they told her about the previous evening's events.

Maddie watched Cecilia's reticence with Matt and wondered what was going on. She didn't seem the same enthusiastic girl that had hung all over Matt before. Now she stayed aloof from him, her eyes holding secrets where she had been open before her trip to the mountains.

Matt finally pulled Cecilia to her feet and gently pulled her toward the front door. "It's time for me to go to work, little girl, come say goodbye to me."

Blushing, Cecilia allowed him to lead her out the door. Once on the porch, he turned and tipped her chin up to look her in the face, then he softly dropped a kiss on her upturned lips.

Normally, Cecilia would have melted into him, but this time she stayed away from him, just

allowing him to do as he wished, but not responding.

Matt knew something had changed, but he didn't know what it was, and he didn't have time to pursue it. The Sheriff would be expecting him.

He brushed her cheek with his thumb. "I don't know what's wrong, honey, but something is bothering you, I can tell. Whatever it is, you might as well get ready to tell me, because I won't stop asking you until you do."

Cecilia just looked at him guardedly, her lovely green eyes giving nothing away.

Frustrated, he bent to claim her lips once again, and this time he plundered them with more abandon, wanting to elicit a response from her. He put his hand on the back of her head, sensing her withdrawal and ran his tongue across the inside of her upper lip, finally getting a groan from her. When her soft arms finally stole around his neck, he deepened the kiss, feeling his desire grow in leaps and bounds, and he finally had to tear himself away from her.

Drawing back, he looked at her again, the green eyes soft and hazy with desire and wished she were naked beneath him. It was on the tip of his tongue to declare his love for her, but he held back. He just couldn't say it for some reason.

"I'll see you tonight, honey," he said hoarsely and grabbed Daisy's reins to mount her. Prancing backwards, he looked down at her one more time before he spun and galloped off.

Cecilia watched him go, her breathing erratic. She had tried hard not to respond to his drugging kiss, but in the end, she had been unable to resist.

Tears shimmered in her eyes. Why did he kiss her like that and then pull away as if he didn't like her? As if he hated himself for doing it?

She put her trembling fingers to her lips and felt them. They were swollen and tender, and she ran the tip of her tongue over them, savoring the taste of his mouth still with her.

How she wished he really did want to marry her, but she was afraid it was not to be. He just felt responsible for her. Pappy had given her to him, and he didn't know what else to do with her.

She turned and went to find her Uncle. She wanted to hear more about her grandmother and about England.

"All right, Maddie, what's going on?" Heath questioned softly after drawing his wife into the barn for a private chat. "I can tell you are hiding something from me, what is it?"

"I'm not hiding anything, Heath," she replied defensively. She flushed when his eyebrow went up. "I just haven't...told you everything...yet."

"I'm not going to like what I'm about to hear am I?"

Maddie lifted her chin. "Probably not."

"Go ahead, I'm all ears." He smiled lazily at her, already guessing what it would be. Maize's stall had some fresh manure in it, and he knew it had been clean when he left. He also knew he hadn't put the cow in the barn.

Hesitantly, Maddie finally admitted she had been worried for Maize and unable to sleep. So she had taken Buster and the shotgun and come out to put the cow in the barn.

She hadn't thought the cougar would be this far from the ridge, or she wouldn't have taken the chance. "You didn't really want me to leave Maize out and unprotected did you, Heath?" Maddie asked finally as she ended her tale from beginning to end. "We can't afford to get another cow right now."

Heath looked into her beloved face and carefully formed his words. "Maize can always be replaced, Maddie, sooner or later, but there is only one Madeline Marie Danvers, and I could never replace her. I love you, Maddie, more than life itself." He took her in his arms and held her close, thanking the lord that she was safe.

"Oh, Heath, I love you too." Maddie replied, snuggling into his arms.

He rested his chin on top of her head. "I'm going to spank you, Maddie," he said finally.

Maddie stood with her head bowed, unresisting. She had known he would, there was no point in arguing with him. "What about Adam and Cecilia?" She asked the question quietly, knowing they would be in the house that night.

"Does it embarrass you for them to know you are being spanked?" Heath asked softly.

"Yes," she admitted.

Heath walked over to the barn door and closed it, sliding the heavy bar into place. "Then I'll do it here, so they won't hear you crying." He didn't tell her that he hated to hear her cry too, but he was determined to make her think twice before disobeying him.

"Take off your dress, Maddie," he said quietly. He watched as she obeyed him without an argument. She leaned over to step out of it and laid it to the side on a bale of hay. When she looked up at him, tears were shimmering in her baby blue eyes.

Maddie was determined not to fight him this time, but to accept her discipline with grace. She knew he was right. If the cat had caught her outside, she would not be alive to tell about it. She was lucky. She should have stayed inside like he had said and not risked her life like that. She

shivered at the thought of how close she had come to doing just that.

She loved Heath too, and she was pretty sure she was carrying his child. She hadn't told him yet, she wanted to make sure first. She shuddered at her impulsive risking of their baby's life. She deserved this spanking, and next time, she would think more carefully before acting so foolishly.

Heath drew her over his thighs as he sat on the hay bale and adjusted her body where he wanted her. She didn't fight him for the first time, and he was pleased and surprised.

Maddie tried to relax and accept the light swats that Heath began peppering her small behind with, feeling her cheeks bounce beneath his hand.

Gradually, he began to get a little harder, and she began to squirm as the heat and stinging began to build.

When he parted the chemise, she knew the warm up was over, and she couldn't help crying out when his hard palm began connecting with her rounded buttocks in very hard, powerful swats.

Chapter Nine

Maddie squirmed and bucked over her husband's strong knee, sobbing earnestly as he spanked her very soundly with his large right hand. She would not beg him to stop, for she truly felt she deserved this, but she wished it would end! Her bottom was on fire, and Heath didn't show any signs of stopping anytime soon.

"OHH...Heath...OWW...OHH!" She cried and kicked out as he continued to spank her. "I'm sorry...Heathhhh!" She sobbed hard, and she tried desperately to keep her hands from flying to her bottom. She didn't want them pinned.

At last, Heath stopped and placed his hand on her very warm rear-end, testing the heat. Almost done, he decided. Just one more lesson to make sure she understood. "I do love you, Maddie," he said calmly, his hand going to his belt buckle. "That's why I'm spanking you. I don't want you to endanger your life like that again, and our marriage."

He began to slide the belt from its loops, and Maddie's heart sank. Not his belt! She sobbed harder as he pinned her legs beneath his. "Give me your hand, Maddie. I'm not sure you will be able to keep it out of the way, and I don't want to hurt you."

Maddie's firm resolve not to beg fell apart, and she pleaded with him. "Oh no, Heath, please...please not your belt. I promise I'll never do anything dangerous or foolish again!"

"Your hand, Maddie," he insisted firmly and was pleased when Maddie finally slid her small hand back to him.

He shifted her in close to his waist, so her left hand could not get behind her and held her right hand against her back.

He lifted the doubled belt and brought it down with a sharp slap across her reddened buttocks.

CRACK!

Maddie immediately jumped, and Heath held her firmly as he continued to crack the belt across her bucking backside, landing a few along the backs of her thighs, much to her dismay.

She was sobbing wildly by the time he finally dropped his belt and sat her up, holding her close.

Maddie cried out when her swollen cheeks connected with Heath's pants and she gasped. "Oh...oh, Heath...it hurts so much!" The tears were streaming down her wet cheeks, and they splashed onto his bare arm. He was grateful she was there to cry in his arms, and he soothed her, rubbing her back gently to help calm her.

He stood up and walked with her to a stall of fresh sweet smelling hay and lay down on it, drawing her onto his body. He rubbed her hot swollen bottom while she cried, her tears running down his neck.

"I'm proud of you, Maddie," Heath finally spoke softly.

Maddie lifted her head to look down into his brown eyes. "Why?"

"Because you took your spanking so well."

Maddie flushed slightly, and then nodded shyly. "I...I guess I knew I deserved it, Heath."

"I never thought I'd hear you say that." Heath chuckled, pleased at her words.

"I never thought I'd hear myself say it either," she grinned back at him, wiping the last of her tears away. "I guess you're just a bad influence on me, Heath Danvers."

"No, more like a good influence," he mocked gently.

"Humph, that's a matter of opinion where spanking is concerned."

"I love you, Maddie," he said tenderly; as he drew her head down to take her soft lips.

"I know," she breathed teasingly, "more than life itself."

With a mock growl, he flipped her over and came down on top of her. "And don't you forget it." He swooped down to claim her waiting lips.

Cecilia listened as her Uncle talked to her about her grandmother. Perhaps, she should go with him to England, she thought. It would give her the opportunity to get away from Matt. The last thing she wanted was his pity.

"You seem distracted, my dear," said Adam gently, seeing the troubled look in Cecilia's eyes. "I do hope you'll reconsider about going to England."

She looked at him. "I...won't...marry with Matt."

Adam was baffled. "Why not?" he finally asked. He'd had mixed feelings about that himself, but seeing as how they had become so familiar with each other, he really did feel they belonged together. What was troubling the child now he wondered?

Cecilia just looked sad and shrugged her shoulders. How was she supposed to explain that?

"Do you not want him to come to England with us?"

Cecilia thought about that. "Noooo...he come...but no marry with him."

"That's...I won't marry him," corrected Adam automatically.

"Yes."

"I...won't.... marry...him," she echoed tentatively.

"Well, if that's the way you wish it, my dear, I shall insist he abide by your desires. You are my niece, after all, and I have legal custody of you automatically. You cannot get married without my consent, and I shall just withhold it until you are ready."

Cecilia nodded, looking relieved.

"That's settled then," Adam said decisively. "I shall just inform Matt of my decision."

"What do you mean you won't give permission," barked Matt. He had come in for supper, and Adam had tackled him right off the bat.

Cecelia hadn't even met him at the door, and he was tired and hungry and not in a great mood to begin with.

He knew he was going to have to finish spanking her, and he was not looking forward to using his belt on her, especially not with her angry with him like she was. Now that she could talk---he wished she could express herself better!

"She is underage, as you know, and it requires my permission for you to marry her."

"Permission, hell, you just told me I was required to marry her up in the mountains this morning." Matt raked his fingers through his unruly blond hair.

"I've changed my mind," insisted Adam, feeling a little sorry for the younger man. "But you are welcome to come to England with us."

Matt eyed him exasperatedly. "So she has decided to go to England after all?"

Adam nodded.

"But she won't marry me?"

Adam shook his head no.

"Where is she?" Matt's words were getting shorter and more clipped as they went along.

"She doesn't wish to see you, tonight," admitted Adam. "She ate supper early and has retired to her room."

"Retired...to her room?" The words were well spaced as he echoed Adam. His eyes glinted dangerously.

"I'm afraid so, Matt." Maddie had appeared in the doorway, Heath right behind her, and they both heard the last few sentences. "But, you are welcome to come in to supper, it's all ready and waiting."

Matt's eyes narrowed. So the little brat was attempting to get out of her spanking! Well, it wasn't going to work!

"I believe I have some unfinished business with her highness," he replied smoothly. "If you would be so kind as to show her out here, I would appreciate it." He mocked Adam's accent.

Heath's eyes twinkled. "And what would that be?"

"I promised her a proper spanking for stealing Maddie's horse and disobeying her," Matt said sardonically. "I intend to follow through on that promise, then if she wants to stay in her room and not marry me, that's fine."

"Perhaps, as her Uncle, I should administer the spanking," Adam replied thoughtfully. "She certainly does deserve one."

"You may be her Uncle, but Cecilia belongs to me," replied Matt heatedly. "Any spankings she gets will come from me." He found he didn't like the idea of anyone else spanking that pert little bottom, even if it was a family member.

"Not yet, she doesn't," sniffed Adam disdainfully. "Now listen here, old chap, I do have sympathy with you, but the legalities are clear. No matter what the

mountain blokes say, she doesn't have to marry you!"

"Look, this is between me and Cecilia," Matt ground out. "Heath, if you don't want me to come in your house and get her, I'll respect that. But I'm the one who will spank her, when the time is right, and no one else. She IS my fiancée after all."

"Fair enough," Adam decided, rather relieved. He really didn't want to spank the girl; he wanted to bring her to his mother. Making her angry with him might negate that.

"Why don't you come in and have supper, Matt," Heath invited, holding the door aside. "Then you can have a talk with Cecilia if you like."

Heath personally thought that both men had a point, but he was more on Matt's side at the moment. He suspected that Cecilia was trying to get out of chastisement as well.

Cecilia lay on her bed, no longer hearing the rumble of voices from the open front doorway. She hadn't been able to hear everything, but it seemed her wishes were being respected. She sighed in relief.

She pictured Matt's face in her mind, and her heart felt heavy. He had sounded very angry with her, and she wondered how long he would stay around to wait for her to come out of her room.

Finally, after all was quiet, she got brave enough to peek through a crack in the bedroom door. From the rumble of voices, she could tell they had all moved to the front veranda to talk.

Quietly, she slipped out the back door and headed for the privy. She'd just sneak out real quick, and then back in.

She opened the door to exit the privy and was startled at the tall figure in the moonlight staring down at her. It was Matt!

Gasping, she quickly closed the door and leaned against it.

Matt grinned at the shock on Cecilia's sweet face. Chuckling, he leaned against the door. "You might as well come out, I'm not going anywhere."

"NO!" came the muffled expletive through the door. He heard the latch catching and knew she had locked it on him.

"Might as well come out and get it over with, little girl," crooned Matt through the door. "After all, you should be ready for it by now, you knew it was coming."

"Go away!"

"Oh no, I'm afraid I can't do that. You see, I always keep my promises." He took out his pocketknife and quietly slipped it in the crack in the door and lifted the hook.

"Stop that!" came the order through the door as the hook was refastened.

Matt shook his head at her tenacity. "You are just making it harder on yourself, little girl. Now I'm going to have to add extra licks for not obeying me. You know how I feel about that."

Cecilia kicked the door. "NO! I...won't marryyou," she said angrily. "No spank!"

"Whether we marry or not, you are getting your hide tanned." Matt replied gruffly. "Now are you coming out, or do I have to come in?"

Cecilia furiously yanked the door open, allowing it to bang back on its hinges. She stood there with her hands on her hips, spitting angrily at him like a small kitten. "NO! No spank...I...say!" She crossed her arms over her chest imperiously, as if he were to obey her orders.

Matt stared down at her enigmatically, then simply dipped his broad shoulder and hefted her over it.

Cecilia began to pound his back furiously, her feet kicking against his thighs. She screamed in frustration as he began to carry her towards the woodshed about 20 yards away.

On the porch, Maddie sighed sympathetically, knowing Matt had caught her protégée. "Poor Cecilia," she murmured.

"Poor Cecilia!" Heath echoed her frostily, his eyebrows drawing together. "She stole Eggs and could have gotten herself killed by disobeying you, she deserves every lick Matt gives her!"

Adam shifted uncomfortably. "I'm afraid I quite have to agree with Heath, Maddie. The girl certainly deserves a few strokes of a cane." He was rather relieved that Matt was going to do it, however. He disciplined his own wife and children, but it wasn't a pleasant task---necessary, but unpleasant.

Mary Ann Wentworth opened the letter from her son with shaking fingers. When she read the words he had written, she gasped and had to find a chair.

"What is it, Mum?" asked her daughter-n-law. She perused the Matriarch of the Wentworth family; the pale face, the faded blue eyes filling with tears and the wobbly chin that tried to stay stiff.

Mary was sixty-two years old and had hair as white as pristine snow, the fine high bones of her face depicting her breeding. She gasped for breath as she handed the letter to Ruth, and reached for her hand fan to create some air.

Swiftly, Ruth scanned the contents of the letter. Adam had found Cecilia! But, alas, Amanda was dead. "Should I get the doctor, Mum?" she asked in concern. This was quite a shock for Mary.

"No," gasped Mary, as she strove to calm herself and breathe deeply. "I am all right. Just shocked,

that is all." She closed her eyes and laid her head back on the headrest of the chair.

Ruth reread the letter. Adam was bringing Cecilia home for a visit. How wonderful for Mary, she had so missed Amanda. The missive was very brief however, and Adam had signed it with "details when I get back".

Dropping her hands in her lap, she watched Mary uneasily. She seemed to be relaxing, but Mary had been ill, and it was sometimes hard for her to breathe.

Ruth pulled the bell pull that would alert Rose that she was needed, and when the girl arrived, asked her to bring some tea to the library. Rose took one look at Mary and hurried off to do as she was asked.

Moments later, Mary was sipping the sweet hot tea, and her shaking hands were calming down. She smiled weakly at Ruth. "Thank you my dear, you are such a treasure."

Ruth smiled and eyed her speculatively as Mary continued to sip the tea and look at the letter in her lap. Amanda had been gone for eight years, and no one really knew what had happened.

When Amanda had stopped writing, Mary had sent Adam to Scotland to find out what was going on. He had come back and reported that Amanda and Cecilia had run away, and the family had told him that their son had gone off chasing the wench. That was all they knew.

The dour Scottish father of Michael McCormick hadn't been very friendly, and Adam had come home quite perturbed. He did what he could to find Amanda for Mary, but she had seemed to disappear once she hit the American continent.

Actually, he had been tracing McCormick himself, because he hadn't found Amanda's name

anywhere. Once McCormick disappeared from the New York area, he had lost track of him, and so lost track of Amanda as well.

Edward James Wentworth had been furious. The ring bearing the family crest had disappeared, and he was sure Amanda had taken it. There had been a major argument, and the family was torn apart when Amanda had married Michael McCormick without his permission, and he had told her to never darken his door again.

Ruth and Adam didn't know all the particulars. Mary and Edward had both been very closemouthed about the whole thing, but Ruth knew that Mary had suffered greatly.

She watched as Mary stared sightlessly out the window. The heavy red drapes had been pulled back and fastened with the gold cording at the side and the wide expanse of the garden was open to view. Mary was partial to roses, and the garden sported several varieties.

Ruth looked around her, her pretty blue eyes taking in the room with a critical eye. She blew the brown hair back from her forehead as a wispy curl fell over one eye.

The Wentworth estate had been in the family for many generations, and most of the furniture and styling was Queen Anne and Elizabethan. It pleased Ruth to leave it as such, on that; she and Mary were in agreement.

Edward Wentworth had been killed in a foxhunt a few years ago, and Adam was now the administrator of the estate, as well as the owner of the home, and she and Adam took care of Mary.

Edward had left all his estate and money to Adam, with a small pension for his wife, Mary. He had not even mentioned his daughter.

Ruth thought him a hardened, embittered old man, but he had always treated her well. Then again, she had never given him much trouble, and he had been proud of his grandson.

He rarely paid any attention to his granddaughter, and Ruth knew he did not have much respect for woman as anything other than brood mares. If he had ever had any respect for women, no one ever mentioned it. She often wondered what it was that the pretty Mary Ann had ever seen in the crusty old bugger.

These things had always angered her, but she had held her tongue, although Adam knew how she felt about it. At least, she had learned to hold her tongue after Adam had given her a few lessons in the art, by way of her bottom. She grimaced and wrinkled her aristocratic nose.

The first time he had spanked her bottom cheeks to a painful fiery red with her hairbrush, she had been thoroughly shocked and outraged, but she had learned not to be disrespectful to him or his father.

Adam was very big on proper manners, and although Ruth had been taught properly, she sometimes was imprudent in her outspoken opinions. She had also learned that throwing her hairbrush at him had probably been her biggest mistake!

She had been angry when they climbed the stairs to their bedroom. They had only been married six months, and Ruth had been very angry with her stepfather. When Adam had tried to shush her, she had gotten angry with him. Used to speaking her mind, she had been aggravated when Adam had taken her upstairs to talk to her.

She had begun brushing her hair while listening to Adam scold her, and she had become even more indignant.

"I don't care what you say, I'll speak as I like," she had raged at him, finally throwing the hairbrush in her hand at him in frustration. She knew it had been a mistake as soon as he picked it up and faced her, his handsome face like a thundercloud.

Her heart had leapt into her throat as he strode across the room and grabbed her arm. She hadn't known what he intended when he sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her towards him, but she had soon found out---face down over her husband's substantial knee.

Her dress and petticoats had come up, her lacy undergarments had been pushed aside and her bottom painfully chastised with her own hairbrush as he had brought it down in resounding thwacks across her squirming bottom cheeks.

She had yelped and cried, but to no avail. Adam had spanked her thoroughly, and lectured her mercilessly, for her temper, turning her into a sobbing, shaking mess.

Her bottom had been on fire, and she had been unable to sit for several days without being reminded of her transgressions.

That had been fourteen years ago, right after Amanda had married Michael McCormick in Scotland and disgraced herself---according to Edward, anyway.

"Would you like some more tea, Mum?" she asked Mary gently.

Mary shook her head no, and continued to stare out into the garden, her thoughts far away. Amanda, her beloved baby girl...dead!

She had known it, of course. Her mother's heart had told her, but oh how painful it was to have it

verified. She wondered if Cecilia, the granddaughter she had never seen, looked anything like her mother.

Cecilia was betrothed, to a lawman, according to Adam. She sighed and looked down at the letter in her lap. There was so much life changing information in the short missive, yet so few details for the hungry heart.

She would have to wait until they arrived to find out more. If they arrived under Adam's directions, it would only be a few weeks.

Mary's eyes focused on the beautiful dark pink rose just outside the window. She had planted it when Amanda had been born. She had been such a beautiful baby, and Mary had loved her devotedly. Sadly, she brushed away a lone tear.

Beside Amanda's rose was the strong red rose, for Adam, dear sweet Adam. And, on the other side of the pink rose bush was a beautiful white rose, planted for Cecilia, sixteen years ago. She had often wondered if her granddaughter would ever see it. Now, it looked like that heartfelt wish might actually come true.

She wondered if her granddaughter was as stubborn and softhearted as Amanda had been, and if she ever wondered about her mother's family.

She had often despaired of Amanda's kind heart and hated that Edward had chosen to treat his own daughter in such a callous manner.

She knew that Michael McCormick had taken advantage of Amanda, and Amanda, with her generous nature, had been unable to refuse.

If Mary could have seen Cecilia at that moment in time, she might have gotten a good laugh. Her granddaughter was facing off with her betrothed; a

stick of firewood clutched in her hands and her eyes spitting green sparks.

"Put it down, little girl," warned Matt, his brown eye's narrowing at Cecilia's stance. He had brought her into the woodshed and set her on her feet, then turned and locked the door by dropping the heavy wooden bar into place.

Cecilia had taken advantage of the respite and grabbed a stick of firewood, brandishing it menacingly at Matt. "NO! NO SPANK!"

"Don't make me have to take it away from you, young lady," ground out Matt, advancing on her. He stopped when she actually took a swipe at him. His eyes narrowed dangerously.

Cecilia furiously waved the log about, intending to keep him away from her, but her heart was racing. She was angry with him, angry that he didn't love her, angry that he still intended to spank her even though he didn't want to marry her for real, and angry that he had caught her after she had stayed in her hot stuffy bedroom all evening.

It just wasn't fair! With a shriek, she threw the log at him and bent down to pick up another one.

Quick as a flash, Matt dodged the log, already reading the intention in her eyes. The girl seemed to have a penchant for throwing things. He would address that---again! This time he would make sure she understood it was totally unacceptable.

He reached her just as she picked up another log and grabbed her wrist, causing her to drop it. She squealed in frustration when he pulled her upright.

She kicked and hit at him, but he pulled her over to the bench just inside the door and yanked her across his lap as he seated himself. It was time to settle her down!

Cecilia screamed with rage as he pulled her over his lap, and her fists beat a tattoo on his calf. It didn't seem to faze Matt, and she felt her skirt being lifted and her bloomers yanked down by his hand.

"NO! NO!" She yelled indignantly and kicked ineffectually; it seemed nothing could stop him, although she struggled furiously.

Matt laid into the wiggling white bottom like a man on a mission.

He gripped her wiggling hip with his left hand and dropped hard hot spansks on the pale cheeks, leaving red handprints all over them as he worked.

She had a damn good spanking coming, and he intended to see that she got all she deserved!

Cecilia yelped and hollered as Matt set fire to her backside, and finally, she stopped fighting him, hoping he would stop. The tears rolled down her flushed cheeks as she sobbed.

Matt stopped spanking when she stopped fighting him, and he pulled her upright to look into her red face. "Are you going to stop fighting me now and accept your spanking?"

Sobbing, Cecilia stared at him in consternation. There was more? Her butt was already on fire, and she didn't want any more!

When Cecilia didn't answer him, Matt stood her up and took her to the corner of the woodshed and faced her into it.

Picking up her long skirt, he put her hand on it. "Hold this up! You are going to stand here with your bare red bottom on display and think about what could have happened to you in the mountains. You are also to think about your bad habit of throwing things, young lady, and the extra lick's you're going to get for that!"

Extra? Cecilia began to sob harder as her heart sank!

Chapter Ten

Cecilia stared into the corner of the woodshed, sobbing softly. The hair on the back of her neck raised when she suddenly noticed the green eyes glowing in the lantern light, just off her right shoulder.

Not daring to turn her head, her eyes shifted sideways, and the complete view of the giant wood spider came into sight. She hated spiders! They literally scared her spitless.

The stacks of wood in woodsheds were as high as the ceiling practically, and spiders were often in the piles, and she hated like crazy to be sent after some for a fire!

She backed up and emitted an ear splitting shriek as she dropped her skirts in panic. It had been less than a foot from her face, and its body was the size of an elongated marble, not to mention the legs!

Matt had been seated on the bench, watching her. His attention had been distracted for a moment as he looked at the razor strap on the wall and was unprepared when Cecilia made a break for the door.

He jumped up and caught her as her hands scrabbled to open the heavy wooden bar. To his surprise, she did not fight him, but instead acted like she was trying to melt into his body, her arms hanging onto his neck for dear life as she shrieked into his chest.

He realized suddenly that she was frightened. Was this an act to get out of her spanking? She surely couldn't be that scared of him!

"What is it, honey?" he asked, puzzled. He tried to unglue her face from his hard chest. Shaking,

Cecilia looked back at the corner and pointed towards it, her finger trembling.

Matt disentangled himself and peered into the corner, seeing instantly what was upsetting her. He didn't blame her too much, he didn't care for spiders himself, but they didn't frighten him like they apparently did her.

Picking up a piece of kindling, he raised his arm carefully, intent on assisting in its demise. It stared balefully back at him and refused to scurry off, which made him uneasy. He hesitated, and then renewed his determination to not let the spider win even if it was almost as wide as his hand span.

Feeling a sudden draft behind him, he looked back over his shoulder and saw Cecilia disappearing out the doorway. With a muttered oath, he dropped the kindling and sprinted after his runaway.

Cecilia had succeeded in lifting the bar and rushing out the door, but was hampered by her bloomers, still at half-mast. She couldn't run near as fast as she'd like to, but she tried, the image of that spider staring at her fresh in her mind.

She didn't intend to get back in that corner, no matter what Matt had to say about it!

Suddenly, she felt her waist grabbed, pulling her to a stop and strong arms beneath her knees, lifting her off the ground. She looked up into Matt's brown eyes, breathing heavily.

"No...no...please," she begged him, afraid he was going to take her back to the woodshed. She kicked helplessly, her feet too far from the ground to do her any good.

"Take it easy, little girl," soothed Matt gruffly. "I'm not taking you back in there."

She slumped against him then, sniffing in relief, her arms reaching around his shoulder as she buried her face in his neck. When he strode inside

the barn and sat down with her on a hay bale, she sobbed in relief.

Matt held her tightly, realizing she had really been very scared. Her body was still shaking and trembling. He savored the feeling of her in his arms; she was a woman of delightful contrasts. She had loaded a rifle and taken on a cougar, yet she was terrified of something she could step on.

Matt loved long hair on a woman, yet the short cap of ebony curls that lay against his shoulder made her seem smaller somehow, and more defenseless.

He loved the long nape of her neck, and he ran his fingers soothingly up and down it. At last, she sighed and just sat still, seemingly enjoying being in his embrace.

He was caressing the silky thigh where her dress had slipped up, noting that her bloomers were still down around her thighs.

The feel of her soft firm flesh made him tremble, and desire surged hot and strong through his body.

Cecilia offered no resistance as his seeking fingers moved further up her slender legs, reaching the soft springy curls at the apex of her thighs. She gasped and moved her thighs apart, allowing him to slip his fingers into the silky wetness.

Cecilia began to tremble all over again as Matt's seeking hand probed that secret place on her body. She found she wanted him to continue exploring her, making her yearn for—something, she didn't know what.

She just knew she didn't want him to stop what he was doing, and she moaned softly and laid back, letting her legs fall open so he would have better access.

"Oh God, Cecilia, if you don't stop me, I'm going to take you right here, and your Uncle will shoot me," he whispered thickly.

"No," groaned Cecilia, looking up at him, her green eyes heavy with desire. "No stop, Matt." She reached up and pulled his head down to her soft lips, grinding hers against his, tentatively probing them with her small pink tongue as she had felt him do to her a couple of times.

Matt couldn't help himself, he swept her up hard against his chest, taking over the kiss, his hand coming up to cup her breast and thumb her hardening nipple through the thin cotton.

As she turned responsively towards him, he moved down and cupped her bare buttocks, pushing her up hard against his body.

Groaning with desire, he stood up and carried her to the soft fragrant hay and laid her down, his lips hardly leaving hers.

Following her down, his hard shaft pressed between her open legs, begging to be sprung so it could enter the waiting, willing softness of her womanly sheath.

Cecilia unconsciously lifted her hips into his, wishing the bloomers were not restricting her. Her wish came true when Matt reached down and swept them off her body.

Unfettered, she opened her legs wide reveling in the feeling of his hardness against her womanly center, and she pulled him closer, straining and yearning against him.

It was Heath's voice calling to Buster that finally broke him out of his headlong plunge into desire, and trembling, Matt drew back. It took a monumental effort, but he rolled off Cecilia and stood up.

"We can't do this," he said hoarsely, looking down at her sweet open thighs, wishing nothing more than to finish what had begun. "Cover yourself," he added harshly, turning away from her.

Bewildered, Cecilia quickly sat up and pulled her dress down, watching Matt with confused eyes, hurt eyes.

He stared out the barn door, trying to get control of himself. Finally, he muttered, "Get dressed, Cecilia. I'm not going to spank you anymore tonight. Consider yourself having a reprieve."

She quickly slipped into her bloomers and stood up, his rejection like a cold shower washing over her. She didn't know what she had done wrong, but whatever it was, Matt didn't like her, that was obvious. She ran past him and out of the barn.

"Cecilia, wait!"

But, it was too late, she ran on winged feet to the back door of the house and let herself in.

Matt followed her more slowly, going on around to the front to get on Daisy. He didn't even stop to say goodbye, he just mounted his horse and rode on out, the throbbing between his legs making it uncomfortable to ride.

What the hell was he supposed to do? She didn't want to marry him, but she wanted him to go to England with her. How was he supposed to be around her all the time and not take her?

He burned for her, and she was in his blood now, and he couldn't seem to get enough of her kisses, her sweet body. He was afraid to spank her; afraid he wouldn't be able to control himself. Sighing, he rode on into town, headed for a sleepless night.

Cecilia ran through the kitchen, the living room and into her bedroom, slamming the door behind

her. In the sitting room, Heath and Maddie were talking with Adam.

Maddie sighed in sympathy, but the men just looked at each other.

"Wonder why Matt didn't come in," Adam remarked thoughtfully, "I wanted to talk to him."

"I don't know," Heath replied, shrugging. "He usually does."

Maddie knocked softly on Cecilia's door. Not getting an answer, she opened it a crack and saw Cecilia, laying face down on the bed. She was crying, her slender shoulders shaking.

Softhearted Maddie hurriedly stepped inside and rushed to the bed. "Oh, poor Cecilia, does it hurt badly?" She put her hand on the young girl's back, and Cecilia just buried her face in the pillow, refusing to look up.

"Now, Cecilia, you know Matt just spanked you for your own good, because he was worried and cares about you." She shuddered as she echoed Heath's words to her, finally seeing them in a new light.

"No," sobbed Cecilia. "I won't marry with Matt."

"You are angry with him," guessed Maddie, not really knowing why she said that. "That's understandable, but it will pass, and you won't be angry anymore."

Cecilia didn't know how to make her understand, so she didn't even try.

Finally, Maddie stood up. "I'll let you get some sleep then, Cecilia, you will feel better in the morning."

Cecilia smiled weakly up at Maddie, and then turned away. She knew she wouldn't feel any better. The pain in her bottom was nothing compared to the pain in her heart, and there was no way to explain it. Matt just didn't like her. She

didn't want him to go to England with her either, not now.

She would tell Adam tomorrow that she didn't want Matt to come. She didn't want him to feel sorry for her, to be responsible for her. She had Adam for that. She would go to England and visit her family. Maybe she would even find a home there and stay there. Maybe she would find someone there who would...love her.

The next morning, Cecilia was up early, studying the picture books that Maddie had laid out for her a few days ago. She intended to learn everything she could before she went to England with Adam; she wanted to be able to talk!

When Adam came in, her face was pale, but she looked determined. "Matt no go to England," she said to him. "I...no want him...to go."

Adam studied her for a moment, wondering what was going on. Finally, he spoke. "Cecilia, are you angry with Matt?"

She looked at him for a moment, and then shook her head, her green eyes sad. "No, not angry."

"But you don't want to marry him, and now you don't even want him to go with you, is that right?"

"Yes," she replied, nodding her head.

"Well, that is your choice, of course. That being the case, I can get two passages a lot sooner. We can leave day after tomorrow if you like."

Cecilia hesitated, and then nodded her head. "Yes...we go."

Adam looked at Maddie and Maddie looked puzzled.

After breakfast, Adam saddled his horse and spoke to Heath. "I'm going into town to find Matt and let him know we are leaving in a few days, without him."

Heath looked at him thoughtfully. "Adam, you don't have a notion of taking off with Cecilia and not letting her come back if she chooses do you?"

Adam looked affronted. "Of course not! I would never keep her from her desires. But I personally think this would be the best thing for her. She really is a total innocent and needs an education. I can provide that, and a home for her. If she chooses to come here at a later date, then I'll allow it. But know also, if she chooses not to, then I'll not make her either."

"I understand," replied Heath. "Why don't you leave us your address? We'll need to notify you if the will Pappy left can be validated as legal. That land seemed important to Cecilia, and I think it would make her happy to know if she gets it."

"Of course." Adam tipped his hat to Heath and then cantered off.

Heath watched him out of sight, wondering exactly what was going on with Cecilia.

"What's got you all riled up this morning, you're like a bear with a sore head," grumbled Sheriff Crockett as he eyed Matt across the breakfast table. "And you haven't even touched your breakfast." He chewed on his bacon as he studied the glowering face across from him.

"Nothing," muttered Matt. He took a drink of the hot coffee, ignoring the bacon and eggs staring up at him like a smiling face. Irritated, he shoved the plate aside. "Not a damn thing!"

The Sheriff helped himself to a slice of the bacon waving it around in the air before he took a bite. Chewing, he continued talking. "The only time a man looks like you do is when a woman is involved. That little girl's got you tied up in knots don't she?"

"I don't want to talk about her," growled Matt, grabbing the bacon out of the Sheriff's hand as it waved under his nose.

"Well, here comes that Uncle of hers, and I bet he's looking for you." He took the bacon back from Matt as he turned around to see Adam walking up to him.

"May I have a moment of your time?" Adam asked politely, removing his hat.

Matt grunted and pushed the chair back from the table and followed Adam outside to the boardwalk. Before Adam could begin, he held up his hand and spoke. "I won't be going to England with you."

Adam's mouth gaped open for a moment, then he recovered. "Well, actually, that's what I came to talk to you about. It seems Cecilia does not want you to go. So I decided to move the date up and take the two bookings for next week. We leave on the train tomorrow."

"That's fine with me," replied Matt tersely. "I can't travel with her like that and not be married to her, so if she doesn't want to marry me, then I don't want to go.

Adam began to get a glimmer of what this was all about. "Did something happen between you two last night?" he asked shrewdly.

"Since you are her Uncle, I will answer that," replied Matt evenly. "No, nothing happened, but I know I can't be that close to her for long before it does, so I will not go with you without marrying her."

"Are you in love with my niece?"

Matt looked at him, and then looked away, his brown eyes studying the distant mountains. "I don't know," he said at last. "I think so, but she doesn't even know what love is."

"It sounds like you aren't sure either," Adam replied, his eyes twinkling.

"Maybe not, but you keep a close guard on her. Don't let anyone take advantage of her."

"Well, she is betrothed, therefore she can't see anyone else." His voice was amused.

Matt looked relieved. "Yes, I guess she is. That's good then. Just make sure she understands that."

Adam handed him a piece of paper. "My address, should you wish to contact her or send her a letter? Are you going to come and say goodbye to her?"

"I don't think so," Matt muttered. He didn't think he could take the hurt in her eyes. He knew what he was doing was for the best, but he didn't think she could understand.

Hell, she would have let him take her right there in the barn last night, whereas any other lady except a whore would have screamed bloody murder if he put his hand down her dress.

"Right then," Adam replied, putting his hat back on his head. "I'll just get on down to the train depot and get the arrangements finalized. "Don't worry, I shall take good care of her for you."

The next day, Maddie and Heath took Adam and Cecilia, to the train station, Adam's horse tied to the back of the buckboard to be returned.

Cecilia looked around the small station, looking for Matt, even though she was sure he wouldn't be there. He didn't care if she left or not.

Uncle Adam had told her he wasn't going with them and pride forbade her to beg him. Of course, she had told her Uncle she didn't want him to come, but that was beside the point.

She had been very quiet, doing all the chores Maddie had assigned her, following her around and pointing to everything and repeating it when Maddie

told her what it was. She ached to learn, and her quick mind picked things up very fast.

Adam had promised her a new wardrobe, made especially for her when they reached England, and she had simply agreed, not even excited about the thought of new clothes.

"I'll be excited to get your first letter, Cecilia," Maddie said, her baby blue eyes glowing. "I just know you'll learn to write very quickly once you have a personal tutor."

"I...will," promised Cecilia, hugging her friend. "Thank you...for all."

Heath hugged her too and then handed her over to her Uncle Adam. Just as he began to help her up the steps to the train, Matt strode up.

Cecilia stared at him from beneath her bonnet, her green eyes stricken. Her heart beat fast as he took her left hand and slid a small gold band with a small sparkling stone attached to it onto her finger.

"That's so you'll remember who you belong to," he growled, then turned on his heel and strode away.

"Well, that was romantic," exclaimed Maddie indignantly. "Small wonder Cecilia doesn't swoon."

Cecilia looked at her hand and looked at Matt's retreating back. It was on the tip of her tongue to call him back, but he had looked so angry. She didn't understand what the ring meant or what he had meant. Did he think she was his because Pappy had given her to him?

"Come, my dear, up you go," urged Adam, seeing the confusion in her eyes. In a few months, she would be in a better position to understand Matt's enigmatic words and make some decisions for herself. For now, it was better that she go with him.

Tears stung her eyes as Cecilia bit her lip and turned away. She allowed the conductor to draw her on up the train steps. With her nose pressed to the window, she watched, looking for a glimpse of Matt as the train pulled away. Seeing none, she finally gave up hope and settled back in the seat.

It would be about fifteen days before they arrived at her Grandmother's in England---a long journey.

Matt watched from the window of the diner, seeing the small nose pressed against the train window and had to keep himself from stopping the locomotive. Nothing would be gained from it; she needed this time to grow up. As the train pulled out of sight, he clapped his hat on his head and went outside, watching it grow smaller in the distance.

"Don't worry, son, she'll be back in a few months." Sheriff Crockett put his hand on Matt's shoulder. He could read between the lines.

"Who said I'm worrying," Matt replied gruffly and he picked up Daisy's reins. Mounting her, he looked down at the Sheriff. "You gonna stand there jawing all day or you gonna check out that complaint about the stolen pigs with me?" He turned around and cantered off, the Sheriff watching shrewdly.

Shaking his head, Sheriff Crockett muttered something about young whippersnappers these days, and he mounted Alberta and cantered after his upstart deputy.

Cecilia was finally able to shake off her sad feelings about Matt as Adam courteously described everything around them.

He purposely tried to take her mind off the deputy by helping her with her words, naming things for her to repeat after him, and Cecilia began

to enjoy herself, her green eyes lighting up with pleasure at the new scenes around her.

Finally, she looked down at the ring again, and then held it up to the light, watching the stone sparkle.

"Pretty," she murmured, pleased that Matt had given it to her.

"Do you know what that means, my dear?" Adam asked softly, figuring she had no idea.

Shyly she shook her head no.

Adam cleared his throat. "It means you and Matt are engaged to be married. It means he wants you to come back to him when you are ready, and get married."

Cecilia's green eyes shimmered with emotion. "He...wants me?" She had thought he wanted nothing to do with her after last night, that he didn't like her.

"Yes, he wants you."

"Matt no like me," she said sadly. "Why...want me?"

"Oh, I think you are wrong about that, my dear," chuckled Adam. "Men don't give girls a ring unless they want them. This ring means you belong to him and no one else."

Cecilia smiled then, her heart fluttering with hope. She wasn't sure what to say, but soon, soon she would know all the words!

Adam echoed her thoughts. "When we get to England, your tutor will help you learn all about writing and reading. As bright as you are, it won't take long at all before you can write Matt a letter."

Cecilia hugged that knowledge to her heart, hoping he was right. There were so many things she didn't know! She wanted to learn everything at once, but it was impossible.

Three days later, they were on board the Clipper Rose. Just as Adam had promised, she wasn't near as sick as she had been coming over. Her cabin was very comfortable, and she was thoroughly enjoying herself.

It didn't seem that long at all before they were in Cheltenham County, in Gloucestershire, pulling up in front of one of the most beautiful houses Cecilia had ever seen.

She stared in awe while Adam paid the driver, and he went on down the driveway. It had been a good carriage ride up the tree-lined drive once they came through the wrought iron gates at the entrance.

As far as you could see, there were green expanses of lawn and a beautiful profusion of flowers everywhere. The great home was made of stone, with carved arches in the doorways, and there were stone pillars along the front of the house. There were three stone steps leading up the expanse of the entryway with lions on pedestals beside the steps.

She was startled when she heard the baying of hounds, and she stepped behind Adam as two dogs, with very short legs and long red noses and ears came trotting around the side of the house.

"That's just Percy and Peter," chuckled Adam, reaching down to scratch their ears. "They are basset hounds and wouldn't harm a flea."

Cecilia reached down hesitantly to pet them and was rewarded with doggy licks on her hands, much to her delight.

A few seconds later, two children came running up behind the dogs, screaming in glee when they saw Adam. "Papa, Papa, you're finally here!"

Cecilia stared at them curiously, one a boy and the other a girl, both with dark hair like their father. The young girl had green eyes, like her own, but the boy had blue eyes. The boy resembled Adam, though, while the girl didn't look like him at all.

"My children, Nicole and Nicholas," said Adam, after giving them a family bear hug. "Nicole is twelve and Nicholas is ten. Children, this is your cousin, Cecilia McCormick."

Nicole dropped a small curtsey and Nicholas bowed slightly, their grins matching as they studied Cecilia. "A pleasure to meet you, I'm sure," said Nicholas. Nicole nodded her agreement.

"Hello...to you," responded Cecilia shyly, not sure what to say.

Cecilia was unprepared when the door opened, and a woman strongly resembling her mother stepped outside.

Mary Ann Wentworth just stared, her heart beating fast, the tears springing to her eyes. The girl looked so much like Amanda that it was heartbreaking.

"My dear Cecilia, at last we meet!" Mary's hands were trembling as she reached out to the young girl.

Cecilia smiled tentatively, and then shyly took the proffered hands, allowing herself to be drawn into her grandmother's embrace.

"Hello...grandmother," she said hesitantly, wanting to make sure she got it right.

"Adam!" came the soft exclamation as Ruth stepped outside. Adam folded his wife into his embrace, greeting her with a kiss. "It's so good to have you home."

"It's good to be home, darling," Adam murmured. Then he turned her towards Cecilia.

"Cecilia, this is my wife, Ruth."

Cecilia nodded and smiled, again, not sure what to say. There was so much she wanted to say! "Hello."

"You don't talk much," remarked Nicholas curiously, looking up at Cecilia.

"There's a reason for that, Nicholas," returned Adam evenly. "And, that was rather rude, you must apologize to Cecilia."

Cecilia flushed and held up her hand. "No...it okay." She turned and looked down at Nicholas. "You...teach me?"

Nicholas puffed his chest out, proud that she had asked. "Sure, and I am sorry," he added on the end of it, looking at his father. "But why don't you talk very much?"

"That, my son, is a long story," replied Adam. "I suggest we let Cecilia come in and get rested, then you can all get to know her, she will be staying...indefinitely."

Chapter Eleven

Matt looked up as Sheriff Crockett slid onto the bar stool next to him. "Bring me a beer, Annie," he said the girl behind the counter.

Matt turned back to his glass, twirling it slowly in his hands while he stared at the amber liquid.

"You been making a habit of this place lately," noted the Sheriff unnecessarily.

"You keeping a record or something?" Matt returned coolly.

"Thank you, Annie." The Sheriff took a drink of the frosty brew, and then eyed his young deputy speculatively.

"You aren't fooling me any," replied the Sheriff shrewdly. "You're missing that little girl something fierce."

"So what if I am?" Matt looked squarely at him, his jaw half clenched as if ready for a fight.

"Whoa, son, I'm not needling you now, just making an observation. Have you heard from her?"

"No," Matt replied shortly. It had been six weeks since Cecilia had left. Six long weeks and Matt hadn't heard from anyone, not even Adam. Course, he knew it took days to get mail across the ocean, but even still, he had hoped to hear some news by this time. It was getting on towards the end of October, and he was getting more restless than ever.

"Have you written to her? Or sent her a telegram?"

"No."

The Sheriff sighed and rolled his eyes. "Son, didn't anyone ever tell you what to do when the girl doesn't fall into your lap? Course not," he muttered, answering his own question. "You're too spoiled, you have the girls chasing you all the time."

Matt flushed slightly and scowled.

"There's this thing called romance you know, where you do things that the ladies all like, flowers, little gifts, letters, all that rigmarole." He took a big swallow of his beer while Annie scowled at him too. He grinned and winked at her.

"It's kind of hard to romance someone who's hundreds of miles away," snorted Matt. "Besides, what does an old coot like you know about romance? If Dixie hadn't proposed to you, you'd still be shinnying into bed at night, alone!" His green eyes gleamed with mischief and returning good humor.

The Sheriff chuckled and nodded his head. "Oh, I'd have gotten around to it sooner or later. Not my fault Dixie was in such a big hurry now was it? Guess she just couldn't wait to have her way with me."

"I'm going to tell her you said that, Sheriff Crocket," laughed Annie. "She'll nail your hide to the wall!"

He winked at Annie again. "She can try, but more likely she'll end up over my knee."

"Oh, you," protested Annie, shaking her washrag at him. "You're incorrigible." Mumbling she went off to wipe down the bar.

Turning to Matt, the Sheriff spoke, "I do have some good news for you, though."

Matt's eyebrow rose questioningly.

"Jonathan Whitehead has talked to his lawyers about the situation. He said the adoption isn't legal; especially without permission from Cecilia's family, and that was never even sought. We both think that Pappy wanted Cecil to be provided for, and so did his best to cover that. And besides, we don't know that he didn't ask around. But, since he thought Cecil was a boy, it would have hampered progress;

and he didn't want to stir up too much of a hornet's nest because he didn't want to be found himself."

"That makes sense," replied Matt thoughtfully.

"However, he wants to honor Pappy's request that Cecilia have the land since he doesn't have any use for it. So, the will won't be contested, and he intends to give Cecilia the deed for the property, even though the lawyers say the will wouldn't hold up in court. It's his to do with as he pleases, at any rate, and he wants her to have it."

Matt's face brightened. "Well, that is good news! That should make her happy."

"So, you want to tell her? Or do you want me to send Adam a telegram?" The Sheriff's eyes twinkled at him.

"I'll tell her." Matt threw back the rest of his drink. "And while I'm at it, I'll tell her to get her butt home by Christmas."

"And what if she doesn't consider this home anymore?" The Sheriff studied him complacently.

"Then I'll just have to go over there and get her!" He slammed the empty beer glass down on the counter and stalked off.

"Not very romantic, boy," called the Sheriff after him, delighted at Matt's reaction.

"Romance be damned," muttered Matt.

He mounted Daisy and decided to spend his day off tomorrow up at the little cabin, maybe get it ready for winter. He didn't want to admit that it made him feel closer to Cecilia. He had spent a few days up there already since she had been gone.

Matt missed her, especially at night when he pictured her sweet bare bottom over his lap, and the glimpse he had gotten of her full little breasts with the pink aureoles around the rosebuds. He groaned and pushed the thoughts away; he had work to do. All those images accomplished were to

keep him in a constant state of arousal, and that made it hard to ride!

Cecilia stared at the letter in her hand. It was from Matt! She looked at Adam with shining eyes, her fingers trembling with excitement.

"Well, aren't you going to open it?" Adam chuckled, happy to see her smiling. She had seemed pretty distant lately, and kind of unhappy, as if she were restless. He often found her fingering the ring Matt had put on her hand, and he knew she missed him.

He was enormously proud of her accomplishments. She had taken right to her studies with the personal tutor he had hired and was doing wonderfully. She could speak without hesitation now, having mastered the sounds of the alphabet and was learning to read and write.

She spent hours at it, almost to the point of Adam having to pull her away from her studies just to get some fresh air. It would take years to make up for the education she should have had thus far in the sciences, math and culture, but all that would come.

Tonight, they were going to a social dinner at Lady Worthington's home, and she would be meeting people on a more intimate level. It would be a chance to practice the good manners and social graces that Ruth and Mary were teaching her.

Cecilia opened the letter and took out the paper folded inside. It wasn't a very long letter. But still Cecilia had to sound out several of the words.

Dear Cecilia,

I thought you would like to know that the property that Pappy left you is yours. Jonathan Whitehead will be sending the deed to me on your

behalf, to be given to you when you return from England.

I've been up to the cabin and made it ready for winter. I even laid in a supply of corn for the deer and will try to get up there once a week to put some out for them.

How much longer are you planning on staying in England? I can't feed these animals by myself forever you know. It would be nice to have you home by Christmas.

Your fiancé,

Matt

Cecilia flushed delicately as she finished the letter. Not one word about missing her or anything! Angrily, she handed the letter to Adam and went to her room.

She paced the floor, her usual pleasure in the beautiful surroundings escaping her. She paused by the canopy bed and grabbed a richly embroidered pillow to throw at the pink rosebud wall. It just wasn't fair!

She sat down in the cherry wood rocking chair overlooking the rose garden and stared out the window, rocking furiously. Why did she have to miss him so much, and he didn't appear to miss her at all? Her slippered toe pushed against the hardwood floor, sending her backwards over and over as her thoughts came fast and furious.

Did he really want her to come home just to feed the animals? Surely not! Maybe he did miss her, even if it was just a little. Her breathing became erratic as she remembered the last time they had spent together, she had thought about it often.

Sometimes, at night, she yearned for his lean fingers to explore her once again, to feel him

between her thighs, his hardness lying against her innermost parts.

She was beginning to see though, that these sorts of things were private. She had had a few talks with Ruth about the proper way to act around young men and what was and wasn't acceptable behavior between a couple. She hadn't told Ruth about her and Matt, but she knew their behavior would be frowned upon unless they were married.

Sighing, she finally got up and went to the cherry armoire and opened it, looking for the new gown she planned to wear tonight. She wondered if there would be any young men at the meal, and whether they would find her attractive?

In the study, Adam and Mary were talking about that very thing. Adam had shown Mary the letter and Mary had snorted with disdain. "He certainly doesn't sound like much of a charmer," she said distastefully. "You say he is a policeman in some wild hill country? Why would my granddaughter be interested in someone like that? If she stays here long enough, she could have her pick of young men, from good families. She is beautiful, talented and very clever. It won't take her long to catch up to girls her own age in grace and charm. Intellect will follow."

"I believe she is in love with Matt," replied Adam thoughtfully. "And he with her. Also, I'm not so sure he hasn't...compromised her."

"What?" Mary was aghast. "Are you sure about this?"

"They have been in many compromising situations, life is very different there than it is here, Mother," replied Adam.

"Nonsense," declared Mary. "Even if he has, she can still make a proper marriage here."

"That's not the point," Adam argued. "They want each other, although they are both stubborn and hardheaded about it. And, besides, Cecilia is now a property owner, although Jonathan Whitehead will retain power of attorney until she is married or turns twenty-one. And she loves those mountains. I doubt she would be happy here anymore. I would like to think she would, but nevertheless, I don't think she will."

He got up to pour a drink for himself and Mary. "I know you would love to have her stay here in England, but I doubt it will happen, Mother. I just don't know that it will ever be home to her."

"It will if she gives it a chance," protested Mary. "She has yet to meet anyone!" Her faded blue eye's narrowed. "I lost my daughter to one rascalion, I don't want to lose my granddaughter when I have just found her."

"You never did tell me all of that story, Mother," replied Adam curiously.

"That's because I never wanted to remember it," snorted Mary. Then she looked sad. "There's not much to it really. Michael McCormick swept Amanda off her feet, much to our dismay. Amanda was very stubborn and strong willed and when her father told her she could not see him as a proper suitor, she ran off and married him anyway, without our consent.

Being of legal age, she was able to do as she wished, but her father never forgave her and refused to allow her to return home when she asked. They had a terrible row, and Amanda left here in a fury, apparently taking the ring he set such store by, with her.

We didn't know her husband was abusing her, and she had too much pride to tell us until much later. Edward said she had made her bed, let her lie

in it and refused to allow me to let her come home when she wanted out. She left Scotland shortly after that, taking Cecilia with her. That was seventeen years ago."

She took a sip of her wine, swallowing painfully as she choked down the memories. "It wasn't until you went to see her again when Cecilia was six, that we even knew she had disappeared, and her husband with her."

"Yes, I know," replied Adam heavily, remembering the scene at the crumbling old Scottish castle. Apparently Amanda's Scottish in-laws had not had much use for Amanda and didn't seem to care that she was gone.

The dour old man had said good riddance to bad rubbish, and Adam had been hard-pressed not to knock some sense into him. He had left with a bad taste in his mouth, but he had communicated with them now and then, always asking if any of the three had ever come home. The answer had always been no.

Given their attitude, Adam felt no obligation to inform them that their granddaughter had been found. Let them figure it out on their own. It was painfully obvious to him that Michael McCormick had hoped to marry into money and perhaps get his hands on some much needed cash for the decaying old castle he called home. When that didn't work, he had begun mistreating Amanda.

Shaking off the old memories, Mary said, "We need to have a strict word with Cecilia on proper behavior tonight. There will be many people at this dinner party, including several young men of marriageable age. Cecilia is a complete innocent in the ways of men. You need to be firm with her, Adam, and make sure she knows she is not to be alone with any of them."

"I'll do that, Mother," Adam replied.

A short while later, Cecilia appeared in the doorway of the study, and Adam motioned her in. He was at a loss for words at first, the vision of her in the beautiful dinner dress filling his senses.

Cecilia came in and shut the door, advancing to give her Grandmother a kiss on the cheek.

"You look absolutely stunning, my dear," said Mary mistily, taking in the vision in front of her. "Isn't she beautiful, Adam?"

Adam cleared his throat. "She is indeed, Mother."

Cecilia smiled and blushed, the soft pink hues coloring her slender neck and face. She still didn't know how to react to compliments; she was so unused to them.

Adam studied her in great detail. The buttercup yellow dress was a perfect foil for her ebony curls and exotic looking eyes. It made her green eyes look deeper green, the standup collar behind her neck just meeting the base of her hair that Rose had pinned up in a gorgeous turtle shell comb.

The dress was very fitted with several seams in the bodice running down to the narrow waistline, the attached skirt falling in soft silky folds to the floor. The cut of the bodice was rounded across her breasts, their fullness slightly visible above the line of pearls that lined the yellow satin.

She had a pearl choker at her neck, with a drop pearl on a gold strand that nestled just between her breasts

The design was simple, yet elegant and tasteful, not gaudy and full of ribbons and bows and frills.

Her almond shaped eyes shone with excitement and the innocence of youth. Missing was the bored, satiated, tired look so many young people wore,

who believed they already knew all about the world around them.

Cecilia was a woman born to attract men, Adam reflected, and she would have many pursuers in a very short time. Clearing his throat again, he finally spoke. "Cecilia, your grandmother and I would like to help you with some advice about tonight."

"All right, Uncle Adam," she replied, feeling apprehensive about the coming evening. She felt so inadequate!

"Tonight you will be meeting a lot of new people, many of them young men. And while young couples do often take air on the patios, or walks in the gardens, I am asking that you refrain from being alone with any of them."

Cecilia's green eyes flashed. "Why is that, Uncle Adam, don't you trust me?"

"It's not you I don't trust," replied Adam, not liking her spurt of defiance. "In polite society, a young girl's reputation is to be protected at all costs. You are still an innocent in the ways of the world, and I don't want you to be taken advantage of. I know you don't understand what I am talking about as yet, so you will just have to trust me."

"I was alone with Matt," she said, her face flushing. She didn't tell him what they had done.

"Things are different here, than in America. I don't want to argue about this, Cecilia. I've not given you a direct order before, but this is for your own good. I want you to promise me you will obey me." He looked sternly at her.

"I'm not quite as stupid as you seem to think, Uncle Adam," Cecilia said rebelliously. "I can take care of myself. I don't see the need for this...order...as you put it."

"Whether you see the need or not, is not the question," Adam said tersely. "We have never

disagreed before, Cecilia, but on this I am quite adamant. I do not like you questioning me when I am responsible for you. I'm your Uncle after all, and expect to be obeyed." His eyes gleamed dangerously in warning.

"All right, I shall do my best to follow your---orders," replied Cecilia, unhappily.

She felt angry with Adam for putting restrictions on her when she hadn't even met anyone yet. What if she wanted to have a private conversation with one of these young men?

Somewhere in the back of her mind, the idea of kissing someone else and comparing the kiss to Matt's had been developing, and she was curious as to how she would react.

Seeing that his niece did not seem convinced, Adam felt the need to add a consequence. "I would appreciate it very much if you did. However, I won't hesitate to spank you if you disobey me in this."

Cecilia's head jerked up, and she stared stonily at him. She looked at her grandmother who was nodding her head in agreement. "You should listen to him, dear girl," she said kindly. "We are only doing what's best for you."

She stared at them for a moment, then nodded tersely and left the room.

Cecilia was very cool to Adam as they made their way to the party. And just as she had been told, there were a great many people there. She stared around the lovely home in awe, the sparkling chandeliers sending electric light over the dinner table.

The lovely china and stemware gleamed, and the mumble of voices conversing with one another filled the room. It was fascinating after being used to the soft glow of lantern light back in the hills. Everywhere she went electricity was becoming more

and more common. Even Grandmother's home had some in it.

"Good evening, good evening," gushed Lady Worthington, greeting them as they were shown into the great dining hall, magnificently lined with portraits of all sorts. Immense dark blue draperies were hung at the tall windows, secured by golden cords. "It's such a pleasure to have you and your family, Mary," she said, looking curiously at Cecilia.

In fact, many eyes were drawn to Cecilia, and she felt herself blush as she stayed close to Mary. She smiled tentatively back at her host.

Lady Worthington was quite the Matriarch, with her half glasses on her nose and her arched eyebrows. Her white hair was beautifully coifed in a smooth chignon, and the richness of her heavy satin and lace cream colored evening gown bespoke of wealth. She wore a strand of delicate pearls around her neck, and the fine bones of her face were well defined beneath the soft flushed cheeks of age.

"And it's a pleasure to meet you, my dear." She studied Cecilia with great interest, thinking how much she looked like Amanda.

Cecilia answered as Mary had taught her to do, with a curtsy and a greeting. "The pleasure is all mine, thank you for inviting me."

The look that passed between Lady Worthington and Mary was one of mutual understanding. The girl had passed her first test. Mary pressed Cecilia's hand, indicating she was doing well.

Cecilia acquitted herself well during dinner, going through the eight course meal like a champion, using all the right forks and spoons for salad and soup and on down the line to the roast rack of lamb.

The young man on Cecilia's right had an engaging grin and a roving eye that made her blush

when it fell quite frequently to her bosom. She didn't feel threatened by him, though, or have that breathless feeling that Matt always created when he was near her. But she thought him quite handsome with an aquiline aristocratic nose and strong features.

"I hear you have been in America," he whispered, his light blue eyes twinkling at her.

"Yes, until several weeks ago." She liked his easy, friendly manner, and he had put her at ease right away. His name was Allen Beauchamp, and he was a nephew of Lady Worthington.

As they made small talk, she found herself looking at his firm lips, wondering what it would be like for him to kiss her as Matt had kissed her.

"Are you planning on staying in England then," he finally asked curiously, brushing a lock of brown hair out of his eyes. "If so, I'd like to see you if I may." His eyes were earnest, and his white teeth gleamed in an even smile. Dimples danced in the corners of his mouth, making him appear mischievous.

He awaited her reply anxiously, hoping to beat out the other young swains, some of whom were here tonight. His Aunt's table could seat fifty guests, and Percival Swainwright across the table already had his eye on the lovely girl at his side.

Not to mention Andrew Holtsgood three guests down on his right. The bloke kept craning his neck to look down at them. Luckily, he had an inside with his Aunt and had gotten the coveted spare seat beside Cecilia.

He eyed the sweet profile as he sipped his wine, noting that reports of her loveliness had not been exaggerated. Allen had also noted the small diamond engagement ring on her left hand; he'd heard about that too.

A smile crept across his well-shaped lips. America was a long way away, and the chap shouldn't have let her out of his sight. All's fair in love and war, as they say, and he intended to wage war for the lady's affections.

Mary, on the other side of Cecilia, was quite aware of Allen's interest, and she approved. Allen would make quite a good match for Cecilia, and she would be well taken care of for the rest of her life. Charming young man too, she had known him all his life.

After dinner, the ballroom was opened up, and a band began to play a light waltz. "May I?" Allen asked, extending his arm to Cecilia.

Cecilia hesitated, and then put her hand on his arm. Ruth and Adam had tried to teach her some ballroom dancing, but she had never practiced with a partner like Allen. It wasn't long, however, before other young men were cutting in on Allen, and she began to find she quite liked it.

The evening passed quickly as she laughed and danced. Finally, Allen danced her out onto the patio and stopped with her to catch their breath. The night air carried the scent of roses, and the cool air was a bit brisk. She shivered.

"Shall I get your wrap?"

"No, no that's not necessary." She looked back through the French doors that were standing open. She could see Adam and Ruth dancing together in the slow waltz, and she envied their closeness.

A few other couples were on the patio dancing or talking, and it was well lit. She didn't see how Adam could object. It's not like they were alone or anything.

"Are you quite sure? You are shivering," remarked Allen, rubbing his hands caressingly up and down her outer arms.

Cecilia didn't want to tell him she was shivering from the close proximity to his body, and from nervousness.

"I'm fine, really."

"I don't think so," he responded imperiously. "You wait here, I'll get your shawl." He disappeared inside before Cecilia could protest.

Shrugging, she turned back to the moonlit gardens with their well-shaped shrubs and was soon interrupted by the young Percival. She had already danced with him a few times this evening and found him a bit boring. Not quite as interesting as Allen.

"Care to walk with me, my dear?" asked Percival smoothly, his dark eyes gleaming in the moonlight. He pulled on his small well-clipped mustache with two fingers as he strained to see into the darkness beyond the patio.

"You mean in the garden?"

"Yes, I'll show you around Lady Worthington's prized rosebushes, if you like." His bold glance slid down her face and back up again, a knowing smile on his face.

"I'll just stay here, thank you," replied Cecilia graciously. If she were going to be alone with someone, it wouldn't be Percival she decided, not liking the way he looked at her.

"You're missing a rare treat. Some of those roses almost match your beauty," he responded gallantly. Skillfully, he flashed a hand signal into the darkness that Cecilia couldn't see.

Almost immediately, the sound of a kitten's cry mewed plaintively on the evening air, and Cecilia's sharp ears picked it up. "What's that?"

"It sounds like a lost kitten." Percival cocked his head, waiting for the sound to come again. It sounded again, slightly closer this time.

"Come on, maybe it's hurt," he said with mock concern. Before she could protest, he grabbed her hand and pulled her down the steps of the patio and through the garden to a stand of shrubs and small trees. Cecilia's love and concern for animals made her completely forget Adam's admonition!

Chapter Twelve

"Here, kitty, kitty," Percival called mockingly as he stepped inside the circle of tall shrubbery. He and Cecilia's view of the house was cut off, and she felt uneasy suddenly, wishing she had not followed him so willingly. Then again, he had just pulled her along; she hadn't agreed to come.

She felt even uneasier when another somewhat short and plump young man joined them, one that Cecilia also recognized from the dance earlier.

"Hello, old chap," he said to Percival, his bold eyes roving up and down Cecilia's frame. "What little kitten have you brought out here for us to play with?"

"But, I thought...I mean...we heard...the sound of a kitten in distress." Cecilia sputtered, wondering what on earth was going on. And why was this boy looking at her like that? She tried to take her arm out of his grasp.

"You mean---this little kitten?" Grinning, he mewed, the same sound that Cecilia had heard before!

"It...it was all a trick?" She stared at him angrily. "Just why would you do something like this?"

"No reason, other than to get you to ourselves for awhile. Old Allen has been monopolizing you all evening. It's time to share." He reached out and ran his pudgy finger down the side of her face, his hand dropping to brush across the tops of her breasts.

Cecilia shuddered and drew back. His touch was distasteful! "Keep your hands off me," she hissed.

Percival grinned. "The little kitten has claws, Robert."

Suddenly, the brush parted and Allen stepped into the circle, his face grim. "What do you two

infantile schoolboys think you are doing? Not the old fake kitten trick I hope?"

"Come on now, old chap, there was a time when you were a kitten chaser," teased Percival. "We just wanted to talk to her. You've been keeping her to yourself all evening." His bold eyes told a different story as they lazily slid over Cecilia's body, and Allen understood all too well what Percival and Robert wanted.

"Not this time," he replied evenly, putting Cecilia's shawl around her shoulders. "Those days are behind me. I grew up."

"Yes, like we bloody believe that," scorned Percival. "Come on, Robert, let's get out of here. It's quite obvious Allen has beaten us to the sweets this time."

"Quite right, I'm with you Perc," replied Robert nastily. He followed Percival out, and the two boys headed back towards the party.

Allen watched them go and then turned to Cecilia. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't think about those two when I left you alone on the patio. I should have known they would be up to old tricks."

He didn't add that he had been a part of them before. It was one of the ways he and his friends had checked girls out, to see if they were willing to play or strictly the marriageable type. It pleased him that Cecilia was so fresh and seemingly innocent of guile and tricks.

Cecilia looked up at Allen, a question in her eyes. "What were they talking about?" She had a feeling she knew.

"Don't worry about them, they just wanted to steal a few kisses." He looked down at her full pink lips, not really blaming his friends. He'd like to steal a few kisses too; he just didn't want them getting any! He found himself unable to look away from the

inviting pink softness, slightly parted and just waiting for him. His head began to dip.

Cecilia's eyes shimmered in the moonlight, her pale skin glowing and soft as silk. She stood mesmerized as Allen's head began to lower towards her, and she closed her eyes as his firm lips gently touched hers.

She waited for the sensations to begin in her body and was curious to note that there was only a pleasant feeling. He began to deepen the kiss; his arms stealing around her and Cecilia allowed herself to be drawn in, waiting for those heady feelings that Matt incited in her. When it didn't happen, she finally pulled away.

Allen smiled regretfully and allowed her to go. "It just wasn't there for you was it?" He asked her shrewdly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, whoever this man is that you are engaged to has your love doesn't he?" He picked up her hand and pointed to the ring.

Cecilia pondered that for a moment. "I love him, yes. But he doesn't love me."

"Then why are you betrothed to marry him?" Allen was perplexed.

"He says I belong to him." She twisted the ring on her finger thoughtfully. "He gave me this ring and said to remember who I belonged to, but that is not the same as love." She looked sadly at Allen. "At least, I don't believe it is."

Allen would have loved to agree with her, but his innate honesty wouldn't allow it. "For us men, it can mean the same thing." He laughed when she looked puzzled.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but you were experimenting when you allowed me to kiss you, weren't you?"

Cecilia blushed, and then nodded. "I wanted to see if it felt the same."

"And did it?"

"No, with Matt I feel much stronger feelings; like I want to kiss him and go on kissing him forever." She tried to describe her feelings.

"Nothing like deflating a man's ego," replied Allen dryly, wincing.

"I'm sorry if I made you feel badly."

"It's all right. It's not your fault. But if you ever change your mind about this Matt, I'll be here." He grinned down at her.

Cecilia smiled back and started when she heard her name being called.

"Cecilia!"

"Oh no, it's Uncle Adam," she gasped, peering through the bushes. "I'm not supposed to be out here!"

"Don't worry, I'll just explain that you were with me."

"You don't understand!"

"Come on, it'll be all right." He put his arm around her shoulders protectively and led her out of the circle of shrubs. He grimaced when he saw Adam Wentworth striding towards them, his face like a thundercloud.

Cecilia's heart sank too when she saw her Uncle. He did not look happy at all, and his warning sprang into her mind. She looked doubtfully at him, unsure if he would really keep his word or not. He had never threatened her before, much less actually spanked her. Would he really do it?

"What are you doing out here, Cecilia? Didn't I ask you not to come outside?" He stared hard at Allen. "Why is she out here alone with you, Allen? You know this is highly inappropriate. I'm disappointed in you."

He took Cecilia's arm, his green eye's glittering down at her. "I hope you have a good explanation for this." He began marching her towards the patio.

"It's my fault, Sir," replied Allen hastily, hurrying after them. "I danced Cecilia outside to the patio."

"This is NOT the patio," Adam snapped. "Gadding about in the bushes is not the same thing as being in plain view of others on a lighted veranda. That, I would have accepted."

Adam's voice had a tone Cecilia had never heard before, and she bit her lip. How could she explain that she had been tricked? If she did, it would prove she couldn't take care of herself as she had vowed. But, if she didn't---she tried not to finish that thought.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Adam, I just..." she hesitated as he stopped and looked at her. "I just wanted to see the roses," she finished in a rush, sending Allen a warning look.

Adam paused for emphasis. "The roses are on the OTHER side of the house."

"I can explain, sir," began Allen again, but stopped when Cecilia sent him another warning look. For some reason she did not wish him to defend her.

Adam scowled at Allen. "Well, I'm waiting."

"Uhh..." stammered Allen. Recovering he said, "We were just discussing my asking permission to...uhhh...court her."

Cecilia arched her eyebrow. That would go over well.

Adam looked from one young person to the other, then back at Allen. "That could have been discussed inside. As for permission, I shall withhold that for the moment until I can ascertain whether I can allow that or not, given your irresponsible behavior."

He took Cecilia's arm and went on inside, intent on finding Ruth and Mary to say their goodbyes.

Cecilia looked back, and Allen winked at her. She sent him a conspiratorial smile that Adam did not miss, and his lips thinned into a straight line. So they were making fun of him! Well, the little chit would soon find out what happened when she blatantly disobeyed him. No niece of his was going to ruin her reputation right under society's nose!

When the carriage pulled up in front of the house, Adam said sharply, "Go to my study, Cecilia, and wait for me. I shall be there presently."

Cecilia's face fell, but she didn't argue as she allowed him to help her out of the carriage. Ruth sent her a sympathetic glance, knowing what was in store for her. They had all known the request Adam had made of Cecilia before they left.

"Aren't you being a little hard on her, darling?" Ruth asked, placing her hand on his arm.

Adam sent her a piercing look. "Not at all, Ruth. She knew what was expected and was warned of the consequences in advance. I'm trying to do what's best for her, and she is in my care. Therefore, I have a responsibility to her that I take very seriously."

"Of course, darling, but she is not used to you correcting her in this way. She might grow to resent you."

"Adam is right," spoke up Mary. "I was there when he warned her. She has been so sweet and biddable; I can't think why she disobeyed such an explicit warning. I have to say, I am a bit disappointed myself."

Secretly, though, Mary thought the evening a smashing success. Young Allen, or someone like him, had been just what she was hoping for. Since the boy seemed intensely interested in Cecilia, and

expressed a desire to court her, all Cecilia needed was the right push. Now, she just had to make that happen.

"No, Ruth, I don't think Cecilia will resent me," Adam replied to his wife. "She has to know her limits and boundaries, especially if she should decide to stay here." He held his arm for her as they proceeded up the walk, continuing his explanation.

"She will be in my care for several more years or until she marries. It's best we begin the way I mean to go on. Up to this point, Matt has been her disciplinarian, but he isn't here. And, they may never get back together, so it's time I took charge anyway."

"All right, darling, whatever you think." Ruth's soft heart couldn't help feeling sorry for Cecilia. When Adam made up his mind to give you a spanking, he did a very thorough job and made sure you had no desire to repeat the wrong you had committed.

Cecilia slipped inside the cozy study, nervously noting the razor strap hanging on the wall by the great stone fireplace and the straight-backed brocade Queen Anne chair against the opposite wall. A sense of dread filled her, and the image of her over Matt's knee flashed through her mind.

Suddenly, she was intensely homesick and wishing it was Matt here to punish her instead of her Uncle. She wiped away the mist in her eyes and tried to remember how little he had written to her and how impersonal he had been.

She walked over to the window and stared out at the sweeping expanse of lawn, beautifully manicured and shaped by human hands. It was turning slowly browner as autumn stripped away Mother Nature's summer colors.

She really did like England, but oh, how she missed the mountains! All the leaves would be beautiful gold and orange and red hues by now, even snow on the high tops of the peaks. They were so majestic and spacious!

The countryside here was beautiful and green, but it was different, more congested. Not like the hundreds of acres of mountain land, filled with rushing streams, all kinds of wildlife and yes, danger too. But, you could walk forever and not run into a soul there. It was free and unfettered from civilization, and she longed to be there.... with Matt.

She pictured his face in her mind, and her heart yearned for him, for his touch, for his lips on hers. When she heard the study door open, she stiffened, and then turned to face her Uncle.

Adam briskly walked into the room and went to the Queen Anne chair. Picking it up, he walked back to the middle of the room, and then sat down on it. He held his hand out to Cecilia. "Come, my dear, let's get this unpleasant business over with."

Cecilia was unaware of the silent plea in her huge green eyes as she walked mutely towards him.

Adam was not unmoved, but he was determined to follow through. If he didn't, she would never learn to respect his word.

It was on the tip of Cecilia's tongue to explain that she had been tricked, but the thought of being so ignorant in the ways of the world made her stop. She didn't want to appear so stupid. Besides, she doubted it would make a lot of difference in the final outcome. She had stayed out there with Allen because she chose to.

Reluctantly, she put her hand into Adam's and allowed him to pull her around to his right side. She couldn't help resisting when he took her by the

elbow and put his right hand around her waist to guide her down across his knees.

"No, Uncle Adam, please," she begged softly. "I'm sorry, really I am." She tried to pull back but was unsuccessful as he pulled her inexorably on over, ignoring her protest.

"I'm sorry too, Cecilia," he said firmly as he adjusted her body and lifted her long skirt and petticoat. "I wish you had not disobeyed me; then we would not have come to this."

Cecilia felt her skirt and petticoat come over her back and be pinned beneath his arm. She hoped he wouldn't bare her; that would be so embarrassing. She felt humiliated enough as it was, just to be in this position.

Adam could see Cecilia's curved bottom through the sheerness of the knickers and decided to spare her modesty...this time.

"I'm going to spank you with just my hand this time, Cecilia, and leave your knickers on. But, if you find yourself in this position again, it will be a bare bottom and a hairbrush, paddle or strap, that I use, is that clear?"

"Y...yes, Uncle Adam," stuttered Cecilia in relief. A hand spanking, how bad could it be? Matt's belt on her bare buttocks was ten times worse than that.

She felt relieved and grateful for her Uncle's generosity. Little did she know she would have cause to regret that thought!

Adam had strong hands and arms, toughened by years of playing rugby and squash. Getting a firm grip on her hip, he raised his arm and brought his hand down in a series of three scorching slaps to her fanny, delivered hard and fast.

"SLAP! SLAP! SLAP!"

The delayed reaction to the first three spanks suddenly set in, and Cecilia couldn't help the shriek that tore from her lips as her legs shot out, and her body stiffened in his hold. Over and over he repeated the pattern, three spanks at a time in one place, until Cecilia thought her bottom would surely ignite into flames, and she became a squalling mess.

Frantically, she began clawing at the floor and kicking her booted feet up, trying to dislodge herself and block the scorching swats.

"Oh no you don't, young lady," Adam said firmly, and he stopped and put his right leg over both of hers, effectively pinning her beneath him. Then he continued the burning barrage.

Cecilia howled in pain as the onslaught continued unabated. Tears ran in streams down her cheeks, and she tried unsuccessfully to twist and squirm away from that merciless hand, but it was all a vain maneuver. She finally accepted she wasn't going anywhere and just cried helplessly, pleading with him to stop.

"I promise I will NEVER disobey again," she shrieked, slumping over his knee in defeat. "Just p...please, please let me up!" She hurt so much it took a moment for her to finally realize that he had stopped and was gently pulling her dress back down.

She sobbed wildly as he helped her up onto his knee and shrieked when her weight settled on her bottom.

"There now, little one, its all over," he soothed quietly, his hand throbbing. He hadn't wanted her to think she was getting off easy, so he had really spanked her hard. He put his arms around her and pulled her close for a comforting hold. "Are you going to obey me from now on?"

"Y...yesssss," she sobbed, trying to get a hold of herself. "I...I'm s...sorryyyy," she wailed into his shoulder.

"It's all right, I forgive you. It's all over now, there's a good girl." He patted her back soothingly and at last she began to settle down.

Finally, she wound down to a few hiccups, and Adam stood up, bringing her up with him. "Time for you to get to bed now," he said kindly as he turned her around and pointed her in the direction of the door.

"Yes, Uncle Adam," Cecilia said obediently as she stiffly walked away. She stopped and looked around at him, her eye's still swimming with tears. "Are you going to let Allen come and see me?"

"Do you want to see him?" Adam asked thoughtfully.

She looked at the floor. "I like him. I think we could be good friends." She looked back up at him.

"What about Matt?"

She flushed. "Matt doesn't like me."

"What makes you say that?" Adam was genuinely surprised at her comment.

She twisted the ring around and around her slender finger. "He...he feels responsible for me. He doesn't love me." Her eyes looked sad suddenly.

Adam tried to be fair. "Cecilia, I think you are wrong. I think Matt does love you."

"I wish I could believe that," she whispered as she turned to let herself out. "Goodnight, Uncle Adam."

"Good night, Cecilia," Adam echoed, wondering if she was right. He really didn't think so. And yet, Mary would be ecstatic if Cecilia chose to stay here.

What if he sent her back to the states, and she was right about Matt not being in love with her? Would she wish she had stayed in England then?

He turned away to pour himself a drink. It would bear thinking about.

Mary studied the letter in her hand, the one that Matt had written to Cecilia. Did she dare do it? Sighing she put it back in her dresser drawer, keeping it safe.

As she prepared for bed, she thought about Amanda and how she had been lost to her. Robert had refused to allow her to interfere on Amanda's behalf, and now she wished she had anyway. Should she interfere on Cecilia's behalf? Wouldn't her granddaughter be better off here, among family, married to someone who could provide for her every need? Or want for that matter?

She knew Allen was very interested in her granddaughter, and marrying him would insure that Cecilia didn't go back to the states. Grimly, she made up her mind. She **WOULD** take matters into her own hands this time. She did not want to lose Cecilia.

Cecilia stared out the window of her bedroom as she lay in bed, on her side. Her bottom ached and burned still, but her eyes were dry. She closed them and pictured Matt's face.

Hugging the pillow, she willed herself not to cry. If he didn't love her, she couldn't force him. If only he would do something to show he cared, she would come home in a heartbeat. Her eyes burned as the recalcitrant tears began to flow again, not from the pain in her bottom this time, but from the pain in her heart. How she wished she could go home and feel like Matt loved and missed her!

Matt let himself into the diner; the snow softly falling in big wet plops behind him. It was very close to Thanksgiving, but the winter freeze was already in the air. Seeing Sheriff Crocket seated in their favorite booth, he went over and sat down with a grunt, leaving a trail of water behind him for Annie to scold about.

"Still no news?"

Matt looked up at him, a stricken look on his face that the Sheriff had not seen before. Without a word, Matt dug into his pocket and took out a folded piece of paper and handed it to him.

"Thanks, Annie," said Matt gruffly as she placed a cup of steaming hot coffee at his elbow. He wrapped his cold hands around it while his friend perused the contents of the missive from Mary Ann Worthington.

The Sheriff's eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he read the carefully crafted letter.

Dear Mr. McCracken,

I am Mary Ann Worthington, Cecilia's grandmother. I am delighted to have her returned to the bosom of her family, and I thank you for your efforts in that regard.

I'm sure you have been waiting to hear something from the dear girl, and as she cannot bring herself to hurt you, I find myself in the capacity of having to write to you on her behalf.

I am aware you two were betrothed and of all the circumstances surrounding the betrothal. While I appreciate all you have done, your assistance is no longer required. Cecilia has met a young man here, and I have great hopes of them marrying in the near future.

He will be a most worthy match for my lovely granddaughter, and well able to keep her in the

custom she deserves. He is from a very old, very established family here in Gloucestershire and is very much in love with her.

Of course, she feels a debt of gratitude to you, who wouldn't? But if you have any feelings for her, then do her a favour and let her go.

You can release her in good conscience and know of assuredty that she is in complete agreement to this. I have enclosed the ring you gave her as proof.

As for the land she will own there, simply send the deed to Adam, and he will handle it.

Kind regards,

Mary Ann Worthington

With a noncommittal grunt, Sheriff Crockett folded the letter and slid it back across the table. "You have never heard a word from the girl herself?"

Matt shook his head glumly. "No, she has never returned my letter."

"Maybe it's none of my business, Matt, but tell me honestly, do you love her?"

Matt stared into his coffee cup for a moment, then replied heavily. "Yes, dammit, I love her!"

Chapter Thirteen

Sheriff Crockett's brown eyes narrowed speculatively at Matt's declaration of love for Cecilia. Finally, he had to ask, "Did you ever tell her that?"

"No. Words like that are hard to say, you know that," growled Matt. "But, she ought to know, I gave her a ring didn't I?"

The Sheriff rolled his eyes derisively. "Women have to hear these things, boy, I've told you before; they need romancing!"

"Well, it doesn't matter now anyway," Matt, replied hoarsely. "She doesn't love me, probably never did. She has met someone else and fallen in love now, for real, and returned my ring."

"Not exactly," the Sheriff hedged.

"What do you mean, not exactly."

"Who is that letter from, Cecilia, or her grandmother?"

"What's the difference, in this case," Matt replied morosely.

"The difference is, Cecilia didn't say it herself. Who knows what's going on over there? You haven't heard from Adam either." The Sheriff leaned forward to emphasize his point. "All I'm saying is, until I heard it straight from the girls own lips, I wouldn't believe it."

Matt felt a spark of hope replace the total darkness of defeat. Maybe the Sheriff was right! He thought for a moment. There was one person he could talk to...Maddie! He'd go see Maddie! She knew Cecilia better than anyone else.

He stood up and drained the last of his coffee, throwing some change on the table.

"Where you going?"

"I'm going out to Heath's place and talk to Maddie. Maybe you have something here." Matt spun on his heel and strode out.

Sheriff Crockett leaned back in his booth with a satisfied smile. "Maybe I should write a column for the lovelorn," he told Annie, winking up at her. "Do you think I could make any money at it?"

Annie snorted. "I wouldn't quit my job if I were you, Sheriff."

"Sassy woman," he muttered, watching her walk away.

Cecilia came into the library, looking for her grandmother. As usual, she felt the smooth skin where Matt's ring had been and missed it terribly. It had disappeared over two weeks ago, and she hadn't been able to find it. Peeking inside, she spied Mary in a wing-backed chair, done in golden brocade with a rose design on the seatback.

"Hello, Grandmother," she said fondly as she took the chair across from her. The great fireplace had a cozy fire in it, the bright flames crackling a warm greeting.

"Hello, darling," she said with a smile. "I wanted to talk to you this morning, if I might."

"Of course!" She smiled back at the woman with eyes like her own. "Go ahead, talk away."

"You had mentioned to Adam that you would like to see Allen Worthington, is that correct?"

"Yes," replied Cecilia slowly. "I like him, he seems really nice."

Mary held up the letter that Matt had written, and Cecilia recognized it. "Cecilia, Allen is more than nice. And he is interested in you. He has asked Adam's permission to court you, do you know what that means?"

"It means he is interested in a possible marriage," replied Cecilia slowly. "But, Grandmother, I don't think I would want to marry Allen." She thought about the kiss they had shared. It didn't make her feel the same way Matt's did. "Besides, I am engaged to Matt."

Mary's face softened. "Now, Cecilia, I know you have had your heart set on this lawman, but the truth must be faced darling, he is not in love with you. If he were, he would not have written like this." She held up the letter, and Cecilia flushed with embarrassment.

"I know he doesn't love me, Grandmother. He feels...responsible for me; that is all. But, I am in love with him; I think I always have been. Maybe he would grow to love me." Sadness mixed with hope gleamed in her lovely eyes.

Her grandmother shook her head soberly. "No, darling girl. With men, they either love you or they don't. It doesn't happen along the way."

Cecilia looked puzzled. "But isn't it the same for women?"

"Not necessarily," replied Mary. "If a man loves you, then you can be assured of a future, children, the means to take care of them, all your needs and wants fulfilled. Love is secondary for women, but for men, it must be first."

She crossed her fingers, hoping Cecilia was innocent enough in the ways of the world to believe her. A twinge of guilt stabbed her, but she pushed it away. The die was cast, the letter already written to the lawman. She would do anything to keep Cecilia in England---with her. She would NOT lose her!

Cecilia knew in her heart that her Grandmother was wrong. Love was important. The way Matt made her feel was important. Ruth had explained very simply the physical contact between a man and

a woman, and she knew that she didn't want Allen or anyone else touching her that way. If Matt didn't want her, then she didn't want anyone else.

She worried her bottom lip with her small teeth as she stared into the fire. Ruth had also told her that men could have this relationship with many different women and not love them. Not all men of course, but most could. But, usually, if the man loved the woman, then he would try to stay faithful to her.

She sighed heavily; it was all so complicated. All she really knew was that she loved Matt in every way she could think of. She wanted to be close to him, she wanted to touch him and have him touch her.

She loved the dimple in his chin and the smile in his brown eyes when he was happy with her. She just loved everything about him except the spankings she received. Those she didn't like at all, but it was his hand delivering them, so she accepted it without hesitation.

She was happy when she was with him, when he was holding her and comforting her, even when he was mad at her, she still wanted to be with him. She wished he felt the same way.

Mary watched the play of expression across Cecilia's lovely face. She was so beautiful, so like Amanda, and yet---she did not have Amanda's stubbornness. She was more---amiable, more pliable.

Those years of innocence and being cut off from the world had done that for her. She did not have the hard, bored, brittle edge that many young people of today had. If only she could keep her here, maybe she could keep her from making the mistakes her daughter had made. A bad marriage being the worst one!

She had known Michael McCormick was a poor Scotsman, looking for a moneyed heiress, but Amanda had been too stubborn to see him for what he was. Her husband, Edward, had known it too, but his lack of interest in his daughter to begin with had allowed him to wash his hands of her when she had refused to be obedient and not follow Edward to Scotland to meet his family.

She would never forgive Edward for turning Amanda away when she had asked to return home. It had cost her daughter her life.

Brushing aside the painful memories, she tried to concentrate on the present. Keeping Cecilia here was of paramount importance. Who knew what this lawman was really like? His letter certainly gave little clue as to his personality. And she knew he had no money, title or position. What could he offer her granddaughter?

Adam had seemed to like him and the other people he had met there in America, but then Adam didn't always see beneath the surface. As far as Mary was concerned, it remained a wild untamed land in many ways, a land not steeped in the traditions of mother England. No, her granddaughter belonged here---and Mary intended to see that she stayed here!

Maddie looked quizzically at Matt. "I don't understand this, Matt, I can hardly believe Cecilia has fallen in love with someone else, but she is young. I suppose it could happen." Maddie was sure Cecilia had been in love with Matt, though, and her womanly instincts were rarely wrong.

Matt shifted uneasily on the kitchen chair. He and Maddie were having pie and coffee while Maddie read the letter. Now he wanted her honest opinion.

"You seemed to know how to communicate with her better than anyone else right off the bat, Maddie, do you think she loved me?"

"I am certain of it," she replied swiftly. "But how do you feel? Couldn't you tell, yourself?"

"Oh, hell, Maddie," Matt replied impatiently. Then he apologized for his language. "Sorry, but this is a damned nuisance---sorry," he apologized again, running his fingers through his blonde hair.

Maddie was amused. Girls had been falling all over the marriage shy deputy for a few years now, and he didn't know what to do with them all. She supposed it might be hard for him to discern true love.

"But YOU love her don't you?" She watched his face grimace in exasperation at her question.

"Yes, I love her! I've never felt about another woman, the way I feel about her. I miss her, I wish she was here, and I want to spank her little fanny for causing me so damn much trouble," he grumbled vehemently.

He got up and paced the floor. "I've got a good mind to go over there and just get her and bring her little butt home!"

Maddie smiled in delight. "Well, what's stopping you?"

He stopped pacing and stared at her. "Well---not a damn thing!" He grabbed his hat and jammed it onto his head. "I think I'll just do that, thank you, Maddie." He nodded to her and left through the back, the screen door banging behind him.

Maddie got up and watched him mount Daisy, a smile playing around her lips. She sent a prayer heavenward, praying she was right, and Cecilia really was in love with him. She was pretty sure she was right, though. But, if not, at least he would know the truth.

Cecilia and Allen were in the study, laughing and talking while they wrapped some Christmas gifts with colorful paper. Allen smiled down at her as he placed a piece of ribbon on her delightful nose.

They were seated on the floor in front of the twin windows, their length reaching from floor to ceiling, the French panes revealing the softly falling snow outside. It was a week until Christmas, the first real Christmas that Cecilia had ever experienced.

For a moment, she thought about the Christmases with Pappy, how sparse and simple they had been compared to the opulence that surrounded her here in her grandmother's home.

The only thing to denote the day different from any other was the dried figs Pappy would buy on his last trip into town before the winter snows set in.

Cecilia hadn't really even known what Christmas was except for a vague memory from childhood, when she had received her doll, Haddie, from her mother.

She had learned a lot since Matt had brought her out of the mountains. Maddie had taught her about God and how to pray, and she knew that Christmas was the celebration of his Son's birth.

Grandmother was teaching her other things about Christmas, like gifts, shopping, giving and food. Oh, the wonderful smells that had been permeating the air for the last few weeks and continued to do so!

Briefly, she wondered what Matt was doing, if he celebrated Christmas and most of all, whether he missed her. Her heart felt bleak for a moment as she contemplated the snowy landscape. She

wondered if he had put enough feed out for the deer.

"Penny for your thoughts," Allen interrupted her reverie. He knew she was thinking about her lawman, her face was too expressive to hide it. Jealous, he wanted her to focus on him.

Cecilia smiled up at him. "They aren't important, just old friends."

Matt paid the carriage driver and turned to face the great home. He had been assured that yes, this was Adam Worthington's home, and the address he had was correct.

He pulled his cowboy hat down to keep the big wet flakes from landing on his nose and pulled his sheepskin jacket collar up. He bent down and picked up his valise with one gloved hand and headed up the long walk towards what appeared to be the massive front door.

His boots crunched the snow between his feet as his sharp gaze scanned the perimeter, and then settled on the door between the huge white pillars. The trappings of Christmas were all around him, the pine branches hanging on the front door with gold ribbons tied around the ends, and gold bells hanging below that.

At the door, he hesitated, then picked up the heavy ornate knocker with the lion's head. He banged it against its counter piece, three times and waited, feeling unsure of himself, but determined.

The warmth from inside the house rushed out to conflict with the bitter air around him as a young woman in some kind of black uniform with a white cap on her brown hair opened the door. "May I help you, Sir?"

"I'm here to see Cecilia McCormick and Adam Wentworth," he replied, taking his hat off and shaking the snow off it.

"Come in, Sir, and I'll get Mr. Wentworth," the girl replied quickly as she stepped aside to let Matt come in.

"I'll handle this, Rose," interjected a cool voice, and Matt looked up to see a stately looking older woman coming into the room; a woman with a guarded look who did not seem happy to see him.

This must be Mary Ann Worthington, he thought, his sharp gaze scanning her. No, this woman did NOT like him, that he could tell right off the bat.

Mary's heart sank to her feet, but her expression gave nothing away except the light of battle in her eyes. She knew instantly who this was. It was Cecilia's lawman! "What do you want here?" she asked in a soft ferocious tone. "Cecilia does not wish to see you! Go back where you came from."

Matt's eyes narrowed. "Ma'm, I've come thousands of miles to see Cecilia, and I'm not leaving until I've done so, now where is she?"

In the study, Cecilia froze in place as Matt's brisk manly tones rang down the hallway. In a flash, she was on her feet, her heart leaping with joy.

Allen arose too, disappointment filling him. The look on Cecilia's face told the whole story. She was devoted to her lawman, and only he could illuminate her face like that with just the sound of his voice. He, Allen, would never have that effect on her.

Cecilia flew out the doorway and into the entrance hall, then stopped dead at the sight of him. "Matt!" she squealed with unabashed joy, and she sped to him, throwing herself into the arms he held open to receive her.

"Didn't you get my letter?"

Mary's question was lost as Matt's eyes lit up at the sight of Cecilia in a pretty cranberry gown flying towards him. When she called his name joyfully, he opened his arms and drew her into his warm embrace, his own sore heart feeling much lifted at her loving greeting. He held her close, inhaling her womanly scent and loving the feeling of her softness against him. Lord, but he had missed her!

From the study doorway, Allen studied the competition. His gaze drifted from the tall top of Matt's head all the way down to the black boots that were leaving puddles of water on the floor, then back up to meet the piercing stare from the brown eyes. He held Cecilia possessively, and the message was clear; she belonged to him and he had no intention of giving her up.

Sighing, he leaned nonchalantly against the doorway to watch. Briefly, he wondered if Allison Witherspoon would speak to him again after he had dumped her so quickly in favor of Cecilia. It really was a pity there were so few girls of good families left to choose from.

"Yes, ma'am, I got your letter," replied Matt, his gaze swinging back to Mary, although his hold did not lessen on Cecilia. "But I decided to find out for myself."

Cecilia leaned back in his arms to look up into his rugged face. "Find out what, Matt?"

Mary had the grace to flush slightly as she answered Cecilia. "Never mind, darling, it's not important."

Matt decided to keep it to himself for the moment, his quick mind picking up the nuance. He would bet his backside that Cecilia did not know about the letter. His old friend had been correct. The old battleaxe just wanted him out of the way!

Still, the look in her eyes was an unconscious plea not to give her away, so he decided to put the information on hold and make her sweat a little instead.

He picked up Cecilia's left hand. "Where is your ring, little girl?" He asked silkily, and Mary did not miss the innuendo. "You are supposed to be wearing it?"

"I'm sorry, Matt, but I sat it on the kitchen sink, and it disappeared. I haven't been able to find it since."

"That's all right, honey, I'll get you another one," he replied, turning her hand over and kissing the palm. Ordinarily, he would have threatened her backside, but these were unusual circumstances.

The Sheriff had said women needed romance, so he would do his best. He was unprepared for the guarded look that came into her lovely green eyes at his words though.

"Matt!" interrupted Adam's voice suddenly as he came around the corner. "I thought I heard something going on out here. It's a pleasure to see you, but why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

He turned to Rose, who was hovering nearby. "Get a room ready for Matt, he'll be staying here."

A smile lit up his features as he strode forward to shake Matt's hand. Rose hustled off to do his bidding, and Mary's lips thinned. This was not going the way she had hoped.

"I came to see if Cecilia was ready to come home," replied Matt. He didn't like it when she didn't answer, but bit her lip and looked away.

"There is plenty of time to talk about that, you can't leave until after Christmas anyway, it's too close. You can stay until after the holidays can't you? Maybe even plan a wedding here if I remember your original idea.

Mother can't travel, as you know, and I'm sure it would give her great pleasure to be able to attend Cecilia's wedding, as it would the rest of us."

The day passed in a whirl of activity, and Cecilia did not get time alone with Matt at all. She had not missed the undercurrent between Matt and Allen, and she was wise enough to recognize it as jealousy. But, if Matt didn't care, why would he be jealous?

And what was that comment about getting her another ring? What did it matter, if he didn't want to marry her anyway? Did she dare hope he might care after all? Her traitorous heart could not keep from hanging onto that thread of hope.

She had known a decision would soon be needed as to whether she would stay in England or return to the States, and she had been hesitant to act. She liked Allen, but she didn't think it was enough to get married on.

She knew Grandmother thought it was, and she had done her best to encourage Cecilia to think that way too.

But, she missed the mountains, and she missed Matt. She missed Maddie and Heath, and Pappy too. She supposed if she decided to stay, though, that she would get used to life here. Then again, maybe she would just live in the mountains on her own; she could do it. If Matt didn't like it, well, that was too bad!

Sighing, she pressed her nose against the frosty window glass, peering outside. At least here, she wouldn't be snowed in all winter. Decisions, decisions---and most of them really rested on Matt.

Restlessly, she paced the floor of the library. She was hoping she might have a chance to see Matt before she went to bed.

For Matt, the day had been an enlightening one. When he had shown Adam the letter, he had been angry, and rightly so. He had asked Matt to let him deal with his mother's meddling, and Matt had been happy to agree.

It had been interesting meeting Adam's family and sharing a big supper with them. It hadn't taken long for Allen to get the hint to take a long walk on a short pier, and he had left soon after Matt had arrived. Now he was through talking with Adam and Mary and his intent was to find Cecilia.

He wanted to get some things straightened out and set the record straight once and for all...she was his! And she had better not forget it...and she was coming home with him!

That decided, he headed for the library. It seemed to be a favorite haunt of hers today.

When he looked inside the room, he was rewarded with the sight of her, her back to him, her nose seemingly pressed against the glass.

He slipped up behind her and slid his arms around her, turning her to face him. Without a word, his lips swooped hungrily down to capture hers. At last; a chance to have her to himself!

Inside his study, Adam stared disapprovingly at his mother, while she stared angrily back at him.

"I can't believe you did that, Mother. If it were anyone else, I'd give them a well deserved thrashing."

"I was only doing what is best for Cecilia," Mary snapped arrogantly. She looked down her aristocratic nose at her son. "You surely can't believe she will be happy in some backwoods spot with nothing? Why, I'm sure he can't support her the way I can."

"Mother, you were doing what's best for YOU, admit it. I believe Cecilia loves Matt, and she has been growing increasingly restless, no matter how much you have thrown young Allen in her way."

He leaned back and folded his arms across his white shirted chest. "People are happy without all this folderol you know. Brocton is quite a nice place to live, I enjoyed myself there."

"But, Adam, if Cecilia goes back to America, I'll never see her again," Mary blazed at him.

"Nonsense, Mother. You aren't near as helpless as you make yourself out to be at times. Transatlantic travel is becoming faster and more comfortable all the time. I believe you would do fine traveling aboard a steamship.

As for communication, the telephone will inevitably span the oceans, I'm sure. New technology is developing at a fast rate. You should really consider going to America again, should the occasion arise."

Mary didn't answer him, but her faded blue eyes spoke volumes.

"I think we can convince Matt and Cecilia to get married right here. They just have a few things they need to decide on between them.

In the meantime, lets enjoy the holidays, and you can get to know him better. I think you will like him if you give yourself a chance."

His sharp green eyes studied his mother, knowing she would eventually come around to his way of thinking. He couldn't help but have sympathy for her, he knew how attached she was to her granddaughter already.

Finally, Mary sighed and relented---slightly. "All right, Adam, I shall give him a chance, but I don't expect to like it, and I intend to keep hoping Cecilia will change her mind and stay here."

Inside, she knew it was a lost cause. Cecilia had a glow about her that had not been there before. It was as if this backwoods lawman had lit a candle inside her. She positively shone with excitement.

Mary snorted to herself in disgust. Love---bah humbug!

Chapter Fourteen

Cecilia felt herself melting, melting into Matt, her bones slowly turning to water. The few chaste kisses she and Allen had shared were nothing compared to this! This was feeding her soul. Her hungry heart couldn't get enough, and she moaned softly, her soft arms clinging to his neck, her fingers feeling the soft hair at the nape. Her breasts thrust against his hard chest, pebbling into hard buds as desire raced through her body, betraying her once again. Everything but this man's hands and mouth left her consciousness, and she responded with all her being.

Matt ran his hands down the length of her silk dress, delighting in the feel of her firm buttocks in contrast to the warm silky softness of the cranberry fabric. He wished he could take the dress off and feel her satiny skin, bury his hardening shaft between her thighs and make her his own, finally.

Possessively, he cupped her buttocks and lifted her against his hard erection, delighting in the feel of her and groaning, knowing he would not be satisfied this night.

"I can't stand much more of this, little girl, say you will marry me, as soon as possible," he husked against her mouth. "I need you so much, it's like a fire in my blood."

Cecilia looked up at him with stars in her eyes. She wanted to say yes, wanted to so badly. But she had learned that need was not the same as love. She not only loved Matt, she needed him. Without him, she felt only half alive. But how did he feel about her?

"I...I can't," she finally said hesitantly, pulling away from him with a tremendous effort.

"What do you mean you can't?" he asked suspiciously.

Cecilia warred with herself. She wanted him say he loved her without being prompted. She didn't want him to just lust after her; she wanted his love. But how could she tell him that? Did he know the difference himself?

"Because...because I'm not sure we should get married," she confessed, only half telling the truth.

His eyes glinted dangerously. "Do you mean to tell me I traveled all this way to tell you how much I love you and want to marry you, and you aren't sure now?"

Hope crept into Cecilia's heart, and she drew a sharp breath. "Say that again?"

"Say what?"

"That you love me!" she squeaked, hardly daring to breathe.

"Well, of course, I love you, that goes without saying..."

"NO! You aggravating man...NO!" exploded Cecilia, suddenly angry and ecstatic at the same time. "It does NOT go without saying!" She stood on tiptoe and shouted into his incredulous face. "NO! NO! NO!"

"You always did like that word didn't you," he asked dryly, the truth suddenly dawning on him that he had been a fool.

"If you had told me you loved me, I would never have left Brocton!" She stamped her foot at him. "Are you telling me you have loved me all along?"

"Why do you think I put a ring on your finger, little brat?" he growled. His palm itched suddenly. "You belonged to me, how could you even doubt I loved you?"

"Gee, I wonder how?" she cooed snidely. "Because you never SAID so, that's why! I thought you just felt responsible for me."

"You still have a spanking coming, little girl, don't push me," snapped Matt, his own heart beginning to soar, in spite of his words.

"NO! I do NOT have a spanking coming, you odious man," Cecilia liked that word. It was a new one she had learned, meaning a royal nuisance, and she thought it fit Matt perfectly at the moment.

"No, I only gave you a reprieve. You have about two seconds to tell me you will marry me and that you love me too, or I'll consider the reprieve ended!"

"You can't force me like that!"

"Your choice." He grinned triumphantly at her, knowing she was mostly bravado at the moment.

She laughed at him then. "All right, I love you and YES, I'll marry you!" She threw her arms around his neck, and he lifted her off the floor and swung her around in a circle with a loud war hoop of triumph.

"How soon can we be married??" Matt asked thickly after another long drugging kiss.

"Soon, I hope," she responded breathlessly.

They were interrupted when Adam knocked on the door, deciding they had been alone long enough.

Two pairs of bemused eyes looked his way and he grinned. "Planning the wedding?"

"We haven't got that far," replied Matt, "but I've gotten a definite yes out of the stubborn brat."

"I am NOT stubborn!" Cecilia's small chin jutted out defiantly. "It's you who refused to tell me you loved me."

Matt flushed slightly, and then grinned sheepishly. "Well, I'm saying it now, so how soon can we be married?"

"I'm sure Mary will want to have a proper wedding, probably not until spring I would guess," said Adam helpfully.

Matt's eyes narrowed. "No way, Adam! I want to get married as soon as possible, within the next week. All Cecilia needs is a dress, anyway, what's the big deal?"

"The next week!" Mary had heard Matt's last sentence, and she blew into the room, bristling with indignation. "There is no way you can get married within a week, especially not before Christmas! It's...it's...impossible!" She threw her slender hands in the air, and her face was red with ire.

"Then how about we dispense with all the nonsense, and I'll just take Cecilia down to the nearest preacher and have him say the words?" Matt flashed back at her.

"Adam," Mary shrilled angrily, "tell this backwoodsman that things are not done that way here in the middle of civilization!"

"Mother," began Adam soothingly, "I have full confidence that you and Ruth can accomplish the impossible in English society, and do it magnificently if you so choose. I've seen you do it before."

"But...but..." spluttered Mary, "there's the church to be seen to, the dress to be fit and sewn, invitations, shopping...its just not possible, Adam! Not with Christmas so close, people will not be able to rearrange their schedules to include a wedding. The very idea is preposterous!"

"Grandmother," interjected Cecilia hastily. "Can we have a compromise here? Matt and I neither one want to wait months to get married. I'd like to stay

through the holidays, get married in a couple of weeks and then return home."

She smiled at Mary softly. "I'd like you to have some time to get to know Matt, but we can't stay here forever. Our home is in America...together." She slipped her hand into Matt's and smiled up at him.

Mary realized sadly that her dream of having Cecilia stay with her was not going to come to fruition. Finally she replied, "All right, darling, if it makes you happy, then we'll do as you say."

She looked sharply at Matt. "I hope you plan on taking good care of her and bringing her to see me at least once a year."

"I'll do that," replied Matt, willing to be congenial now that the worst hurdle was finished. "But you are welcome to be there when our first child is born, in fact, we would like that very much," he said gently, as her face softened.

"It's settled then," enthused Adam, clapping Matt heartily on the back. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you," grinned Matt wolfishly, looking down at Cecilia.

She blushed. "Yes, thank you, Uncle Adam."

"Time to call it a night then," Adam said jovially, eyeing them suspiciously.

"There is just one item of unfinished business I have yet to settle with Cecilia, then I'll see her to her room," said Matt smoothly.

Beside him, Cecilia stiffened. Surely he wasn't going to spank her? But what other unfinished business did they have?

"And what might that be?" Mary asked, looking from one to the other.

Adam looked interested as well.

Matt guessed there must not be many secrets among these kinds of families, because Mary and Adam didn't seem ready to leave them in private.

"I promised Cecilia a spanking, before she ever left, and I've yet to deliver it. I'd prefer to get it out of the way so we can start fresh."

Cecilia's heart sank, and her face fell. "Tonight? Do you have to Matt?" She looked up at him, her green eyes pleading.

"Whatever for?" snorted Mary. "Anything that's left this long ought to just stay buried, in my opinion." She looked down her aristocratic nose at him.

"I thought you did that, Matt?" Adam added. If he hadn't been spanking her in the barn, what had he been doing?

"No, I was going to, but she had a scare in the woodshed from a huge spider, so I didn't."

He turned to Mary. "Time doesn't matter in this case, Mary, I always keep my promises. I told Cecilia she would get a spanking for disobeying Maddie and stealing her horse to go off into the mountains alone, and that's exactly what I meant. There was a predatory mountain lion on the loose that night, and it stalked her. She could have been killed, and it was a foolish thing to do in any case. There are many dangers in the mountains, and not just wild animals. She should not have been out there alone." His sharp gaze dared her to disagree, but he needn't have worried.

Mary's hand flew to her throat as she gasped. "You did what? Cecilia! I'm afraid I quite agree that a spanking is certainly in order! I cannot sympathize with you on this, darling, and I will certainly not interfere."

Matt didn't bother to say it wouldn't have made any difference. He kept silent, just nodding approvingly.

"You can use my study, Matt, and if you need something a bit more substantial than your hand," said Adam sternly, "there is a razor strap hanging on the wall and a nice paddle in the bottom drawer of the desk. There is also a good English cane hanging by the fireplace. All are quite adequate to send a message home to a deserving young lady." He looked disapprovingly at Cecilia.

Matt took Cecilia's hand. "Come on, let's get this out of the way, so we can go from here with a clean slate."

Cecilia allowed him to pull her along, although her feet dragged. "I don't think this is very fair, Matt," she said petulantly. "I outsmarted the cat, and possibly even saved your life. I can take care of myself in the mountains, I lived there for eight years."

"I know that, Cecilia, but the real point is that you disobeyed Maddie and stole her horse. That in itself has earned you a well deserved spanking." He opened the study door and nudged her inside. "As for the rest, I don't want you going about alone, and if this spanking helps you understand that, then I won't have to spank you over it later."

Cecilia pouted as he took the Queen Anne chair from against the wall, the same one her Uncle Adam had used. She watched with growing agitation as he set it down in the middle of the floor, her palms beginning to perspire slightly.

Matt opened the desk drawer and took out the paddle. It was about a foot and a half long, oblong in shape and about five inches in width. It appeared fairly substantial. He had never used a paddle before, but there was no time like the present. He

didn't think she would stay bent over for a razor strap, and he wasn't sure about the cane, so this seemed the best solution.

"I...I've never had a paddle used on me before," stammered Cecilia fearfully.

"I've never used one, either," replied Matt, his brown eyes determined. "But, I'm going to turn you over my knee and hand spank you first, then I'll experiment with the paddle."

Cecilia warred with herself. Biting her lip, she fought down the desire to run, knowing it wouldn't accomplish anything except more spanking. As he took her hand and led her to the chair, she couldn't help trying to bargain instead.

"Please, Matt, I've never stolen anything in my life, and you know I wasn't really stealing Eggs! I'm sorry I disobeyed Maddie, really I am. But, I was homesick, can you understand that?"

Matt was pulling her to his right side as she frantically tried to mitigate her punishment. He spoke as he tugged her down over his long thighs and began pulling up her dress. "Of course, I can understand that, but Maddie knew the dangers involved and wasn't at all sure you knew how to get back home, so she did what she thought was best, and you should have respected her."

He stopped to admire the pretty bloomers she wore. They were white, soft and silky, and parted in the middle, a pretty red ribbon running through the waistband and around the hem of the pantaloons. Gently, he slid his thumb into the waistband and slid them down to her knees. His hand slid back up the backs of her satiny thighs and over the curves of her lovely buttocks, caressing with pleasure.

"As for the stealing, anytime you take something that doesn't belong to you, its called stealing." He lifted his hand and brought it down with a loud

smack, right in the middle of the two rounded globes.

SMACKKK!

"Ouch!" yelled Cecilia, hanging onto his pant leg with one hand and her other one touching the floor. "But I would have returned Eggs!" She squealed as several more spanks landed on her bottom.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!
SMACK! SMACK!

"I'm sure you would have, if the cougar hadn't gotten her first! But again, that's NOT the point!" He continued to spank her, the lovely cheeks growing dark pink as he applied his hand liberally, in spite of her squeals of protest and kicking legs.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!
SMACK! SMACK!

Cecilia began to squirm and twist, her protests growing more tearful as the sobs began to threaten. "Matt, please!"

Matt stopped and picked up the paddle. Hefting it in his hand, he considered how hard to spank with it.

Cecilia looked back fearfully, the tears already gathered in her lovely eyes. "Noooo...Matttt," she whined, seeing him testing the paddle for weight. "You don't have to use that...really!"

He looked down at her, not unmoved by her plight. "Yes, I do, Cecilia, you need a stronger lesson than just my hand." With that he raised the paddle and brought it firmly across the center of the rounded cheeks.

SPLATT!

Cecilia squealed in earnest as the paddle bit into her tender bottom. The pain was so much sharper than Matt's hand, it was more like the belt or strap, but covered her whole bottom at once. She decided

immediately that she hated it. She shrieked again when he brought it down twice more.

SPLATT! SPLATT!

"NO! Stop...it hurts too much...please stop, Matt!" she yelped, bringing her legs up and trying to block him.

Matt noted the fact that she was not crying as yet, and Cecilia always cried, but it was having an effect.

"I think one small adjustment is in order," he said smoothly, tipping her forward a bit more and putting his leg over both of hers.

"NO! No, you can't!" Cecilia threw her hand back then to cover her buttocks perched embarrassingly high in the air. What must he be seeing, she thought in dismay, feeling thoroughly humiliated.

Matt took the small hand that was trying vainly to get in the way and held it to her back, and then surveyed his captive with great satisfaction. He tried not to dwell on the beautiful sight before him and instead lifted the paddle, intent on getting this over with.

Ten times he brought the paddle down, trying not to spank in the exact same spot, then stopped to survey his handiwork.

By this time, Cecilia was sobbing frantically, squirming and wiggling in earnest, her howls of pain filling the study.

Her bottom cheeks and the upper thighs were quite red, but except for a few small areas, he didn't see any signs of real bruising. "A few more should do," he said grimly, just wanting to end it.

SPLAT! SPLAT! SPLAT! SPLAT! SPLAT! SPAT!

He stopped and dropped the paddle, and Cecilia slumped in relief, her chest heaving with sobs. Gently, he picked her up and held her to him.

Cecilia wanted desperately to rub the aching burn from her roasted cheeks, but she buried her face in Matt's chest instead. Her bottom ached against his pants, the muscles hard beneath her punished backside, and she wiggled uncomfortably. "I...h...hate that th...thing," she sobbed.

Matt sighed and rubbed her back, his other arm holding her close. "Behave yourself, and you won't ever have to worry about it."

She pushed back from him, looking at him with mournful eyes. "You won't get one of those will you?"

Matt chuckled. "I doubt I would "get" one as you put it, but I'm sure I'll make one. Maybe a nice round one that lands on one cheek at a time."

"Nooo," moaned Cecilia as Matt stood her up to pull up her pantaloons.

Matt decided it was much too dangerous to have her in such dishabille around him, he was already in enough pain as it was, just from viewing her lovely feminine center, surrounded by silky, springy black curls. His hard throbbing shaft reminded him of that quite annoyingly now that the punishment was over.

"Two weeks is going to be such a long time," he groaned, helping her sit gingerly back on his lap. He bent and captured her soft pink lips between his own, nibbling on them.

"Why do we have to wait?" Cecilia asked innocently, secretly longing for "it" as Ruth had described it. Seeing as how Cecilia was engaged, Ruth had felt it her responsibility to inform Cecilia of the duties expected from her husband in the marriage bed, and "it" was one of those.

Frankly, Cecilia thought the idea of being naked in Matt's arms an enthralling one, but she had gotten the idea that it was a taboo subject and one

not talked about except in vague references. She didn't totally understand what her Aunt was describing, but then her explanation had been pretty brief.

Matt frowned and then sighed. "Because it's the right thing to do," he said firmly, knowing Cecilia hadn't been raised with too many principles. "You are supposed to be a virgin when we get married, according to the Bible, anyway."

"But why?"

Matt groaned. "You are NOT making this any easier, little girl, now hush before I turn you back over my knee for being a brazen hussy."

"What's a hussy?"

"A hussy is a little girl that share's her body shamelessly with more than one man, and usually for money!"

"I thought that was a whore?" Cecilia had learned that from Allen.

"Where did you learn that?" Matt asked, scandalized. "I think the big city is not doing you any favors, little girl! It's time I took you back to Brocton before you get too worldly. I kind of like you just the way you are."

"I learned about whores from Allen," she said giggling. "When we went shopping in London, he pointed out a bo...ba...brothel to me."

"What else did you do in London? And where was your escort? Don't tell me you went there with just this Allen?" Matt studied her flushed face, not liking the sound of what he was hearing.

"Oh, no, we all went, Nicole and Nicholas, Aunt Ruth and Uncle Adam, Grandmother, and Allen too. We went Christmas shopping, and...I got you a gift," she finished shyly.

"Did you, now?" Matt's eyes gleamed as he relaxed and enjoyed her excitement. She was so

innocent it floored him at times. Then she would come out with the darndest things! He thought of the small gift he had tucked away in his valise for her and smiled.

"Yes, Grandmother gave me ten pounds to spend. And guess what? We rode a horseless bus!" Her eye's shown with excitement.

Matt chuckled. "That is different from the horseless carriage a bit isn't it? Lots more people."

"Yes, Aunt Mary and Uncle Adam have a horseless carriage, although Uncle Adam keeps talking about something called a gray ghost that he would like to buy...some new kind of car. There were several horseless carriages on the streets of London, but not many out here in Cheltenham."

"Yes, Sam Decker is talking about buying one of those. He's seen a couple of them over in Panier flats."

"You mean the ghost?"

"No, the horseless carriage," Matt replied. "I have to admit, I kind of like them myself. Not sure how well they would do in Brocton, though, the roads are pretty rough."

"Well, I want to learn to drive one. Allen says they can go faster than the two mile per hour speed limit!"

"Now why would you want to do that?" growled Matt. This Allen didn't appear to be a very good influence on Cecilia. It was a good thing he was taking her back to America with him.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "It just sounds like fun. I love the way the wind blows in your face." Her emerald eyes glowed.

"I better not catch you speeding when I buy one, or your rear end will wish it was having a cool breeze blowing on it by the time I'm done tanning it."

Matt stared frostily down at her, wondering if maybe he wouldn't buy one. Keeping her off a fast horse might be hard enough at the rate the little minx was learning.

"Oh, Matt," she sighed. "Don't be such a spoilsport."

"Quit sassing and come here," he growled and tipped her chin up to receive his kiss once again.

Cecilia forgot all about him being a spoilsport as she yielded to his mouth. Her arms crept around his neck, and she pushed her pert young breasts up against his chest, wanting to get closer to him.

They sprang apart when a light tapping sounded on the door. "Looks like Adam is on the job," muttered Matt, ending the kiss regretfully and standing up. "Come on, little girl, time for you to be in bed."

Two weeks later, Mr. And Mrs. Matthew McCracken were ensconced in the London hotel suite Mary had rented for them as a wedding gift. Tomorrow, they would be headed for America, but tonight was all theirs.

Cecilia stood proudly before her husband, the necklace he had given her for Christmas, a single green emerald on a gold chain, around her neck. He had said it matched her beautiful eyes.

Her dark hair hung in soft waves to her shoulders, and her virginal white satin gown clung softly to the contours of her shapely body. She wore nothing beneath the thigh length satin, her arms and shoulders bare except for the thin straps holding the garment up. It had been a gift from Ruth. The sheer covering had been discarded as Matt's warm hands had slid off her shoulders.

"You are so beautiful," Matt murmured, his thumb circling the rosy nipple beneath the fabric. He was undressing her slowly, savoring every inch of pale delicious skin he uncovered.

Cecilia was trembling, but doing some exploring of her own as she worked on the last button of his pristine white dress shirt. Sliding it off his shoulders, she enjoyed the feel of his firm brown skin beneath her fingers, the muscles that rippled in his arms as she slid it down.

She wasn't scared at all; instead she was trembling with excitement. Her shaking fingers moved to his belt, and he had to help her a little as he stepped out of his pants, finally standing before her with nothing left to the imagination.

He groaned when her exploring fingers ran down his muscled ribcage, and then timidly touched his manhood, erect and throbbing. "There will be time for you to explore later, honey, right now, you better let me do the exploring."

Cecilia smiled up at him, not knowing for sure what he meant, but willing to let him lead. She dropped her head back as he kissed her face, her eyelids, moving on down to the soft column of her throat.

He followed it on down to her soft shoulders, moving the thin straps aside and down her arms, the satin garment finally falling off her body into heap at her feet. At last, he was able to look at her, fully nude before him, and his desire for her grew.

"Come here, you," he growled, picking her up in his arms and carrying her to the large bed awaiting them. He laid her on the soft quilt and followed her down.

His hands and mouth worked until she was writhing beneath him, moaning and pulling him

closer. "This will hurt at first, but I promise you, it's only for a moment."

She tensed at his words, not expecting anything to hurt. Her eyes opened wide as she felt his hard swollen shaft trying to penetrate her tight sheath. It was uncomfortable, and she tensed even more. "Matt," she cried, unsure of what was going to happen or how much it would hurt.

"Sshhh, it's all right," he said thickly, backing off a bit to gently caress her sex, lightly running his finger inside her. "You're really tight, honey, but you can take me, honest. Try to relax."

"I...I'm trying, Matt," she said breathlessly, as his finger slid inside her. She closed her eyes and let his fingers and mouth bring her to a yearning state once again.

This time, when Matt moved over her, she tried to stay relaxed. As he moved into her, she held onto him around his neck, her breathing erratic and her body trembling.

Matt looked down into her eyes. "I love you, honey," he said tenderly, and then he thrust firmly, breaking past the barrier and stopping inside her.

He kissed her as she cried out and stayed still, letting her absorb the foreign feeling of him within her body. He was trembling with the effort of trying not to rush her, his own desire to take her fully washing over him.

He reached down and suckled her rosy nipple, eliciting a gasp and a rise against him and he began to move slowly, kissing his way back up to her lips, taking her moans and gasps into his own mouth.

As Matt had promised, it didn't hurt anymore, far from it. She felt her body straining, yearning, moving with him until something seemed to burst inside her, and she cried out with the heady pleasure of it all.

It was a long time later that they lay satiated in each other's arms, her head resting on his shoulder.

"How many children do you want, honey?" Matt asked, his fingers tracing circles on her soft skin.

"How many can you give me," she teased, lifting her head to look into his eyes.

"Oh, I think I can manage as many as you can," he chuckled, feeling his shaft stirring to life once again.

"You know we have a ship to catch in the morning."

"Uh huh, but that's hours away," he replied. "Tomorrow, we can go home to Brocton, tonight..." the rest of his words were lost as he turned over to cover her, pressing her into the bed.

"Yes, tonight," she breathed in response. "Tonight is ours." Her eyes shone like stars.

"Tonight and every night, for the rest of our lives," he vowed fervently. He swooped down to capture her lips once again.

