



The Marriage Committee

Catherine Snodgrass

THE MARRIAGE COMMITTEE

Paul called himself a fool for loving her. Belle could do a lot better than him. She *deserved* better. There wasn't a night or day that passed without him cursing the demons and the past that kept him from letting her know how he felt.

Oh, there was a time when she had first arrived when he thought he could. Then the Tanners had run into a bit of trouble and the old Paul, the Paul he fought, the Paul he *feared*, had leaped in to help. It shocked him how quickly the ghost of his former self had appeared. Since then, he'd done everything in his power to tamp down passion of any kind. He simply could not afford to be that person anymore. And now his past had just ridden into town.

Brady was the only one in Cottonwood Bend who knew Paul was a former Texas ranger. And he knew why Paul had switched professions. Brady had accepted his decision and offered Paul the chance of a church in this quiet little town once the former preacher had moved on.

But the men before him now...well, that was a painfully different matter. They might not have known about Paul's new line of work, but they sure knew what had happened before he'd dropped out of sight. The way they gabbed when liquored up, it wouldn't be long before the whole town knew. What would the townsfolk think then of their wonderful, kind, thoughtful reverend?

PRAISE FOR THE MARRIAGE COMMITTEE

Winner, RWA Texas Gold Contest—Best Historical!

Winner, Word Museum's Reviewer's Choice Award!

“...Grabs you from the first paragraph, and won’t let you go. The characters are true to life and the dialogue sizzles. The story is compelling and you’ll find yourself rooting for Belle and Paul with every word. The writing is crisp and first-rate. This is an exciting, suspenseful historical romance that will keep you up all night to finish it. Don’t pass it by!”

—Elizabeth Delisi
Word Museum

“4½ Stars!...Snodgrass pits humor and romance against some powerful conflicts. When Belle seduces the pious reverend in the local whorehouse, it’s a scene stealer. This second installment in the *Texas Brides* series is one that can stand on its own.”

—Faith Smith
Romantic Times BookClub Magazine

“5 Stars!...The plot is goooood!!! The characterization is typical of the old west, where the reader is swept away into the past of bygone days through this wonderfully written story. The intrigue of not knowing what is about to happen next makes this story so moving. Very good page-turner. Great suspense!”

—Wanda Maynard
Sime~Gen Reviews

“5 Angels—Recommended Read!...The people of Cottonwood Bend wiggle their way into your heart and refuse to leave. You’re heart breaks for Paul and what his past has forced him to endure. You understand Belle’s need for independence and her struggle with her feelings for Paul. The plot is solid with twists that keep you turning the pages. Ms. Snodgrass has created a treat in Cottonwood Bend. The emotion and friendship that abounds will have you coming back time and again to visit. This story is about past mistakes, change, love, friendship and new beginnings. Catherine Snodgrass has woven a tale that you won’t soon forget.”

—Cindy
Fallen Angel Reviews

“5 Hearts!...A romance that should, and hopefully will go down, as one of this year’s best and I, for one, am happy I read it. For those of you who love romance novels—and make no mistake, this is one in every sense of the word—do read this one. You won’t regret it.”

—Louise Riveiro-Mitchell
The Romance Studio

“4 Hearts!...A delightful excursion to the wilds of 1880 Texas. The author incorporates fully realized characters into a fast-paced and engaging narrative full of twists and turns. Paul is an exceptional hero: complex, wounded and wrestling with his demons as well as his passions. Belle is a strong heroine but flawed by her own indecision with regards to Paul. Together their passion is HOT.”

—Melissa Fowler
The Romance Reader’s Connection

“4 Hearts!...An impressive romance penned by Catherine Snodgrass. She has a remarkable talent in her ability to weave an intriguing tale...The characters are warm and inviting...the vast secondary characters...are equally well written and perhaps within this company, the marriage committee will find huge success...A fascinating read and is highly recommended for historical romance fans.”

—Penny
Love Romances

“...Snodgrass brings to life the human relationships of small-town life in 1880’s Texas with plenty of humor, drama, and surprise developments. Her descriptions are vivid and drop the reader right into the center of the lives of the townsfolk of Cotton Bend, Texas. I highly recommend *The Marriage Committee*.”

—Theresa Gallup
Fictional Pursuits

“...A madcap attempt to push two people together who are perfect for each other. Too bad they don’t see it that way. When the town gets together to marry them off, things get crazy. Matchmaking, romance, sneakiness, and jealousy are just a few things that make this story amusing and sweet. When I finished this book, I felt like the characters were all real people that I interacted with on a daily basis. Ms. Snodgrass’ ability to create lifelike characters that step from the pages and make themselves real to the reader is a gift. If you enjoy a lighthearted romance with light love scenes and a sweet story, you will enjoy this book.”

—Ansley Velarde
The Road to Romance

ALSO BY CATHERINE SNODGRASS

Another Chance, Another Time

The Chance You Take

Circle in the Sand

Dreams

Feather On The Wind

Foggy Nights, Book I: Silk Dreams and Satin Lies

Foggy Nights, Book II: Smoke and Shadow

Hurago

Out of the Ashes, Book I: A Simple Choice

Out of the Ashes, Book II: My Only Wish

Out of the Ashes, Book III: The Favor

The Quest for Gillian's Heart

Second Chances

Seven Rings Binding

The Texas Brides, Book I: The Wishing Tree

The Texas Brides, Book II: The Marriage Committee

With Bryndis Rubin

Always Faithful

Ice Princess

Judging Ellie

THE MARRIAGE COMMITTEE

BY

CATHERINE SNODGRASS

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

THE MARRIAGE COMMITTEE
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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ISBN 1-59279-499-8
Cover Art © 2006 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CHAPTER 1

Texas, 1880

Belle Marshall forced the grief to the deepest part of her heart. Doc had lived a full life. He'd been an old man. His health had been failing for years. He had had a right to pass on. To have continued living with the pain he suffered...Well, she wouldn't wish that on her worst enemy...if she had one. Why wish it for a man she admired beyond words? Still, losing him, no matter how much she'd known it was coming, hurt more than she could bear.

She dared a look around. It seemed the whole town was gathered at the graveyard today, except for the Tanner bunch. The cowhands were off with the herd, headed north to Dodge months ago. Her sister and the rest of the Tanners had left for a visit to Virginia last month. They'd be gone until the end of this month. Belle had missed them before they'd been gone a day, but now she ached for their company. She felt lost

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without them, even in this crowd.

Her gaze wandered from person to person. Everyone had fulfilled one of Doc's last wishes—no one wore black. He'd wanted bright happy colors and he'd got them. Belle had chosen her pink gingham dress with white lace at the hem, neck, and cuffs. Doc had always said it made her look as bright and pretty as one of Mrs. Freebush's roses. Everyone else looked plenty colorful, too.

Mr. Cyrus's vest matched the canary yellow in his wife's dress. Mrs. Cyrus fingered the dark green ribbon around her wide waist. Florine Brady had chosen purple satin shot with cream panels. Her husband's string tie was cut from the same cloth. Very nice. Bright. Happy. Doc would have been pleased.

The only exception was Paul Harrington. The preacher was limited in his wardrobe. But he honored Doc's wishes the best way he could—with three daisies threaded through his lapel.

She shifted her gaze back to the Cyruses. Seeing the old couple lean on each other in their grief wrenched Belle's heart. She knew what they were thinking—*We're next*. That's what Mrs. Cyrus had said over Doc's body the night before. Rather than think her selfish, Belle understood the fear and had wrapped an arm around her. It had helped to ease her own fears at the time. But in the warmth of this beautiful summer day, watching the Cyruses support each other, their light blue eyes misty with unshed tears, Belle's agony doubled.

A breeze rustled the leaves in the cottonwoods edging the perimeter of the graveyard. Belle closed her eyes and turned her face into it, shutting out everything but the sound of Paul Harrington's voice. Not too deep, not high pitched, just perfect. She could listen to him talk for hours and never grow tired of hearing him. He caught a person's attention from the first word and held it, which was good for a preacher. Not too many people fell asleep during his sermons.

Belle wondered if it was because he was a young preacher. Most of

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the ones she'd known in the past were old, definitely set in their ways. They'd tote their bibles around, quoting gospel in that holier-than-thou manner, and set themselves above their parishioners. Not Paul. He was...well, normal.

He'd make a good father. Belle's eyes flashed open. Where in the world had that come from? Not that she hadn't thought it before. But here? When she was burying her mentor? Doc would have gotten a big chuckle out of that. In fact, he'd have laughed so hard he'd have set off a coughing spell.

Not one to mince words, Doc had never hesitated to point out Belle's interest in the young reverend. She'd be lying if she said that wasn't so. Thank goodness Doc kept his opinions to himself. Seeing that know-it-all look in his old eyes every time Paul came around was bad enough—worse, because each time Doc would say, *"That fella's sure sweet on you."*

Belle didn't know if that was so or not. Mothers in town certainly noticed his availability. They took every opportunity to parade their daughters in front of him and offer their help at church. But it was Belle he turned to when it came time to organize social events and committees. Yet, in the two years they'd known each other, Paul never so much as hinted their relationship was more than friendship. And he certainly never spoke for her.

It was just as well. Belle had no place in her life for a husband, especially a preacher. They expected traditional wives, and Belle wanted more out of life than that. Not that she didn't want a husband and children one day, but she wanted a man who understood she had needs beyond the boundaries of marriage. As far as she knew, there wasn't a man like that who existed for her—certainly not Paul Harrington. He was about as traditional as a person could get.

She let the sound of his voice drift into her soul while she marveled at the way the sunlight made the gold in his light blond hair sparkle.

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She'd seen him with his shirtsleeves rolled up, his shoulder muscles flexed against the wood while he leant a hand at a barn raising. He certainly wasn't afraid of hard work. His skin was a light bronze from hours in the sun. What woman wouldn't be interested?

But Doc had opened a world to her that Belle could have only imagined before. She might not be a doctor in the true sense of the word, but everyone knew she'd been Doc's eyes, ears, and hands these last two years. Belle doubted anyone would call her on it now. She was all the town had. A husband would take her away from them.

Maybe that's why no mothers trotted their sons before her. Not that Belle would have noticed. She was always too focused on her work. And she found Paul, too much of a distraction as it was. Or maybe Doc wasn't as quiet about his notions as she'd hoped.

Belle's gaze drifted Paul's way. He cradled his bible with those marvelously long fingers—fingers that could dry a child's tears with a tenderness that tugged at Belle's heart. She'd seen those fingers at work and knew they were callused. But they could right a bow in a little girl's hair with as much skill as they wielded a hammer. And all Belle could wonder was how they'd feel brushed against her cheek.

Paul closed the bible, drew in a breath, and looked right at her. His green eyes mesmerized her, held her in place. They were the color of life itself. She couldn't have moved if a stampede of longhorns were headed her way.

"Belle?" he said.

"Yes?" The word came out in a choked whisper. He wanted something of her.

He glanced toward the grave. Belle's gaze followed. Of course. She was the closest thing Doc had to a relative. By that right alone, she was to toss the first handful of dirt on his coffin.

Heat rose to her cheeks. She was ashamed of herself, letting her mind wander in sinful pursuit while they were burying a good man.

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She imagined Doc's hearty laughter over that, his teasing afterward when they were alone. Tears flooded her eyes. She wouldn't cry here. Please, not here. She simply couldn't deal with the sympathy of others right now. She had to hold herself together. God, how she was going to miss the old man.

Clenching her jaw against the grief, Belle squatted down and blindly grabbed a fistful of dark brown earth. Stepping carefully to the edge of the grave, she opened her palm and let the dirt drift from her grasp. It fell to the coffin below like a gentle rain, so much easier to deal with than hearing the clods plunk down harshly.

When the last was gone, Belle stared at her palm. She'd forgotten to take off her gloves. A dark brown stain blotched the ivory. It would take a lot of scrubbing to get it out. Maybe she'd leave it as a reminder of this day—not that she needed any.

Someone else stepped forward. The smack of dirt on the coffin jerked Belle from her daydream. She couldn't watch this, but she couldn't walk away either. She had an obligation to fulfill.

Another person edged forward—Florine, a businesswoman in her own right. She owned one of the best bars in town and did a good job of keeping her girls in line. Belle supposed she had to—Florine was married to Sheriff Bill Brady. Their professions made them an unlikely couple, but they looked like they belonged together—both tall, auburn-haired, slender, with a businesslike approach to life that rarely wavered. No one dared call him Bill or Billy. It was Sheriff or Brady. And God help the soul who used the name Flo. Florine would cut them dead with a glare.

Given her own full name—Mary-Belle Marshall—Belle sympathized with her. It had just taken longer, and the chance to leave home, for Belle to make her wishes known. She never wanted to be Mary-Belle again. That was the past, a different person—someone Belle longed to put far behind her.

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Florine draped an arm around Belle and gave her shoulders a squeeze. "He was quite an old fella, wasn't he?"

Belle allowed herself a smile. "Yes, he was. I'll miss him."

But she wouldn't miss the coughing that had wracked his body every time he'd tired himself. Or that rattle in his chest when the days had grown cold, a hack no doctoring had seemed to cure. Or seeing him struggle to move his aching bones across a room. No one knew how much he'd suffered, but Belle would take that news, that promise of silence, to her own grave.

Brady slipped his hand through Florine's arm. "You ladies might want to step back. The edge don't look too stable."

Belle glanced at her feet. Sure enough, a steady shower of dirt drifted down. Florine moved away. Belle followed suit, taking a giant step back. Her heel caught the edge of her dress. She toppled forward and felt the ground crumble beneath her.

The mourners gasped. Belle fanned her arms, then squeezed her eyes shut as she fell into Doc's grave. A hard body slammed against her, knocking the wind from her lungs. Arms wrapped tight around her waist and cushioned her fall.

They hit the coffin hard. Belle heard an "oof" from her hero and opened her eyes. Paul lay beneath her, his face twisted with pain. It passed quickly, yet neither of them dared to move.

"Are you hurt?" he finally asked.

"No. Thanks to you. But I can't say the same for you."

He pulled in a ragged breath. "I'm good. Just hit it harder than I wanted. I need a second."

"I'm afraid I've caused you to break something."

"No...really, Belle. Just be still."

She didn't like the sound of his voice. It was strained, as if agony tore through him. She glanced into his face and saw him staring beyond her into the sky. Belle doubted he was focused on anything.

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She shifted to her forearms. Paul grunted, grabbed her waist, and hoisted them both to their feet. “Brady—”

“I got her.” Before Belle could protest, Paul had her by the waist again. He lifted, Brady caught her under the arms, and she was on solid ground once more.

Florine and Mrs. Cyrus fussed over her, brushing the dirt from her pink dress. Belle let them. Only a good washing could save this dress now. She watched Paul leap from the grave unassisted, and marveled at his agility.

“At least no one’s hurt.” A small *tsk* ended Mrs. Cyrus’s sentence.

“Only our pride.” Paul flicked dirt from his trousers. “Mr. Tucker, you’ll be glad to know you’ve made a sound coffin. It survived the weight of both our bodies full force. Didn’t give at all.”

Mr. Tucker’s wattle jiggled with his nod. “We should get on with it then, before someone else decides to test it out. Been ages since I’ve seen ground this unstable. Must be from all the rain we’ve had this year.”

“Hold up, Tuck.” Brady jerked his head toward Main Street. “We got riders coming.”

One by one, people turned for a look. Sure enough, a group of six men were making their way up the main street of Cottonwood Bend.

“Texas rangers.” Paul brushed dirt from his sleeve and squared his shoulders, but his narrow gaze never left the approaching men.

Belle shaded her eyes and studied the men. How could Paul tell who they were? Rangers wore no badges. Only the officers carried papers saying who they were. These men looked like tired cowpokes or, worse yet, a band of thieves creeping into town.

Their hats drooped from days exposed to the elements. Dust, dirt, and sweat etched stories into the fabric. The wide brims hid the men’s faces from the sun. Their shoulders sagged from exhaustion. And the horses looked like it was all they could do to put one hoof in front of

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the other.

They ignored the shops and houses along the way. Didn't look at the beautiful little flower gardens behind picket fences. Nor did the hitching posts or shaded boardwalks hold any appeal. They kept on a straight course for the graveyard.

"Stay here."

Paul hurried toward the riders. Brady was close behind. They met the rangers at the steps of the small church not twenty feet away. Several of the riders were wounded—one so badly he could barely seat his horse. Instinct urged Belle to rush to their aid. Caution kept her in place.

"Can we help you, gentlemen?" Paul asked.

They stared at him, eyes wide, mouths agape. Someone laughed, a hollow sound that echoed his weariness.

The leader swung down. "Well...I'll be switched."

He tilted his hat back with the point of his finger. His dark whiskers matched his eyes. Weary as he looked, amusement still danced in them.

"This just about takes the cake." He shook his head and gave a half-hearted chuckle, then waved his hand to the men behind him. "We got wounded. We need a doctor."

Heads turned Belle's way. Yes...it was her responsibility now. She wasted no time seeing to it.

"Get them over to the office. I'll run ahead and get things ready." Belle lifted her skirts, ready to dash off.

A man on horseback stared down at her. He held his left arm close to his chest. Dried blood soaked his sleeve. "Her? She's the doc?" He snorted. "Ain't no woman gonna doctor me." For emphasis, he spat in the dirt.

Belle lifted her chin and met his glare. "We'll see how you feel when the infection gets so bad you're ready to have that arm cut off." She gave him a wicked smile. "Don't worry, I'll let you pick between

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the clean saw and the dirty one we use to butcher livestock.”

She shifted her attention to the man next to Paul. “The reverend and the sheriff will show you the way. I’ll want the worst injured first.”

He scratched the dark stubble on his cheek. “That’d be our prisoner. He’s a hard one. Can’t say his life is worth saving.”

Belle drew a deep breath. He held up his palm before her lecture saw the light of day. She tucked it away. She had a feeling she’d need it again real soon.

“But we’ll get him to you, ma’am.” A hint of a smile danced on his lips. Belle tried not to take offense. She was a woman in a man’s world. His attitude was typical of those who didn’t know her. She refused to let it keep her from doing her job.

* * *

Paul watched Belle walk away. She had the attention of every man there—even the wounded. And who wouldn’t look at the sway of her skirt as she hurried down the boardwalk? Those trim hips of hers had mesmerized him more times than he could count.

Belle Marshall was by far the most beautiful woman he’d ever met, and Paul had met a lot of women in his time. He had been smitten from the instant he’d first seen her two years before. Age and maturity since then made her all the more attractive.

He loved her ready smile, the way her forehead wrinkled between her eyebrows when she concentrated on work, the light that always sparkled in the depths of her light brown eyes. And her hair...it was enough to drive a man insane—dark brown with hints of red when the sun hit it just right. She always wore it up, never down. He craved to know how long it really was. Seeing those few tendrils that often drifted against the back of her long creamy neck, it was all he could do to keep his fingers from curling around one.

Seeing her so grief stricken today tore at his heart. He longed to hold her close and tell her everything would be all right. Then she’d

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fallen. His instincts had kicked in. Somehow, Paul managed to jump the width of the grave and catch her. He'd realized then what true agony was.

Never had his body reacted so quickly to a woman's softness. Paul blamed it on the years of abstinence, the years he had wanted her. Then she had levered herself onto her elbows, pressing her stomach right into his problem area. He'd almost lost it right there—like an untried boy. He couldn't have gotten her off him fast enough, and had prayed for something to calm him down before he crawled from the grave.

Paul called himself a fool for loving her. Belle could do a lot better than him. She *deserved* better. There wasn't a night or day that passed without him cursing the demons and the past that kept him from letting her know how he felt.

Oh, there was a time when she had first arrived when he thought he could. Then the Tanners had run into a bit of trouble and the old Paul, the Paul he fought, the Paul he *feared*, had leaped in to help. It shocked him how quickly the ghost of his former self had appeared. Since then, he'd done everything in his power to tamp down passion of any kind. He simply could not afford to be that person anymore. And now his past had just ridden into town.

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But the men before him now...well, that was a painfully different matter. They might not have known about Paul's new line of work, but they sure knew what had happened before he'd dropped out of sight. The way they gabbed when liquored up, it wouldn't be long before the whole town knew. What would the townsfolk think then of their wonderful, kind, thoughtful reverend?

"Paul, what the hell—"

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Paul cut Cal Webster off without so much as a glance. "You'll find the doctor's office in the back of the boarding house on the corner, just a block away." He couldn't risk talk out here with the whole town gaping at them. Already they whispered among themselves, and Florine and Mrs. Cyrus were headed his way.

Cal stared at him. His faced screwed up in that funny look he always got when something confused him. Paul noticed he hadn't changed much since he'd seen him four years ago. Of course, it was hard to tell, as dirty as they all were from being on the road.

Stony, Clarence, Sid, and Marty still stared at him. But their gaped-mouth astonishment was gone.

Paul glanced at the sixth man, on horseback between them. His arms were bound at the wrist. Splotches of blood stained his torn clothing. He slumped lower in the saddle with each second that passed. Marty controlled his reins.

Cal tucked his hat back into place and jerked his head toward Stony. "You heard the good reverend. Get the wounded over there and keep a good eye on Jessop."

Paul's lips tightened to a thin line. Which Jessop? Frank? His past was truly slamming him in the face.

Not one for talk, Stony motioned the others on with a flick of his bony hand.

Cal splayed his fingers on his hips, just above his holster. "Sheriff, soon as the little lady's done with our prisoner, we're going to need a sturdy cell for him."

Brady hooked his thumbs in his breeches. "He doesn't look like he's going anywhere. We'll let Miss Marshall decide when it's best to move him."

Florine edged her way up front. "And if you know what's good for you, I wouldn't be calling her little lady around here. People have a lot of respect for her and they won't take kindly to it."

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Cal's cheeks reddened, darkening his suntanned face. At least he still had the decency to know his place. He dropped his gaze to the patch of grass nestled against the church steps. "We'll be needing a place for the horses. That stable down the street any good?"

Mrs. Cyrus puffed out her ample chest. "Why, it's the best in town."

Not to mention it was the only one in town.

Cal nodded. "And a place for us to bunk. Which boarding house is the best?"

Paul crossed his arms and rocked on his heels. "Depends on what you're looking for. Busby's has plenty of room this time of year. It has beds and food." Although it took a strong soul to put up with Mrs. Busby's sour disposition.

"If it's whoring you want, Fran's is the place for you. For the right money, she'll rent you a room and all the extras that go with it. If you're looking for a clean bed and good food, then you'll want Cyrus's. That's where you'll find the doctor's office. Big two-story house on the corner. White fence, wide porch, yellow trim."

"Good enough for me." Cal snagged the reins and hauled himself into the saddle. "We need to talk. Catch up on old times."

Paul jerked his thumb toward the graveyard. "We've got a man to bury. We could use an extra hand."

Cal glanced that direction. "I've buried enough men, *Reverend*."

"Then one more shouldn't hurt you."

"You oughta know." He tipped his hat to the ladies, turned his tired horse around, and rode away.

Paul measured each step. Too bad Cal wasn't on his way out of town.

"Whoring?" Florine flicked the back of his head with her fingers. "What kind of talk is that coming from a preacher?"

He smoothed his hair into place and frowned at her. "I'm trying to

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make a point that we don't want any trouble in our town...from anyone."

Brady scuffed his boots against a tiny patch of grass. "And trouble's just what we're in for if that's really one of the Jessops they've got with them. You know they'll do anything to get one of their own back."

And with the Tanner ranch hands and owners gone, the town didn't have the muscle to protect itself.

Mrs. Cyrus tucked her handkerchief into her sleeve. "Then we'd best be seeing what we can do to help Belle put those rangers on the mend and on their way. Come along, dear."

"You go on. I'll be there shortly." Florine waited until Mrs. Cyrus was halfway down the boardwalk before turning to Paul and Brady. "We've got another problem."

Naturally. Didn't trouble always come in threes? "What's that?" Paul asked.

"Several of the women—most of the women are concerned about the...exposure Belle will receive from men now that Doc is gone."

Brady chuckled. "You mean they're afraid she'll see a naked man."

Florine jabbed an elbow in his ribs. "She's an innocent young woman."

Paul snorted. "Who's been doing Doc's work for him since she got here? I'm sure she's gotten a gander at a man by now." Although the thought didn't sit well with him either.

"But until now, the fine ladies of Cottonwood Bend could convince themselves Doc was handling all the dirty work." Brady laughed. "Now they can't lie to themselves any more."

Florine shot him a glare from the corner of her eye. Gathering her composure, she flashed a sweet smile Paul's way. "It's time Belle was married. It's time you spoke up."

He stumbled back. A punch to the gut would have shocked him less. Even Brady stopped laughing and stared at his wife in stunned

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silence. Paul found his voice somewhere in his hip pocket. Using it wasn't as easy.

"What?" he choked out.

Florine's mouth tightened. "You heard what I said. People have been talking for years about that puppy dog look you give Belle. They figured you were waiting for her to grow up more. Then they figured you were shy. Now...well, let's just put in this way, Reverend..."

She smoothed her gloves over each finger and avoided his gaze. "Belle is the best thing this town has. We can't lose her. If seeing her married will ease the minds of some of our more prissy residents, then so be it." She dropped her hands and nailed him with a look. "So, what's it going to be?"

Paul's mouth moved but the words wouldn't come.

Florine laced her fingers and tapped her thumbs together. "In other words...we will *not* lose Belle. We can't afford to. And that's exactly what will happen if this matter isn't resolved. First the women will refuse to let their husbands go to her, then they'll refuse to go themselves. And, finally, the children. You know how people are when they get a notion. So...if you won't speak up, we'll find someone who will."

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Anger swooped in. He didn't respond well to threats of any kind, no matter how well intentioned. He fought a snarl and looked steadily into Florine's amber-colored eyes. "Then I think you'd best be doing that."

Her eyes widened a fraction. This obviously wasn't something she had anticipated. To her credit, Florine recovered quickly. "Then we shall. In fact, I think we'll form a marriage committee. With the Fourth of July celebration days away, it should fit in quite nicely. Good day, Reverend Harrington."

Her footsteps clicked a hasty retreat down the boardwalk.

Brady gave a low whistle. "Boy-howdy, you've stirred up a

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hornet's nest now. I'm going to have to hear it tonight."

"I don't like being cornered."

The other man clasped him on the shoulder. "And you're going to like seeing the woman you want married to someone else?"

Paul shrugged his hand away. "It's a bluff. That's all."

Brady stared after his wife. "Florine don't bluff." His voice softened. "Come on, Paul. You can't keep living like this. This isn't you. You want her. Go after her."

"I can't. You know that."

He slowly shook his head, never once breaking eye contact. "No...I don't suppose you can. Living the life of a martyr has too much appeal."

Paul's jaw tightened, so did his fists. "I've got a man to bury." Without another word, he strode back to the graveyard.

CHAPTER 2

Belle had never seen a man so torn up before. He had passed out before he reached the boarding house. It'd taken two men and some measure of badgering from her to get him carried to the doctor's office inside. He never budged, never fought them, just dangled between their arms like a giant rag doll.

Everywhere she looked there was blood. His gray wool breeches and heavy cotton shirt, even his black leather vest, were ripped to shreds. The patches of skin beneath the holes were rubbed raw. She honestly didn't know where to start. Maybe the head ranger was right. Maybe there wasn't much hope of saving him, especially if she was only doing so for a hangman's noose.

She dipped a cloth into the steaming basin of water while she stared at his bruised and swollen face. A week's worth of black prickly whiskers sprouted there. One eye was so swollen, Belle doubted he'd be opening it any time soon. A cut sliced through his eyebrow over the

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other eye. His breathing was slow and shallow. Belle was looking at a dead man—one way or the other. The human thing to do was let him go now.

Sighing, she wrung out the cloth and drew it over his face. Doc hadn't taught her to give up on people, no matter how hopeless things seemed.

The door opened. Belle peeked around the privacy screen. She expected Florine and Mrs. Cyrus to be shoving their way into her examining room. Both were overly concerned with how much of these men Belle might get a gander at. She'd already chased them out once with a promise to call them for assistance should the possibility of seeing the man's private parts rear its ugly head. But this intruder was definitely more welcome. Tension seeped from her shoulders.

Paul shut the door behind him. "Do you want me to lock it?"

Belle glanced at the man laid out on the operating bed, then back at Paul. He was just what she needed.

"As long as you stay on this side of the door."

Paul seated the bolt and slipped behind the screen with her. "Undertaker's taking care of Doc. I thought I'd come over to see what I could do for you. Considering how Mrs. Cyrus is fretting in the kitchen, looks like I came none too soon." He stared down at her patient. "Good heavens, he's a mess!"

"He is that."

Paul pulled in a deep breath. "What do you need from me?"

"I need him naked. That's the only way I'm going to be able to see how bad off he is."

Heat rose to her cheeks. Belle cursed the reaction. Innocence be damned—interference was something she simply could not tolerate. She was determined to fight Paul and anyone else on this.

Paul passed a slow gaze over the man, most probably noting the same injuries Belle had. That or he was stalling while he built steam to

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argue with her. Finally he shifted his gaze her way.

“There’s not much left of his clothes as it is. The best thing to do would be to cut them off. You start with his shirt and vest. I’ll get the boots. Once you’re done, I’ll get the breeches while you check out his torso.”

Thank heavens there was at least one person left who didn’t suddenly treat her with kid gloves. Belle wanted to toss her arms around Paul’s neck and hug him right then and there. Instead, she grabbed up shears and cut away what remained of the injured man’s shirt and vest.

Paul tugged on the boots. The man groaned and rolled his head to one side. “At least he’s got some life left in him.”

She slapped the shears into Paul’s open palm and wiped a fresh cloth over the man’s face. When she got no response, Belle moved to his torso. Deep cuts and scrapes covered him. Dark bruises mottled his ribs. She had to look hard to find some place that wasn’t hurt.

“This man took one devil of a fall.” Even as she said the words, Belle knew how ridiculous it sounded. This was no mere fall. Someone, or several someones, beat this man to within an inch of his life.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Paul drape a towel over the man’s groin.

“Looks like he took a bullet to the thigh.” He pointed in that direction then waved his finger toward the man’s hip. “Another grazed him here. They aren’t fresh wounds either.”

Belle could see that. Congealed blood sealed the hip wound and the one on his thigh still oozed. Movement aggravated his body’s attempts to heal itself. She pressed her hand against his forehead. It was hot to the touch—hard to tell if it was from his ride in the hot sun or infection from all his injuries.

Mentally she ticked off the list of things she needed to do: the bullet had to come out; he’d have to be swabbed down with a wash for all the

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cuts and scrapes. As for any internal injuries...

She sighed. An herbal tea would help stop any internal bleeding and help him heal, but he certainly wasn't able to drink it at the moment. Someone would have to spoon it down his throat.

She allowed herself a tiny smile. That ought to keep Florine and Mrs. Cyrus busy for awhile and out of her hair. They could give him a sponge bath while they were at it. He sure as heck could use one.

Belle stared at his thigh. The weight of her new responsibilities bore down upon her spirit. She was it. The health and well-being of this town rested on her untrained, inexperienced shoulders. This went far beyond hurts, fevers, ills, childbirth, and rashes.

"What's the matter?"

Her gaze slid Paul's way. "I've never pulled a bullet out of a man before. I never saw Doc do it either."

"Sure you have." His smile bolstered her spirits. "What about when Mrs. Wooster fired a load of birdshot into her husband's rear?"

Belle gave a small laugh. Mrs. Wooster had found her husband indecently engaged with one of Fran's girls from the other end of town. "It was rock salt, and Doc said he deserved to suffer through it."

She glanced at the wound. This was just the beginning. There was so much to consider. "What if he's got a burst appendix? Or something else inside that I don't know about? I can't do this. I'm not a doctor. I—"

"Stop, Belle." He reached for her, hesitated, and dropped his hand to his side. "You can do this. I know you can. Try to think of it as an annoying splinter."

"That's quite a splinter." And she'd be going in blind, poking and prodding. How would she know when she found it?

Paul wrapped his fingers around her shoulders. "No one's more gentle than you. You won't cause him any more pain than he's already in."

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There was one way to make sure of that, but ether was tricky stuff. One time she'd gotten an extra whiff of it, she got so dizzy Doc laughed at her until he cried. And the few times they'd used it, it was pretty clear when the ether took effect. This man was out cold. How would she know when enough was enough?

Paul rubbed his thumb in circles against the top of her shoulder. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were shaking. Belle, it isn't like you to be indecisive."

She blinked, focusing on his features once more. A hint of a furrow tugged his eyebrows together—a mix of worry and confusion. Doc wasn't around to catch her if she faltered, but if truth be told, she'd caught *him* in more than one mistake. She had yet to err. This might be the first time.

Belle cocked her head to one side. She wondered what Paul would do if she reached up and dusted those faint worry lines away with her fingertip. Judging from how quickly he'd set her away from him earlier when they'd fallen in the grave, she'd bet he'd hightail it out of there. Yet here he was still tracing gentle circles against her shoulder.

Belle laughed to herself. Where was her head lately? She wasn't looking for the complications having a man in her life would bring. But each time she looked at Paul...

She drew in a breath and pulled away. Now certainly wasn't the time to deal with this. She had other things that had to be her first concern.

"You're right. It isn't like me. I've fiddled around long enough. It's time to get started. You wash off his thigh. I'm going to make sure he stays unconscious."

* * *

"I told you, ain't no woman gonna see me naked."

Belle's temper hung by a thread. He was the last of her patients, the one least wounded, and the most difficult. He sat in the middle of the

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examining table, clutching his shirt to his chest like a frightened bride on her wedding night. If she hadn't been so doggone tired, Belle would have laughed.

"I only want that rag you call a shirt. That hardly qualifies as being naked."

Lips pursed, coal-black eyes focused unblinkingly on her, he shook his head. They were getting nowhere fast. The fact that he could lose his arm if not treated couldn't sink in past his fear of a woman seeing even a glimpse of skin. Belle didn't have the breath or energy to reason with him further. He was going to be helped with or without his cooperation.

"Mr. Wickam, you've managed to chase Mrs. Cyrus and Mrs. Brady away, but you can bet I'm not going anywhere. We can do this the easy way or the hard way."

Wickam didn't budge.

"Very well." Belle flicked the buttons on her dark gray duster free from their holes. There was more than one way to skin a cat and Belle wasn't above going the back route if she had to. "I'm going to brew a pot of tea. Would you care for a cup, Mr. Wickam?"

He blinked at her and pulled himself up a notch. Good, she caught him unaware.

"I'm...I'm a coffee man myself, ma'am."

Belle summoned her sweetest smile. "Coffee it is." She hooked her duster on a peg near the door and left, shutting the door quietly behind her.

Quite a crowd had gathered in her kitchen. Florine and Mrs. Cyrus hovered over Daisy, who tried her best to throw together a meal for the unexpected company. She looked close to tears, but the poor little thing didn't have the heart to chase the other women out of her kitchen. And, even though Daisy answered to Belle, she was smart enough to realize this was Mrs. Cyrus's boarding house, despite the fact she rarely set

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foot in the place.

The men were oblivious to the activity around them. Paul, Brady, Cal Webster, and Stony sat at the table clutching cups of coffee while they stared at the polished pine. The wounded rangers lounged in the shade of the back porch. Belle saw them through the window. They had kicked back their chairs, shaded their eyes with their hats, and were now snoozing.

She clicked the door to the doctor's office closed. All heads turned her way. "Florine, I'm going to need a bottle of your stoutest whiskey. Daisy, a fresh pot of coffee, please. I'll set the kettle for tea." Each jumped to the task without question.

Webster cocked his chair on its back legs. The wood creaked in protest. "How's Clarence?"

"The chair is not a rocker, Mr. Webster." Belle pushed him into place as she walked by. The legs banged against the wooden floor. The men on the porch jumped up, reaching for weapons that didn't exist.

Paul waved them down. "It's nothing. Go back to sleep."

Muttering unintelligible phrases, they settled down.

"Clarence?" Webster asked again.

"Stubborn." She pumped the kettle full of water and set it on the stove. "But I have a way around that."

"Do you now?" Webster started to tilt his chair back. One look from Belle stopped him.

She liked visitors to be comfortable. But these men weren't normal company. If she didn't set the rules now, they'd run roughshod over the place in the blink of an eye.

Webster laced his hands behind his head. Laughter danced in his dark brown eyes. The humor did nothing to ease the stench that arose from him and his companions. Belle had seen cowboys who had been on the trail for months that weren't this dirty. Skunks smelled sweeter.

"Does your plan involve whiskey, ma'am?"

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Paul leaned forward. "Actually, no. Belle normally downs a quart of whiskey after a hard day healing the sick and wounded."

"Two after delivering babies." Brady lifted his mug in mock toast.

Belle smothered the laughter that bubbled up.

"Really?" Webster gave a hearty laugh. "And how does your husband feel about that?"

Mrs. Cyrus just about pounced on the man. In all the years she'd known her, Belle had never seen the woman move so quickly. "Oh...Belle is unwed."

"I...see." Webster kicked back his chair. His gaze shifted over her, appraising her worth like he would horse stock.

Belle longed to double her fist and smack that smug expression off his face. She caught movement under the table. Paul nudged the chair with his foot. Webster flailed his arms for balance and tumbled backward. The clatter roused the men on the porch again. They flashed dirty looks into the kitchen and settled down again.

Webster glared at Paul, righted his chair, and wrapped his fingers over the back. "What was that for?"

"I think you know."

Four simple words spoken with deadly precision. Belle's pulse raced. This wasn't kindly Reverend Harrington. Here was a real glimpse of the man beneath the collar. Belle didn't know if it frightened or intrigued her. She nestled her arms under her bosom, hoping to quell the thud of her heartbeat.

Stony looked them over from under his eyebrows. Pulling in a deep breath, he faced Belle. "Ma'am, I don't know about everyone else, but I sure could use a hot bath and a place to rest. I understand you run the boarding house here."

Belle gave a single nod. "Rooms are two dollars a week. An extra two dollars for three meals a day. An extra dollar for the bath. The bathhouse is out back. You tote your own water. The stove's in the

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bathroom. No room until you've bathed."

He swept up his hat as he stood and fished the money from his vest pocket. "Sounds like a deal to me." After placing the coins on the table, he walked on to the bathroom.

Belle retrieved the money and weighed it in her palm. "Same goes to you and the rest of your men, Mr. Webster. We aren't fancy, but we're clean and we promise a hearty meal. Frankly, you and your men reek."

Ignoring the comment, he jerked his head toward the doctor's office. "What about Jessop? Is he ready to move over to the jail?"

Belle dropped the coins in an old butter crock under the window. "Mr. Jessop's injuries are far too serious. He needs tending, not jostling."

His grip on the chair tightened. "I don't think you understand how dangerous—"

"I wasn't born yesterday, Mr. Webster. The Jessop reputation has managed to filter into even a town as small as ours. But the man in there is hardly a threat to anyone right now. Besides," she held out her hand for the whiskey bottle as Florine walked through the back door, "if all you big brave Texas rangers stay here, who would dare storm the place? The boarding house is better protected than any jail cell would be."

"She got you there, Cal." Brady's laughter roused the two on the porch yet again. Flashing dirty looks toward the house, they shuffled to the shade of the tree in the corner of the yard. There they sank back down to sleep.

Webster stretched to his feet. "I'd swear that somehow I've been flimflammed and hornswoggled. Either way, looks like I'm outnumbered." He wandered to the rack by the back door and retrieved his hat. "Miss Marshall, my men and I will be needing those rooms." He plucked his coins from his vest pocket and placed them on the sink

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board. "We'll make sure we're all tidied up before we come in. The others will pay after they've rested."

He flicked the brim of his hat her way. A shower of dust rained down. He shrugged as if to say, "Oh, well," then left.

Belle lifted her eyebrow to the others. "If I'd known it was that easy to get rid of him, I would have insulted him earlier."

Still chuckling, Brady looped his arm through Florine's. "No doubt he's out surveying the town for places to post lookouts. All he had to do was ask. I'd show him every one."

Florine patted his fingers. "But how could you know? You aren't a"—she feigned a gasp—"Texas ranger."

Brady's laughter shook the room once more. He reached for Mrs. Cyrus's arm. "Come on, ladies. Let's head home and you can tell me about this new committee you gals added for the Fourth of July celebration. Maybe it's something we could interest Cal Webster in joining." He shot a glance over his shoulder to Paul and let the women lead him away.

Paul stared at their departing figures. Surely they were pulling his leg. They couldn't possibly be seriously considering marrying Belle off to someone. And certainly not Cal Webster. He left a line of broken hearts wherever he went and, rumor had it, more than a couple of younguns. Just the thought of children set Cal to twitching.

"What committee are they talking about?"

He shooed the thoughts away and looked at Belle. She stood inches from him, head cocked to one side. A wisp of her dark hair curled against her neck, tempting his finger to nestle inside. The very notion that Cal might touch her in *any* manner set his teeth on edge.

One way to put a stop to all of this was to tell Belle what was afoot. She'd bring their plans to a halt quicker than they could blink an eye. Or would she? Maybe she wanted a husband and family. It seemed that was the goal for most of the women Paul knew. But somehow, Belle

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had always seemed different, not inclined to look at the young men who vied for her attention.

“Paul...what committee?”

“A stupid one.” He snapped to his feet. “I’ll tell you about it later.” He pointed to the whiskey bottle clutched in her hands. “Save that bribe for later. I’ll take care of Clarence.”

Paul heard scuffling behind the screen the second he opened the door. Judging from Belle’s frustration, he guessed Clarence was gearing up for another battle.

“Relax. It’s only me.” Two strides took him to the man’s side.

Clarence sagged with relief. “Sarge, whew, I thought it was that lady doc again.”

“She and I decided I’d take care of you.”

Clarence shrugged off his shirt. “I took a knife wound a couple of days ago. Pretty good gash. It’s painin’ me somethin’ fierce.”

Paul studied the wound from side to side. Someone had tried to care for it—deep and nasty as it was, no infection had set in. “But not enough to let a doctor take care of it.”

“She ain’t no ordinary doc. She’s a woman.” Clarence twisted his face around for a look.

Paul blotted a wet cloth over the wound. “I’ve never known you to be flustered around a woman. If I recall rightly, you used to be quite a ladies’ man.”

He chuckled. “Weren’t we all? I’d have to say it gets old after a while. The ridin’s mighty hard and long. This here’s our last run. We’re done once we get Jessop turned over. I can’t say for the others, but there comes a time when a man starts to lookin’ to settle. If you know what I mean.”

Paul wrung out the cloth and avoided comment. It was tempting to want a normal life, but he was the last man to consider settling down.

“But there’s ladies, and then there’s ladies. And Miss Marshall...”

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Clarence gave a low whistle. "Now there's a package. Pure lady through and through. The kind to make a fella really stand up and take notice. I gotta tell you, Sarge. I been stiff as a board since I first laid eyes on her. Each time she's near me, I feel like a green boy ready to lose myself. I couldn't have her tend me. I just couldn't. You know what I mean?"

Did he ever. Paul could give lessons on how Belle affected a man. There were nights he went to bed hard just from thinking about her, and woke up the same way, too. He tortured himself by finding excuses and ways to be around her: always putting her in charge of church activities and fund-raisers; always escorting her to social events around town; always finding some way, any way, to be near her. It was no wonder Florine, Mrs. Cyrus, and the other women expected him to step forward. If only they knew the man he really was—the man he kept hidden. They'd change their minds pretty quick then, and rush their princess back to her tower.

Now that was hardly fair, his conscience chided. Belle never put on airs of any kind. No one put her on a pedestal to be worshipped. They cared about her, loved her...just as he did.

No, not the way he did. He literally ached to have her. It took superhuman effort not to declare himself, not to sweep her into his arms and whirl her around the dance floor time after time, not to pull her into the shadows during a warm summer evening and smother her lips with one kiss after another.

But passion was one of those emotions he had to keep a tight rein on. It belonged to the other Paul, the reckless one. It had no place in his life, not if releasing it would mean letting those other demons out, too. It was a chance Paul couldn't risk taking. He was still paying for his past mistakes. A lifetime wasn't enough to make up for what he'd done.

In some respects, he was no better than Cal. Paul had his share of

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the ladies behind him, too. At least he could say in all certainty he hadn't left behind any children like Cal supposedly had. But then, Cal hadn't killed his own sister either.

CHAPTER 3

Paul cut the thread on the last stitch in Clarence's arm. Belle would probably have heart failure if she knew what he was doing. Out on the range, a man had to get resourceful from time to time or die. The choices were that simple.

He didn't have Belle's soft touch or gentle manner. And he sure didn't have even a smattering of the medical knowledge she did. But he had picked up more than his fair share by watching his parents all those years. When push came to shove, Paul could get the job done...most of the time. He'd even had the unenviable task of pulling bullets out of a few of the men.

Some had teased and called him Doc. Thankfully, the nickname hadn't stuck. Doctoring might be in his blood, but it held no place in his heart, a big disappointment to his parents—one of many.

"That ought to do it." Paul tied a bandage over the wound.

"Just like old times, ain't it, Sarge?" Clarence flexed his arm into

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his shirtsleeve.

Paul had to agree with Belle. The man was in sore need of a bath. "Just like."

Nothing like. Any doctoring Paul had done before was rushed, unsanitary, and often by campfire with coyotes howling in the distance or in a gully with gunfire zinging over their heads. The last thing he felt like doing was reminiscing.

"Sure have missed having you along with us. Ain't as much fun as it used to be."

That might have more to do with the rigors of the job than it did Paul's absence, but he wasn't up to discussing it with Clarence. Paul hadn't missed being a ranger one bit: the days and nights in the saddle; crouching low in the hot sun hour after hour waiting for the criminal to show; having horse after horse shot out from under him. The threat, the danger. He slowly shook his head. Whatever thrill it had given him in his youth was gone, and he didn't want it back. There were more thrills in living a safe and productive life.

Clarence chuckled. "Almost fell off my horse when I saw you standing there today. Who'd a-thought you'd ever be a preacher man?"

Paul tossed the needle into the trash. "Just goes to show that any man can change."

"Guess that's why you helped her with him, ain't it?" He jerked his head to the bed tucked in the corner of the room where Jessop lay. "It's what they call turnin' the other cheek."

"Something like that, I suppose." Paul studied the bottles of medicine in the glass-fronted cabinet while he washed his hands in the basin.

"Amazin'. You had the perfect chance to—"

"You know what, Clarence? You're all done here." Paul tucked the towel over the rack and shoved back the privacy screen. "You might want to get in line at the bathhouse out back. Daisy and Belle cook up a

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fine meal. The beds here are the softest you'll ever find."

Clarence hugged his arm and winced. "If it's all the same, I think I'd rather stay at the whorin' place down the street."

"Cal will probably want all of you together. Just in case." He motioned to Jessop.

"Yeah. Guess that's right." He studied the floorboards.

"Don't worry. You won't see Miss Marshall that much. She'll be busy. You'll be busy. You can avoid her most of the time."

Clarence pulled up a smile. "Thanks, Sarge. I would like to have a good meal. Can't remember when I slept in a soft bed last."

"Good." He whipped open the door. "If you start to feel feverish or poorly, let Miss Marshall know. She'll fix you up a tea to help you through it. Wouldn't surprise me if she made you all some tonight with supper."

"Aw, Sarge, only dandies drink tea." He pinched his thumb and forefinger together like he was holding a cup and stuck out his pinky.

Paul laughed and steered him toward the door. "You're already on Miss Marshall's bad side. Do yourself a favor and drink the tea, or she might find a more inventive way to give it to you."

Looking pale and a little more than defeated, Clarence shuffled across the threshold, most probably expecting Belle to pounce on him. But the only people in the kitchen were Daisy and Stony, quietly sitting side by side, peeling potatoes at the table. After darting a glance around, Clarence dashed through the door. The two at the table never noticed him.

Paul cleared his throat. Slowly, they looked his way as if surprised he was there. "Daisy, where's Belle?"

"All this company snuck up on us, Reverend. We weren't exactly ready, what with the ranch being so quiet. Belle took the wagon out to the Tanners' to stock up on some vittles."

And there went his chance to talk to her for now. And for the rest of

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the day for that matter. Once she got back, she'd be busy throwing supper together, and seeing to her boarders. It'd be best if he followed her to the ranch. They'd have a chance to talk uninterrupted on the ride back. If he hurried, he might catch her before she reached the place.

Paul took the shortcut through Belle's backyard, skirted the sleeping rangers, and jumped the white picket fence. The boarding house cat screeched and leaped into the trees, startling the birds meant to be its prey. Hoping to avoid any curious parishioners, Paul hurried down the tree-shaded alley. He spotted Mrs. Freebush on her back porch. Her rocker creaked with each slow movement, then fell dead with silence the second she saw him. He'd be the subject of drawing room gossip by sunset. No telling what she and her friends would come up with. The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he zipped by her house. He knew she watched every step he took.

That feeling stayed with Paul until he ducked into the side door of the church. Logic told him Mrs. Freebush couldn't have kept him in sight for four blocks. His knowledge of the woman's snoopiness didn't agree. He rubbed the last of the heebie-jeebies from his neck as he strode across the church toward the rooms in back he called home.

"I knew you'd have to show up some time today."

Paul jumped at the sound of Cal's voice. He'd been so intent on reaching Belle he hadn't seen him stretched out on the first pew.

Cal swung his feet to the floor. He'd cleaned up while Paul had taken care of Clarence: the whiskers were gone; his slicked back hair looked black; he smelled of witch hazel, even sported shiny new boots.

"What did you do? Pay the others to let you in the bathhouse first?"

Cal shrugged and rubbed the polished wood beneath his thumb. "Mrs. Cyrus let me clean up in the back of her store."

"Even sold you new boots. You look almost respectable...almost."

He continued to caress the wood. "Nice pew. It cradles a man. Couldn't help but fall asleep while I waited for you. Must be hell trying

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to stay awake for your sermons.”

Paul ignored the comment. “I’m glad we could provide some respite for your weary soul.”

The words sounded hollow, false, and more than a little sarcastic. These men hadn’t been in town a full day and already his carefully erected facade was starting to crumble. Or maybe it was the implication hinted at by Mrs. Cyrus letting Cal bathe in the back of her store—the women were setting him up for Belle.

Cal laughed softly while he stroked the wood. “Very preacher-like...almost.” Leaning back, he crossed his legs at the ankles, parked his arms over his chest, and looked around. “Nice little church.”

Paul followed the direction of his gaze. It *was* a nice place. The town took great pride in it. The extra touches that made the place special were due to their work. A big stained glass panel greeted worshippers when they walked in. High ceilings added to the larger than life feeling. The pews were made locally by Jake and A.J. Tanner, and the hymnals were relatively new. Definitely a lot of community effort involved in the place. Paul was lucky to be a part of it.

He and Cal looked at each other. Sized each other up was more like it. They could very well have been sitting on opposite sides of a poker table.

“Why are you here, Cal?”

Cal tilted his head to one side. “A better question might be, why are you? A sheriff...yeah. I could even see you passing yourself off as a doctor. But a preacher? Come on. I’m surprised the Lord hasn’t struck you dead.”

Paul resented the implication. “A man can change.”

“True.” He cocked his head and looked at Paul from the corner of his eye. “But this is a little drastic...even for you. You can’t bring her back by sacrificing your own life.”

“I’m not going to talk to you about this. I made my decision long

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ago.”

“Did you make it, or did your parents make it for you?”

That hit too close to home for Paul. His father hadn’t spoken to him since the day Marissa had died. And his mother? Paul didn’t want to think about it.

“I don’t have time to reminisce with you. I’m in a bit of a hurry.” Paul pivoted on the heel of his foot and strode toward his rooms.

The pew groaned with relief as Cal stretched to his feet. “I figured that when you came busting into the church. So where are you off to in such a hurry? Have anything to do with our pretty little doctor lady?”

Paul whipped around. “Stay away from Belle.”

A smile cut across Cal’s face. Slow steps brought him closer to Paul. “So...she’s your sweetheart. How did you two manage to keep that a secret from everyone?”

The urge to lie overwhelmed Paul. That would be enough to make Cal back down. He pulled in a deep breath and glanced around. A white lie was a lie nonetheless. Tempting as it was, he couldn’t stand here in this beautiful church and go against the man he’d sworn he’d be.

“Belle and I aren’t sweethearts. We’re just very good friends.” More than that. They were best friends. Odd that it took until now to realize that. But there was some measure of comfort in the revelation.

Cal’s eyes widened a fraction. “Friends?” Disbelief shifted to astonishment. “You’re serious.” His eyes narrowed. “But you don’t want to be.”

Paul flinched. How could Cal waltz into town and tear away his mask so quickly? They hadn’t seen each other in four years. It was as if it were only yesterday.

Boot heels tapped a slow path Paul’s way. Cal shook his index finger at him. “You want her. You want there to be more. You..love her.”

Tight-lipped, Paul stared at the other man. Cal’s laughter bounced

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off the ceiling eaves and surrounded him. The laughter screamed, "*You're hooked.*" There was no sense in denying it.

Cal turned his palms up. "I don't understand. How can you stand there, knowing how you feel, and not act on it? She's a beautiful woman. Beautiful women and you are like..." He clasped his hands together. "And you're telling me there's nothing?"

This was about a thousand times worse than Doc's needling. At least with Cal, Paul could lay it all out. "And there can never be anything."

"Why?" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "She not interested? I've never known that to stop you. You could always sweet talk—"

"You know why."

He stood there for what seemed like forever, forehead knitted while he pondered the reasons. "Because of what happened to your sister?"

Paul nodded.

"That's the most...It wasn't your fault."

"We both know that's a lie." His arrogance had cost him dearly. He had always been too full of himself. At least Cal didn't argue that point.

"And you think by declaring yourself to Belle, you'd be putting her in danger, too?"

Oddly, that thought had never crossed his mind. Of course, things had changed in the last several hours. "Cal, four years ago I was a hard-drinking know-it-all who could do no wrong. Women were something I used and tossed aside."

"You were the best, and that's a fact. It's not bragging. As for the women..." He shrugged a shoulder. "Well, we've both had more than our share. There've been a few I haven't exactly been proud of myself for leaving, either. But I don't see how this has anything to do with Belle."

Letting go, loving her, was just the first crack in his armor. Paul couldn't afford it. That man, the old Paul, had to stay locked away.

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Something in his face must have told Cal what he couldn't put into words. Cal's gaze bore deep into his own. "I see. You know, the man responsible for all this is right down the road."

Paul's laugh held no humor. "Who can tell? He's been beat beyond recognition. And, unless I guess wrong, someone dragged him behind a horse for extra measure."

His gaze wandered to the stained glass window. "I suspected as much, too. It wasn't us, though. Another company had him first. They turned him over to us for transport while they went off to round up the rest of the Jessops. We were caught off guard before we could part ways. First company took off after the gang while we hightailed it out of there."

Cal pulled his head around on a sigh. "Ain't no more rides after this one. We all agree we're done. It's not as thrilling as it used to be, Paul."

"I wonder if it ever was. Maybe we were just too young and stupid to realize it."

He nodded. "Maybe. But I will tell you this much...if you can help keep a man like Frank Jessop alive after what he did to you, you're a better man than me."

Paul wrapped his hands around the doorknob and smiled. "I always was. Now...if you'll excuse me." He ducked into his room, shut the door firmly behind him, and leaned against it. Old Paul rapped persistently inside him. He wanted out badly. And he wanted out now.

* * *

Belle took her time riding to the Tanner ranch. There was really no hurry. The boarders would eat tonight whether she came back or not. Daisy was already elbow-deep in her famous corn chowder. She'd top it off with sourdough biscuits and hot apple pie. Belle's stomach rumbled just thinking about it. She could get by in a kitchen, but she sure couldn't make food sing the way Daisy and Grace did.

Thinking of her sister made her lonesome for her company. Funny

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in a way. The older they got, the closer they became, and they'd been pretty close growing up. Belle remembered the day Grace had gotten married and left home for good. She had cried herself to sleep that night she'd missed her sister so much. Who would have thought she'd be following her in less than a month? It had opened a whole new wonderful world for her. Misery had turned to happiness Belle couldn't put into words if she lived a thousand years.

That's why this recent unrest not only confused her, but it also bred more than a little guilt. She had so very much to be grateful for. What right did she have to feel something was missing? Maybe Doc's death sparked these feelings—a need to live life, embrace life in the face of death.

Be happy. His last words to her. Until then, she'd thought she was. When his last breath had expired, Belle remembered she'd turned and buried her grief in the haven Paul's arms provided. Tears spent, grief lingering, she had lifted her head from his chest a different woman.

Belle laughed out loud. Now she was being fanciful. Both horses twitched their ears at the sound, but plodded onward. Nothing much bothered those two old girls. She should take a lesson from them.

Their ears flicked around. Belle cocked her head to one side. She heard it, too—a rider coming up the road behind her at a steady trot. She wrapped the reins around one hand and pulled her reticule close with the other. Traveling alone probably wasn't the smartest thing she'd ever done. What if it was one of the Jessops? They were a notorious bunch who wouldn't think twice about doing whatever it took to get one of their own back.

Heart pounding in her throat, Belle tugged open the ties on her reticule and pulled the pistol to her lap. At least she wouldn't go down without a fight. She curled her fingers around the grip and waited. It wasn't long before the rider was right behind her. The horse's step slowed. She tightened her grip as the rider edged up beside the wagon.

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“Well, hello there.”

Belle gave the rider a sideways glance. Cal Webster. What in the world was he doing here? At least he'd cleaned up since she'd last seen him and he was actually smiling. Without those scruffy dark whiskers, her gaze was drawn to the hint of a dimple in his left cheek and the sparkle in his deep brown eyes. She supposed he could be considered good-looking, in an unrefined way.

“What brings you out here, Mr. Webster?”

“Your cook told me you were headed out. I didn't think it was safe for you to be alone.”

“Well, then I guess I won't be needing this.” She slid the pistol back into her reticule. As an afterthought, she curved an eyebrow his way. “Or will I?”

He pressed his right hand over his heart. “From me? Never.”

“Hmmm...somehow you make me question that, Mr. Webster.”

“Ah, heck, Belle. Call me Cal.”

“Why? Because all the ladies do?”

His laughter was genuine, his demeanor more than a little charming. He sat atop that horse like he was a part of it. Like he owned the world and all it possessed. She could see why a lady would lean his way. He moved under their defenses in the blink of an eye with that bright smile, a few witty phrases, and the sheer maleness that poured from him. Had they been on solid ground, Belle wouldn't doubt he'd try to subtly corner her for more intimate chitchat. He might be surprised to find her reaction wasn't as agreeable as he hoped.

“How is it that a woman as beautiful, as capable as you, is unspoken for?”

It certainly didn't take him long to overstep his bounds. His manner, his attitude, the way he looked at her—all were meant to convey desire. Instead, she felt like she needed to toss on more clothes to keep his gaze from touching her.

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"I hardly think my personal life is any of your concern."

He tilted a nod her way. "Right you are, ma'am. My apologies."

They rode in silence for a few minutes. Obviously, she'd nipped his poor attempts at flirtation in the bud and he couldn't think of anything intelligent to say in its place. That was fine with Belle. As far as she was concerned, he could rein his horse around and head back to town. A gang of cutthroats would be easier to deal with than this man's company. She chided herself for being so quick to judge. But his overbearing nature made it impossible not to do so.

Another rider pounded up the road behind them. Cal whipped his head in that direction. His hand fell to the pistol strapped to his side. Then he relaxed.

"Well, well. Looks like someone else was concerned for your safety."

Belle twisted around in the seat and saw Paul barreling up the road. His face was grim, set in stern lines normally reserved for only the most wayward of his flock. His clerical garb was gone. That was nothing new. Often when he rode or worked around the church and town, he changed into more practical clothes. But somehow today he wore the tan breeches, vest, and shirt differently. No, that wasn't quite right. *He* was different.

He slowed and edged up to the right side of her wagon. His thigh muscles flexed with the horse, controlling the animal. Belle's breath caught. She swallowed hard and forced her gaze to Paul's face. He leveled an ugly glare Cal's way.

"What the devil are you doing here?"

Belle's eyes widened. If she didn't know better, she'd swear Paul was ready to haul Cal off his horse and beat the dickens out of him.

Cal just laughed. "Being a gentleman."

"Somehow I doubt that."

She glanced from one to the other. Cal smirked. Paul glared.

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Without uttering a word, they said a million things.

Little things filtered back to Belle: Paul's knowing who these men were before they identified themselves; their reaction to seeing him; snippets of conversation. They were no strangers.

"How is it that the two of you know each other?"

Without breaking eye contact, Cal replied, "Paul used to ride with us."

He could have spun his head around and not shocked her more. Slack-jawed, Belle stared at Paul. Impossible! This sweet-natured man had been a rough and tumble Texas ranger? She could hardly imagine him breezing into town with Cal's bluster, barking out orders and chasing after women.

Yet hadn't Grace always said there was more to Paul than met the eye? Belle knew she alluded to the trouble the Tanners had had a couple years back. Paul had jumped into the thick of things to help them, then eased back into his preacher role right after. Belle was new to the area then, concerned with her own woes. The incident was the barest of memories. It sure deserved looking at now.

Judging from the tightness in his jaw, Paul didn't seem too happy that Cal had shared this little bit of history with Belle. That in itself was telling. One part of her longed for more details while the other wanted to sweep the news under the nearest bush. It was too late to ignore the facts. With Cal's men lounging around town, it wouldn't be long before everyone knew Paul used to be one of them. Tongues would be wagging hard before the week was out.

A sudden thought made her grin. Laughter took over. Paul's puzzled frown made her laugh all the more.

"I'm almost afraid to ask. What's so funny?"

"Oh my, the church is going to be packed on Sunday once this news gets out."

His hearty laughter chased away his glower and brought back the

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Paul she knew—the one with the sparkling green eyes. Belle patted the seat beside her. “Want to take over the reins for me?”

Cal snorted. “You were ready to shoot a hole through me.”

Belle pulled the team to a stop. “Maybe I thought you were more of a threat.”

“I wouldn’t bet too heavy on that one, ma’am.”

* * *

Paul ignored the verbal jab and tied his horse behind the wagon. He had the prized seat next to Belle. That ought to be enough to show Cal he had no business here. Cal didn’t budge. He stuck with them like a fly on stink and was twice as pesky. Paul didn’t know what he was trying to prove, but he could prove it somewhere else. He trotted alongside the wagon like it was an everyday event, oblivious to the fact he wasn’t wanted.

Any conversation Paul hoped to have with Belle was impossible. Cal whistled a tune and watched the passing scenery. That whistle faltered when he caught his first glimpse of the Tanner ranch. Paul snickered. At least he wasn’t as unaware as he pretended. He couldn’t fault Cal his surprise.

The Tanner place was nestled in a shallow valley that seemed made for a home. A massive oak tree stood in a field behind the house. Green grass spread deep into the trees at the farthest edges. A barbed wire fence marked the corrals. The main house and outbuildings were sturdy and fresh with paint. Paul ought to know since he’d helped fix them up.

The ranch wasn’t a grand place, but it felt like home...normally. Without the Tanners here it looked lonely, felt lonely. They’d even taken the dog with them. Grace wouldn’t go anywhere without that dog and Jake wouldn’t let her. Paul didn’t know how they managed the long trip with four adults, a hoard of children, and the dog.

He shook his head. Jake and A.J. were braver men than he was. Even in a private car, he couldn’t imagine surviving a train ride to

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Virginia and back with all that.

The front door burst back on its hinges as Paul pulled the team to a stop. Clutching his sobbing three-year-old son in his arms, the Tanner's ranch manager lumbered onto the porch. He was a big man to start with, but in the last several months his girth had increased with that of his pregnant wife, begging the question of who really carried their child. Hoyt's good nature allowed him to take the ribbing in stride, but Paul knew the worries that plagued him. Judging from Hoyt's pale face and wide eyes, Paul guessed the time had come for Hoyt to face them.

Porch boards rattled under his tread as he stomped toward them. "Thank the Lord you're both here." He darted his gaze between Belle and Paul. "It's Justina. The baby's coming. I...Reverend...Belle..." His chin quivered. Tears pooled in the big man's eyes.

"Calm down. Everything's going to be all right." Belle's voice was soft, gentle. Hoyt's fears were real, at least to him, and she wouldn't chide him, not like Doc would.

Cal swung from his horse and stood at the side of the wagon, hand outstretched to help Belle down. She gave him no more than a glance before she slipped her fingers into his. The wagon shifted, throwing her off balance. Cal girdled her waist and eased her to the ground. He held her against him for what seemed like minutes, his hands on her waist, hers braced against his shoulders. Rage bubbled beneath the surface of Paul's skin. It doubled when Belle actually smiled and finally pulled away.

"Thank you, Cal. I believe you saved me from a nasty fall." She grabbed her healing basket from the wagon bed and walked inside. She never went anywhere without it, no good healer would. But now she'd have to get used to carrying Doc's medical bag, too.

Hoyt tried to follow her inside; she blocked her arm across the doorway. "Not until you calm down and the child stops crying. Justina has enough to worry about right now." A glance Paul's way turned the

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problem over to him. He'd have to deal with Cal later.

Paul jumped from the wagon and trotted up the three steps to the porch. Hoyt stood there paralyzed with a mixture of indecision and fear. Paul peeled the child from his arms and thrust him Cal's way.

Cal's eyes widened. He waved the boy away with frantic motions of his hands. "No, I—"

"You get the child or the father. And I doubt you'd be of any help to Hoyt right now." Paul shoved the boy into Cal's arms, giving him no choice.

He was still holding the child at arm's length when Paul pulled Hoyt around to the back of the house. Hoyt waited until they were out of sight of the other man, then crumbled to the ground and looked to the heavens.

"Reverend, what in the world am I gonna do? She and the baby almost died the last time. I never should have got her pregnant again. I swear, if she makes it through this time, I'll never touch her again." Tears streamed down his face.

Paul propped himself against the wall beside him. "I'd be willing to bet Justina might have a word or two to say about that."

Hoyt managed a chuckle. "I suppose she would." He wiped the heel of his hand over his cheeks. "Aw, Rev, I love that woman somethin' crazy."

"I know." Paul plucked a blade of grass and split it with his fingernail while Hoyt shared snippets of their life with him. He said little in response—a smile here, a nod there.

Paul used to think he needed to add some word of wisdom. It had taken awhile for him to realize that was rarely the case. Most people just needed an ear. He was glad to give it. They left feeling better, or seemed to. Of course, there were those people whose problems never went away, those who were lonely for company, and the rare few who tore down their neighbors with vicious gossip. Paul treated them all the

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same. It was a bigger part of ministering than standing before the congregation on Sunday. He liked to think the time spent listening averted problems elsewhere.

But, if truth be told, there were times it was inconvenient. He couldn't make it down the street without someone wanting to bend his ear about something. How could he fault them? Paul had only himself to blame. And he supposed that's what made Florine and the others think they could order him to marry Belle. Somewhere they'd forgotten he was a man.

He nearly laughed out loud. No, they hadn't forgotten he was a man. He was so much an extension of the people and town he served, they'd forgotten he could have a mind of his own. That, too, was laughable. His mind *was* on Belle. So where was the fault?

Paul tossed the mutilated blade of grass down and plucked another. Before, it had been a badly kept secret he could hold in his heart. Now they'd ripped control from his fingers. That little nudge, his past riding into town—everything was conspiring to tumble his safe little world.

"If I was a bettin' man, I'd bet you hadn't heard a word I said, Rev."

Paul chuckled. "You got me on that one, Hoyt. I've just got a few things on my mind."

He nudged him with his elbow. "Bet I can guess what one of those things might be."

Paul cocked his head Hoyt's way. "I thought you weren't a betting man."

Hoyt tossed back a laugh. "Caught at my own game."

Paul shoved himself to his feet and brushed the grass from his breeches. "Let's go rescue that son of yours."

"Yep. Somehow I suspect your friend is a little lost when it comes to children."

Silence greeted them as they rounded the corner of the house. At

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least young Burt wasn't crying anymore, but he had little liking for Cal. Judging from the sidelong glances each gave the other, Paul had a feeling it was mutual. They sat on opposite sides of the porch steps, ready to flee at the least sign of trouble.

Belle swung the front door open. Each skedaddled as far from the other as possible—Burt to his father and Cal to hold the door for Belle. She acknowledged his help with a nod, but focused her attention on Hoyt.

“Everything is fine and normal, but we're going to be awhile.” Belle handed a slip of paper Paul's way. “This is what we'll be needing at the boarding house. If you and Hoyt could take care of that and get it to Daisy, I'd appreciate it.” She eyed Cal up and down. “You keep Burt occupied.”

He snatched the paper from Paul's fingers. “I'll take care of this.” He motioned to Hoyt and the two strode toward the smokehouse. Burt trotted along, hand tucked firmly in his father's.

“If only it were that easy to get rid of him all the time.” Belle tucked her arms over her chest. A smile lit her eyes. Paul didn't like it. She was getting too close, too fast to Cal. They'd be even closer in the days to come, with him at the boarding house all the time—near her. Teasing. Taunting. *Touching* her. The image drove a spike of jealousy through his heart.

Paul clenched his fist by his side. Not if he had life in his body. It was time to put a stop to this right now.

“There's something I need to tell you. Something you should know.”

She tilted her head to one side. A scream from inside pulled her away.

He caught her arm before she could leave. “What can I do to help?”

Belle curled her fingers over his. “Boil me some water and keep them out of the way.” She jerked her head in the direction of the men,

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gave him a wink, and ducked inside.

His heart followed while the rest of his body stood at rigid attention. How could so simple a gesture, one she'd given him countless times over the years, knock him senseless now? It was all he could do to stand there when what he wanted to do was sweep her into a crushing embrace and—

“You heading back with me?”

Paul jerked around in time to see Cal hoist a smoked ham and a side of bacon into the wagon.

“Or do you trust me alone with the wagon?” Standing astride, Cal braced his hands on his hips. “You know you can’t watch me twenty-four hours a day.”

Paul itched to punch that smirk off his face. “The hell I can’t.” He leaped the railing and stomped toward Cal. “I’m going to be on you like stink on shit until you leave.” He punctuated each word with a stab of his finger.

Cal’s smirk faded. “Well...we’ll see about that, won’t we?”

“You can count on it.” Paul copied his stance. They’d faced criminals this way countless times—determined, steely eyed, unwavering. Paul never thought he’d be facing down a friend.

Cal broke contact first and climbed into the wagon seat. “I’ll bring this back later.” He waited as long as it took Hoyt to load bushels of corn, potatoes, and vegetables into the bed, then clicked the reins.

Paul braced himself against the porch and watched the creaking wagon until it disappeared from view. Hoyt hadn’t budged either. In fact, he stood not six feet away, staring at him. It snapped Paul’s last nerve.

“What are you looking at?”

Hoyt swept off his hat to scratch his head. “I’m thinkin’ it’s a stranger.”

Paul shoved away from the post and stomped inside.

CHAPTER 4

Belle placed the sleeping baby girl in the cradle. Justina slept, too—exhausted but happy. The birthing had lasted less than six hours and was without complications—much easier than the last time. That did little to calm Hoyt. Each time Justina cried out, his footsteps rattled a path to the bedroom door, where he declared there would be no more children. Spewing out a string of Spanish curses, Justina threatened to take a carving knife to his privates as a permanent solution. Hoyt had the good sense to stay away after that.

Belle cupped the tiny head covered with black hair. She had helped bring quite a few children into the world over the years. These tiny miracles never ceased to amaze her. Oddly, she never longed to have one of her own. She supposed that might have something to do with having grown up with so many brothers and sisters. Or perhaps it was the pain of childbirth. Yes, it often ended in joy, but there was also the agony. Sometimes babies were stillborn. Sometimes mothers didn't

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survive. And there were times babies were anything but a blessing.

“Sleep, little one,” she whispered and crept from the room.

Light from the central living area greeted her. Hoyt and Paul were probably celebrating the baby’s birth. All Belle sought was sleep. She glanced toward her old bedroom and sighed. There was an injured man she’d neglected too long. If possible, she had to get back to town.

She pressed her fingers against the small of her back and stretched until the bones cracked. A twist here, one there, and the rest of her spine followed suit. Stifling a yawn, she followed the light.

The Tanner house was built for sharing. One sprawling floor housed a central kitchen and living area, with a separate arm of bedrooms for each branch of this Tanner family. Grace and Jake occupied one side while A.J. and Millie had the other. The children slept wherever they wanted. It was more home than the crowded shack Belle and Grace grew up in.

As Belle’s responsibilities in the community had grown, she’d been forced to move to the boarding house. That had made it easier to manage the place and help Doc deal with patients. But Sunday dinners at the ranch were sacred. Nothing interfered, except the absence of the owners.

Belle wrapped her arms around her midriff. With a town full of people constantly at her door, how could she possibly be lonely? Laughing at herself, she shrugged the feeling away and stepped into the large kitchen. It was empty except for one person—Cal Webster. Somehow, Belle managed to hide a grimace and forced herself to keep moving.

“Where is everyone?”

Cal pushed away from the table and opened the oven door. “Hoyt went to bed. Paul’s tucking in the boy.”

“And why are you here? Aren’t you concerned your prisoner will cut bait and run?” Belle inhaled the scent of hot biscuits. Her stomach

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rumbled loud enough to wake the dead.

Smiling, he pulled a biscuit free and handed it her way. “Now, Miss Belle, you assured me he wasn’t going anywhere. Why would I doubt you?”

She pinched off a piece and popped it in her mouth. Soft, hot, delicious. “Who cooked?”

“I did.” He puffed up his chest. “I might not be good with children, but I know my way around a kitchen. There’s chicken pie to go with that if you’re interested.”

“If it’s as good as this biscuit, yes.”

“You judge.” He pulled out a chair with one hand, slipped the hot chicken pie on the table before her with the other, then whipped out a fork.

Belle pierced the flaky crust. Steam wafted up from the vent. Pieces of chicken, carrots, and peas in creamy white gravy peeked up at her. She blew it cool and dove in. Flavors melted in her mouth.

“Very, very good.” She tilted a nod his way.

“Glad you approve.” He pulled a chair around, then sat astride using the back as an armrest.

“So...how did you become so accomplished in the kitchen?”

He shrugged. “I’ve always loved to eat. I used to hang out with the family cook as a child. Any excuse for a treat. Turned out to be a good thing. On the trail, I did the cooking. Paul did the doctoring—saved more than one ranger’s life, I can tell you that.”

That seemed natural. According to Paul, his mother had a reputation as a healer, just as hers did. But to discover that he had used that ability as Belle had done felt odd.

Stranger still was the fact Belle had never really thought of Paul beyond what he was. He was always the preacher, always had been a preacher. Now here was a part of him, a different life entirely she never knew, never imagined existed. The more she learned, the more her

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curiosity demanded.

She polished off her meal and shoved the plate away. Cal shifted the chair to a normal position. "I suppose you'd like dessert now."

Belle laughed. "I think I'll pass."

He braced his arms on the table and leaned close. "Are you sure? You don't know what I have to offer."

Somehow she suspected it wasn't apple pie. What little camaraderie that existed between them faded. He was giving her that look again, the one that made her feel like one of Fran's girls. She was close to telling him where he could find one of those women when Paul walked in. Cal wasted no time scooting away. He grabbed up her tin and rushed it to the sink. Judging from the scowl on Paul's face, Cal hadn't moved quickly enough.

"Burt asleep?" she asked.

"Finally. The boy soaks up stories like a dry rag." Coming up beside her, Paul tucked a strand of wayward hair behind her ear.

Belle smoothed it down. "I must look a mess."

"No, but you do look tired." He traced under her eye with his index finger. "You have dark circles and look a little puffy. Your week is starting to tell on you."

Belle didn't doubt that. She'd slept little in the days before Doc's death. Afterward, grief and other responsibilities had kept her going. Yet all she could think about for the moment was Paul's gentle touch against her skin. She longed to lean into it. To nestle into his arms and lay her head against his shoulder. All too soon he dropped his hand.

"You should get some rest."

"I'm ready to go whenever you are."

He shook his head. "Not tonight. It's too dark."

"We'll light the lanterns on the wagon."

He tugged her to her feet and led her to the rocking chair in the corner of the room. "Cal and I have already put the horses down for the

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night.”

“But I have a patient—”

“I checked on him earlier. He’s resting—out cold. There’s no change.” Paul pressed her into the chair.

It seemed Belle had no choice. He’d taken care of everything. She gave him a soft smile and eased back. “Ah, yes, Dr. Harrington. I understand your skills rival mine.”

He flashed Cal a dirty look. “And what else did Cal tell you?”

“Not nearly enough to satisfy my curiosity. I have a thousand questions.”

His gaze locked onto hers, a look so filled with pain Belle longed to yank back the words even if they were offered in jest. On impulse, she cupped her palm to his cheek.

“I would never...”

Paul curled his fingers around hers. But rather than pull her hand away, he held it in place. “It’s all right. Some secrets just aren’t meant to be shared...even with best friends.” He gave her hand one last squeeze and walked away.

A swirl of emotions danced through Belle, none of which she could pinpoint. Never had she felt so close, yet so distant from a person. One part of her wanted to pull him close and beg to know what haunted him so. But that might mean sharing a few secrets of her own, and Belle just wasn’t ready for that. She wondered if she ever would be. There was simply too much shame and regret involved. A deep sigh sagged her shoulders. She leaned back, closed her eyes, and slowly rocked the memories away. The emotions were slower to leave.

* * *

Paul shot Cal a sidelong glance before he ducked out the back door. There wasn’t much sense pointing out the obvious to him. It would only give him a chance to gloat over the flirtation. Things might be different if Cal had feelings for Belle. But his actions said otherwise.

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She was just another conquest.

Where had Florine's head been when she'd approached Cal? How could she and the town claim to care for Belle, then turn around and hook her up with a stranger? There were any number of men who were much better for her. Paul ran down the list in his head, wincing at each name.

Brady was right. He wasn't going to like seeing Belle with anyone. But as long as he had breath in his body, no one was going to force Belle into marriage. She'd marry a man of *her* choosing, not the town's—one who'd make her happy, not miserable. And Cal was nothing but misery for women. It was time to nip this little committee in the bud.

Paul strolled back to the barn, with the excuse of checking the paddocks one last time. It wasn't long before Cal wandered into the barn after him.

"She fell asleep in the rocker."

"Belle hasn't slept much these last few days. She's tired. You can see it in her face." Propped against the stall door, Paul picked his nails clean with his knife.

"All I see is a beautiful woman." Cal hoisted the saddle to the stall railing.

"All you see is a roll in the hay."

"And what do you see?"

Paul refused to be drawn in. At least Cal had the good sense to realize it. He poured out a measure of feed for his horse, patted the animal on the rump, and closed the stall.

"So...where do we bunk tonight?" Cal asked.

He slipped the knife in its sheath inside his boot while he considered the alternatives. With the Tanners and their ranch hands gone, there was room to spare. But the bunkhouse was shut tight. There was little sense going in there. Belle would go to her old room. Justina

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had the nursery while Hoyt and Burt slept in the children's room nearby. That left one whole wing of the house vacant. And Paul wanted Cal as far from Belle as possible.

"We'll sleep in the boys' room on A.J. and Millie's side of the house." When Cal followed him to the door, he added, "But I want you gone before Belle and I leave in the morning. I need to talk to her alone."

Cal snorted and shook his head. "Gonna spill all you know, aren't you?"

"Belle has a right to know. This isn't fair to her." He lengthened his strides, determined to put some distance between himself and his nemesis.

Cal kept a steady pace with him. "Who are you to judge? She's a woman. I've never known a woman who didn't want to snag a husband."

Paul whirled around, nailing him in place with a look. "Something you've always avoided like the plague. So what game are you playing here, Cal?"

He smirked, shrugging a shoulder. "Maybe I'm tired of the chase. As I said, this last ride was a hard one. Maybe I'm looking for a sweet woman to warm my bed and fill my belly."

"They're paying you, aren't they?"

Cal tossed back a laugh. "Where would you get an idea like that?" He clapped his hand over Paul's shoulder, then shoved past him and into the house.

The screen door groaned a protest. The commotion roused Belle. She flashed them a dirty look through sleep-laden eyes.

"You two are worse than children." Shoving to her feet, she shuffled off to bed.

Cal jerked his thumb down the opposite hallway. "I take it our beds are this way."

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Paul snickered. “Well, what do you know? You’re not as stupid as you look.”

“Too bad you can’t say the same thing.” He wiggled his eyebrows and ducked into the first room.

Paul didn’t bother to force laughter. There was probably more truth to Cal’s comeback than he realized. Only a stupid man would let a woman like Belle find love somewhere else. All his arguments about keeping the old Paul at bay rang hollow when the prospect of seeing her in the arms of someone else loomed over him. He could tell himself it was for her own good all he wanted. Deep inside, the very thought gnawed a hole in the pit of his stomach.

How much self-control did a man have to possess before he turned down the jaded path of reprobate? When he loved, he loved hard. The old Paul also drank hard, played hard, gambled hard, and lived a life the devil envied. Could he separate one from the other? Fear nagged at him. It seemed he had everything to lose if he tried, even the one thing he wanted most in the world—Belle.

* * *

Belle inhaled the fresh scent of rain. Sometime during the night a squall had drifted through, leaving everything fresh, sweet smelling, and cool. She enjoyed it while she could. As the day wore on, the air would turn hot and sticky.

She watched Paul tie his horse to the back of the wagon. Cal was nowhere in sight. He’d returned to town shortly after sunup. Belle hadn’t been sorry to see him go. He was too much a contradiction for her—nice and pleasant one minute, leering and lecherous the next.

“Ready to go?” Paul asked.

Belle tucked her healing basket in the wagon bed. “Sure am.” She grabbed the edge of the seat with both hands. Before she could hoist herself up, Paul jumped in the bed, climbed over the seat, and gave her a hand up. He lifted her with little effort until they were standing toe-

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to-toe. He held her waist with his hands long enough to steady her. The heat of his touch rippled through her.

Belle lifted her gaze. His lips were so close. Then all too soon the moment was over.

As she sat, Paul did, too. After a parting wave to Hoyt, he clicked the horses into action and they started for home.

"It's nice to see Justina up and about so fast," Paul said. "It took a load of worry off Hoyt's shoulders. He was sure she was going to die."

"If he came to the door one more time bellowing, he just might have," she said with a smile. "Justina was ready to skin him alive."

"So I heard." Paul chuckled. "It's been a long time since I've heard a string of Spanish curse words."

Belle laughed. "I don't know what she said, but I sure know she meant every word."

"Those two make quite a couple."

Who could argue that point? Justina and Hoyt were something else. They were clearly devoted to each other, yet Justina looked forward to Hoyt's four-month trail rides. She said it got him out from under her feet, gave him a chance to play with his friends, and they made up for lost time when he came home. She had been none too happy when Hoyt declared he would not leave her side until their child was born. He'd fretted like a hen with chicks the whole time.

"And you took it all in stride. Doc would have been proud of you."

The praise caught her by surprise. Belle stared at her hands folded on her lap. She didn't know what to say.

"Belle...are you happy?"

Her eyebrows scrunched together. She turned her head in his direction. Paul kept his gaze focused on the road. "Of course. Why?"

"Do you want more?"

More? Belle didn't know how to answer the question. "I guess I often wish I could go to medical school and be a real doctor. More and

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more women are doing so. It's almost acceptable. But I don't know where I'd get the money for something like that. Plus..." It was too silly to say—childish even.

"Plus what?" His voice was gently prodding, not demanding. How could anyone refuse him? She could see now why so many confided in him.

"I hate the idea of leaving this place. I would miss everyone terribly."

"They'd sure miss you. They'd do just about anything to keep you from leaving."

That almost sounded like something was afoot. And Paul's gaze hadn't left the road since they started down it.

"Well, there's no cause for worry. I'm not going anywhere."

He nodded slowly. "What about marriage, Belle? And children. That seems the goal for most young women. What about you?"

"Are you asking me to marry you, Paul?"

His head whipped around. "Do you want me to ask you to marry me?"

She had expected a fast denial, not this. Caught off guard, Belle struggled for a response. A harsh no seemed unwarranted. Yes was too frightening when she considered the consequences.

Paul reined the horses to a stop in the shade of a cottonwood tree. He twisted around in the seat and faced her full on. "The women don't want your innocence to interfere with your ability to heal. They've banded together and formed a marriage committee. They're determined to find you a husband."

The news was like a blow to the gut. Finding words before was child's play compared to this. A wild mix of emotions went through her—hurt, confusion, betrayal, and, lastly, anger. How dare they move behind her back? Why hadn't anyone spoken to her, asked her feelings on the matter? Or was that what Paul had been sent to do?

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Her jaw tightened; her body tensed. But the mounting anger did nothing to keep tears from threatening. They lay just beyond the edge, choking her, ready to fall in the half-beat of her heart. For Paul to be in league with them would be the ultimate betrayal.

As if judging the direction of her thoughts, he slid his hands over hers. "I don't blame you for being mad, Belle. I was when I heard."

She stared at the tree behind him. "Are you a part of this?"

"Heavens no! I'd think you'd realize by now I have more respect for you than that."

"Until now, I thought the town did, too." But it was a relief to know someone was on her side. Of course she could count on Paul.

Belle slipped her hands from beneath his and adjusted the ties on her bonnet. "This is easily solved. I'll simply tell them I've no need of a husband."

"I don't know if it's as simple as telling them no. They've already sent their first man out to court you."

Belle smiled. "You."

"Cal."

Her smile dropped. *That's* why he had been hanging around her skirts like a hungry dog at a gut wagon. The very notion of him as a suitor, much less a husband, set her skin to crawling. "I don't understand. Why not you? I'd think you'd be their first choice, considering how much time we've spent together over the years."

His gaze drifted everywhere but to her eyes. "I told them no."

Another punch to the gut. No...this was more like a knife to her heart. Belle didn't know why the rejection hurt so badly. Surely his actions over the years had been clear enough, or rather his non-actions. And hadn't she told herself over and over again that the role of traditional wife wasn't for her? Marriage to Paul would mean nothing less. Yet, knowing all this still did not ease that pain in her heart.

One question begged to be asked. Try as she might, Belle couldn't

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stop it from coming out. “Why?”

This time he did look at her. The fire in his eyes pierced deep into her soul. Belle shivered from the intensity. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

“Do you want a husband, Belle?”

Somehow she forced herself to shake her head no.

“Why?” His tone was demanding—angry in fact. “Why, when that’s what every woman around you longs for?”

She forced the answer past a throat gone dry. “Because...I...he...” Belle licked her lips and swallowed hard. Damned if she wasn’t going to cry.

Paul grasped her shoulders in a gentle hold and pulled her into his arms. “Don’t cry, sweetness. Please don’t cry.”

Belle rested her head against his shoulders. He held her tight, safe, while he rubbed soothing circles on her back. He’d never answered her question, but then, she’d never answered his. Belle supposed it was a reasonable standoff.

“This is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard of,” she finally said.

Paul’s fingers drifted upward to her neck. He brushed a wayward strand of hair from her cheek and paused. His breath danced hot over her skin. Belle closed her eyes with the sensation.

“It would help if I knew what they were up to,” she somehow managed to say.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to insist they let me on that committee.” His voice was huskier, his lips a whisper from touching her neck.

Belle waited while her body ached for something she could not name. “I don’t much like that Cal is right under my roof. I do hope he minds what little manners he has.”

“I intend to see he does. I’ll be staying at the boarding house until they leave. I asked Daisy to give me the room closest to yours. I’ll see Cal stays put.” He nuzzled her ear, sending shivers of pleasure rattling

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through her.

She edged closer, nudging her breasts into his chest. Paul sucked in a sharp breath. Belle swore she could feel his heart pound in time with hers. His hold loosened. As gently as he'd pulled her to him, Paul pulled her back. His gaze caressed her face, then settled on her lips.

A breeze rattled the trees, showering them with remnants of last night's rain. Whatever spell surrounded them was broken. In unison they sat back in the seat. Paul snatched up the reins and set the horses in motion once more.

They rode to town in silence. It was just as well. A thousand thoughts skipped through Belle's mind, all leading to one question—how could she stop this crazy committee? They meant well. Realizing that, her anger slowly dissipated. But she refused to let them run her life, no matter how true their motives might be.

"I suppose we could always find another doctor," she said, more to herself than to Paul.

"And do you think you'd be happy with that?"

Probably not. Doc's first reaction to her had screamed, "*Intruder! Charlatan!*" Yet he'd opened his eyes and mind to the things Belle knew about natural healing. They had made a good team. She doubted she'd be that lucky again. She would wind up at cross purposes with any new doctor.

"I'll just tell them I'm not as innocent as they think."

Paul swiveled his head in her direction. "Are you trying to get me hanged? Who do you think they'd blame? I'd be lucky to find myself facing a shotgun on one side and a preacher on the other. Failing that, they'd probably have me tarred and feathered and run out of town on a rail...after they horsewhipped me."

Belle smothered a giggle under her hand. "Surely not."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Let's not test it."

No, it probably wasn't a good idea. And they would blame Paul. In

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all these years, he was the one she had spent the most time with. They'd never believe her claims of another.

Paul turned the wagon into the small stable behind the boarding house. He jumped to the ground and reached up to help Belle down.

"I have another idea," she said.

He grabbed her waist and lifted her with little effort. "What's that?"

Belle braced her hands on his shoulders. "Well, since you have no interest in me and none in marriage, why don't we just tell them you and I have been courting these last years? We'll tell them we wanted our privacy. That you were protecting me by not offering when they—"

"Pushed me into a corner?" He set her feet on the ground. "I never said I wasn't interested in you or in marrying you. I just think you can do better than me."

Without another word, he stepped around her and led the horses into the stable, leaving Belle more confused than ever.

CHAPTER 5

Belle stared at Paul's departing figure long after he'd disappeared into the stable. How could he think himself not worthy of her? She didn't know whether to follow him and demand an explanation or let the incident be swept under the rug. Why should she care either way when it was she who claimed not to want a husband?

She plucked her skirts in her hand and marched to the house. There was too much to do to worry about this now...or ever. Paul would never pursue her as a wife, and Belle wanted no husband. It was perfect. They would be friends forever. So why did she feel all twisted inside?

Belle yanked open the kitchen door. It swung back hard on its hinges. She let it bang against the wall and slam shut. Caught in mid-kiss, Daisy and Stony burst apart. Daisy's cheeks flamed red. Stony snatched his hat from the table and ran past Belle. Daisy spared Belle no more than a glance, then ducked into the parlor.

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Belle let her go. If Daisy wanted to let a man she'd just met grope her, that was her business. He could strip her naked and have his way with her on the kitchen table for all Belle cared.

A headache throbbed at her temple. Belle tried to massage it away as she stomped toward her office. It wasn't like her to be so foul, but the world seemed content to conspire against her. She wrapped her fingers around the door handle and pulled in a deep cleansing breath. Her patient, conscious or not, didn't need to feel her distress.

Except for the handcuffs linking Jessop's wrist to the bed rail, there was no change in the man's condition. Belle had little doubt who was responsible for binding the man. Cal had made his feelings pretty clear. No doubt he'd cuffed Jessop yesterday when he'd returned with the goods for the boarding house. Paul would have noticed when he'd returned to tend him. Why hadn't he told her or confronted Cal about it?

Belle shrugged it off. For all she knew, he had. Maybe he trusted Cal to remove the cuffs. Maybe he didn't trust Jessop either. There was no sense making an issue of it now. The man was clearly too injured to care. If having the handcuffs made everyone else feel safer, so be it.

She pressed her hand to his forehead. Still warm, on the edge of being feverish, but the care he'd received the day before had helped stave off infection. Another wash in an herb bath wouldn't hurt.

As she set the kettle on to boil, Daisy slinked back into the kitchen. She said nothing, didn't even acknowledge Belle's presence. But she was still beet red from the base of her neck to the tips of her ears. Belle kept to her business. If Daisy wanted to talk about it, she would. Until then, Belle considered it Daisy's own affair. She bided her time staring out the window, watching a pair of squirrels scramble for food.

The stable doors stood open. Paul had yet to leave, or else he'd forgotten to close them. Belle shook all thought of him away. Too many feelings, too many questions swirled around her this last day. All

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she longed to do was shove them away where they belonged, where she was safe, where her well-ordered world and plans weren't tossed in a twister.

The kettle whistled for her. Belle filled the basin with hot water. It released the delicate sweet-spicy scent of her concoction of black currants and feverfew. Just as quickly, it faded. Belle smiled. Perfect. She'd discovered over her many years of healing that people were more willing to try medicine her way if they couldn't complain about the smell.

A splash of cool water settled the mix. Belle grabbed the basin with pot holders and carried it to Jessop's bedside. She dipped a cloth into the water. Once it cooled to the touch, she wiped it over his skin. Jessop didn't budge.

With all the blood and grime gone, his recent wounds stood out. So did the old ones. Everywhere she looked, Belle saw scars. It was hard to believe Paul had faced down a man like this...men like this. He couldn't have come away unscathed. How many scars dotted his body? How many more marred his soul?

Belle had a feeling they were too numerous to count if they had caused him to change his life so drastically. But then, if he hadn't changed, Belle never would have met him, and she couldn't imagine a life where Paul did not exist.

"Well, so much for not thinking about all that," she said to herself, and wiped the cloth over Jessop's chest.

He boasted a leathery tan from the neck up and the forearms down. The rest of him was dirty white. He had a scraggly patch of black hair smack in the center of his chest, another lead down from his navel and ducked under the sheet that hid his crotch.

"This is ridiculous." Belle flicked back the sheet. *That* was the big mystery? It was all she could do to keep from laughing.

The door opened behind her. Belle jerked the cover into place, then

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flicked it back. It was time to stop this nonsense. She wet the cloth and swiped it over his thighs. Florine's gasp as she rounded the curtain said it all.

"Belle! What in heaven's name are you doing?" She darted toward them.

"I'm tending to my patient. What are you doing?"

Florine cast a wide-eyed gaze over the man. "Oh, Belle, you shouldn't have."

"Why? Because of that?" She pointed to his penis and snickered. "I can't believe that's what all of you were so fired up about. It's just about the silliest-looking thing I've ever seen. It looks like a pathetic little mole caught in a patch of moss."

Florine covered her face to hide a smile. The sparkle in her eyes gave her away. The more she fought, the more laughter overcame her. She clutched her sides and laughed until tears poured down her face.

Belle didn't see what was so all-fired funny. She was just stating fact. Still, Florine's laughter was as contagious as it was raucous. It was a wonder Daisy didn't come running. She always liked to be in on a good laugh. But when Belle finally managed to get Florine back into the kitchen, there was no sign of Daisy. Belle would give ten guesses where she'd gone.

Florine yanked a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "Belle, you are priceless. I can't wait to tell Mrs. Cyrus."

"Good." She emptied the basin onto her herb garden outside the door, then faced Florine with hands on hips. "Then the two of you can get rid of this marriage committee of yours."

That sobered Florine up pretty quick. She tucked her handkerchief back in its place and laced her fingers before her. "Now, Belle—"

"I know you meant well, but I have never been more embarrassed in my life." Taking a step toward Florine, she opened her palms. "It

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implies desperation on my part. That I can't get a husband on my own."

Florine brushed the notion aside with a flick of her wrist and a tiny laugh. "It implies nothing of the kind. You are very highly regarded. Your skills as a healer are tremendous. The women merely wanted to ensure your job wasn't thwarted by—"

"My virtue?"

"Something like that."

Belle hauled her basin onto the sink board. "Then you can tell them I've seen all. The mystery is over."

"And have them think you're scandalous?"

Belle's shoulders sagged with defeat. Florine curled her fingers around them. "You know they'd insist on marriage immediately...and to the only apparently interested suitor."

Cal Webster. Belle shuddered at the thought. She stared out the window to the open stable doors. "All right. You keep your committee. But make it for all the single women in Cottonwood Bend, not just me."

"Of course. Wonderful idea." Florine gave her shoulders a squeeze and stepped away. "Everyone will have a wonderful time. But we'll need a bigger place to meet. Can we use your parlor?"

"What's wrong with your saloon?"

"You know the ladies aren't comfortable there. Some won't set foot in the place."

It didn't seem to bother them when the circuit judge paid his monthly visits. No matter what the case, people crammed into the makeshift courtroom until even a mouse would be hard-pressed to find room.

"Very well." She could keep a better eye on things that way. Maybe rein in some of their wayward enthusiasm. Belle glanced over her shoulder. "There's just one more thing."

Halfway to the door, Florine smiled. "Yes?"

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“I want Paul on your committee. You’ll find him out back with the horses. He’ll see my interests are met.”

“I’m sure he will.” Still smiling, Florine ducked out the door and marched to the stable.

Belle couldn’t tell if she’d won, lost, or called a draw. She had a feeling it was a little of all three. Florine bore serious watching.

* * *

Paul braced himself against the railing just inside the door and watched the horses meander around the plot of grass next to the stable. He didn’t know how long he’d stood there in the dim light, but it wasn’t long enough. He was just as hard as the second he’d walked in. Drops of water fell down his collar. Dunking his head in the rain barrel hadn’t helped either.

Oh, it wasn’t the first time Belle had affected him that way. It just seemed an all too common occurrence of late. But usually his long black cloak hid him. His tan breeches weren’t as kind. At least he’d managed to arrange things somewhat. Instead of having a bulge down his leg, he had one jutting out beneath his fly buttons.

It would help matters considerably if he could just stop thinking about Belle. That was impossible. The feel of her breasts stabbing him in the chest was forever branded there. And he’d come this close to kissing her—something he’d regret the rest of his life...because he hadn’t done it. Then to turn around and tell her he wanted her but didn’t want her... One head was warring with the other.

Paul squeezed the bridge of his nose. The memories wouldn’t go away. Now what would they do? She was his best friend. He’d be lucky if she ever spoke to him again after today. And if she did, where did they go from here? The pull was too great. He couldn’t fight this much longer. Then what?

He looked to the ceiling. “God, how much does a man have to do? How much is enough? How much is too much? If you could just give

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me some kind of sign to tell me what to do next—”

“There you are.”

He jumped at the sound of Florine’s voice. “Didn’t Brady ever tell you not to sneak up on a man like that? You scared the devil out of me.”

She charged toward him and slugged him in the arm.

“Ow!” He ducked out of her reach. “What was that for?”

“You need the devil scared out of you, you big tattletale.”

Paul rubbed the feeling back into his arm. “Belle had a right to know. What you’re doing isn’t fair. She doesn’t want a husband. She said he’d only get in the way.”

Florine reared back to smack him again, then thought better of it. “No woman’s going to admit she wants a husband. Men are slippery enough as it is.”

Damn, women were infernal. He jammed his thumb into his chest. “Belle wouldn’t lie. Not to me.”

“Hmph...we’ll see about that.” She crossed her arms over her chest and stuck out her hip. “There’s been a change of plans. Belle insists the committee be devoted to all the single ladies in town. She wants you on the committee to see her interests are met.”

“I’ll be there. And I think the ladies whose lives you’re trying to manipulate should be there, too.”

“Fine. I’ll see to it. Meeting in one hour at the boarding house.” One corner of her mouth lifted with her eyebrow. “You might find that the ladies enjoy this more than you think.”

“I’m sure some will. But I doubt Belle will be one of them. She doesn’t like being cornered any more than I do.”

Florine’s know-it-all gleam never faded. “We’ll see about that. An interested man can be quite persuasive and oh-so good for a lady’s ego.”

Did she think he was stupid? Why was Florine playing these games

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all of a sudden? "I'm tired of this, Florine. Just say Cal's name."

She tilted her head and nodded. "That's one possibility. Although I just don't think he's right for her. Oh, he'll play along. Maybe he'll even marry her. But he's not one to settle. Once the new wore off he'd be gone. We want Belle married, not brokenhearted."

It was Paul's turn to throw that smirk back at her. "There are some who'd call it one and the same."

"And yet you stand before a congregation of devoted parishioners each week and preach the virtues of hearth and home." She loosed a long dramatic sigh, followed by a sly smile. "I think that once we get things rolling, you might be surprised who'll want to court Belle." She raised her index finger. "One hour...Reverend."

Florine flounced out the door without another word. Her skirts made enough noise to wake the dead. How could he not have heard her come in?

One hour. That gave him plenty of time to head home and change into his minister garb. He still had to pack a bag for his stay at Belle's. At least he could walk now without discomfort. After closing the front stable doors, Paul swung onto his horse and cut down the alley. It seemed the more self-involved he became, the more antisocial he was. He'd actually gone a full day without seeing or talking to one of his parishioners.

As he closed in on Mrs. Freebush's house, he noticed the old woman sitting on the back porch in her rocker. If it weren't for the change of clothes, he'd swear she hadn't moved in the last day. He imagined she was probably pretty lonely being widowed without children. True, she had her friends. But they had families of their own. There was no one to share those quiet hours.

Paul smiled. Her eyes widened when he tied the reins to her picket fence, then headed her way. "Good morning, Mrs. Freebush."

She spread her fingers at the base of her throat. "Why, Reverend,

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you scared the daylight out of me. I just about near didn't recognize you without your preacher clothes."

"Sorry, ma'am. I don't like to dirty them up when I'm working or riding." He braced one foot against her bottom step. "I just saw you sitting out on this beautiful morning and thought you might not get the word in time."

The rocker tilted forward with her weight. "What word is that?"

"Florine and Mrs. Cyrus thought it'd be fun to add a little matchmaking committee to the Fourth of July festivities. The meeting is in one hour at the boarding house. Every single woman and man should be there."

"Pish-posh." She leaned back. "Sparkin' for the young."

"Or the young at heart. Besides, you can't expect Florine and Mrs. Cyrus to do this all by themselves. I'm sure they'd value your ideas."

That hooked her. Smiling, she braced her hands on the chair arms to push herself up. When Paul reached to help her, she waved him away. "That's true. Those two do get carried away with themselves. They should concentrate on the simple things. I'll be there."

Paul said his good-byes and left. Now, to pay a little visit to Hiram Tucker. Maybe some good would come out of this committee after all.

CHAPTER 6

One hour. That didn't give Belle much time to throw together refreshments. And just how many people should she expect? They'd either be packing her parlor full or heading for the hills rather than be matched up. At this point Belle couldn't say which she'd prefer. Whichever one called an end to the whole affair would be preferable.

"Daisy, where in the world did you get to?" she mumbled to herself. They had a lot of work to do, chairs to set out, furniture to move. As she made her way across the dining room to the parlor, her thoughts wandered back to the refreshments. Did she really want to make them that comfortable? The sooner they left, the happier she'd be. The Fourth of July was two days away. How much did they expect to accomplish in that short time?

Belle smiled. There was her saving grace. This was all talk. No committee she'd ever been on could work that fast. She worried for nothing. Still, it wouldn't hurt to play the game. Florine and Mrs. Cyrus

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would get frustrated soon enough. All she had to do was sit back and wait.

She wrapped her hands around the handles to the parlor's double doors, eased them open, and froze. She'd found Daisy—sprawled over Stony's lap. His hand was somewhere up her skirts. His head was buried in her bare bosom. And Daisy was oblivious to all, her head tossed back in pure abandon.

Belle stepped back, closing the doors as she went. What did one do in a situation like this? She fanned the heat from her cheeks. She couldn't barge in on them. They'd all be embarrassed beyond words. It certainly wasn't her obligation to interfere. Daisy was a grown woman. She knew the consequences of her actions. But Belle needed that parlor, and goodness knew how far they intended to take their cuddle.

Quick steps took Belle back to the kitchen. At least she could work on refreshments while she figured out what to do. Cal was just coming out of her examining room when she walked in. For once Belle was actually glad to see him. He knew his way around the kitchen. He was just the help she needed.

"I assure you he's not going anywhere. Not handcuffed to the bed rail like that," she said as she strode across the room.

"I was just checking. It is my job, Belle. Trust me. You don't want a man like Jessop on the loose. He's clever and he's dangerous." He pulled out a chair to sit down.

"Don't get too comfortable. I'm hosting that wonderful little committee in less than an hour. I need help with refreshments. So wash up and pitch in." She pumped water into the coffee pot, filled the basket with grounds, and set it on the stove. Cal hadn't budged.

Hands on hips, she whirled around on him. "Cal!"

He lifted his hands. "Just hold on a minute. Hear me out. Won't feeding these people make it look like you're giving your approval of their actions?"

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Belle hadn't considered that. The last thing she wanted was to make it seem like she blessed this.

"They boxed you into a corner. Make them work at it. Let them wear themselves out."

She crossed her arms over her chest. He was one to talk. "And yet you didn't hesitate to put yourself in league with them."

Chuckling, he unfolded her arms. Rather than let her go, he slid his hands to her wrists, then gently laced his fingers through hers. "Only a crazy man would miss out on the chance to court a beautiful woman." He pressed closer, lips parted slightly.

Belle leaned away from his kiss. Her stomach churned in knots so tight she swore she'd throw up. "Don't!"

He dropped her instantly and put some distance between them. Befuddlement masked his face. "I just—"

"I know what you just. Don't." Had no one rejected this man before? "And if you try a stunt like that again, I'll—"

"Tell Paul?"

That annoying smirk was back. Belle's palm itched to wipe it off his face. The longer she stood there glaring up at him, the more she wanted to smack him.

"Tell Paul what?"

She and Cal turned their heads toward Paul's voice. He stood just inside the doorway, eyebrows barely separated by the furrow between them. His minister's clothes seemed out of place with the vein that throbbed in his neck. Mild-mannered preachers didn't succumb to rage, but then most weren't former rangers.

How would you know? her conscience chided. Belle gave up trying to argue with herself. Every time she turned around, her blasted conscience was nagging her about something. Frankly, she wished it would shut up for once and leave her happily unaware.

"I'm glad you're here. You and Cal can help set up the parlor.

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You'll find some extra chairs stacked in the cellar. We'll probably need them all." Expecting them to carry out her order, Belle marched from the room, shouting for Daisy at the top of her lungs.

Paul listened to Belle's progress through the house. It was pretty clear what had happened before he walked in the door. At least Cal had the good sense not to act smug about it. In fact, he looked everywhere but at Paul, a good indication he knew he was in the wrong.

"The cellar's over here."

He gestured to a door on the far side of the room as he stomped toward it. Lifting the glass chimney on the lantern beside the door, Paul struck a match from the tinderbox and set the wick to flame. Lantern in hand, he opened the door. Cal could stay or follow. It didn't matter to Paul. He just had to do something before he gave in to the urge to haul Cal outside for a quick lesson in messing with another man's woman.

The thought jerked him to a stop. Cal smacked into him. "What's wrong? See a spider? Want me to kill it for you?"

"No, wiseacre, a snake." Paul trotted down the steep stairs. That ought to keep Cal quiet for a few minutes. He hated snakes. When Paul looked back, Cal hadn't budged.

"Do you want *me* to kill it for *you*?"

Cal flashed him a dirty look. "Shut up. It's nothing to joke about." Still cautious, he took the steps one at a time while he squinted into the dim light for signs of slithering.

Paul hung the lantern on a wall hook. Light chased some of the gloom away, but it would take at least two more to fully brighten the place. He'd never seen a cellar as big as this one. It covered the full length of the house and doubled as root cellar, household storage, and wash room on rainy days. If hard-pressed, Belle could put cots down here for boarders. The place was spotless. Woe be it to any creepy-crawly creature that dared venture here. Belle or Daisy saw they never lived to spread the word.

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"The chairs are over there." He motioned to the stack perched against the wall.

"I see them," Cal snapped out.

Paul smiled. "Relax. A snake wouldn't be caught dead around here. Daisy would chop off its head and serve it for dinner."

"Sounds like a good plan to me." Reassured, Cal walked over and grabbed a stack. A mouse skittered out from beneath. Cal screeched, dropped the chairs, and high-stepped it back to the stairs.

Paul fell against the wall and laughed so hard he thought his ribs would bust.

The commotion brought Belle. She scrambled down the stairs, broom raised high for battle. "What is it?"

"A mouse," Paul managed to say.

She eyed Cal up and down. "And you call yourself a Texas ranger. You squealed like a little girl."

"And he ran like one, too." Paul laughed all the more.

Cal snatched the broom from Belle. "I was startled, that's all. All your jabbering about snakes. I'll get the damned mouse."

She took the broom back. "You get the chairs. The mouse is as good as dead." She trotted up the stairs. Paul followed her footsteps across the floor. The back door opened. "Hey, kitty! Mouse!" Seconds later, a flash of orange and white zoomed down the steps.

"The chairs, gentlemen. Now, please," she called down.

Cal grabbed his stack and toted them away. Paul followed. The cat already had the mouse cornered.

By the time they set the last chair in place, people crowded the parlor. It was a fair group for such short notice. Mrs. Freebush arrived, quickly followed by Mr. Tucker. Each acknowledged the other with a nod, then mingled with the others. Mrs. Cyrus and Florine stood at the forefront, chatting with arrivals, laughing. Mr. Cyrus hovered near the table of coffee, tea, and cake Belle and Daisy had somehow managed to

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throw together at the last minute. The rangers even showed up. Cal threaded his way through the crowd toward them. Sheriff Brady lounged near the door. That seemed a good place for Paul.

“Quite a gathering.” Brady braced himself against the doorjamb.

Paul mirrored his position on the opposite side. “Sure is.” You’d think they were giving away money.

“I heard Florine snuck up on you today. You must be losing your touch. The man I knew a couple of years ago never would have let that happen.”

“I’m not the man I was.”

“No...I don’t suppose you are.”

Belle’s arrival interrupted any further discussion. That was fine with Paul. The last thing he felt like was listening to Brady lecture. It was starting to become a habit with him lately. With everyone, come to think of it.

One of the men in the back row stood to give her his chair. Belle waved him down. “Looks like a fair gathering.”

“Pretty fair,” Paul said. It looked like every single man and woman in town were here. Some were already considered courting couples. Others openly flirted with each other. A few kept to themselves and cast shy gazes toward the person who most caught their interest.

Florine clapped her hands. “Let’s get started.” Silence slowly descended as people took their seats. Mrs. Cyrus took one of the chairs facing the group and appraised every face she saw—except Paul’s and Belle’s. Paul didn’t know if that was a good sign or if it spelled disaster.

“Thank you all for coming,” Florine said with a bright smile. “We know this is all last minute, but we thought it would be fun to add a little something for the single people at our Fourth of July celebration.”

“We’ve already got the dance Saturday night,” someone called out.

“Yes, but this would be more along the lines of a competition.”

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"Men against women?" Daisy asked.

Murmurs rumbled across the room.

"No." The firmness in Florine's voice quieted them once more. "Think of it like a knight winning the favor of a fair maiden."

That made a few of them scratch their heads. Paul tried not to laugh. He leaned closer to Brady and whispered, "Where does Florine get her notions? I never much pegged you as a knight."

Brady looked at him from the corner of his eye. "Or her a fair maiden."

Florine's gaze nailed them both to the wall. "Did the two of you want to share with the rest of the group?"

Damned if she didn't sound like a schoolmarm. "No, Mrs. Brady," they replied together. That earned snickers from the room and another glare from Florine.

Mrs. Cyrus shoved to her feet and added her support. "The men will compete for the hand of their lady by some contest or show of strength. They'll win their lady's company at the picnic."

"Shoot fire, I have that already," Mark Hanson said. Several nodded their agreement. "Why bother?"

"The men have to pay a fee to enter the contest. The money collected will go to the church," Florine said.

Paul stared at her. So now the church was involved? He didn't like that turn of events. He stared at Florine and slowly shook his head. "New books for the school."

She barely spared him a glance. "Very well. Books for the school."

That seemed to please everyone. Heads nodded around. People scooted to the edge of their seats.

"So what's the contest?"

It was Mrs. Cyrus's turn again. "We thought a lot about it and decided shooting bottles. Entry fee is two bits. A lady will step up. The gentlemen interested in her company will pay their fee and line up.

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Whoever hits the most bottles wins.”

Paul watched the hope drain from Belle’s face. “Don’t worry,” he whispered. “I’ll get them.” The words haunted him. He tried to slough them off. This was a stupid game, not a life or death situation. He wasn’t being cocky or overconfident, was he? Paul couldn’t answer the question. All he knew was he couldn’t stand to see the worry in Belle’s face.

“What if it’s a tie?” Stony asked.

“Then they’ll have several choices. They can share the lady’s company, pay the fee and shoot again, or one of them can forfeit.”

“What if only one man competes?” Brady asked. “What would be the sense of wasting bullets and bottles?”

Florine gave him another exasperated look. “The purpose is to raise money for the school and to have a little fun. It would hardly be sporting if he just paid his money and went on his merry way. He has to shoot just like everyone else. If he misses or does poorly—”

“Then he has to do chores for the lady every day for the next week,” Mrs. Freebush said.

The ladies liked that idea. Paul couldn’t say for the men. But no one disagreed.

“Good.” Florine smiled. “Then it’s settled.”

“Let’s sweeten the deal a little,” Cal said. “The winner gets a kiss from the lady.”

Belle’s worry before was nothing compared to the horror zipping across her face now. Her gaze shifted Paul’s way. “Do something,” she whispered through bared teeth.

He nodded. “You know. This is all very good and nice, but I don’t think I could condone gun play on a Sunday. And since the Fourth of July falls on a Sunday—”

“Then we’ll do it tomorrow on Saturday.” Mrs. Cyrus clasped her hands together. Her eyes lit with excitement. “Yes, we’ll do it then and

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have the dance tomorrow night. The winner gets a kiss from his lady and her companionship for the dance and the picnic. The lady provides the picnic. Everyone will participate.”

“And congenial company.” Cal looked straight at Belle and smiled. “Or *she* does chores for the man the following week.”

More nods and laughter followed. Belle elbowed Paul in the ribs. What did she expect him to do? She didn’t wait for him to decide. She laced her fingers before her in a white-knuckled grip.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do this. It wouldn’t be fair. You see, I...we”—she grabbed Paul’s hand and hauled him closer—“have been seeing each other for a very long time now. I’m sure that’s been apparent even though we’ve tried to be discreet. The reverend didn’t want to say yesterday. He’s such a gentleman.”

Cal’s eyebrows lifted. He looked like he would burst out laughing at any second. A glare from Paul warned him to stay in his place.

“He didn’t want to besmirch my reputation. Isn’t that right...dear?”

Paul draped an arm around her shoulder and tucked her against him. “Yes...yes it is.” She quivered ever so slightly.

Florine crossed her arms under her bosom and lifted one eyebrow. “Really? Prove it.”

She was really starting to annoy him. “I don’t think—”

Belle placed her palm on his chest. “It’s all right, dear.”

He pecked a kiss on her upturned cheek, then glared at Florine. “There. Happy?”

She didn’t budge. “Yes, we can all see the boundless and unfettered affection the two of you have for each other.”

Great. Sarcasm. “I’m a minister. I’m reserved by nature.”

The rangers howled with laughter. Brady joined in. Belle tensed. Paul squeezed her shoulder.

“If you’re single, you will compete. That’s only fair. Does the room agree?”

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“Absolutely.” Mrs. Freebush smacked her knee.

And Paul had tried to hook her up with Mr. Tucker. That plan had backfired quick enough.

“As a man of the cloth, I would never expect him to engage in any activity dealing with guns,” Belle said.

Paul blessed Belle for trying. Brady smothered another snicker under his hand.

“It’s his choice if he wants to compete or not, dear,” Mrs. Cyrus told her. “But you have no reason to sit out. You are a driving force in this community, with certain social obligations. And you would be the first person to lecture someone about their obligations. Unless, of course, you two are also secretly betrothed. We might consider that grounds for being excused.”

Belle’s lips tightened. They were cornered. Finally, she shook her head.

Mrs. Cyrus sighed. “We thought not.”

Cal stretched to his feet and hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. “Miss Belle, I understand you put together a mighty fine picnic. I look forward to sharing it with you. I’m pretty fair on the dance floor, if I do say so myself. You won’t be disappointed.”

She was rigid under Paul’s arm. Before either of them could think of an appropriate response, the cat trotted by. The dead mouse dangled from her jaws. Puzzlement furrowed Belle’s forehead. The cat marched up the aisle straight to Cal. She sat before him and placed the mouse on top of Cal’s boots, then meowed.

Paul smiled. Justice did exist.

One corner of Belle’s mouth lifted in a smile. “Sure you want to compete for my company, Mr. Webster? Looks to me like you’ve already been spoken for.”

Cal squatted down to the cat’s level. “Good cat.” Almost as an afterthought, Cal stroked the cat down the back. She responded with a

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half meow, half purr. Wincing, he lifted the mouse by the tip of the tail and walked down the aisle. The cat trotted faithfully by his side. Women on the end chairs leaned out of their way. A few of the men did, too.

He paused next to Belle. "Where do I—"

She jerked her thumb toward the door. "Out beyond where the horses are. You'll need to bury it or she'll bring it right back to you. There's a trowel near the back door."

"Cat got a name?"

"Killer."

"I suppose it'll do." Heaving a sigh and still wearing a grimace, Cal marched from the room. The cat never left his side.

"That just about does it," Florine said. "We'll see everyone tomorrow at high noon."

As the crowd filtered away, Belle ducked from the room. In the distance, Paul heard a door slam. Now wasn't the time to try to find her. He spent the rest of his day as he normally did, visiting parishioners under the weather, stopping by the general store where the men usually gathered in the afternoon, working on his sermon for Sunday. But today his heart just wasn't in it. His head was befuddled as well. If asked, Paul couldn't say anything particular occupied his mind. He just couldn't think straight.

Near supper time, he gathered his things from his room and moved to the rented one in the boarding house. As promised, Daisy put him next to Belle's corner room. If anyone dared come near her, he'd hear it.

The room had all the nice touches of home. In most respects it was better than his austere place. The wide bed was soft. A blue and white quilt matched the curtains. Both were courtesy of the Ladies' Quilting and Sewing Circle. A tallboy hugged one wall. A small table with a blue pitcher and basin stood next to it with a mirror perched above.

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Blue and white braided rugs covered the floor. Blue and white, everywhere.

Paul laid out his shaving gear and brushes on the table, then wandered downstairs. The other men, with the exception of Stony, were already gathered around the table waiting to be served. Paul thought better of making himself comfortable. Without a word to his former associates, he walked on to the kitchen.

In the midst of slicing the ham, Stony glanced up. He gave a nod and finished his work.

“What can I do to help?”

Belle waved her head toward a pan of biscuits. “Put those in the bread basket, then take it all out with the butter crock. Make sure they keep their hands off it until supper comes out.”

“Then we’d better take it out at one time.” Stony set the knife and fork aside. “That bunch goes after food something fierce.”

“Hopefully, they’ll have some manners while they’re here. Although I’m beginning to think there’s no hope for some of your friends.”

Stony smiled while he wiped his hands on a piece of toweling. “I’m thinking you’re right, ma’am.”

Paul emptied the biscuits into the basket. Stony hadn’t spoken this much in...well, never. The extent of his conversations usually consisted of a word or two at the most. If they were lucky, they’d get a nod.

“All right.” Belle took a bowl of carrots in one hand and green beans in the other. “Let’s feed this mob.”

Paul took up the rear behind Daisy who carried boiled potatoes and gravy. Any man who left the table hungry tonight was a fool. Two peach pies waited on the sill for dessert.

The men waited as long as it took to set the food on the table. Belle and Daisy slipped into their seats at either end of the table.

Belle folded her hands under her chin and watched the rangers heap

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food onto their plates. “Reverend Harrington, would you honor us by saying the blessing?”

Paul applauded her timing. She caught them with their forks halfway to their mouths. Each slipped Belle an apologetic glance, set their fighting tools down, and bowed their heads. Paul made the prayer short despite the urge to draw it out. This time around the men attacked their plates with less vigor and more of the manners Belle asked for.

Cal speared a carrot and shoved it in his mouth. With the first bite, he cocked his head to one side. “Daisy, cinnamon carrots. Very good.”

Her smile thanked him, but her gaze focused on Stony.

So, that’s what’s going on.

Paul tried to catch Belle’s gaze to see if she noticed. It remained fixed on her plate. She picked at her food or pushed it around. It broke his heart to see her so forlorn. If it weren’t for Cal, he’d set her mind to rest right now. But it was Friday night. Paul doubted Cal or the rest of them would be sticking around much longer.

Sure enough, they cleared the table of every morsel there plus the peach pies in the kitchen, thanked Belle for the meal, and were out the door. Only Stony stayed behind.

“Let me help you gals with this.” He started to stack the dishes.

Belle grabbed one plate before he could pick it up. “Actually...it’s such a pretty night to sit on the porch swing. And I can get these just fine.”

He and Daisy looked at each other. Neither argued with Belle. By some unspoken agreement, they stepped away from the table and walked outside. Belle and Paul were finally alone, yet striking up a conversation felt awkward, especially since Belle seemed closed off.

She said nothing when he helped carry the dishes to the kitchen. Of course, neither did he. They went about the domestic chore like they had done it a thousand times before. She washed the dishes, he dried and put them away. When the last pan found its home, Paul knew if he

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didn't say something soon, the chance might be gone.

"Now what?"

She cut behind him. "I have to knead dough for tomorrow's breakfast. I don't need any more help. Thank you. I appreciate it."

He caught her arm and pulled her back to him. She cocked her head to one side quizzically. The right words wouldn't come.

"I need to write a letter. Do you have paper and ink?"

"In the parlor desk."

Paul retrieved both. He cursed his cowardice with every step. He didn't know what he was afraid of. All he wanted to do was reassure her that she wouldn't wind up with Cal tomorrow. What was so bad about that? He shook his head. It was the look on her face, deep in her eyes, that worried him. She looked...lost, betrayed. He shrugged it off. Neither seemed right.

He returned to the kitchen and set the materials on the table. Belle acknowledged him with a glance over her shoulder, then went back to work. Paul settled down, dipped the pen nib in the ink, and stared at the paper. And stared. This mundane responsibility was a chore tonight, too.

Paul heaved a sigh and began. *Dear Mother and Father.* And so began his weekly recall of events.

"Working on your sermon?"

He looked up. Belle wiped her hands clean and set the covered pan of dough near the warmest portion of the stove.

"No. Each week I send a letter to my parents."

"Really? I write to Ma every week, too. She says my letters always make her smile. She's awful proud of Grace and me. Claims she raised us proper and it makes her hold her head high among all the hoity-toity snobs. Sometimes I sure wish she were closer. I worry about her health. She looked a little poorly when they visited at Christmas."

The poor woman had been exhausted. That's what Paul

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remembered. At least she had gotten some rest while they were here. She'd called it spoiling, but Paul noticed she never tried to stop Belle or Grace from taking charge.

Belle untied her apron and tossed it to the sink board. "I bet your parents are awfully proud of you. First, you're a Texas ranger, upholding the law. Then you turn your life to the service of God."

Paul set the pen aside. "I wouldn't know. I haven't spoken to them since I came to Cottonwood Bend."

Belle frowned. "Why?"

"They don't answer my letters."

Her frown deepened. "Have you gone to see them?"

He shook his head. "They live in Dallas. I've asked to come see them. They haven't replied."

"Are you sure they're well? Maybe something has—"

"I'd know if anything happened." People like Dan and Hattie Harrington didn't have things happen to them without everyone knowing and talking about it. He grabbed her fingers and gave them a playful tug. "It's all right."

"I disagree. I sure as heck wouldn't bother writing to someone who didn't write back to me. Or maybe if Ma didn't write, I'd be charging right over there to demand why."

Paul laughed lightly. "Maybe you have a point... Any of that peach pie left?" Even though he knew there wasn't, it seemed a safe way to change the subject to what they really needed to talk about.

"The vultures ate everything. I've never seen food go so quick."

"Don't let their lack of manners fool you. It's hard living on the trail. They might get one meal a day. You go into town rarely and when you do, there's no guarantee of a good meal. They appreciated every morsel."

"I'm sure they did." She slipped her hand from his and walked back to the sink.

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Paul followed her. She stared out the window into the dark beyond. Or was it the lantern light reflected in the pane of glass that caught her eye? Whichever, it riveted her attention.

He caught her shoulders in a gentle hold. Belle's gaze shifted to his in the window.

"I will win tomorrow, Belle. Have no fear of that."

"How?"

"I'm a dead shot."

"You used to be a dead shot, Paul. That was four years ago."

He traced circles against her shoulders with his thumbs. "No...I practice every day."

Confusion wrinkled her brow. "Where? Why?"

"I go out in the field just beyond the woods. As for the why..." He shrugged. "Let's just say I have to make sure of something." Paul prayed she wouldn't press him further.

Belle stared at his reflection. Questions hovered unspoken. Finally, she must have decided to let the matter go. Her woebegone expression returned. Her gaze drifted away.

"I will win."

"If you say you will, you will." She turned in his arms. Paul didn't break his gentle hold. She focused that unwavering gaze on his clerical collar. "It's just that...it's this..." A blush covered her cheeks. "I've never been kissed before. I always figured when I got my first kiss it would be private, something special. But tomorrow, in front of everybody..."

He tilted her chin up on the crook of his finger. Her gaze slowly shifted to his. Paul waited the space of one heartbeat and dusted his lips over hers. It was a simple kiss, sweet. Tell that to the rest of his body. He longed to yank her against him, to plunge his tongue around hers. By sheer willpower alone, he pulled away.

"There. Now no one will ever be the wiser."

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Belle nodded. “Yes. I...I suppose I should call it a night. I’ll see you in the morning.” She got as far as the doorway and turned around. “Thank you, Paul.”

He waited until he heard her footsteps on the staircase, then returned to his letter. The words stared up at him. He read what was there and snorted. It was nothing more than a rambling log of events. Where was the emotion, the feeling? He’d written to his parents once a week since he’d arrived in Cottonwood Bend. They never answered. What was the point?

He put the lid on the ink bottle. Maybe Belle was right. Maybe he should visit. Paul shoved that idea aside the second it left his head. They had made it quite clear when he left. The unanswered letters proved that. Odd that it still had the power to wound him. And yet for four years he kept trying to win back their favor. When did the nightmare end?

“Now.” He lifted the sheet of paper, opened the stove, and placed it on top of the dying embers. It curled, turned brown. A flame flicked at one end. Paul watched the paper disintegrate into ashes. They’d turned their back on him long ago. It was time to close that door.

God never closes one door without opening another. How many times had he said that to someone who had lost hope? Now he knew how they felt and he asked himself the same question they often did. *So where’s the open door?*

CHAPTER 7

Belle sat on the edge of her bed. She stared into the dark, seeing nothing. Just as she had earlier in the kitchen when she looked out the window. Then, it was worry that drew her sight inward, now...

She pressed her fingers to her lips for what had to be the thousandth time. She'd seen others kiss and knew there was a lot more involved to it than the simple touch of lip upon lip. And yet Paul's kiss set her pulse to racing. Heat rushed throughout her body. A gentle, sweet kiss that bore with it a wealth of feeling. He could have pecked her lips and left it at that. Instead, he'd nestled his mouth against hers, lingering but a moment before easing ever so slowly away. This man knew how to kiss a woman. Which begged the question—what must his real kisses feel like?

Belle shoved herself to still-wobbly legs. Arms wrapped around her midriff, she paced a slow circle around the room. She should be asleep by now. She never had trouble falling asleep. But she didn't have the

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focus to change into her nightclothes. Too much energy pumped through her veins to lie down. Walking didn't help. The room, her sanctuary from the world, smothered her and she was all too aware that Paul lay only a wall away.

What was he thinking right this moment? What was he doing? Did he sleep soundly? Was his kiss merely to fulfill the wishes of a friend? Or did he crave more? Did he sit on the edge of his bed and stare into the dark, wanting her as much as she wanted him?

Belle squeezed her fingers against her temples. *Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!* Madness had to be seeping into her brain. This couldn't keep on. If she couldn't sleep and obviously wasn't going to try, there were plenty of things to do.

She listened at the door for a moment or two. The last thing she needed to see was the object of her distress. All was quiet. She eased the door open a crack to be sure. She had a straight view down the hall—no one lingered there. Belle's way was clear. Still, she didn't dawdle. Skirts in hand, she tiptoed downstairs. A few hours of quilting would take her mind off...things. If it took until morning to wipe Paul's kiss from her mind, so be it. By then she'd be too exhausted to have it haunt her.

Voices drifted her way. Belle peeled back the lace curtain on the door window with the tip of her finger. Paul sat on the stoop. Cal strolled up the walk and joined him. Daisy and Stony were nowhere to be seen.

Belle eased away. The parlor door opened with nary a sound. She ducked inside and shut the door behind her.

Belle leaned against the door. Lighting a lantern would surely call attention to herself. Would Paul feel the need to come in? Worse yet, would Cal? A soft moan reached her ears. Someone else was in the room.

Belle squinted into the darkness. Two bodies twined together on the

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couch. It wasn't hard to figure out who—or what they were doing. Belle hadn't lived in that one-room cabin all those years without learning a thing or two. What shocked her most was that Daisy would risk so much for such momentary pleasure. What if Stony got her with child? To Belle's knowledge, Daisy never took the herbs Belle offered to the town prostitutes. Stony would be gone in a week's time and he'd be taking Daisy's reputation with him.

Belle backed out quietly. Concerned as she was, she understood Daisy was a grown woman and responsible for her own actions. Belle doubted she'd listen anyway. All she could do was catch her when the fall came.

She glanced up the stairs. Sitting in her room held no appeal. She couldn't get to the quilt. Working in the kitchen might give her a head start on breakfast, but the food would be stone cold by morning. She sank to the bottom step and listened to Paul and Cal.

"I figured you'd be at the whorehouse," Paul said.

Cal's response was slow in coming. "I played poker over at Florine's for a spell. Whorehouses..." Belle watched his shadow shrug. "Well, those gals don't have the appeal they used to. They just lie there. It's not real. Nothing beats the way a real woman acts when she's with you. It makes a man feel—"

"Yeah, I know," Paul said.

Belle silently cursed him. *She* didn't know. The least Paul could do was say it out loud for her benefit. Gathering her skirts to keep them quiet, she scooted closer. As before, she peeled back the edge of the curtain. A quarter moon lit them in a pale silvery light.

Cal snorted. "And yet you've got a prime female right under your nose and you haven't made a move."

"I've got more respect for Belle than that."

"Cut the bull. You're in love with her."

Paul's shoulders sagged. "She can do better than me." He jerked his

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head Cal's way. "She can do better than you, too, so stay away."

Cal chuckled. He laced his hands behind his head and leaned against the post. "All you have to do is make a claim and I'll gladly back away. If not..." He shrugged a shoulder. "The way I see it, Belle's ripe for some good loving. If you're not going to give it to her, I will."

Paul struck with the speed of a viper. In less than the blink of an eye, he wadded Cal's shirt in his fist and shoved him against the porch rail. "Stay away from Belle."

One side of Cal's mouth lifted. "Or what, *Reverend*?"

Belle's heart hammered against her ribs while she waited for Paul's response. She'd never seen the animal in him unleashed. Pride welled up in her chest that he should be so quick to defend her. But should she let him pummel the dickens out of Cal or intervene and reveal she'd been eavesdropping?

A girl's shout from the street parted them. Belle craned her neck for a better look. Paul trotted down the steps, meeting one of Fran's girls halfway up the walk.

"Oh, Reverend, we need Doc Belle in a hurry. One of them rangers hurt the new girl real bad. She's doubled up somethin' fierce, a-screechin' to the winds."

Belle dashed to her office. In one swipe, she snagged her healing basket and Doc's bag. Paul's footsteps thundered on the stairs. By the time she reached the front door, he was by her side.

Puzzlement furrowed his brow. "How did you—"

"I was upstairs when she came running up. I had a feeling something was wrong." A lie, but oh-so much safer than the truth. Belle whipped open the door.

Peg Brant jumped from the shadows the second she saw Belle. Tears melted her heavy makeup. She looked like a doll left too long in the sun.

"Doc Belle, you gotta come quick. That ranger hurt our new girl

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real bad.”

Belle clasped her shoulder. “I’m hurrying as fast as I can. Come along and don’t you fret so.”

The girl had to trot to keep up with Belle’s stride. Paul matched her step for step.

“Cal’s gone on to try to smooth things over. I wouldn’t doubt Brady will be along shortly.”

They heard the girl’s screams a half a block from the whorehouse. It sounded like someone was being murdered. Men zipped from the two-story building like they’d been shot from a cannon. Once they spotted the reverend headed their way, they slinked down a side street into the dark.

Peg darted in front of Belle to catch the door. Belle spared her no more than a nod in thanks, then trotted upstairs. Fran waited at the top. As always, she wore a black lace gown with a high neck. Most of the time, Belle would say it was becoming and elegant. Tonight she looked one step shy of death. She clutched her hands before her in a white-knuckled grip that matched the paleness in her cheeks.

“Thank God you’re here, Belle. Reverend, it might be best if you stayed below for now. The sheriff’s downstairs in the greeting room with those rangers. You would serve us best there. I still can’t get what he did out of Retha. Maybe you’ll have better luck with him.” She steered Belle toward the girl’s room at the far end of the hall.

Belle heard footsteps beat a path downstairs—a few more of Fran’s clients making a run for it. She sure had a houseful tonight, just like every Friday night.

Retha lay in a ball in the center of her bed, clutching her stomach and screaming at the top of her lungs. One look at Belle and tears poured down her chubby cheeks.

“I’m dyin’! He poked it in me and now I’m dyin’! Did the preacher come? I need a preacher! Oh, Lord, I don’t want to go to hell!”

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“Stop this nonsense right now.” Belle peeled her arms away from her stomach. “Where does it—” Belle stared in dumbfounded shock. “Good heavens, you’re having a baby!”

“What!” Fran nudged her way forward. “You lied to me!”

Retha clutched at her arm. “Oh, please don’t fire me, ma’am. I didn’t know. I never had a sign. I’ve always been a big girl. I didn’t know I was carrying. Honest. Oh, please, I need the money.”

Belle sighed. “Hot water and clean linens, Fran. This baby is coming quick.”

She mumbled something under her breath that sounded like “simpleton” before she left. Belle couldn’t blame her. Retha didn’t seem like the brightest star in the sky. The fact she was a big girl hid her condition from everyone who might have noticed. As for the men she serviced, Belle guessed they had one thing on their minds and that wiped all else away.

“I’ll be back shortly, Retha. Just calm yourself down.”

“Are you a doctor? A lady doctor?”

“I’m a midwife and a healer.”

“I never stopped my monthly bleeding. That can’t be good, can it?”

She peeled her fingers away. “No, Retha, it can’t.” She refused to lie to the girl.

* * *

Paul had never seen Clarence in such a state. He sat in an overstuffed red velvet chair in the corner of the room, bawling away. They’d yet to get a coherent word out of him. Of course, it didn’t help to have Brady and Cal hovering over him. Paul was hard-pressed to tell which one was madder.

Clarence cast a woeful gaze Paul’s way. His eyes matched the chair. Whatever had happened, it wasn’t intentional.

“Come on, you two. Give him some breathing room.” Paul snagged Cal and Brady by the arms and tugged them away. Clarence leaned

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forward and buried his face in his hands. “I swear, Sarge. I didn’t mean it.”

Paul squatted down to his level. “What happened?”

He didn’t answer until he felt Paul’s hand on his knee. “I just put it in her and she hollered somethin’ fierce. I skedaddled out fast and tried to help. She just kept screamin’ and screamin’. Said she was dyin’. That I killed her.”

It’d be a cold day in hell before Clarence thought about lying with another woman, even if they did get to the bottom of this. “Don’t worry, my friend. There has to be a reasonable explanation.”

“There is.”

They turned as one. Belle stood just inside the doorway. “She’s about to give birth.”

Brady’s frown said it all. “But—”

Belle held up her hand. “I know. Let’s just say she’s a big girl with not too many smarts and very little common sense. She showed up here yesterday looking for work. Fran hired her. This shouldn’t take long. Paul, Retha wants you in the birthing room. She’s hoping having a connection to God in there will give her baby a better chance at survival.”

Cal snorted. There was no humor in the sound. “And if the baby doesn’t survive, it’s Paul’s fault? That’s a mighty heavy burden to place on God, much less a preacher.”

Paul silently thanked him for saying what he could not. Surely this went above and beyond what preachers were expected to do. Men simply did not belong in the birthing room. But how could he say no? He was the one who approached these women. Kept on the fringe of society, none bothered to show their faces in church and hadn’t for a very long time. *He* was the one who came to them. The one who convinced them they had as much right to reach out to God as the next person, no matter what profession they chose in order to survive. And

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now that the door was open, he was ready to turn his back because things were getting sticky?

“Everyone will understand if you don’t want to do this,” Belle said.

Yes, he supposed they would. And not a soul would condemn him. But could Paul live with himself if he denied the woman’s request? What if his presence did make a difference, if only to ease her worries during the long hours to come?

“I’ll do it.” He wouldn’t like it, but he’d do it. He’d opened a door and couldn’t very well slam it shut now.

Belle gave him a single nod and turned. Fran hugged herself in the doorway.

“This is hurting your business tonight. Would you like us to move her somewhere else?”

Fran shook her head. “No one’s coming back tonight. Besides, I don’t think moving her is possible or wise. We need to give that baby a fighting chance. Lord knows it’s going to need all the help it gets.”

Belle glanced Paul’s way once more. “Give me a few minutes to make sure she’s somewhat decent before you come up.”

“All right.”

He followed the women’s ascent up the staircase. Each twitch of Belle’s skirts chased one worry away and bred another. Fran peeked over her shoulder at him, then whispered something to Belle. Belle slowly looked down the length of him. It was so subtle a gesture Paul might have missed it had he blinked, but there was no mistaking what she’d been looking for—and found. Her cheeks flamed red before she whipped her head around and hurried up the stairs.

Male pride, long buried, swelled his chest. She’d noticed him as a man, not a friend. And for the first time, instead of wanting to run the other way, joy lifted his spirit. Paul let it fill his soul; after all, this was all he could ever allow himself to have with Belle.

“Come on, Clarence,” Brady said. “We’ll take you over to Florine’s

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place. A couple of drinks ought to calm your rattled nerves.”

Clarence smoothed back his hair and slipped on his droopy cowboy hat. Smiling now, his hands still shook. “I’ll catch up with you outside. I need to talk to Sarge for a minute.”

“You let us know if he wants us to kidnap him,” Cal said with a smile. Brady chuckled.

Paul had to laugh. “Don’t tempt me.” Facing a hundred cattle rustlers definitely had more appeal than stepping into that room upstairs.

Clarence waited until Brady and Cal left. He swept off his hat and studied the patch of red and gold carpet between him and Paul. While he searched for words, he twisted the brim of his hat into an unrecognizable wad.

“You’re a preacher man now, Sarge.” He swallowed hard. “Of course, you was never one to go spoutin’ off to another soul. A man knew he could tell you somethin’ and it didn’t go no further.”

“We ran with a lot of men like that.” He glanced toward the closed door. “Cal included.”

Clarence shuffled his feet. “I know...but this is different. What I got to say, I mean.” He drew in a deep breath. “I sinned powerful bad tonight, Reverend. Not because I wanted to lie with a woman. Heck, I always felt God understood that. It wasn’t like I had a wife. I didn’t take on with another man’s woman. Tonight was different.”

“How so?”

He curled his fingers deeper into the mauled hat. “I lied to myself. I thought if I could find a gal so different from Miss Belle, everything would be all right. I wanted the biggest gal they had. It wasn’t right from the start. I just wanted to get it over with. I think this was God’s way of punishing me for denying my feelings for Miss Belle. He don’t cotton to lyin’, even when someone does it to hisself.”

Clarence looked up at Paul for the first time. “What do you think,

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Reverend? Should I step up tomorrow at the contest? I'm a pretty fair shot. I might even be able to beat ole Cal."

What did he think? There weren't enough words in the English language to say what he thought. What the devil was going on here? First Cal, now Clarence. No more.

Paul clasped his shoulder. "Now I've got something to tell you in confidence. You can't tell anybody." He waited for him to nod, then went on. "Belle is my woman. She has been for a long time. We didn't want others poking their noses in our business so we kept it quiet."

Clarence sagged with defeat. It was hard to watch the disappointment wash over his face. But Clarence was an honorable man. He'd back away.

"You make a fine couple, if I do say so myself. Don't fret. I'll never tell a soul." He tucked the hat in place and walked away.

So much for not lying. He stared at the closed door, losing his thoughts in the pattern etched in the frosted glass. It wasn't a lie. He'd tagged Belle as his years ago when they first met, using every excuse he could muster to keep her near him. No wonder Florine had cornered him.

But none of that changed the fact that Paul still wasn't good enough for Belle. What if he gave in to passion and loved her the way he wanted, the way he craved? What would he give in to next? His temper had reared its ugly head too much this last day. Maybe that would be the first to go. Humility? Yep, here he was getting ready to trot upstairs for a childbirth because he thought he could make a difference.

Old Paul mocked him. He was tired of the fight, especially where Belle was concerned. Maybe it was time to let her decide who and what she wanted. Time to let her know how he really felt—that a day, a second, didn't go by without him wanting her.

Paul pulled in a deep sigh and let his gaze travel to the landing. But she'd also have to know who he used to be. By telling her, he risked

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more than losing any love she felt—he risked losing their friendship. The old gambler inside him jumped up—he was always willing to take a chance. But never did he have so much to lose.

Fran zipped across the landing and down the stairs. “You might want to get up there, Reverend. Retha’s in quite a state. I’m sure having you by her side will make it a little quieter for all of us.”

Paul caught her arm before she ducked around the newell post. “What did you say to Belle?”

A catlike grin spread over her face. “What did I tell Belle, or what did she say back to me?” Laughing, she slipped free and hurried on.

* * *

“That man is hard and hungry for you. When are you going to put him out of his misery?”

And Belle had actually glanced around to see for herself. Where was her head? And then, when she didn’t find what she was looking for, she asked Fran how *she* could tell. The answer wiggled under her skin, setting off goosebumps that had yet to leave.

“Not by looking at his breeches. Although that’s pretty clear. It’s in his eyes each time he looks at you. Like he wants to eat you alive.”

In the space of one hour she’d learned that not only did Paul love her, he wanted her as well. Now what? Belle closed her eyes. She couldn’t fool herself any longer. His was the face she looked for in the crowd. He was the one who’s company she sought. The ear to share all. The person she depended on. Doc had known it. She refused to see it until now.

So what had changed? Was Doc up in heaven doing what he couldn’t when he had been here—matchmaking? It sure looked that way to her.

Belle pressed her fingertips against her temples. She didn’t want a husband. Being with Paul would change everything—her life, their friendship, her independence. She couldn’t bear that. Images of her

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mother slammed into her.

Ma pushed out babies with frightening regularity. True, Belle had the means to prevent that, but so did her mother. Yet you'd blink and another was on the way. She worked and toiled and looked twice her age. Pa fared no better. With each passing year, he grew a little more stooped and a lot more short-tempered. And then...

Belle squeezed her eyes shut. No, she couldn't think about that now. There was no guarantee she and Paul would become her parents. There was also no guarantee they wouldn't. Then where would she be? Where would *they* be? Their friendship destroyed, her independence gone. She shook her head. It just wasn't worth it.

Then he walked into the room, and Belle saw the longing deep in his eyes. It was all she could do to keep from going to him and resting her head on his very broad chest.

Retha broke into a sob when she saw him. She reached for his hand. "Bless you, Reverend, for coming."

Smiling, Paul wrapped both hands around hers. "I'll be with you as long as it takes."

She pressed his hand to her painted cheek. "My baby ain't gonna live, Reverend. I just know it."

Belle stared at the makeup smudged against the back of his hand. Slowly, he pulled his head her way. All she could do was nod.

He patted Retha's hand. "If that's so, then we'll get through it."

"But my baby won't be going to heaven without a proper christening," she cried.

"Nonsense." Though he smiled, a frown knit his brow. "God would never turn away an innocent baby. Don't you worry about that."

Most preachers would be hovering over Retha with a bible. Heck, most preachers never would have crossed the threshold of this place. Not Paul. Never Paul.

Belle drew up a chair for him to sit. The night would be long. On

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impulse, she curled her fingers over his shoulder. He glanced up, but there was no question in his eyes. He knew what she thought, what she felt, even if she couldn't say the words or didn't want to admit them to herself.

* * *

Paul developed a newfound respect for Belle, for women in general. Childbirth was agony. To go through so much pain. To try to squeeze another life out of your body. No wonder so many women and infants didn't survive. Something so impossible had to be a miracle. There was no other explanation for it.

Now he knew how Hoyt felt. No torture known to man was worse than watching your woman go through this. He'd never felt so helpless. He longed to be on the other side of the door where all men should be. But his conscience refused to let him desert them now.

Retha squeezed the blood out of his hands more times than he could count. Paul let her. At least he could contribute something. She and Belle did all the real work. Fran darted in from time to time with fresh water and linens. The other girls stayed away, probably scared to death a similar fate awaited them.

He chanced a look Belle's way. Sweat glistened on her face and neck. Her sleeves were rolled back to her elbows. A white apron protected her dress. Dark tendrils of hair clung to her neck. She never noticed, or if she did, Paul couldn't tell. Her focus remained on her patient. Throughout the hours she mopped Retha's brow, gave her sips of cool berry tea, and not once offered her false hope.

"Okay, Retha, this is it." Belle folded the sheet back and lifted the woman's knees. "Paul, if you'd get behind her and help lift her up, it'll make things easier."

He did what he was told, but refused to look beyond the top of Retha's head. As it was, she was quite a load to hoist. He crawled in behind her, caught her under the arms, and helped her up.

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“Now push.”

The force squashed Paul against the headboard. He thought he'd never breathe again. Retha went slack.

“That's good. It's done.”

Belle's voice was barely above a whisper. No baby's cry cut the air. Retha rolled her head to one side and said nothing. Paul dared a look as he pulled himself from the bed, but Belle had the child bundled.

“What...what was it?” Retha squeaked out.

“A son,” Belle said. “You had a son.”

Tears drifted in silent tracks down Retha's face. “Reverend, you'll see he gets a proper burial in the graveyard?”

“I'll get the undertaker. We can have him laid to rest come morning.”

“If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not have too many people know my shame.” She flicked away the last of her tears. “I'd like it done tonight.”

“I'll take care of it.”

* * *

Paul stabbed the spade into the soft earth. He tried not to think about the little life that never was, that really never should have been. It was a blessing the boy was stillborn. So why then was his death so hard to take?

From the second Paul walked into Florine's to ask Brady, Cal, and Clarence for help, no one said a word. They followed him to the graveyard, shovels in hand, and dug. People would have questions in the morning, or maybe not. Cottonwood Bend was a small town.

“Here they come,” Cal said.

They turned together. With Belle by her side, Retha carried the baby. Her step never faltered, nor did her steady gaze toward their destination. Fran and the other ladies trailed behind her. Cal muttered an excuse and slipped away.

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“Seems a shame to put the little one in the ground without a box,” Clarence said, more to himself than anyone else. He darted around back and returned a few minutes later with a crate lined with his bedroll.

Gratitude shimmered in Retha’s eyes as she placed the baby inside. She stepped back into Fran’s embrace while the men lowered the makeshift coffin. Clarence sealed the top with his saddle blanket and a plank of wood.

Paul kept his words brief. Words of comfort and hope, of life everlasting. Afterward, they filled the grave.

Retha watched until the last, then heaved a sigh. “Fran, I’ll be gathering my things. I can’t go back to that life. I can’t be that person again.”

“Child, what will you do?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. Doc Belle, I’d appreciate a room. I’d be glad to work for it, cleaning and such.”

“I’m full up now, Retha. Except for the cellar,” she added with a tiny laugh. “But once the rangers leave I’ll—”

“The cellar’s fine enough with me. I’ll be along directly.”

The small gathering filtered away until Paul and Belle were all that remained. She stared at the grave, shaking her head every so often.

“Years ago a young woman came to me,” she finally said. “She found herself in the family way. She had no husband. All she wanted was something to make the baby go away. I refused. A week later they found her drowned in the river. The guilt was...awful. I swore when I came here that I’d see no woman ever found herself in trouble. Even those who tempt fate.”

She looked so sad, like this was all her fault. He slid his arms around her, tucking her close.

“There’s nothing more you could have done for Retha. You did all there was.”

Belle tilted her head back. Her lips parted. She had to know this was

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more than one friend comforting another. The proof was wedged uncomfortably between them, yet she seemed no more in a hurry to move than he.

Paul traced the apple of her cheek with his thumb, down to her jaw, up to her tempting lips. His heart pounded against his ribs. One kiss. One sweet, deep, long kiss. That's all he wanted. What was so wrong with that? Everything.

He took a giant step back. "I'll see you in the morning."

Belle watched the dark swallow him and willed her pulse to stop racing. None of this made any sense—his actions or her own. There really could be no doubt about it—they were both insane.

"Doc Belle, I'm ready."

She forced a smile for Retha, draped an arm around the woman's shoulders, and led her into the house. Fran could talk about Paul's misery all she wanted. Belle was starting to have quite a bit of her own...and she didn't have a clue how to fix it without getting herself in more deeply than she wanted.

CHAPTER 8

Retha looked far prettier without makeup than she did painted up. At least Belle thought so. Her skin was smooth and the perfect shade of cream. Not a blotch marred it. Her red hair also fared better this morning, pulled back to a small bun at the nape of her neck. But it would take a while before it recovered from years of doing whatever it was those girls did to keep it mountain high.

As she'd promised, Retha pitched in right away, helping around the boarding house. Belle wasn't sure how smart that was. Exhaustion etched lines in her face. Grief weighed her spirit down. The healer side of Belle wanted to send her off to bed for the day. The woman in Belle understood her need to keep busy.

Daisy set a platter of sausages in the center of the table. Bootsteps echoed on the staircase. On cue, Clarence came up from the cellar.

"Just like clockwork." Daisy's smile widened when she saw Stony.

He gave her a wink and pulled out a chair. "Mornin', ladies. Looks

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like a mighty fine meal.”

“Maybe you gentlemen can make it last more than five minutes.” Belle put the basket of biscuits next to Cal. On second thought, she moved them nearer to one of the other rangers. That didn’t seem to be any safer—both were quick to grab. “You know, I just realized. I don’t know your names.”

They looked at one another like she’d just asked them to list the state capitals. They sat there scrubbed clean, dark hair slicked back, and struggled for a response.

“I’m Sid. He’s Marty,” the one closest to her finally said. “We’re brothers.”

“I see.” There was a strong resemblance. Very strong. “Do you have a last name?”

“Tewes, ma’am,” Marty said.

Belle left the biscuits in front of him. “Clarence, are you going to sit?”

He hovered in the doorway, his gaze stuck on Retha. “Yes, ma’am. Just waitin’ for the crowd to clear out of my way.” He slipped into the nearest chair. “Miss Retha, I hope you slept well.”

Belle doubted she had slept at all. Still, Retha said she did and thanked him again for giving up his room to her. It was an unexpected gesture on Clarence’s part. Belle wondered how much guilt played a part in his sacrifice. It didn’t matter. It was his room. He could use it or give it up. The choice was his.

One chair remained vacant. Belle glanced toward the staircase. It wasn’t like Paul to sleep in or be late.

“If you’re lookin’ for Reverend Paul, I saw him ride out long before sunrise,” Retha said.

Cal piled food on his plate. “Probably went out to practice his shooting. He’s going to need it. He hasn’t held a gun in his hands in over four years. There’s no way he can win today.”

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Belle caught him looking at her out of the corner of his eye. She refused to be goaded. But there was nothing she could do about the twinge of panic that settled in her stomach.

"Miss Retha, are you going to be participating in the contest today?" Clarence asked.

Her gaze traveled slowly to him. "That's for single women."

"Well...yes, ma'am." A dopey grin cut across his face. "You're a single woman."

Retha's smile didn't quite make it. "But hardly the type the town considers suitable."

"I wouldn't exactly say that, ma'am."

"You sure changed your tune from last night." She stabbed the spoon into the bowl of potatoes and left.

Clarence looked lost. Bless the poor man's soul. He just didn't have a clue what to say when it came to women.

Sid slugged his upper arm. "Idgit."

"I was just trying to make up for last night." He sounded so mournful it was hard not to feel sorry for him.

Cal smeared a mound of butter over his biscuit. "You've got nothing to make up for, Clarence. You didn't cause what happened last night."

Belle couldn't agree more, but she wasn't going to let Clarence get off that easy. "But this should give you something to ponder the next time you think about using *those* types of services again."

Crimson faces ringed the table...except for Cal's. He gave her a wink and hid his smile behind his coffee mug.

"I think I'd like fried chicken and corn bread in that picnic basket, Miss Belle."

"Then you'd best pack it yourself because you'll be eating it alone." She darted into the kitchen before he could bait her further.

Retha sat at the table, dabbing tears from the corners of her eyes.

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"I'm sorry for rushing from the table like that, Doc Belle. It's just that..." A sharp intake of breath steadied her nerves. "I don't know if I'll ever be considered a respectable woman."

"Not if you don't think you will." She started to sit with her, then thought better of it. Retha needed a healthy dose of reality, not sympathy, or she'd be wallowing in self-pity forever. "It's been less than one day since you made your decision and already you're ready to give up."

Fresh tears sprung to her eyes. "But how can I forget the past and what I've done?"

"You can't, so learn from it and move on." Belle filled the basin with hot water and soap. She could lecture for hours about that lesson, for all the good it would do her. As long as she lived, Belle would never forget the guilt she felt over having failed that girl all those years ago.

As she dunked the second pan into the sudsy water, Retha picked up a towel to dry the first. "My tits hurt powerful bad, Doc Belle. They feel like rocks."

"You're milk's coming in. Bind your breasts real tight and that will help. In a week or two, it'll go away."

Retha heaved another sigh. "I suppose I could hire out as a wet nurse. Is there much call for that here? You suppose people would have a grudge against me?"

Belle forced a smile as she looked up at her. "Those who do aren't worth knowing. Holding grudges never did anyone a lick of good. Reverend Harrington is always preaching that things happen for a reason. Maybe all of this was so you could start a better life. Being a wet nurse is honorable and good work. Think of all the babies you'll be helping."

She slung the water from her hands and steered Retha toward the door. "Go grab yourself some breakfast. We still have a lot of work to

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do. The picnic might not be until tomorrow, but this little marriage committee is determined to lay out a spread of food today for their contest.”

Retha was nearly to the door when she turned around. “Do you think the ladies will mind if I come watch?”

“I’ll make sure it’s all right.” Either they let Retha stay or Belle would go. That ought to cinch things. And they had to treat her like the lady Retha longed to be.

“Now that’s a smile every potential suitor likes to see.” Cal braced himself against the door frame. “Thinking of me, I’ll bet.”

Still smiling, Belle arched a brow. “As a matter of fact, I am. I’m thinking of how lonely you’re going to be after this stupid contest is over.”

He tossed back a laugh. “I doubt that very seriously.” He laughed once more and strolled toward her office. “How’s Jessop today? Any change?”

“None.” In fact, he hadn’t budged since the day before. Belle had had to check close to see if he was breathing. His body was warm, but not wracked with fever. As she had the night before, Belle had bathed his wounds, then spooned a currant tea down his throat.

“It’s been two days. Any idea how much longer he’ll be out?”

“None. He was close to death when you brought him in. Maybe his body is just deciding which way it wants to go.”

She expected Cal to say he’d be better off dead. Instead, he walked into the room—most probably to check for himself. He returned shortly, shutting the door behind him.

“Looks like I’d better send a wire to let my people know what’s going on.”

“Maybe you could even ask for reinforcements to help you guard him.”

What she meant to be sarcastic only made Cal smile. “Not a bad

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idea. It'll give us more time to court, Miss Belle."

This time the panic wasn't so easy to ignore. He was close enough to touch her if he took a notion. She curled her fingers around the handle of the cast-iron pan and dared him to try.

"Until later, Miss Belle."

She listened to his footsteps fade, then cast her gaze heavenward. *I don't know where you are, Paul, but please don't fail me now.*

* * *

Paul stared at the tin cans—or what was left of them. He could stand here all day and the result would be the same. Once a day he came to this deserted clearing on the outskirts of town. He lined up tin cans, sticks, bottles, anything he could find. He tried straight rows, staggered rows, hidden niches. The results were always the same—he never missed. And each time it made Marissa's death harder to understand.

He holstered his Colt .45 and swung into the saddle. Thinking about all that now wasn't going to do him or Belle any good. He had to stay sharp, stay focused. He couldn't fail her today. She needed him to win.

So had Marissa.

There was no chasing the nightmare away. He relived it each time he rode away from his practice site. The terror in her eyes. The bullet piercing her chest. His father's scream echoed in his head. And the sheer, utter horror that he had killed his sister.

I never miss. Cocky words that would taunt him until the day he died.

He shoved the memories away once more. Belle was depending on him today. And while this wasn't a life or death situation, the stakes were just as important. If he lost, it wouldn't be the image of her with Cal that bothered him most, it would be the crushing disappointment in her eyes.

Paul heeled his horse to a faster trot. The morning grew late. He

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could end this all with a word, an announcement. The idea was laughable. Florine and Mrs. Cyrus hadn't believed it when Belle told them they were a couple. They sure as heck wouldn't believe they were betrothed. And how would Belle feel about that? Pretending to be courting was one thing, but to feign a marriage proposal? They'd best keep to their present course.

All he had to do was beat Cal. And he'd start by using the oldest tactic in the book—intimidation and distraction. On the job, Cal could be as steady as the next man, but he had his weak spots. Paul wouldn't have to do much, just rattle him a bit.

He smiled to himself. *This might turn out to be fun after all.*

* * *

Belle's stomach twisted into knots. Noon and no sign of Paul. Tables laden with enough food to feed the town three times over lined the boardwalk near Cyrus's general store. Main Street was blocked from end to end. People milled about chatting, laughing, and in a few instances flirting.

Brady, under Florine's direction, set the targets up fifty paces down the street. There were enough bottles and cans there to last well into sunset. Mr. Cyrus started the tally. Each single woman was listed on one side of an old chalkboard; the man vying for her and the amount he paid was listed on the other. Most women had more than one man shooting for her. The only exceptions besides herself were Mr. Tucker for Mrs. Freebush, Stony for Daisy, and Mark Hanson for Pammy Wilson. The last two men guarded the tally board. No one else dared put their name next to those ladies.

Mrs. Freebush held court over them all, perched under an oversized parasol in one of the chairs Florine had hauled over from her saloon. Belle had never seen the woman so jolly. She noticed Mr. Tucker wasn't far from her side. There was definitely some serious flirting going on over there.

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“Okay, Belle, your turn.” Mrs. Cyrus stirred her fingers through a basket of folded papers. “Draw a number to see when you go.”

She shifted her gaze to the older woman. In all the years Belle had known her, she had never given Mrs. Cyrus a cross word or look. Today was the exception. Glaring at her, Belle shoved her hand in the basket.

Long fingers wrapped gently around her wrist. She glanced up. Paul. Relief flooded her bones. He laced his fingers through hers and pulled her hand from the basket.

“Belle goes last.” A look dared Mrs. Cyrus to argue.

“Very well,” she finally said. “I suppose if Mrs. Freebush can go first, Belle can go last.” She fixed the smile back on her face and moved to the next lady.

“I’d just as soon get it over with,” Belle whispered.

“They’re the ones who put this show together. The least we can do is make them wait for the main act. Besides”—he leaned close until his breath caressed her ear—“victory, like fine wine, is meant to be savored. You take your time and enjoy it.”

She turned her head slightly. His lips were near enough to kiss. Belle was sorely tempted to do so. “Where were you this morning? I was afraid...”

His fingers traced a path to her upper arm. “I would never let you down, Belle. You can always depend on me. I was just ensuring success this morning. Trust me...no one’s going to be kissing you today but me.”

Like a lovesick schoolgirl, Belle bobbed her head up and down. Anything intelligent she might say was lost in his green eyes and sweet smile.

Brady clanged the fire bell and broke the spell. “Let the contest begin. First up... Hiram Tucker for Nola Freebush.”

Mr. Tucker unfolded his lanky frame from the chair and ambled up

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to the target line. "Get ready to pucker up, Nola. You're in for the kiss of your life."

"Hiram, you old coot." She cackled. "That gun looks older than you. I hope you're stronger than you look. I've got a mess of chores that need doing around my place."

"Don't worry your pretty little head over that, Nola. This old gun still has plenty of firepower in it. I guarantee I can take care of whatever you need fixing."

Howls of laughter pealed through the crowd. A few of the younger ladies blushed...so did some of the older ones.

Laughter melted the years from Mrs. Freebush's face. She scooted to the edge of her seat. "Then let's get to it. I've got gutters that need cleaning."

He wrapped his arms around his waist, gave her a bow, and took his position. His hand was steady, Belle would give him that. His aim wasn't bad either. Six out of twelve bottles fell.

"Good enough for you?" He holstered his weapon.

Mrs. Freebush tapped her fan against her lips. Her eyes danced with mischief. "Not bad. You can come collect that kiss now. But you didn't get all those bottles."

"I expect you'll take the loss out in trade." Mr. Tucker wasted no time reaching her...or getting a kiss that left little to anyone's imagination.

Paul braced his hand on the post, framing Belle with his body. "I knew they'd make a good match."

She enjoyed the feel of him next to her, the comfort, the safety, the rightness. "I never realized how lonely they were until now. It sure makes you happy to see them." Belle wondered if the same couldn't be said of her and Paul.

Brady took the forefront once more. "Next up... Mark Hanson for Pammy Wilson."

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Mark stomped into place. No one competed against him. What in the world did he have to be angry about? Poor Pammy clutched her parasol in quivering hands and chewed on her bottom lip. She looked three shakes away from tears.

“He’s awfully cocky, isn’t he? Seems a shame there’s no one around to take him down a notch or two.” Belle didn’t shout, but she also didn’t bother to keep her voice down.

“Yes, ma’am, it is.” Sid nudged his way toward the tally board. “Not so fast there, Mr. Cyrus. I’d like a chance to win Miss Wilson’s company.”

Rage mottled Mark’s face. Weapon drawn, he charged to the board. “No! No one challenges me.”

Sid plunked his money down. “Then it’s about time someone did.” He turned slowly, resting his hand on the hilt of his gun. “And you might also think twice before you come at a man pointing a gun. Some might not take too kindly to it.”

Brady stepped between the two. “Gentlemen, take your marks.”

It was a humiliating defeat. Mark never had a chance. His rage, his cockiness, and lack of experience told on him. Only one bottle fell. Sid blasted them all away. Contest won, he retrieved his prize—a simple kiss. Pammy blushed and gave him a shy smile, then threaded her arm through Sid’s. Mark shoved his way through the gathering, muttering curses as he went. Somehow Belle didn’t think Pammy minded the outcome in the least.

Clarence parked himself beside Paul and hooked his thumbs in his holster. “Do you think I should add Miss Retha?”

Belle turned his way. “No. I know you’re trying to do good, but you’re pushing too hard. She needs time.”

He nodded and shuffled away.

Another hour passed while ten more contestants stepped forward. Then it was Stony’s turn.

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Daisy clutched her folded hands under her chin and waited with a smile that dimmed the sun. No one challenged him.

Stony waved his hand toward the bottles. "Line up twenty-four, Sheriff. They're paid for. I don't want there to be any doubts."

There weren't. In less time than it took to think about it, the bottles lay in shatters on the ground. Stony swept off his hat and strode toward Daisy. But instead of kissing her, he got down on one knee and put his hand over his heart.

"I made you a promise last night and I intend to keep it. I hit every one of those bottles. Will you marry me?"

"You bet!" She grabbed his hand, hauled him to his feet, and tossed her arms around his neck.

Stony twirled her around twice before setting her down. "How 'bout it, Reverend? We'd like to get married right away."

"If you're sure, then there's no time like the present." Paul swept his arm before him. "After you."

The crowd shifted as one.

Cal blocked the way. "Not so fast. The contest isn't over."

"No one said it was," Paul said. "But it's a good time for a break, get these two married, have a bite of food. No one else seems to mind. Are you afraid of losing your edge?"

Cal laughed at him. "Not me. By all means...have all the break you need."

Paul tilted a nod his way and motioned the crowd on.

It was a delightful turn of events, even if it was sudden. Some spark had drawn Daisy and Stony together from the second they'd met. Maybe some simply didn't need years of association to know they were meant to be.

Belle stood up for Daisy while Cal stood for the groom. After the short ceremony, Belle caught a glimpse of Pammy and Sid holding hands. Looked like there were more than a few sparks there, too. That

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surely wouldn't sit well with Mark.

Cheers and well wishes followed the couple from the church and back to the food. Somehow Paul had managed to talk Florine into supplying beer for the gathering. People bellied up to the tables and stuffed themselves. Paul ate little, content to engage the children in a game of kick the can. Unfortunately, they played a little too close to Cal. He winced with every squeal and glared at them all when the can came too close to him.

Belle watched the sun slip toward the horizon. The contest seemed to be forgotten. Just as the thought left her, Paul trudged over. A pair of .45s were strapped to his hips.

"It's getting late. Let's end this contest now. I'm sure everyone's had just about enough and are ready for the dance."

Cal wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"Really? You missed a spot on your chin."

Paul whipped a handkerchief from his pocket.

Cal slapped it away. "Enough fooling around. Let's get this over with."

* * *

Paul followed at a leisurely pace. Cal was anxious and in a hurry, not to mention stuffed with food and beer. So far, so good. They took their positions side by side.

Cal squinted against the setting sun. "This is no good. I can't see the target. We'll have to face the other direction."

"Can't." Paul jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Some of the younguns are back there playing hide and seek. No telling where they could be. By the time we round them up, it'll be dark. And"—he jerked a pistol from his holster and fired. Glass exploded—"I can see just fine."

"Dirty, low-down...You planned this." He squeezed each word through clenched teeth.

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“You going to shoot or not?”

“You’re so damn good, you go first.”

“My pleasure.” Paul snapped the second pistol free and fired off a round. It hit home. They all did. One after the other. The crowd was silent, except for the children playing behind them. He didn’t dare look at Belle’s face. It might break his concentration.

Cal stretched the kinks from his shoulders and aimed. Twelve bottles fell.

“Impressive,” Paul said, and reloaded his weapons. “Set them up again, Brady.” Brady’s fingers barely left the last bottle when Paul fired. Success...again. But he knew better than to get too proud of himself.

The sun was lower now, almost to the horizon and directly behind the bottles. Cal aimed. From the corner of his eye, Paul watched the cat drag the exhumed mouse over to Cal. It waited, then twined itself around Cal’s legs. The bullet hit air.

“Foul!” Cal shouted. “That was planned.”

“Belle told you to bury the mouse deep or the cat would bring it back to you.”

“I didn’t know it had to be six feet under!”

Paul shrugged and scooped the cat into his arms. “I’m a fair man. Brady, we’ll give him that one. Put another bottle up.”

A can rattled in the street behind them. The younguns shouted and raced for it. Cal grimaced. “Get them out of here. How the devil can a man concentrate?”

Most men could, but not Cal. And in that instant Paul knew he’d won. Anger, frustration, and a full belly destroyed Cal’s concentration. Still, he took his mark and aimed. Shot after shot rang out, but no glass echoed the report. He dropped his hand and stared in mute shock over the bottles mocking him.

Paul set the cat on its feet. “Looks like I win.” He turned then. Joy

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radiated from Belle's face. He returned her smile. Long strides took him to her. He lifted her chin on the crook of his finger and dropped a kiss to her lips.

Florine edged up beside them. "I'm afraid that won't do. It has to be a real kiss."

"A real kiss or forfeit," Cal said.

"Sid—"

"That was different," Florine said. "A real kiss or forfeit."

He searched Belle's face. Not a trace of joy remained. Her eyes begged him not to fail, not to back down. His heart agreed and, heaven knew, his body agreed. Kissing her would change everything, and all the demons he'd spent years fighting could come rushing back.

A chant went up among the crowd. "Kiss or forfeit! Kiss or forfeit!"

Belle balled his shirt beneath her fists. Her lips were so close, parted, waiting...for him. No other man would ever touch her, not as long as he had breath in his body. Slowly, he bent nearer and slid his mouth over hers. With the first flick of his tongue over hers, she melted against him.

Paul caught her around the waist and pulled her closer. It wasn't close enough. Then she kissed him back and destroyed the last bit of sense that remained. He couldn't think, but he could damn sure feel.

A throat cleared behind them. Reluctantly, he sealed the kiss. She stared up at him, eyes wide. With wonder? With disgust?

"Okay, everybody," Mr. Cyrus shouted. "Let's tear this down and get to dancing."

* * *

Dancing? Belle couldn't walk, much less dance. She was rooted to this spot, tucked against Paul so close nothing was left to her imagination. "I...I should help clean up."

"I should, too." He let her go and grabbed the end of the table to haul it away.

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“So tell me,” Florine whispered, “still think of it as a pathetic mole in a patch of moss?”

Belle blessed the dusk that hid her flaming cheeks.

CHAPTER 9

Belle stood as far back on the sidelines as distance allowed. Pride kept her at the dance. She refused to dash off to her room like a frightened little girl, but she also wasn't ready to take a twirl across the dance floor. Her legs still quivered from Paul's kiss.

Planks of wood covered the dusty street. A raised stand next to it held the fiddler. It didn't take long for couples to pair off. A rumor flew around that someone had spiked the punch bowl. But Belle had been standing by it all night and it was still in pristine condition. That didn't stop people from gulping it down. They'd fan themselves and giggle. Flirtations intensified. In the morning they'd blame the punch. Only Belle knew better and she'd never tell.

So far she'd been forgotten. A blessing, to be sure. She couldn't take any ribbing right now. Too many emotions ran through her head, none of which she could define, but all dealt with Paul.

He'd tucked himself among the men on the far side of the dance

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floor. Every so often their gazes met, stealing Belle's breath as well as what little remained of her senses. The kiss had changed everything between them. They were no longer friends. They were...intimates. Never again could they be alone without someone speculating. No more talks. No more quiet moments in each other's company. Planning church events was out of the question if it meant the two of them would be alone. Belle felt cheated, robbed.

The fiddler slowed the tempo down to a three-quarter waltz—Belle's favorite and Paul knew it. She laughed at herself. Of course he knew it. He knew everything about her. Well...almost everything.

She shifted a look his way. But he wasn't standing there any more. He was headed toward her. Paul skirted the dance floor until he reached her. Without ceremony, or even asking, he took her hand and drew her among the others.

Her heart hammered against her breastbone. They'd danced like this dozens of times. Why should this be different? Why did his hand now feel hot and meaningful against her back?

Belle tried to catch the rhythm, tried to follow his lead. Impossible. Her normally nimble feet failed her miserably. Finally, mercifully, the song ended. Paul linked her arm through his and led her to the side. Tension replaced the smiles that had existed before. Belle hated the change, resented it.

"I think we need to talk." His voice was just above a whisper.

They certainly did, but not here. "I'm ready to go home anyway."

Belle crossed her arms over her chest. Paul kept his behind his back. They strolled back to the boarding house like that all the way. No words, no laughter, no looks—just awkward, awful silence. At the gate, he jumped forward to open it. Belle thanked him. She'd never done that before. She never had to when they'd been just friends.

A lantern burned in the window, casting its pale light over the front porch. Belle motioned to the swing. "It's a pretty night. Why don't we

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sit here?" A twister could be roaring through town and Belle probably wouldn't have noticed.

As she sat, Paul pulled one of the wicker chairs opposite of her. Another normal moment spoiled. She was all too aware of his closeness, the heat of his body, the scent of male surrounding her. It chased away everything else.

"You wanted to talk?" He'd better speak first because she couldn't think of anything to say.

"Yeah." But no words followed. Paul scooted to the edge of the chair and slipped his hand under hers.

"I...I wish we'd never kissed."

"Do you? Really?" He captured her other hand, then traced her knuckles with his thumbs.

"Yes," she somehow managed to say. "It's changed everything."

"What was I supposed to do, Belle? Let him kiss you?" His lips covered hers before she could reply.

A soft sound left her throat of its own volition. Suddenly her hands were free. She slipped them around his shoulders, into the hair at the nape of his neck, drawing him closer, deepening the kiss herself. The swing creaked with his weight. Strong arms encircled her and cradled her over his lap. And yet the kiss continued.

She matched each flicker of his tongue against hers, each nip of his lips, and craved more. Her body ached to be touched, to press so tightly to him nothing could wiggle between them. And hot...goodness she was hot. And it had nothing to do with the summer night. She burned inside and out like her skin had a fire of its own. Yet it was nothing compared to the thrumming need centered under miles of skirts and petticoats.

Paul's hands stoked the fire. They rubbed sweet lazy circles against her back. Up and down. Up and *down*. He swooped low, cupping her buttocks. Even through tons of material the sensation stoked Belle's

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need.

She peeled her lips from his. “Inside,” she gasped out. “We need to go inside.”

Without hesitation, he lifted her in his arms and hurried to the door. Belle grabbed the handle and swung it wide. Long strides carried them to the parlor. Paul kicked the door closed and aimed for the small sofa. His lips seized hers once more. Sweet, wonderful bliss. Now she knew how Stony and Daisy felt.

He cradled her over his lap as he had before. Hands bracketed her back, then swooped to her bottom. Belle could bear it no longer. Lips sealed to his, she wadded up her skirts and straddled his lap. Paul didn’t wait for an invitation. His fingers dusted her calves, her thighs, then kneaded deep into her buttocks.

Biting back a groan, Belle arched against him. Paul answered with a soft grunt and dragged his lips down her throat. He lapped his tongue at the well, then licked his way wherever flesh was exposed.

Belle pressed her pelvis into his hard length, reveling in the shockwaves of pleasure that rippled through her. Cool air brushed her chest. Somehow he’d opened the buttons down the front of her dress. How, when his hands urged her hips onward?

She glanced down. His tongue! He’d flicked them open with his tongue. Just the thought was enough to... He nudged her shift down and closed his mouth over her breast. Arrows of delight shot down to her groin.

“Oh my!”

A deep groan was his only response. Belle cupped his head to her while he moved from one breast to the other again and again and again until she swore she’d die from the sensation. And just when she thought she could bear no more, she felt him fumbling with his breeches. She shifted, giving him more room. He sprang free, bumping full against her swollen, aching center. All that rested between them

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now was a tiny sliver of cotton.

Belle struggled to reach the ribbons that held her pantalets in place. Paul gently drew her hands away, wrapped his hands around her hips, and rocked her against him. She bit her bottom lip in an effort to keep from crying out. She wiggled closer until he was wedged into the cleft of her body and ground herself along his ridge.

Paul tossed back a silent cry. She curled her hands over the sofa back, riding him hard while the sensation built. He urged her on, harder, faster. Everything centered on that single point, the place where they were almost one. Belle felt like she would explode. And then she did. Seconds later he followed, spilling himself in the folds of her petticoats.

They rested foreheads together while the fire inside cooled. With each heartbeat the awkwardness between them grew once more. Someone should say something, shouldn't they?

Belle eased back and looked into his eyes. "Here we are almost as close as two people can be, and you feel like a stranger to me."

Paul plucked her from his lap and quickly adjusted his clothing. "I'm sorry, Belle. This is all my doing. I never meant things to go this far. I think it'd be best if I moved back to my own place."

She tugged him around. "It was my doing, too. You will not take the blame."

A half-smile lifted the corners of his mouth, but never reached his eyes. He traced her cheek with his thumb. "Then we'll share it. I'll see you in the morning." He dropped a kiss to her lips, then darted for the door.

"We still need to talk," she said as his fingers closed around the handle. "Now more than ever."

"Not tonight." He glanced over his shoulder. "I've already said much more than I intended."

Belle longed to play dumb, but she'd done a fair share of *talking*

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herself tonight.

* * *

Belle arrived late for church. If asked, her excuse would be the Fourth of July celebration preparations—which wasn't exactly a lie. She, Retha, Daisy, and Stony spent the early morning helping Mrs. Cyrus set up the food judging booths. Ladies were quick to drop off their entries before they dashed off for church. Belle was grateful for the distraction. She just wasn't ready to face Paul this morning.

Luckily, people still milled about in the aisle this morning. Pammy was on Sid's arm. Both beamed smiles. Mrs. Freebush and Mr. Tucker sat together in the center pew, laughing at each other like two schoolkids. Belle looked around. Everyone paired yesterday was still side by side. Joy filled the air. At least the marriage committee had done some good.

Belle made her way to the first pew, greeting people as she went. Paul stood up front talking to Brady and Mr. Cyrus. So far he hadn't seen her. But Florine sure had. She flashed Belle a smile and waved.

"Where did you disappear to last night? I looked around and you were gone." Her voice was loud enough for Grace to hear in Virginia.

Silence dropped like a heavy curtain around Belle. She knew her cheeks flamed. She could feel the heat. Paul kept his face turned from the congregation. No doubt he was suffering the same fate. A touch to her elbow pulled Belle's head around. Cal hovered behind her, his gaze steady on Florine.

"Belle was tired last night so the good reverend and I saw her safely home." He escorted Belle to her pew as conversations picked up again.

"That was unexpectedly nice of you," she whispered.

"Even *I* can be a gentleman when the need arises." He gave her a wink and settled back to wait for the sermon.

Meaning what? That Paul couldn't? Panic raced through Belle's heart. Had he seen what they'd done last night? Heat swept through her

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body. She dared a glance his way. He studied the hymnal cradled in his big hands. She had to know.

“What did you do last night?”

“I stood guard duty.”

“Over Jessop?” She gave a small laugh.

“In front of the parlor.”

His voice was low, for her ears only. But she swore everyone heard, especially when Paul turned the second the words died and looked their way. Belle wanted to crawl into the nearest hole.

“Why?”

His reply was a noncommittal shrug.

* * *

Paul stepped behind the lectern. One by one the congregation quieted. People focused on him. Some smiled. Everything was normal, except him. Belle crowded his mind. He moved and spoke out of habit, listening but not hearing, responding automatically. Nothing squeezed past the image, the sweet feel of Belle in his arms.

He cursed himself a thousand times over for letting things go as far as they had the night before. At least he'd had some sense about him and hadn't gone inside her. But, God knew, he wanted to, and no matter how much Paul told himself he regretted last night, he also craved to have more. To have her completely.

He drew in a breath, forced a smile, and read the announcements as he scanned the gathering. New couples sat together. A few touched fingers on the little space of pew between them. Cal guarded Belle, just as he had guarded them last night.

They'd nearly startled the life out of each other when Paul had whipped open those parlor doors. Cal's only explanation was that he figured he owed Paul one. Paul let it go. Last night it was an annoyance; this morning he was grateful Cal stalled Florine's attempt for information.

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He read from the book of Psalms. They sang a hymn, passed the collection plate, blessed the money given. That's when Paul's luck ran out. He stared down at the hastily scribbled notes that made up his last-minute sermon. He was going somewhere with these rambling thoughts. But where? Still he pressed on, tripping over words and sentences that normally flowed with a life that inspired others. And all he could think about was the buttons down Belle's dress and wonder how quickly he could get them open.

This is ridiculous.

He stopped in the middle of a sentence and curled his fingers over the edge of the lectern. "I'm sorry. All I can think about is all those pies and preserves waiting to be judged. My mouth is watering something fierce. It's a beautiful day to celebrate our country's birthday. I doubt the Lord would mind if we called the services over and started the festivities. Besides...I'd be willing to bet more than one gentleman out there is anxious to share that picnic with his lady."

Cal chuckled. "Then maybe us losers should do the judging so you winners can have room for the picnic."

"Fair enough." Brady jumped up and waved everyone to the doors.

One problem solved, but that left one remaining. He watched Belle wander out with everyone else. If he wanted to talk to her, now probably wasn't the right time. They didn't need the town gawking at them. They needed a little privacy...but not too much. Waiting for their picnic was time enough. That left Paul at loose ends for the moment.

He followed the crowd to Main Street where the women set up tables of canned goods, breads, pies, and cakes for judging. Paul watched the judges from a discreet distance. It was the first time since he'd arrived that he didn't have to choose. He didn't know if he appreciated the break or felt left out.

Jars of peaches, pickles, cucumbers, and beets beckoned him. Grace had left behind a jar of strawberry preserves for judging. Paul felt

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cheated. No one's preserves rivaled Grace's. Tomatoes, okra, green beans. Paul's mouth watered. The agony doubled when he caught a whiff of blueberry cobbler.

Cal snapped off one of the sweet pickles and popped it in his mouth. So far he'd made all the right noises over each entry, just as the other judges did. But he had a long way to go. If he didn't pace himself and the amount of food he stuffed in his face, he'd never make it to the end.

Florine looped her arm through Paul's. "Come help us judge the sewing. With Millie gone we really need a third to break any tie."

Paul chuckled. "I don't know one stitch from another. How can I judge?"

"You know what's pretty."

"True. But shouldn't you also judge on the amount of work that went into each piece?"

Florine smiled and tugged him along. "That's why you'd be perfect. Come on. Belle should be joining us shortly."

Now things were starting to make sense. "Quit pushing, Florine. I think you've done enough matchmaking these last few days."

At least she didn't argue the point or deny the obvious. In the end Paul was grateful. Judging together gave him and Belle back some normalcy. They were friends with a common goal. But once the ribbons had been awarded and those picnic baskets came out, things turned awkward once more.

"Why don't you stake us out a nice shady spot? I'll grab the basket and join you in a few minutes." She draped a faded red-checked cloth over his arm and was gone before Paul could agree. And, although he didn't much like walking to the pasture behind the cemetery by himself, Paul had to admit it was much better than doing so as a couple where everyone could stare at them.

He selected a patch of grass beneath a towering cottonwood tree as

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far from curious onlookers as he could get. To double their chance for private conversation, Paul made sure the trunk was between them and everyone else.

Belle wasn't far behind. She hoisted their picnic basket with two hands. *Probably has enough to feed an army in there.* Right now food was the last thing on his mind.

"How's this?" He waved his arm over the cloth.

Belle glanced around, then smiled. "Perfect." She set the basket in the middle. She tossed back the cover and hauled out a jar. "I brought a jar of Mrs. Cyrus's brandied apricots. I thought—"

Paul placed his hands over hers. "We need to talk."

A blush covered her cheeks. She hugged the jar to her chest and looked everywhere but at him.

"Belle...last night was—"

"Just as much my fault as it was yours. There's no need to concern yourself. It won't happen again."

"Yes...it will."

Her gaze slowly slid to his. "Paul, it was wrong."

"No, it's the first right thing I've done in a long time. And if you think I...we can go about life as if it didn't happen, you're wrong. There's no going back. There's no pretending it didn't happen."

He'd spent years wanting her. A taste would never be enough. He peeled her fingers from the jar and wrapped her hand in his. "But I do regret that I compromised your reputation last night."

Her gaze was steady, unwavering. "I have no intention of marrying you."

Paul traced the veins in her hand. "I don't blame you, not with everything that's come to light about me these last few days."

"That has little to do with it."

"How can it? I must seem like a stranger to you."

"Well...you're certainly not the man I thought you were," she softly

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replied.

That was an understatement. He still wasn't the man she thought.

Belle slipped free of his gentle hold and hugged her arms around her midriff. Why was this so hard? She knew what she had to say, why couldn't she say it? It's not like they were strangers. They'd known each other for years. Everything was ruined. Neither of them was the same now. Before she'd known what she wanted and didn't want. Now...

She pushed to her feet and wandered to the tree trunk. No answers were written in the bark either. All she could do was spit it out. If it meant losing Paul...

"You need a sweet, dutiful wife, Paul. I can't be that. I won't be that. You need someone traditional...like you."

Traditional? Paul didn't know whether to laugh or...what. He was as far from traditional as a man could get. He stared at his minister garb. Hell, he didn't know who he was anymore. Maybe Brady was right. Maybe he had spent the last four years being a martyr. From one extreme to the other.

Paul couldn't say he resented being a preacher. He loved being able to help others, to listen, to offer guidance when asked. It sure beat living on the edge of hell. But he did resent the constant battle to keep a rein on the demons that haunted him. They tore him up inside. Surely there had to be some middle ground.

He glanced up at Belle. Her back was straight, stiff. He could feel the tension even from this distance. She was his middle ground, his lifeline, and he'd been fighting that for years, too. It was time to take a chance before he lost that opportunity for happiness, too. If she were any other woman, one of the ones from his past, Paul would have taken her long ago. But she wasn't just any woman. She was the woman he loved. How much of the truth could she handle? A traditional husband might be quite appealing after she heard who he really was.

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Paul plucked the daisy from the grass. He stared at it for a moment while he gathered his courage. A gentle breeze ruffled the petals. A bee drifted by, paused, and lit. He crushed flower and bee in his fist, relishing the sting that pierced his hand. Life, passion still coursed in his veins begging to be unleashed, but could it be controlled?

He opened his fist and tossed the contents aside. His palm throbbed, a reminder that it was now or never.

"I've seen you do smarter things." Belle squatted down before him and flicked the stinger from his hand. "I don't know if I have anything in the basket to ease the pain."

As she started to rummage among the food, Paul caught her wrist. "I'll be fine. And I've done more stupid things than this. In fact, I have a list five times the length of my arm of stupid things I've done. Starting...or ending with hiding from myself."

He stretched to his feet, pulling her up with him until they were face to face. "I'm about as far from traditional as a man can get. I'm more like Cal than I care to admit."

She lifted a brow. "Then you've done an excellent job of hiding it all these years." But he hadn't, had he? There were hints, inklings from Grace and Jake that there was more to Paul than met the eye. Belle had always brushed the talk aside as fanciful notions.

He let her hands drop and leaned against the tree. "If you knew me before, you wouldn't have liked me. I was just like Cal. Maybe worse because I was arrogant, cocky, self-absorbed. I knew it all."

She gave a soft laugh. "I find that hard to believe." Smiling, he glanced her way. Belle's breath quickened. Had his smile always devastated her this like?

Paul watched her eyes widen, her lips part. He tucked his hands behind his back to keep from reaching out and yanking her body against his. Nothing must stop him. She had to know. They couldn't go on until she did.

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“Go ahead. Ask the rangers.” He jerked his head toward town. “They’ll tell you. Ask Brady. He can tell you, too.”

Disbelief was replaced by a look Paul could only describe as fear. He could nearly read her mind. *He truly is a stranger.* A part of him screamed not to tell her the truth. So she thought him traditional. What harm was there in that? Certainly not as much as her thinking him a murderer and reprobate.

Paul shoved away any attempt to lighten the atmosphere. He couldn’t keep this inside any longer. If that meant old Paul would come staggering back, then he’d deal with that later.

“I could out drink, out gamble, out...whore any of them. They held me up on a pedestal. A false god to worship.” He squatted down, picked up a twig, and stripped away the bark. Anything to keep from seeing the condemnation in her eyes when the final word died.

Belle knelt down with him.

“I sucked in the adulation like a dry rag. I was the best. I knew it, they knew it, and we let the world know it. If they needed a sure-shot to bring a man down, they called on me. I never missed. Never.”

“Until?” There had to be an until. Why else would they be here now? He glanced her way. Her heart thudded against her breastbone. Belle clutched her hands in a death grip, like she didn’t want to know but couldn’t help standing there.

“Frank Jessop and his gang robbed a bank in Dallas. They took a hostage. A young woman. We followed for days. Her father rode with us. Finally cornered them on a deserted ranch just west of Houston. I went in. The sure-shot. Never missed. Cocky. Arrogant. Jessop knew who I was. He knew who his hostage was. He held her in front of him, a gun jammed against her temple.”

Paul felt tears well up and blinked them away. He wasn’t in a sweet green pasture any more. He was on a hot dusty ranch with the taste of revenge heavy in his mouth.

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"I gave him one warning, then aimed. He ignored it. I fired. He jerked the woman in front of him and fired back. His bullet slammed into my chest just as mine hit hers. The last thing I heard was Jessop's laugh. The last thing I saw was the blood, the life pouring out of her." Paul swallowed hard and stared ahead. "Her name was Marissa Harrington. She was my little sister. She was just starting to plan her wedding." His gaze settled on Belle.

She smothered a cry and took a step toward him. Paul waved her back. "I don't deserve your sympathy. I murdered my sister. Yes, it was an accident, but my arrogance put the bullet in her chest."

Tears shimmered in her eyes, but she honored his wishes and stayed put. "So, you came here to repent."

He gave a humorous chuckle. "Or hide, as some people think. But I haven't regretted coming here or being a minister."

"Then what do you regret?"

"That I seem to be losing the will to fight the man I used to be. Last night—"

"Was passion, not arrogance. There was nothing wrong in it. You said so yourself."

"Not even if it opens the door to the man I used to be?"

She placed her palm on his chest. "You don't give yourself enough credit. That man no longer exists. If he did, you certainly wouldn't have helped me save Frank Jessop's worthless life. And you wouldn't have been worried today about my reputation."

He slipped his hands around her waist. "But where does that leave us now? I want to be with you, Belle. I want to make love to you all through the night." He butted his forehead against hers. "I'm a minister, for crying out loud. I can't condone, much less participate in something like that. I'm all twisted up inside."

If he wanted answers from her, Belle couldn't give them. There had to be a solution somewhere. She shivered as his teeth nipped at her

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earlobe. Wedging her hands between them, she traced the outline of the ridge below his waistband. Paul sucked in his breath through his teeth.

A woman's scream yanked them apart. Shoving Belle behind him, Paul jumped around the tree trunk. Sid lay sprawled on the ground. Mark stood over him, an axe handle raised high over his head while Pammy screamed for help. Blood oozed from Sid's head.

Paul crouched low, reaching for a weapon that wasn't there. He grabbed the jar of apricots and sprinted across the field.

Belle had never seen a man move so fast. She stood there, rooted in place, breath held. Paul shouted one warning. Mark glared back at him and reared his weapon. Paul hurled the jar. It smacked Mark square in the chest. He gasped for breath and staggered back. Paul leaped up and kicked the weapon from his hand. Mark cried out and fell to his knees.

Pammy slid to a halt on the grass beside Sid. He struggled to his elbows. She forced him down and cradled his bloodied head on her mint green skirt. Somehow Belle forced herself to move. Everything happened so quickly, like a crazy mixed-up dream. She didn't know who to help first.

Mark looked like he'd kill anyone who tried to come near him. Pammy dabbed her petticoat against Sid's head. And Paul looked like his every nightmare had come home to haunt him. In that instance, Belle understood the demons he fought. No wonder he felt unworthy of her. He feared the man she might one day have to deal with. But Belle didn't. Beneath it all, he was still Paul.

Brady ran up to them with Cal and Stony at his heels. "Hanson, what the blue blazes did you think you were trying to do?"

Mark jerked his uninjured hand toward the couple. "He took my woman." He sounded like a child whose favorite toy was stolen.

Pammy whipped her head around. "I'm not your woman."

Brady hauled Mark up by the collar. "I think a night in jail oughta cool you down a bit."

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“Get him over to my office,” Belle said. “I’ll check his wrist.”

“My wrist is fine and I don’t need your help,” Mark spat out. “I can take care of myself.”

“Suit yourself. We’ll see how you feel in the morning.” Belle turned her attention to Sid. “How about you?”

He smiled up at Pammy. “I think I’ve got the best nurse in the world.”

“That knock to the head addled your senses,” Cal said. “She can nurse you better at the doctor’s office.” He and Stony grabbed Sid’s arms and pulled him to his feet. Pammy tossed everything back into their picnic basket and followed.

Paul hadn’t moved. He stared into the distance. Belle dusted her hand down his arm. On tiptoe she dropped a kiss on his cheek.

“Thank God you were here.” Belle searched his face, the sadness there. He needed something more, something to let him know everything was all right. She knew now what Doc had teased her about all along—she loved Paul. Now Paul needed to know it, too.

“Paul, I—”

“Belle!” Florine raced toward them. She waved a yellow paper in the air. “It’s from your sister Prudence. Oh, Belle, I’m so, so sorry.”

Belle snagged the telegram. *Ma and Pa dead*. Four words. Nothing more. She looked up at Paul. Her mouth moved, but nothing came out of it.

* * *

Belle felt like she was moving through a dense fog. The world she knew no longer existed. She couldn’t think, couldn’t feel, couldn’t function. A puppet had more life than she did and definitely more energy. Why couldn’t she move? Why couldn’t she feel? Surely the grief should have been more than she could bear by now.

Oh, but it was. It hovered on the horizon. A dark cloud waiting to consume her. Her parents were dead. Gone forever. She didn’t want to

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think about it. But there was little else she could do.

Poor Prudence. To have to go through this alone. Belle's heart ached to be there. To take the brunt of this from her and shield Prudence and her other siblings from the harshness of death. No, that wasn't quite true. Belle's first instinct was to turn to Grace. To let Grace take over and handle everything. But Grace wasn't here and nothing could get her home quickly. The responsibility was Belle's.

Paul took over. Somehow he'd led her back to the boarding house. Within minutes, friends swarmed about, waiting to help but not knowing what to do. Their sympathy threatened to snap the delicate thread holding Belle together. Grief slammed into her. She didn't have time to give in to it. She needed to do...something. She needed to get moving.

Belle curled her fingers around Paul's bicep. "I'll need you to come with me." For a thousand reasons, none of which had to do with him being a preacher. "Could you saddle a couple of horses? No, hitch a wagon. My brothers and sisters will be coming back here."

"I'll take care of it." Brady dashed out the door.

Florine hurried forward. "What can I do?"

"Get a telegram off to Grace. Tell her I've gone on and will give her more news when I get there."

She followed her husband's hasty exit.

"Cal, I need to get there as quickly as possible. I can't afford to stop for the night. I need you and Stony to go ahead and take a fresh team of horses to the layover shack. Paul can give you directions."

Stony nodded and was off to saddle the horses.

Cal didn't budge. He scuffed his boot tips against the floor like a schoolboy. "Belle, ma'am. I sure am sorry for the loss of your parents, but I've got a prisoner to watch."

Why did she feel he was using this as an excuse and there was a deeper reason he didn't want to help? "Jessop hasn't budged since you

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brought him in. He lies as close to death now as he did then. Brady and the other men can watch him. We won't be gone that long."

He opened his mouth, then clamped it shut. Something else *was* going on. Belle simply didn't have the time or the patience to pull it out of him right now. And it looked like it would take a fair amount of pulling to drag whatever it was to the light of day.

Cal smoothed his hair back with one hand and slipped on his hat with the other. "We'll meet you at the shack then."

"Once the horses are ready, come back and Daisy'll set you and Stony up with some vittles for the trip."

Back ramrod straight, he walked out the door. Belle turned to the next problem.

"Daisy, you and Retha care for Jessop while I'm gone. Come. I'll show you what needs doing. Mrs. Cyrus, if you could help me gather up a few things for my trip, I'd appreciate it. Stuff some vittles in that picnic basket. Make a separate packet for Cal and Stony. We can eat on the road."

* * *

Paul watched her walk off. Daisy and the Cyruses trailed her. He was the only one left with nothing to do. But the biggest responsibility was yet to come—to catch Belle when she stopped running from her grief. Judging from the way she was rattling off instructions, it was going to be soon.

He followed her to the boarding house. She zipped around like a crazy person, grabbing this, stuffing that, tossing out more information to poor Daisy. He wondered if Belle heard half of her own instructions.

Paul caught her elbow as she rushed by and swung her against him. "Enough, Belle. Don't do this to yourself. Don't shut your emotions away. It's not healthy. I should know—I've been doing it for years."

She stared at him, white-faced and trembling. The facade of authority crumbled. Grief washed over her face. "Oh, Paul. Ma and Pa

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are dead. I feel so...helpless.”

“I know, sweetheart. I know. Just let it all out. I’m here. I’ll always be here.” He drew her into the comfort of his arms.

CHAPTER 10

Paul never knew four people could be so quiet. The only sounds that surrounded them were the wagon wheels grinding along the road and an occasional snort from one of the horses. They spared little on conversation—just enough to get by. It was just as well. Anything that came out of Paul's mouth right now would be gibberish.

Belle sat in the wagon bed with Stony while he and Cal rocked side by side on the seat. Stony's and Cal's horses trudged along tied up to the back side. The change-over at the Tanner line shack turned out to be a good idea. The horses that came with Cal and Stony were better rested and ready to go. Which was more than Paul could say for the rest of them. He and Cal took turns at the reins through the night and caught snatches of sleep when they could.

He stole a glance Belle's way. She stared at the trees as dawn lit the passing landscape. What was on her mind? Her parents? Or the spectacle he'd made of himself the day before? She saw firsthand why

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marriage to him was a mistake. And, sadly enough, that gut reaction that sprang from him proved to Paul he had no business considering it. It killed him to know he'd been right all along. Yet the demon was unleashed. Now what? Did he play minister by day and vigilante by night? The very notion was laughable. Talk about being miserable.

And what about Belle? She knew now he wasn't the traditional man she once tagged him to be. Was his alter ego any more appealing? Paul doubted it. They'd gone beyond friends these last few days. There was no going back. Other men might rejoice; Paul felt cheated. Somewhere there had to be answers and solutions to all this. Damned if he knew where to find them.

He looked her way again. Belle's smile chased the goblins away...for now. But they'd be back soon enough. He could have killed Mark Hanson yesterday.

Could have, but didn't. There's a difference.

Some of the tension left Paul's shoulders. He *could* beat the demon. Joy surged through his veins. All he'd hoped to accomplish was his. He'd reached that middle ground he sought. But would Belle see it that way? Worry crept back in.

* * *

Belle watched a hawk soar across the sky. If she could fly like that, she'd have been home the day before. Home. Odd to still call it that after all these years. She didn't consider it home. When she'd lived there, all she'd wanted was to leave. But what else should she call it?

The wagon rocked her eyes closed. Belle forced them open. She couldn't fall asleep now. They were almost there. Paul sure looked like he could use a good night's rest though. So did Cal for that matter. They'd shared the reins since she and Paul met up with them at the shack late yesterday. But if they slept during their breaks, Belle never saw it. They stayed on the bench and hunkered down with arms crossed and their hats tucked low over their faces.

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Stony was the only one of them who took advantage of the pallet of blankets in the wagon bed. Belle had tried to do the same through the night. Any sleep she got was in snatches. Still, the thin padding was easier to sit on than that hard bench. The food went untouched for the most part. Except for Stony, no one seemed to be hungry. She, Paul, and Cal nibbled, but that was all.

She studied the three men. All had that dangerous air about them—even Paul, despite his clerical collar. Belle tried to blame it on morning whiskers, but it was more than that. Something about their manner, the way they moved and watched all around them, screamed these were men who knew their business. Paul's skirmish with Mark sure showed that.

How many times had they ridden together this way? Hundreds? Thousands? And Paul fell easily into the old habit. This was the man Grace and Jake had seen glimpses of years ago. And while Paul might consider that part of himself dangerous and unpredictable, Belle had never felt safer, more protected.

Stony tilted his hat back, stretched himself awake, and looked around. "Pretty land. Near the river?"

"Yes." Sometimes too near. A time or two they'd nearly lost their ramshackle cabin. Pa never stopped planting on the riverside though. No matter how futile, he refused to give up.

"When's the last time you saw your folks?"

"We convinced Ma and Pa to spend Christmas in Cottonwood Bend. They stayed at the boarding house." It had been a tense visit at best. Ma enjoyed herself. So did her brothers and sisters. It was Pa they'd had a problem with. He and Jake just hadn't gotten along. More than a time or two, Paul had taken her father out for a stroll. Or they'd spent the day fishing. It had helped soothe her father's sour disposition and made for a much nicer visit.

They neared the tiny knoll at the edge of the Marshall property.

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Belle scooted to her knees and braced herself against the bench. As they rounded the crest, waves of sweet corn greeted them.

Stony gave a long whistle. That just about said it for all of them. Belle didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the irony. For the first time in a long time, her parents were going to make good money. What a cruel twist of fate that they should die now.

Smoke curled from the stack in the roof. Someone was up. Sheets hung to dry, dancing in the morning breeze. The gentle wind scattered the smoke trail and carried the sound of a bellowing cow their way. The front door swung open. Belle's five-year-old brother dragged the milking pail behind him. Two-year-old Bessie waddled along in his wake. Seconds later, Charity dashed outside and snatched her up. Bessie squealed and struggled for freedom. It was more than a fourteen-year-old could handle.

Belle stood in the back of the wagon. "Charity!"

At the sight of her older sister, she set Bessie on her feet and ran to Belle. Grief twisted her face. Paul scissored the reins back, stopping the team between the barn and the cabin. Belle leaped to the ground.

Charity tossed herself into Belle's arms. "It's awful. Just awful," she cried.

Frowning, Bessie sucked on her finger and studied them.

"Where are the others?" Belle asked.

"On the other side of the north field, digging...digging..." A sob tore the words away.

"Everyone in town says we got a sickness," her little brother said. "They quarter reamed us."

Quarantined? Belle peeled Charity away and held her at arm's length. "What's going on?"

"They think Ma and Pa died too quick. They're saying we've got a disease," she said through hiccups. "No one will help. No one will come out. I stayed back with the little ones. All the rest are up there."

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She jerked her head toward the field.

Belle smoothed her tangled hair, then blotted her tears away. "Where are Ma and Pa?"

"The barn. They wouldn't even bring us a box for them. Prudence and Susannah dressed them in their Sunday best and wrapped them up in blankets. But we can't keep Bessie out of there. She keeps wanting to go to Ma."

As if to prove her right, Bessie pointed her wet finger toward the barn. "Mama. Eat."

Paul scooped her into his arms before she dashed off in that direction.

"I'm still working on breakfast," Charity told them. "I'm not used to throwing a meal together."

No, her responsibility had been watching the youngest children. "What happened? How did they die?"

Charity smeared the tears from her cheeks. "Ma had a growth. She kept getting weaker, then took to bed, then left us. Pa went crazy. He ran around the farm like his feet were afire and his butt was a-catchin'. He was screamin' something fierce. Then he clutched his chest and fell. By the time Prudence reached him, he was gone."

Paul shifted Bessie to Belle's arms. "You settle things here. Cal and I will find the others."

"Mama. Eat."

With a smile, Belle finger-combed the child's wispy dark hair. "We're going to eat. Don't you worry. Paul, could you bring those baskets of food inside before you go? Charity, you can finish the milking and Mason can gather the eggs."

She waited until they were out of earshot, then pulled her money pouch from one of the baskets and handed it to Stony. "Could you go into Sleepy Eye and get two coffins? I'm sure you won't take no for an answer."

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He gave her a broad smile. "No, ma'am, I won't."

* * *

It wasn't hard to find Belle's brother and sisters. Paul and Cal just followed the trail of footprints to the sheltered glade behind the north cornfield. In typical fashion, Taber leaned against his spade while his sisters did all the work.

Paul had never seen a lazier boy. The girls sure never got away with letting others do their work. One cross look from their mother set them in motion pretty quick. Of course, Taber could move fast too when threatened. He probably figured there was no one left to hold him accountable any more. The boy was in for a shock. Belle would never stand for it. And if he wound up living with the Tanners, Grace wouldn't think twice about taking a switch to his lazy backside. Or at least she'd make him think that.

Cal tsked. "Younguns should never have to dig their parents a grave." His horse nickered a response.

The sound pulled up Susannah's head. She tossed her shovel to one side and barreled toward Paul. The promise of the woman to be filled out her figure. Already pretty, she was growing into a beauty. If only she could stay clean long enough to attract the opposite sex. Susannah always had her hands in the garden. Plants and flowers turned green with her touch.

Paul tied the reins to a cornstalk in time to catch her. She hugged him as if her life depended on it.

"It's okay. We're here now. Where's Prudence?"

A muttered curse from Cal pulled Paul's head up. Cal slapped the reins around a cornstalk and stomped toward the grave site. A skeleton crawled from the hole. At least that's what it looked like. If he hadn't known to find Prudence there, Paul never would have recognized her. Her once perfectly rounded figure was now nothing more than a bag of bones. She looked closer to forty than she did nineteen.

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Cal reached her before Paul could take a step. Pru craned her neck back to look up at him. The effort threw her off balance. Cal snapped an arm around her waist and hoisted her effortlessly to the surface. Pru teetered there for a second or two, trying in vain to dust the dirt from her pale gray dress. Then she sagged away in a dead faint. Cradling her, Cal eased her to the grass.

“Boy, get my canteen from my horse.”

Taber moseyed along like he had all the time in the world.

“He meant now, not next week.” Paul snagged the canteen and hurried to Pru’s side. The boy merely propped himself against the tree and closed his eyes.

Cal wet his bandanna and blotted it over Pru’s face.

“Susannah, what in the world’s happened to her?” Paul asked.

She knelt down beside them. “She hasn’t slept since Ma and Pa passed. She’s exhausted herself.”

“Exhausted? She’s wasted away to nothing.”

Susannah passed her gaze over Pru as if seeing her for the first time. How could she have not noticed?

“Oh...dear. I...” There was nothing she could say to justify her inattention and she knew it. She sat back and covered her mouth with her hands.

“She’s taken on a lot since Ma took sick. I always thought we shared the load. I took care of the vegetable garden. Charity took care of the animals. You don’t suppose she’s sick like Ma, do you?” She blinked away tears. “The neighbors are saying we have a disease. No one will come around.”

Cal glanced her way. “There’s nothing here that a lot of rest and some solid food won’t cure. She’s worn herself down to nothing.”

Pru started to come around. Her gaze focused on the man hovering over her, then widened. She forced her hands under her to push upright.

Paul gently held her in place. “It’s okay, Pru. He’s a friend.”

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Sighing, she relaxed. "Silly me. Fainting away like a...like a..." She draped her arm over her eyes. "Grace is really going to fuss, isn't she?"

"Grace and Jake are in Virginia visiting his family, so you have a reprieve. But you still have to deal with Belle."

Pru winced. "Even worse."

"Susannah and I will go ahead and smooth the way. But don't expect Belle to hold her tongue too long. Judging from the way you look, unless you've been sick, you deserve the lecture."

Pru sighed. "I've just been busy."

"Too busy to eat?" Cal snapped.

She peeked at him from under her arm. "Who *are* you?"

Paul left them to their introductions. After a little prodding, Susannah agreed to ride back to the cabin with him. Belle glanced up when they walked in. One look asked him a thousand questions. Paul started with the most important news.

Worry instantly knitted her brow. To her credit, Belle resisted the urge to scold Prudence or to rush to her side. She used the precious minutes before Pru came home to make up their parents' bed, then had Paul drape a blanket around it for a little privacy. Still, the advance warning wasn't enough for Belle. She sucked in a gasp the second she saw her, then clamped her lips shut on any comment.

"Charity, pour Pru a basin of hot water so she can wash up." Belle pulled back the blanket. "You look like you could do with a little rest. By the time you wake up, I'll have hot tea and honey biscuits waiting for you."

"Ma and Pa?"

"Will have coffins. Don't you worry. The men will see to the graves. I'll make sure you're there when it's time."

Pru didn't have the strength to argue. Paul wondered how she'd managed to keep up this long. A weary sigh reached them as she

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slipped into bed. Belle jumped back into serving up breakfast for everyone. At least Bessie was happy. The baby sat in her chair devouring a piece of bread. Strawberry jam spread from one end of her face to the next.

Cal nudged him. "You ready? Stony should be back soon. We don't want to let the sun get too high on us."

A polite way of saying the bodies would start to smell. Cal's willingness to help in light of his comment over Doc's burial surprised him, but Paul supposed Cal had a more personal interest now that he'd gotten to know Belle. They rode back to the gravesite in silence, just as they had on the entire trip here. Stony showed up about an hour later and added his back to theirs.

It took some digging. The earth a foot down turned to clay. It was a wonder Damon Marshall ever grew a thing on this land. His sheer stubbornness wouldn't let him admit defeat and he was too proud to accept outright help—unless it was disguised as something else.

They finished just before dusk. Paul couldn't say for Cal and Stony, but he was exhausted and hungry. Sleep would be sweet tonight and not soon enough coming.

Back at the Marshall homestead, he and Stony loaded the coffins into the wagon while Belle gathered her brothers and sisters. The rest had done Pru good. She actually had some color in her cheeks. Still, Cal refused to let her walk to the grave site. Instead, he hoisted her onto his horse and they followed the wagon on. Paul and Belle followed on foot. Charity and Susannah cried all the way while Mason clung to Belle's skirts. Taber was his normally sullen self. Bessie seemed content to have Paul carry her.

All went the way funerals always did, but Paul had said the words so much this last week they sounded hollow. He doubted anyone there really heard them anyway. With the last syllable, Belle stooped for a handful of dirt.

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Bessie pointed to the coffin. "Mama go night-night?"

Belle let the dirt filter through her fingertips. "Yes, little one. Mama's gone night-night." She pulled her into her arms while the child stared into the grave.

Mason tucked himself closer. "Are we orphans now, Belle?"

* * *

Belle didn't blame the men for looking away. It tore her heart up, too. Paul looked up at the sky. Cal acted like he had something in his eye. And Stony ran his red handkerchief under his nose. They didn't fool her for a minute.

She draped her arm around Mason's small shoulders. "Ma and Pa are gone, so yes, we are all orphans. But we do have each other and we'll get along fine."

"But where will we live?"

"With me or Grace. We'll decide later."

"Can I live with Grace? She has boys there."

That made sense. There were also men. Taber and Mason needed that, too. But it was unfair for Grace to take on the burden of everyone. "Good idea. The boys will stay with Grace and the girls will stay with me."

"We aren't going anywhere." Pru pulled in a weary sigh. "We have a corn crop to harvest."

"I see." Cal picked up the shovel. "Do you want to be next to your father or your mother?"

Pru frowned up at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I think you know." He measured a small distance between his thumb and forefinger. "You're this close to joining them. Harvesting corn should just about push you over that edge."

Guilt shifted her gaze away.

"We'll talk about this later." Belle herded them toward the wagon. "We need to let the men finish up. I've got a fine supper waiting."

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Taber kicked up a divot of grass. "Your cookin' stinks. I've had better hog swill."

The final straw. Belle had had enough. Her parents might have been willing to put up with his mouth, but she damn sure wasn't. "You'll eat what I've fixed or go to bed hungry. It's as simple as that."

He had the good sense not to talk back.

* * *

Paul watched the wagon head home. Whoever Taber lived with was going to have a handful.

"Someone needs to yank that boy up good and proper," Stony said.

Cal retrieved the shovels from behind the tree. "He just lost his mother. How do you expect him to behave?"

Paul peeled off his jacket and draped it over a branch. "He's always been that way. His parents never seemed to notice."

Cal stared down the road. "Well...it's not our place to set him to rights. It's a family matter."

Considering how Cal had been watching over Prudence, Paul wondered if he was saying that to remind himself more than anyone else.

"That's a fact." Stony tossed his jacket next to Paul's. "Let's get to movin'. It'll be dark before we know it."

* * *

Belle watched Pru rock slowly back and forth. They were finally alone, enjoying the night air. The younger ones were sound asleep as were the men. Paul slept on the pallet in the back of the wagon. Stony chose the barn. And Cal stretched out his bedroll on the other end of the porch.

"Did you get enough to eat? Do you want me to fix you something else?"

Pru clucked her tongue. "Between you and Cal I've had enough to

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feed a cow.”

“Sorry, Pru. I’m just concerned.”

“Well, I didn’t do it on purpose, I can tell you that. Ma took sick when we came home at Christmas. She was in a good deal of pain and took to her bed a lot. Of course, the laudanum the doc gave her might have had something to do with that. She tried to heal herself, but whatever she tried never made the pain or the growth go away. I took on the housework and caring for her. I just forgot to eat regular. I was too busy and Pa was in all his states. Some days he’d break down weeping something fierce. Other days he’d be a regular sourpuss, grumbling at everyone and everybody. Living here these last seven months has been pure hell.”

Her mother’s weariness at Christmas now made horrible sense. She’d been sick a lot longer than seven months.

“Why didn’t you say something? We could’ve helped. You could have all come to live with us.”

Her laugh held no humor. “Pa wouldn’t leave this place. Ma wouldn’t leave Pa. She said she had enough to battle and worry over without the two of you tugging on her to come to you.”

Knowing her father as she did, Belle could see why her mother would be concerned about leaving him alone.

Pru turned her face to the stars. “She wanted me to stay with you at Christmas. She was so proud of you and Grace and what you’d accomplished. Proud of the men you’d chosen. She thought I could do well, too. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t tempted. Then I remembered how she cried and cried after you left. I just couldn’t stand to think of her crying like that over me.”

Ma had cried? And here all this time Belle had thought her parents wanted them gone. Not once in the years since had her mother mentioned any regrets or that she missed them. Belle and Grace had always figured they were one less mouth to feed, one less burden. To

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hear different now...

Pru scooted to the edge of the rocker. "Don't get me wrong. Ma was peacock proud when Grace married Jake. And mighty boastful you were working with the town doctor. She loved lording it over our uppity neighbors. She only wanted the best for all of us. If that meant having us leave, she accepted that. I just couldn't do it knowing how she would cry." She leaned back. "Or maybe I wasn't as brave as the two of you."

"In hindsight, it turned out to be a good thing you stayed."

Pru nodded. "Sure was. Even if I did let myself get this way. Trust me. It wasn't intentional. So...has Reverend Paul asked for your hand yet? Ma figured he'd be doing so soon."

Everyone sure liked to plan her life. "I'm not inclined to marry."

"Why? Don't you love him? You sure do sparkle when you two are together. Just like Grace and Jake do."

Belle avoided her gaze. "The idea of marrying just doesn't appeal to me."

Pru leaned back and started to rock again. "It does to me. When I think of how much Ma and Pa loved each other, how devoted they were to each other, I can't wait to have the same thing for myself."

Belle didn't want to disillusion her with the truth. Someone needed to have good memories of their father—Belle sure couldn't. Not after what he'd done. Sharing that news with Pru served no purpose.

"It's been a long day. We should probably get some sleep."

"Probably. I can't believe I slept the day away and I'm still ready for bed. I know you must be exhausted." Pru pushed herself from the chair. "This might sound cruel, but I sure enjoyed having Ma and Pa's bed all to myself. Susannah kicks and Charity hogs the bed."

Belle remembered those days all too well. The only time it was nice to be wedged in a bed with one or two other people was when it was cold.

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“But there’s plenty of room for you, too,” Pru said as she opened the door. “I’ll sleep against the wall so you can crawl in when you’re ready.”

“I’ll be along shortly.” Tired as she was, sleep was the farthest thing from her mind. Belle searched the stars for the Big Dipper. How many times had she and Paul sat outside in the dark picking out constellations? Most of the names she’d learned from him.

Love Paul? Of course she loved him. And that love seemed to be growing by leaps and bounds of late. But marriage? He was her best friend. Marriage would change everything and she just couldn’t risk losing him.

Who was she fooling? Everything was already changed. Belle couldn’t think about Paul without thinking of how wonderful it had felt to be with him *that* way. She craved more of it, much more.

The wagon creaked. Belle shifted her gaze that way. Paul sat in the bed watching her.

“I thought you were asleep,” she said.

“Can’t sleep until everyone is down for the night,” he said. “Old habit. Why don’t you come over here before we wake Cal up?”

A tempting proposition. Paul gave her a hand up as she crawled into the back of the wagon. Rather than scoot over, he pulled her into the crook of his arm. Belle nestled down. It was nice, safe, comfortable. That’s how it always was when she was around him.

He braced himself on one elbow. “Does your disinterest in marriage have anything to do with what happened with Mark yesterday? Because—”

Belle placed her fingertips over his lips. “I thought you were brave. Mark was hell-bent on killing Sid. If you hadn’t been there... Well, let’s just say I was awfully proud of you.”

A frown tugged his eyebrows closer. “And yet marriage doesn’t appeal to you. Why? I love you, you know. I have from the time I first

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laid eyes on you.”

“Sometimes love isn’t enough. When I think of my parents...” Belle bit off the words. She could tell Paul anything, couldn’t she? She gave a humorless chuckle. “Pru thinks they had this wonderful, loving, devoted marriage. Odd how we can live in the same small cabin and see things differently. I used to think not much could go on in there without the rest of us knowing. I just don’t have the heart to tell Pru the truth.”

He traced his thumb along her jawline. “Every couple has its rough spots. Considering how your parents had to struggle to make ends meet—”

“Pa slept with other women.”

There. She’d said it out loud. Paul’s hand froze. Yes, it was a shock.

“Remember that girl I told you about? The one in trouble I refused to help?” When he nodded, she went on. “I saw her in the woods a few days later. She and Pa were talking. She begged him for help. He agreed, then he lay with her right there. The next week she was dead.”

“You think he killed her?”

“I don’t know what to think. I’d like to say no, but...I couldn’t look him in the eye after that. I was so grateful for the chance to leave home. I think about him with her, then I think about all the husbands who go to Fran’s.”

“Not all husbands go outside the marriage. I would never do something like that to you...to us.” He dropped a kiss to the curve of her neck. Belle closed her eyes against the sweet sensation.

“Yes, but how long before you put other restrictions on me? As my friend, you supported my decisions, my work. Now...”

“Belle, I’m far from traditional. I—”

“That’s just it. I don’t know who you are. Until a few days ago, I thought you were Paul, the kindhearted preacher. Then I find out you were rough-and-ready Paul, the Texas ranger. Yesterday, you were

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Paul, the knight jumping to the rescue. How do I know I won't be marrying Paul, the domineering, overbearing, arrogant husband?"

He rested his hand on her flat belly. "Other than giving you my word, I don't know what else to do."

"You can show me."

"How?"

She eased her hand to his neck and pulled his lips to hers. "I'm sure you'll think of a way."

He kissed her then, deep and slow, just how he wanted to love her. It'd be so easy to give in. But they both had reputations to uphold, and a town filled with well-meaning, yet nosy friends. Paul sealed the kiss and danced his fingers to the bottom curve of her breast where it met her corset.

"Make love to me, Paul. Now. Here."

Was that the proof she wanted? Somehow he suspected she needed more than that. "What if you get pregnant? What will everyone think? What will they say?"

"It's safe for now. Later, I'll take the same herbs I give to Fran's girls. As for the town...I don't expect we'll be doing it in the middle of Main Street."

"That's not funny, Belle."

"And neither is a marriage where one of the parties is miserable."

He felt like she'd jammed her fist into his chest and squeezed the life out of his heart. "You think marriage to me would be miserable? Don't you love me?"

It broke Belle's heart to see the hurt on Paul's face. And she hated that she was the one who caused it. But she feared marriage could be more like a prison sentence than a lifetime of bliss.

She grabbed his face in both her hands. "Of course I love you."

Some of the anguish disappeared, replaced by confusion. "I don't understand."

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She nestled her head on his chest. "I don't think you would intend marriage to be miserable. But there would come a time when you would want me to conform to society's rules. You're doing it already by refusing to make love with me outside of marriage."

He tossed up his hands. "This is ridiculous."

An awful silence fell between them. Belle didn't know how long they lay there staring at the sky. It seemed forever.

"I know that I love you, Belle," he finally said.

Belle held her chin steady and forced her gaze to stay strong. "I need some assurance beyond your word that marriage will not fetter me."

His laughter held only frustration. "How in the world can I do that?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something." She smiled sweetly.

He had to be crazy to refuse what she was offering. This was every man's dream—to love a woman without ties. His hands found her waist, then her bottom. He rolled toward her, pressing his hardness against her.

"But it will take more than making love, won't it?"

She didn't answer. She didn't have to.

"What, Belle? Just tell me."

Her gaze caressed his face. "I don't know. All I know is that I'll know it when I see it." She nibbled at his lips. "I understand there are many ways to entice a man."

A chuckle rumbled up from his chest. "There are ways to entice a woman, too. I can take you to the brink and leave you hanging. By the time I'm done with you, you'll be begging for marriage just to satisfy your...needs."

Belle laughed and wiggled against him. "I do believe you've challenged me."

His hands slid to her breasts. "A challenge it is. If I win, it's

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marriage. If you win, it's...whatever you'd like to call it."

Paul had the feeling he was fighting a losing battle, but it was going to be a glorious war. And if he didn't stop kissing her soon, he'd never make it through the first skirmish.

"Off to bed with you." He eased away and rolled his back to her.

Belle snuggled up to him. "I think I'm comfortable right where I am."

She lay there, the tips of her breasts stabbing him in his back. He'd never make it through the night. He pulsed against the confines of his breeches. His body demanded satisfaction...now. His only hope was that she'd fall asleep soon.

Belle smiled. Paul could pretend disinterest all he wished. She knew better. The tension in his body betrayed the slow, deep rhythm of feigned sleep.

She wiggled her hand between the opening in his shirt and raked her fingers over his chest. He quivered beneath her touch.

"You know," she whispered in his ear, "it really isn't a fair challenge when I really don't know what I'm missing."

He laughed softly. "Oh, I suspect you have a fairly good clue."

"Uhm." She flicked her fingers over his nipples. "But...if you really loved me, you wouldn't leave me so...needful."

"Now, I do believe that's supposed to be the man's line."

"Do you always have to be the man?"

Ah, there it was. Part of the proof Belle needed. Everything seemed pretty clear now. She needed to know what she said and wanted mattered. No, more than that. Love must never destroy their friendship, their equality. Marriage must never destroy her independence, her own mind. Was giving way now going to fix all that? No, but hopefully the right something would come along on its own. Paul knew he couldn't force it.

For now...this was a nice start. And how in the world could he

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refuse when she was so enticingly persistent? He shifted around, pushing her down into the pallet.

“Ah, sweet Belle, I thought you wanted me to be the man.”

Her response was swallowed in a kiss Belle swore reached her toes. He traced his tongue around hers over and over, kneading her lips until they ached for more. Belle tugged his shirt from his breeches. One by one she slipped the buttons free from their holes. She marveled at the strength hidden beneath the cotton. Nothing about him was soft.

She followed ridges of muscle up his chest, pausing at the scar Jessop's bullet had left. She shrugged off the uneasy feeling it left in the pit of her stomach and continued on. Over his shoulders, down his arms, scooting material away as she went. Paul shrugged the shirt off and away. His skin was hot to her touch, smooth and hard, and all she wanted was to press herself into him.

As if reading her mind, Paul's fingers made quick work of the buttons down her dress. Belle tossed it into the corner with his shirt. A flick of her wrist loosened the ties at her petticoats. They joined the pile. Only then did his lips leave hers.

“Wait!” Belle sucked in a breath, unhooked her corset, and tossed it aside. She fumbled with her shoelaces, then yanked them off.

Paul's hands replaced hers at her garters. “Let me.”

He lifted her calf to his shoulder and slowly rolled down the stocking, nipping at the exposed flesh. Belle twitched beneath him. Part of her longed to press her legs together, to hide from such intimate exposure. The other part wanted to scream for him to hurry. He tossed the stocking aside and moved to the other leg. Once bared, he danced his fingers up her thighs, outside, inside, outside and in, wadding her shift up as he went.

Belle grabbed the hem and hauled it over her head. Paul sucked in a sharp breath and yanked her pantalets down and off. She lay beneath him, open for all to see, waiting, aching. He traced circles around her

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breasts, brushed his fingers over her belly button, then dipped lower. Touching, but not touching. Teasing, tempting, building the ache more and more.

“Oh...Please.”

He left her long enough to strip himself bare. Belle cursed the darkness that kept her from seeing him fully, then blessed it for fear seeing him would make her shy. She reached for him, wanting him close, in her arms. He slithered up her body, taking his time, tasting as he went. His fingertips dusted her inner thighs and paused at the top. Belle tensed, waiting. A feathery touch stole her breath.

She smothered a cry and opened herself to him. Still he evaded her grasp. With the first caress of his thumb, Belle surrendered. He traced slow circles around and around, driving her to the edge of madness. He probed further, deeper. Belle tensed.

“It’s okay, love,” he whispered, and twirled his tongue around her hard nipples.

Belle pressed hard against his fingers. Pain stabbed through her. He stilled, giving her time. Slowly, gently, he pushed deeper, higher, building her up once more. She rocked with him, oblivious to everything but the wondrous pleasure tightening her core. She felt the peak, the rush, the pure joy, and then he made them one.

She wrapped arms and legs around him, wanting to never let go. He filled her body, mind, and soul. She rocked with each pounding thrust, reveling in the strength that rippled beneath her fingertips. If she lived to be a million years old, she knew she’d never get enough of this, of him.

Belle grabbed his face in both hands and kissed him deep. He groaned against her lips and seated himself hard as release shuddered through him.

CHAPTER 11

A rooster's crow jerked Paul and Belle from a sound sleep. It was no wonder—the bird had decided to perch on the end of the wagon to announce morning was on its way.

Belle lashed out with her foot. "Shoo! Or you'll find yourself the main part of a chicken stew." It fluttered off, squawking all the way.

"Crazy rooster. The sky isn't even light yet." She cuddled up to Paul.

He dropped a kiss to her forehead. "No, but it will be soon. Much as I enjoy lying here with you, I doubt either of us will be very comfortable once that sun hits us."

"Just a few minutes longer."

Smiling, he combed her hair away from her face. "Just long enough for someone to discover us lying here pretty close to naked?"

Most women would gasp and clutch covers to their bosom. Belle merely draped a leg over his.

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“We’ll tell them it was too hot to lie here fully clothed.”

They might believe that. She had on her shift and drawers. Paul wore his breeches. And it was sweet bliss to lie here tangled in her arms. Already Belle drifted back to sleep. He let himself follow.

The rooster crowed again. Judging from Cal’s muttered curse, it had chosen the porch as its next target.

Belle stretched awake. “That does it. Where’s the hatchet?”

“Do you want me to shoot him?”

“Could you?”

“Now that would really rouse everyone, wouldn’t it?”

Paul relished the feel of her taut body against his. He scanned the sky. Dawn was creeping in. Did they have enough time? Okay, *he* had enough time, but what about Belle? He slipped his hand into her waistband and tugged.

“Paul, I...” Her halfhearted protest died when he touched her center.

He watched the pleasure build, then wash over her, and knew he’d never seen a more beautiful woman. Before the tremors died, he peeled her drawers away, shoved his breeches down, and thrust himself inside her. Heaven. That’s what being with Belle was like. Pure heaven. And he couldn’t get enough of her.

Afterward, he stayed buried within her. Her dark hair was a tangled mess; her shift was bunched up to her breasts. And she had that seductive look in her eyes of a woman well-loved.

“You look positively wanton.” He kissed her lips and felt himself grow hard again.

Belle dusted her hands down his back. “I do believe this means I win.”

Smiling, he dropped a kiss to the tip of her nose. “I’m not quite ready to concede.”

“What will it take to make you cry uncle?”

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Good heavens that sparkle of mischief in her eyes was enticing! “I’ll know it when I see it.”

Belle giggled. “This ought to be interesting.”

He cupped her buttocks and lifted her higher. “So will trying to be discreet once we get back to town. Because, sweet stuff, if you think I can stay away from you now, you’re crazy.”

“That almost sounds like another challenge.”

“Nope. Just a promise.”

He took her again, hard and fast. Belle rode with him all the way. They reached the summit together as the first rays of the sun pierced the sky.

They dressed none too soon. Stony stepped from the barn as they slipped the last of their buttons in place. He cast a glance their way, lifted his eyebrows, then walked on to the outhouse.

“Do you think he suspects?” Belle asked.

One look at her hair tumbled about her shoulders answered that question. “Uhm...yes.” He lifted a tendril.

A blush crept to her cheeks. She pulled out the remaining pins and tried her best to tame the heavy mass. She finger-combed the tangles out, gave a few twists and tucks, then pinned it back in place.

“Better?”

Paul nodded. He liked it better down, wrapped around her shoulders. He jumped to the ground and gave her a hand down. The scent of breakfast cooking drifted their way—hot coffee, ham, a whiff of soda biscuits.

Belle tsked. “I didn’t mean for Prudence to have to worry about breakfast.”

“Could be Susannah cooking.”

She looked at him as if he’d grown an eye on his nose. “If there isn’t dirt in it, Susannah’s not interested.”

A wave of heat hit them as they reached the open door. Cal manned

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the stove. He whipped a wooden spoon through a pan piled high with cut up potatoes, carrots, and onions.

He spared them no more than a peek when they walked in. "We need to move the table outside. It's too cramped and hot to eat in here."

Paul couldn't agree more, although he suspected Cal's reason had more to do with children being too close to him than the heat of the cabin. While Belle helped her sisters rally the younger ones, he and Stony set the table and chairs in the front yard. By the time morning chores were finished, Cal had breakfast ready.

The man had truly missed his calling and never ceased to amaze Paul. He'd watched Cal cook a hearty meal out of a single can over a campfire. Given the benefit of a full kitchen, he made a feast with scrambled eggs as light and fluffy as his biscuits. It made a person wonder what Cal could do if left to his own devices.

No one complained, that was for sure. Not even the normally sullen Taber. Pru ate sparingly, but at least she ate. Another stretch of unbroken sleep had added more color to her cheeks. Now all she needed was a little more meat on her bones.

Cal pushed another biscuit her way. Pru waved it back. "If I shove another bite in my mouth, I'll be sick."

He tossed it into the basket with the others. "It'll keep. Give us more to eat on the road."

Belle glanced at the clear blue sky. Morning was already well on them. As much as she appreciated the meal, they had to get going. "If we start gathering everything now, we should be able to get on the road by noon. We can hit the layover shack a little after nightfall, then reach Cottonwood Bend late tomorrow."

Pru's sigh echoed across the table. "I told you yesterday we aren't going anywhere. That corn has to be harvested. It's a good crop. We can't let it go to waste."

Belle stacked the tin plates while she searched for some argument to

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toss back. She could come up with only one. *Young women and children alone?* That would have raised her own hackles, she couldn't very well throw it at Pru. And it *was* a good crop.

"How much tending does it need?" Cal asked.

"Pa was to pick a hundred and fifty bushels of sweet corn now. The rest was going to wait for fall. He was going to sell it for feed and to a mill."

"Then we'll pick the bushels now and you can come back in the fall for the rest."

Indecision warred in Pru's eyes. Maybe a little fear of change, too. Duty bound her here. That and the fact their parents' graves were here. But she and the others couldn't survive on their own. It had always been hand-to-mouth living. And while they might be better off than when Belle and Grace had lived here, that could change in a heartbeat.

Stony cleared his throat and braced his forearms on the table. "Excuse me, Miss Prudence, but...I'd like to buy the place."

The plates clattered to the table. Belle jammed her fists onto her hips. "Without asking Daisy?"

"Why should he?" Paul said. "He's the one who has to do the work."

And Paul wondered why marriage didn't appeal to her. It was clear she wasn't going to get anywhere trying to explain that to him.

Belle arched a brow as she stared down at him. "Oh, really? And I suppose Daisy will be giving tea parties while he's out in the field all day?"

He raised his hands. "Now, Belle—"

"You think it's a lark in that place?" She jerked her arm toward the cabin. From the corner of her eye, she saw Susannah herd the younger ones from the table.

"Imagine having to cram in there. Your only light in the day is a single window and you pray in the summer enough air will come

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through it and the door to take away the heat. You put together meals out of scraps and the little you can get from selling eggs. And every year you push out one baby after the other because your husband has *needs* he wants fulfilled."

"Belle, stop!" Pru shoved to her feet. "That's not fair. It wasn't just Pa." A crimson blush spread over her face. "It was Ma, too. I heard her...them. She begged him, sick as she was. She begged him."

"Yes, because—"

Paul grabbed her arm. "Belle."

She bit off the words. They shouldn't be said. She blessed Paul for stopping her in time.

He slid his hand down to hers, then gently tugged her to her seat. "Belle's right. It's hard work for both of you, Stony. And it's hardscrabble land for farming."

"But not for breeding horses." Excitement lit his face. "If you agree to sell, Pru, I'll pay you half up front and the rest when the corn crop comes in. All you need do is take your personals. I'll buy all the rest."

"It sounds fine to me," Pru said slowly. "But you'd need to make sure Pa's partner doesn't have a problem with that. He has a part interest in that crop."

Stony clapped his hand on his thigh. "I'll talk to him this morning. Is he in town?"

"No, he's..." Her gaze drifted Paul's way.

"You?"

Paul watched the flickering emotions on Belle's face as he nodded. He'd give anything to know what was on her mind that very moment. Surely she'd have something to say, some questions to ask. Instead, after what seemed a lifetime, she went back to gathering the dishes.

Stony clapped him on the shoulder. "Well...what do you say?"

Paul tore his gaze from Belle. He'd made a mess of things these last few minutes, opening his mouth to say the first stupid thing that came

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out. So much for hoping the right words would come, and there wasn't much he could do to correct the problem now.

"I'd say it's a deal. When the crop is harvested this fall, we'll split the money three ways. I think Pru will agree your work should earn you something."

Stony let out a whoop that scattered the chickens. "Wait till Daisy hears. I'm gonna send her a telegram right now."

"What about the sweet corn?" Pru asked Paul. "Pa planned to deliver those bushels to you by week's end."

Cal cocked back his chair. "What in the world were you going to do with one hundred fifty bushels of corn?"

"I was taking it as part payment. The Cyruses bought half for the store and the boarding house. The rest will go to some of the families who are having a hard time of it."

Laden with dishes, Belle dashed into the house. Paul swore he saw tears in her eyes, but for the life of him he couldn't figure out what he'd done wrong this time.

Stony scratched at his whiskers. "I can get it picked, no problem. But I don't know if I can get it to you by the end of the week."

Cal laced his fingers together and cracked his knuckles. "We've already lost a good start on the morning. I can't see that one more day will matter. If we all pitch in, we can get the corn done by the end of the day and take it with us tomorrow."

It was a good plan. What surprised Paul was that it came from Cal.

Pru nodded. A smile followed, then an outright laugh. "Goodness. What in the world am I going to do in a big town like Cottonwood Bend?"

"Well, ma'am, I suspect Belle's gonna be needing your help at the boarding house what with Daisy leaving and all," Stony said with a hearty chuckle.

She glanced toward the cabin. "Do you think she'd let me?"

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“She’s going to have to hire someone. Might as well be her kin.”

Pru fanned her fingers against the base of her throat. “Hire? You mean I’ll be making money? I’m going to talk to Belle right now. As sad as I’m feeling, this is still a wondrous day.”

Stony shook his head and laughed as she ran off. “If she thinks your little town is the big city, what’s she going to do when she sees Austin?”

Cal watched her hurry away. “Lord telling, but I’d sure like to see. I bet she’d be like a little girl in a candy store.”

And who could blame her? In the space of a few short minutes, Pru’s whole life had turned around. The world’s weight slipped from her frail shoulders. Now if only he could find the magic words to turn Belle around. Obviously, they didn’t involve Paul speaking his mind. While he longed to please her, he couldn’t be something he wasn’t. That wasn’t fair to either of them and they needed to straighten that out pretty quick.

* * *

Belle plunged her hands into the water and hauled out another dish for Charity to dry. Susannah and Charity’s chatter wasn’t enough to take her mind off Paul. A part of her wanted to cry, but she honestly didn’t know if it was from despair or joy.

She didn’t know what to think...or feel. Just when she’d thought the worst of him, she discovered his soft side once more. She didn’t understand any of this and she certainly couldn’t begin to understand him. He had more colors to him than a chameleon.

To think he had put in his own money to help her family out. Then to give again to others less fortunate. It swelled her heart to bursting. How could she not love him? How could she not want to spend the rest of her life with him?

She pulled the wandering emotion to a halt. There was still the other Paul to consider. The one who minutes before had reared his manly

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head. It was all too much to deal with.

Pru danced into the cabin. Words tumbled from her so fast Belle couldn't keep up. Not that she had to. She understood all too well what it felt like to finally be free of the burdens this farm laid at a person's feet.

Susannah's eyes brightened. "What about me, Belle? I'm a hard worker. Can I work there, too?" She clapped her hands and did a little jump. "I can take care of the vegetable garden."

Belle let their joy chase away her doldrums. This was the chance of a lifetime for them. She wiped her hands on her mother's threadbare apron. "There's plenty of work for both of you. And it sounds like plenty of work to do before we can leave. I'll take care of things here. The rest of you get to the cornfield. By the time you're done, I'll have supper waiting."

The three snatched their bonnets from the nail by the door and ran out as they tied them in place. Taber shuffled along behind them. The little smidgen of joy she felt went with them.

She watched them load into the wagon around the bushel baskets. Paul glanced her way, setting her heart to racing. For a second or two she thought he would walk over. Instead, he climbed up and took the reins.

Mason tugged at her skirt. "How many do they have to get?"

"One hundred and fifty."

His eyes widened. "That will take forever."

She squatted down to his level. "Many hands make quick work. They'll be done before we know they're gone. Come, you can help me. We have a lot to do, too. We have to pack, set the house in order. Tomorrow all of you are coming to live with me."

"And Grace?"

Smiling, she cupped his small head. "Grace, too."

There was more to pack than Belle had realized. The clothing was

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simple. Somehow over the years, her mother had managed to find satchels for everyone. She packed it all, even that belonging to her parents. Belle didn't know what she would do with it, but she knew she couldn't leave it behind.

Next came the personal possessions. Rag dolls, books, a wooden something Taber had whittled. Belle fingered the button eyes on Bessie's doll. She'd had one just like it as a child.

"I wonder what happened to it." She hadn't thought about that doll in years.

Bessie reached for it. "Mine."

Belle gave it to her and went about her business. Her sisters could finish gathering their personals. Someone needed to go through her parents' things.

She found her mother's healing basket first. Unless one of her sisters wanted it, Belle planned to keep it. She peeked inside at the neatly folded packets of dried herbs each labeled in her mother's tiny handwriting. Scissors, mortar and pestle, and cotton cloths were tucked in a side pouch.

Ma's sewing basket was next to a pile of mending. Belle set both aside for the long trip. With any luck, they'd have the mending finished before they reached Cottonwood Bend. The quilts from the beds could be last. Her mother had labored hard over each one, just as she had the rag dolls. Belle refused to let them stay behind.

Her father's pipe and tobacco lay on a shelf above the stove. Belle didn't know anyone who smoked a pipe, but it might be something of Pa Taber or Mason would want some day. Pa's knives, his rifle, and fishing poles were also theirs. As for his collection of dime novels, Charity would want those. She always had her nose in a book.

Belle pulled out the drawer on the table beside her parents' bed. A faded daguerreotype was nestled on top of linen handkerchiefs. She lifted it out. A young, smiling couple dressed in wedding attire stared

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back at her.

“Ma and Pa on their wedding day.” She traced the edges of the pewter frame.

Emotion clogged her throat. Belle set the portrait aside and pulled a satin box from the drawer. She knew without looking what she’d find. Pulling in a breath, she lifted the lid. Her mother’s brooches winked up at her. One was of marcasite and shaped like a big bow, the other was an ivory cameo. Ma always wore one to church. The pearl hatpins inside never saw the light of day. They were from a time long before Ma had had to deal with children at her feet.

“Enough reminiscing.”

She grabbed the lid with trembling fingers and tried to jam it down on top of a lifetime of emotions. The box slipped from her fingers, scattering the contents over the floor. On hands and knees she retrieved brooches and pins. That’s when she noticed the wooden box tucked under the far corner of the bed.

Made of smooth knotted pine with rope handles, it took two hands and a lot of muscle to haul it out. The maneuvering brought Mason and Bessie to her side. Once out, the three of them sat cross-legged in front of it.

“What’s in it?” Mason asked.

“I don’t know. Let’s see.” Belle shoved the lid back on its hinges and nearly cried. Her rag doll lay on top, her name embroidered on the dress. Grace’s was next to it.

Bessie pointed. “Mine.”

Belle lifted the doll. “No...mine.” Tears she’d thought she could control won. She let them drift to the point of her chin and fall unchecked to her lap.

Mason rubbed his hand in circles over her back. “There, there now.” A haunting version of their mother’s words. Somehow they comforted Belle. She pulled in a breath and dug further into the chest.

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Letters from her and Grace, Ma's mother and sisters. It looked like every letter she'd ever gotten. Belle set them aside. Ma's family needed to know she had passed away.

She shifted through the rest of the box and found trinkets they had all made her from school. Prudence's spelling award. The first blue bonnet from Susannah's garden, all pressed and dried.

"What's that?" Mason pointed to a round hatbox. Had Ma saved some of her hats all these years? Wouldn't that be a treat to see.

Smiling, Belle lifted the lid.

"Wow!"

She couldn't have said it better than that. Twenty dollar gold pieces gleamed up at her.

"How much is it?" Mason asked. "More than a dollar?"

"Oh, yes." Closer to five hundred from the look of things. But where in the world did her mother get this kind of money and why was she hiding it? Unfortunately, she'd never find out.

Belle closed the lid and shoved the box back under the bed. It made her nervous just knowing that much money was in the cabin. Should she tell anyone? No. It was bad enough she was on edge, no one else needed to be. They'd get it back to Cottonwood Bend first, then she'd tell the others. And it was going in the bank.

The letters to family. That would occupy her time. She could take the other wagon to town to post them, get another telegram off to Grace. The idea of the fortune sitting unguarded bothered her. She shoved worry aside. It had been here all this time, safe and sound—why should that change now that she knew about it?

After settling Bessie and Mason down for naps, she found paper, pen, and inkwell where they'd been all her life—in the left kitchen drawer. As with Ma's other things, this, too, was neat and orderly with the paper stacked to ladylike perfection.

Tears welled up again. No matter how little they'd had growing up,

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Ma had always insisted her daughters learn to be ladies. Belle forced her chin to stop quivering.

She'd taught them other things as well. How to be self-sufficient, to survive, to grasp at every chance life offered. She hadn't just pushed Belle and Grace out of the nest. She'd shoved them the first time opportunity came their way. And she would have done the same to Prudence had she not fallen ill.

Belle glanced at the bed where the box was hidden. Maybe Ma was making a chance for her daughters. They sure had one now. Ma would be proud the farm was sold, that her girls would be moving up. Belle smiled. Of course, she'd still insist they find good matches. Marriage was fairly high on Ma's list of doing well. No doubt she would have joined the ranks of those pressing her and Paul to wed.

Her mother had three sisters all living in Philadelphia near Belle's grandmother. She'd never met any of them. It seemed a shame, but there had never been any money to take trips and certainly no place for any of them to stay should they come to visit. Belle added an invite to each letter. Between her and Grace there was plenty of room. And who knew? Maybe one day they'd take a trip up there.

By the time the letters were done and she had the wagon hitched, the little ones were up and ready for fun. Belle didn't know how much fun they'd have in Sleepy Eye, but the promise of penny candy was all they needed.

Her reception in town was much as it had always been, cordial and open. If the neighbors had any fears about disease from her family, those were obviously soothed by the news Stony had bought the place. She sent her telegram and posted the letters at the mercantile store, then answered general questions about her well-being and that of Grace.

"Is that all you need today, young Belle?" Mr. Whitehead said with a broad smile.

"Two peppermint sticks and a bag of penny candy, please."

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"Will do." He wrapped the sticks and handed each to the children. "No eggs for me today?"

"Afraid not. We used them all for breakfast."

He shook his head. "Your ma has the best laying hens west of the Mississippi. There wasn't a day went by without her bringing in eggs for my store. They fetched a good price, I'll tell you that."

Enough to save five hundred dollars? "I'm sure Stony will be willing to continue the arrangement."

"Already has. I'm buying fifty bushels of sweet corn from him. Told me to come around at supper time and pick them up."

She gave him her sweetest smile. "Good for him." Stony needed all the help he could get.

"I was going to wait until then to bring him this telegram. But I suppose you can take it."

Belle slipped the paper from his fingers.

"It's from his wife," Mr. Whitehead said. "She's catching the first stage out soon as you get back."

"What wonderful news." Belle had known Daisy for a long time. Farm life was out of the question. Oh, she might grudgingly join Stony, but it wouldn't last beyond winter. Somehow she forced her smile to stay put as she bid Mr. Whitehead good day.

"Your ma was a fine woman, Belle," he said as she opened the door. "A very fine woman. Sure was sorry to hear of her passing."

And not a word of her father. It wasn't surprising considering how cantankerous he could be at times. "Thank you, Mr. Whitehead. I appreciate your sympathy. She always spoke highly of you, too."

He acknowledged that with a single nod as Belle left. She settled the children, took up the reins and didn't look back.

The others were home from the field by the time she returned. Their wagon was parked in the shade of the barn, bushels of corn piled in the bed. Six hot, sweaty, and exhausted people sat against the barn. Taber

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lay under the wagon sound asleep. Everyone else looked like they weren't far from doing the same.

Paul took the harness to unhitch the team. "Where'd you go?"

"To town. I sent Grace a telegram and posted letters to Ma's kin. Stony, this came for you. Daisy's heading this way once I get back."

His broad smile said it all.

Belle did her best to ignore it. Anything she said now would come out hurtful. "You look like you could all do with a swim in the river."

Cal looked at her from under his hat brim. "Last one there is a rotten egg." No one bothered to move. One by one they drifted off to sleep.

Belle followed Paul into the barn. "I understand Mr. Whitehead from the mercantile wants to buy some of that corn."

"That's what I heard." He patted the first horse on the rump, releasing her to the tiny pasture behind the barn.

She traced her fingers along the edge of the stall. "So...how did you manage to convince Pa he needed a partner?"

He shrugged. "It didn't take much. We talked a lot during their visit last Christmas. We struck a deal."

"I didn't know you knew anything about farming."

"I don't." He released the second horse. "But Jake does."

"Jake?"

"Actually, it was your mother's idea. She liked what Jake had to say. He had good plans, but your father refused to listen and Jake didn't like him enough to take the time to friendly up to him. So your mother came to me and asked me for help. Said they were both too stubborn for their own good." Laughing, he shifted his gaze her way. "Imagine that."

Belle laughed. "Imagine...So, this was Ma's idea?"

"Yep. Even offered to slip me the money to buy the seed. Said she had a bit saved up. But I kind of liked the idea of putting in the money

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myself. Made the whole partnership seem more on the up-and-up. Your father sure took a liking to the idea. Probably because he didn't feel like I was trying to tell him what to do. He did the work and I supplied the money for seed. I also found a couple of buyers."

"I can't believe Ma would—"

"Be such a savvy businesswoman? She was sharp, that's for sure." He draped the harness over its hook and faced her.

"I hope Daisy can do half as well here. I can't believe she's actually doing this."

"Why shouldn't she? She loves him."

It felt like a giant hole had opened up between them. "Are you suggesting that I don't love you?"

"No." He slowly shook his head. "I don't know what you expect marriage to be—"

"And you?"

He wrapped his fingers around her upper arms. "Until you came along, I never thought about marriage. I've given you my love and my word. I can't spend the rest of our lives measuring every word I say. I can't be wondering if the next thing I say is the wrong thing or something magical you want to hear. All I can be is myself. That's one thing I have learned these last few days."

"This is about what happened this morning, isn't it?" A stupid question. Of course it was. But where did that leave them now?

Paul dropped his hands. "I think I'll take advantage of that swim in the river while I have a little privacy." He brushed past her and on to the door.

Belle watched him walk away. Maybe she was asking too much. Maybe she was risking her only chance for happiness. Even knowing that, she still couldn't make herself run after Paul. She had to be sure she wasn't making a mistake. But wasn't it a bigger mistake to stand there and do nothing?

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She nudged Charity awake. "Watch the little ones." Nodding, her sister blinked against the sunlight.

Paul glanced over his shoulder as Belle ran up, then fell in step beside him. "Decided to join me?"

"Something like that." She clasped her fingers before her. Why did she suddenly feel so nervous?

Just spit it out. Say it. What's the worst that could happen?

Sadly, she knew the answer and couldn't bear the thought of never seeing him again. Some part of her longed to turn back the clock to the simple time when they were friends.

"You said you never thought about marriage until I came along, but isn't it also true that you didn't consider marriage possible until a few days ago? Only last week you said you didn't consider yourself worthy enough for me. Now you do. Such a quick change. Everything so fast. Paul...we are best friends. Wonderful lovers. But marriage...don't you want to be absolutely certain first?"

"I am."

"And I'm not. No matter how much I love you. Why can't you give me the time I'm asking for?"

"How long, Belle? A week? A month? A year?"

"As long as it takes. If we love each other, isn't it worth it?"

Resigned once more, he laced his fingers through hers. How could he argue with such logic? And didn't he often preach that anything worth having was worth waiting for? Nothing like having words tossed back in your face. He'd be thinking twice before he used them again.

"Care to go swimming with me?"

It wasn't exactly the answer she wanted, but it would do for now.

CHAPTER 12

Home had never looked so good. Belle was stiff, sore, and plain old bone weary from riding in the wagon. She'd definitely lost her touch dealing with children over the past two years. There was more than a time or two she longed to be riding in the corn wagon with Cal rather than to be dealing with the minor squabbles that broke out between Taber, Mason, and Bessie. Pru was much more effective dealing with them than she was. But she and Susannah rode with Cal.

Belle smiled. Cal probably didn't have it so good after all. Susannah hated being still. If she could have paced the wagon bed, she would have. Belle sure didn't have the patience to deal with that and the little ones to boot.

Charity wasn't much help either. When she wasn't sleeping, she had her nose buried in a book and was happy to turn over any responsibility whatsoever to her older sister. It tightened Belle's jaw for sure. But she didn't know if that was because Charity behaved that way

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or because Belle saw a lot of herself there and didn't much like what she saw.

It was pretty close to sunset when they reached town. Still, the clatter of two wagons brought neighbors to their front porches. The Cyruses waved. Florine started to follow them home; Brady pulled her back. Belle blessed him. She needed to settle in before company, even well-meaning company, came over.

Paul and Cal maneuvered the wagons behind the boarding house. Sid, Marty, and Clarence wasted no time coming out to help. Judging from the napkin tucked in Clarence's neck collar, it looked like they'd left supper to do so. Daisy and Retha weren't far behind.

Retha folded Bessie and Mason into her arms. "Such sweet, sweet little younguns. You just come inside and Aunt Retha will fix you a plate of food to fill those little bellies. Then we'll all clean up, tuck in, and sleep snug as a bug." She hugged them tight and carried them into the house, fussing over them all the way. The children soaked up the attention.

Daisy took charge of Belle's sisters. "Grab your bags. I've got a room all ready for you. I hope the three of you don't mind sharing. Supper's on the table, hot and waiting. I'm sure you'll want to clean up first."

Tired as she looked, Prudence still managed to give Daisy a smile. "We've been sharing a bed all our lives; I doubt it makes much difference now."

Daisy stared at her while she struggled for something to say. Finally, she wrapped her arm around Pru's shoulder and led her toward the house. "You're sharing the room, sweetie, not the bed."

"Good," Charity said. "Because Susannah kicks. I never get a good night's sleep."

"Come on you three," Daisy called over her shoulder. "Supper's waiting for you, too."

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Cal didn't wait to be told a second time.

Paul looped an arm around Belle's waist. "You heard the woman."

And she was hungry as all get-out. But they were home now, in the middle of town. Robbery was rare, but Belle just couldn't walk away and leave the money sitting there. "I just have to get this box." She snagged the rope handle and tugged.

He slipped her fingers free. "You can't carry that. Cal and I will get it later."

She glanced around to make sure no one hovered nearby, then whispered, "Ma's got a small fortune tucked away in the chest. Looks pretty close to five hundred dollars."

He let out a low whistle.

Belle poked him in the ribs. "Shh, I don't want the world to know."

"Here I thought you slept in the wagon with me last night because you couldn't stand to be away from me. And all along you were guarding the box."

His feigned hurt did ease her worries, but there was still the matter of moving the box. "Let's just grab a handle, get it up to my room, and shove it under the bed. I'll feel much better once the bank opens."

"Can't you just take out whatever the money's in? Do we have to lug the whole box upstairs tonight?"

But if Mason saw it, he might say something about what was inside. Then they'd all know. Of course, who couldn't she trust in the house?

"Belle, honey, I haven't slept much these last several days. I'm dead tired and half starved. Make a decision."

He may have added the "honey," but there was no mistaking the edge in his voice. And who could blame him? It'd been a long trip for all of them—both ways. Supper smells drifted to them. Even her stomach growled in anticipation of Daisy's fried chicken.

"It's the hatbox. Top right corner." She clasped her hands under her chin while he retrieved it. She measured each sound as she waited. The

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creak of the wagon when he jumped in. The rustle of things as he dug out the box. Rangers' low voices in the barn not ten feet away as they tended the horses.

Paul jumped down. Coins rattled against each other. "I'm guessing you'd prefer to carry it."

"Yes." Belle levered the heavy box to her chest. Fifty feet and they'd be inside. A quick dash through the kitchen, the dining room, then upstairs. She'd slide it under her bed, lock the door, and all would be well.

He gave a weary laugh. "Don't ever play poker, honey. You'd give away your cards the second you saw them." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and led her inside.

They were halfway across the kitchen when the door to the doctor's office swung open. Frank Jessop stood there, naked as the day he was born. A wild look danced in his eyes. Fever...or desperation? One loop of the handcuff dangled from his arm.

"Prisoner runnin'!" Paul shouted.

Jessop darted between them, knocking the hatbox from Belle's arms. Coins scattered everywhere. Paul tackled his legs and slammed him to the floor. Doors—the back, the one to the dining room—banged against their hinges. Rangers swarmed Jessop. Belle hugged the sink board. Everything happened so fast. Less than a minute. And still the man struggled for freedom even though five men held him down.

Cal yanked Jessop's arm behind his back. "Son of a bitch ruined my handcuffs."

"How the hell did he do that?" Sid asked.

"Damn fool." Clarence snickered. "Why the hell didn't you just go out the window?"

"Because I didn't want splinters in my damn balls!" Jessop banged his head back into Marty's.

Marty reeled from the blow. Cal grabbed a hank of hair and shoved

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Jessop's head to the floor. "Be still!"

"Why? So you can hang me?" A leer spread over his face. "Well, hey there, pretty girls. Come to take a gander at a real man?"

They followed the direction of his gaze. The ruckus had brought the ladies to the door.

Jessop chuckled. His gaze settled on Prudence. "Why, I'm a-gettin' hard just lookin' at you."

Cal yanked his head up and smacked it back down into the floor. "Shut your mouth. And you," he jerked his head toward the ladies, "out!" He looked at Paul. "We've got to get him down to that jail. He should have been there all along."

"Agreed. But it's going to be a fight all the way."

A headache beat at Belle's temples. It was all too much. Money everywhere. A violent, uncooperative criminal. Naked to boot. Somebody had to do something.

Belle marched into the office. This was going to end now. She grabbed the bottle of ether and stomped back to the kitchen.

"I've had enough of this." Five heads turned her way. She snatched a towel from the drawer. "Yank his head up. I'll see he gets cooperative."

Cal did as she ordered. Belle straddled the man on her knees. Jessop opened his mouth to make another of his colorful comments. She never gave him the chance. She pressed the towel to his face as hard as she could. Finally, he went limp. The men loosened their hold and scooted back. Paul helped Belle to her feet.

Sid waved the air. "Jeepers, that's powerful stuff. Makes me woozy."

"Don't worry. You won't pass out unless it's right on your face. A couple of whiffs of fresh air ought to do it." Truth be told, having the open bottle near her face made Belle a little woozy, too. More than woozy—nauseous.

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Paul flicked a bead of sweat from his forehead. "Let's haul some breeches on this guy and get him down to the jail before he wakes up."

Cal shifted a sidelong glance Belle's way. "Unless you feel you've got to mend his wounds again."

"Don't get smart with me, Cal. I'm not in the mood for it." Belle picked her way over the sprawl of men's legs. She felt bad enough as it was. She didn't need Cal rubbing her face in it.

She set the ether in the cabinet. Faint gouges marked the wooden floor. Jessop had dragged the bed over to the medicine cabinet and used one of her forceps to pry open the handcuff links. Goodness knows how long it took him. She frowned. How could they have not heard him? Of course, he worked on it at night. He'd feigned unconsciousness and planned an escape.

Everyone in the house could have been killed. All because she'd refused to listen to men experienced in dealing with criminals. Jessop could have been tended in a jail cell. Why didn't she see it? Why didn't she listen?

Belle closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Because she had been too intent on proving she could fill Doc's shoes.

"Doc Belle?"

"Yes, Retha."

She stood in the doorway just inside the room, wringing her hands before her. "They've taken him away. I heard them say they'll be watchin' guard over him all night. None of the men ate supper. Should I take over a basket?"

Belle forced a smile. "Of course, that would be very nice."

"Thanks, ma'am." She turned to walk away, then looked back. "Doc Belle, there's a ton of money scattered all over in here. Where do you want me to put it?"

In the turmoil, she'd forgotten all about it. "I'll get it. You just work on that basket. Nothing's uglier than a starving man."

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Retha laughed. "Unless it's a naked starving man."

Depends on who the man is. Belle ushered her through the door. "You're right about that one, Retha."

* * *

Paul was still shaking from the ordeal. He'd definitely lost his touch for roughhousing with criminals.

"That ought to hold him." Brady rattled the cell door.

"Yeah...well...just to make sure, we're bunking here tonight," Cal said.

Brady tossed the keys on the battered desk in the corner. "Trust me. He ain't going anywhere."

Cal jerked his thumb toward the boarding house. "I've heard that story before. We're staying put. Come morning light, we're taking him on to Austin."

Sid sprinted for the door. "Then I need to go tell Pammy I'm leaving."

Cal tossed up his hands and looked heavenward. "I'm sick of this. Every time I turn around..." He whirled around on Sid. "No. I've already lost one man to *love*." He sneered the word. "I won't lose another. No one leaves."

This was all too much. Cal was overreacting to everything. Paul had never seen him so antsy before. He might be justified in being angry with Belle, but he had no right to take it out on Sid.

"It's all right, Cal. I'll stay while Sid goes to talk to her."

Sid dashed out the door before Cal could object.

"What's wrong with everyone?" he demanded to know.

Paul settled into one of the few chairs in the room. "It was fun when you were on the conniving side of the marriage committee. Now that it's reaped results it's a different matter, isn't it?"

"Shut up." Cal snapped a finger in his face. "None of this would have happened if your lady friend had listened to me in the first place."

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"I'm sure Belle realizes that by now." And if Paul knew her as well as he thought, she was guilting herself up pretty bad.

Cal paced an angry path before the cell. "Crazy. All of it. Love. A lady doctor. You're a preacher. Lost a good man. Kids everywhere. Every time you turn around, a grave's gotta be dug. Love sneaking around every corner."

Paul cocked his head to one side. What was Cal really upset about here? He didn't have the energy to pull the information out of him.

"If you're that determined to stay, I won't stop you," Brady said. "I'll see y'all in the morning."

Clarence and Marty mumbled a good night. It was pretty clear they didn't cotton to the idea of staying. Cal said nothing. He just continued to stomp to and fro.

Sid returned before they could miss him. Judging from his broad smile, Paul guessed his visit with Pammy had gone well. He'd be away as long as it took to deliver Jessop, not a second longer.

"I suppose you're off now." Cal's tone accused Paul of treachery. He shrugged it aside. Whatever burr nestled under Cal's saddle could stay there.

"Yep, sure am." He swung open the door, startling Retha on the other side.

She gasped, then smiled, then laughed. It was a nice change from the woman he'd met several days ago.

"Goodness, you startled me." Her fingers shook as she lifted the basket on her arm. "I thought the men could use some supper."

He waved her by with a smile. "I'm sure they could."

Before she could get two steps in the door, they swarmed her. Paul left them to it and hurried back to the boarding house. He found Belle much as he expected, sitting at the kitchen table staring at the hatbox.

She looked up. There wasn't much need for her to say what was on her mind, Paul knew. He walked up behind her and kneaded the tension

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from her shoulders.

"It was a mistake. Anyone, any doctor, would have done the same thing. Remember, I supported your decision to leave him here. So did Brady. And we're seasoned lawmen. Sometimes even the best of us forget how dangerous a man like Jessop can be."

She slipped her hand over his. "The look in his eyes. I've never seen anyone so...evil."

"There's nothing good about him, that's for sure. Or his brothers either. They've cut a path through Texas, Oklahoma, and parts of Kansas. Killing, stealing, and hurting innocent people just because they wanted to."

"Sounds like I would have been doing the world a favor by letting him die."

"Could you have lived with yourself if you had let that happen?"

Belle craned her neck back to look at him. "No."

"I didn't think so."

"What about you? You have every reason in the world to hate him and yet you helped me save his life."

"It wasn't easy. I kept trying to tell myself I was a better man now. It didn't stop the hate, but it helped me help you." He kissed her forehead. "I've got to go."

She held his hand in place. "I wish you'd stay."

"As much as I want to be with you, you know I can't. I won't have people questioning your morals." He kissed her and forced himself to walk out the door.

Paul was right. That's what frustrated Belle the most. They both stood to lose if gossip got out they were lovers. She was certain there were one or two who imagined they had been for years. It wasn't herself she worried about, but Paul had a lot to lose. A preacher had to be above reproach in the eyes of his flock.

She laughed to herself. What in the world were they thinking now

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that his past had come to light? How many had raised their brows over his skill with a gun? Who had gasped in shock when he kicked the stick from Mark Hanson's hand? Having relations outside of marriage would definitely be the nail in his coffin. He'd lose his job, his standing in the community. Oh, there would be a good many who would still support him, but generally he'd lose the respect he'd worked so hard to gain.

As for herself, Belle had to say she liked the mix of ranger Paul and preacher Paul. They fit him, rounded him out, made him more human, and impossible to resist.

Belle took the hatbox up to her room and tucked it under her bed. For extra measure she locked the door. She tried to join the others at the supper table, but her appetite just wasn't with her. Still, she enjoyed their company, watching them eat, watching the little ones slowly drift to sleep over their plates. Her sisters weren't far behind.

"Off to bed with all of you."

Pru stifled a yawn. "The dishes—"

"I'll take care of them." Belle shooed them off. No one argued. Her sisters picked up the little ones and slowly trooped upstairs.

"That means you, too," Belle told Daisy.

Daisy merely smiled. "I'm too excited to sleep. I might as well be doing something."

"You could pack," Belle said as they gathered dishes.

"All done. I'm set to leave on tomorrow's stage. Imagine me, a married lady. We have our own place, our own business." Her smile faded as quickly as it appeared. "Was it really hard on all of you living there?"

Belle didn't want to lie, but was the truth all that important? "My father was a stubborn man. We could have had it a lot easier if he'd listened to other people. But he always thought he knew better than the next man. Somehow Stony doesn't strike me as that kind of person. You'll do fine."

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Daisy's smile returned, brighter than ever. "I just don't know how I'll sit still on that stage."

Belle laughed at her. "If you don't get any sleep tonight, I don't think that will be a problem."

"I am going to miss you, Belle. You feel like a sister to me."

"I'm going to miss you, too. But we'll write regular. And we're not that far away—only two days by wagon." She felt herself tear up. "Goodness, you'll have me bawling here in a bit. Let's get these dishes done."

They chatted and laughed while they cleaned up and got things ready for breakfast. By the time Retha returned, they were sitting across the table, digging into the remains of a peach cobbler.

"Just in time." Daisy waved her over. "Grab a fork and join us."

Retha stared ahead, looking but not seeing. Her eyes were rounded, unblinking. She groped for the chair and sat.

Belle and Daisy reached for her at the same time. "What's wrong?"

"I did it. I swore I'd do it and I did."

"What?" they asked together.

"I killed Frank Jessop."

They pulled away.

"I woulda done so sooner, but I kept hopin' he'd die on his own."

"What? Why? How?" they asked in unison.

Retha stared at the table. "He came to our ranch nine months ago while my brothers were gone. Killed my parents. Then forced himself on me and my little sister. Left his evil seed in me. My brothers tracked him down. I followed. I kept hoping the horse ride would help me lose it. They finally caught up to him. Beat the daylights out of him, then dragged him behind that horse."

She slowly shook her head. "You'd think that would be enough to kill him, but it wasn't. The rope broke. They were on their way back to get him when some rangers came by. My brothers turned Jessop over to

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them for hanging. I followed them, too. I had to make sure he was dead."

Belle held her hand. "And that's how you wound up here."

"I made it as far as the whorehouse. I figured one of the rangers would eventually show up and I'd find out where he was. It was easy, except..."

She squeezed Retha's fingers. "Except what?"

Her head dropped. A single tear fell to her lap. "I hated that baby from the second I knew I carried him. All I wanted was for him to die. I did everything I could to see I lost him. Then he was born and I saw that tiny body." She turned tear-filled eyes up to Belle. "It wasn't his fault. I blamed an innocent baby. But now justice has finally been served."

Belle suspected revenge wasn't as sweet as Retha had hoped. "Retha, honey, how in the world could you have killed Jessop? There are four men guarding him."

A tear trickled down her cheek, then another, until they streamed. "I dosed a bottle of Mrs. Cyrus's elderberry wine with laudanum and took it over with supper. Once they were asleep, I covered Jessop's face with a cloth of ether like I heard the men say you do. I figured if a little knocked him out, a lot would kill him. I took it from the cabinet when you were picking up that money. Anyway, when I finished, he was dead."

"You're not a prostitute?"

Belle shot Daisy a glare. The woman had just killed a man and that's all Daisy could ask? "Wake Pru and have her sit with Retha. Then go get Paul and Brady. Have them meet me at the jailhouse. Then come back here."

While Daisy hurried off, Belle gathered her healing basket. There still might be something she could do to salvage the situation if she hurried. Not that Jessop deserved saving, but Retha certainly did. The

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woman could have made a mistake. She was upset, might not have known where to feel for a pulse. A thousand solutions popped into her head as she ran the distance to the jailhouse.

The men lay sprawled wherever they could find a place to sit, oblivious to all that happened. Retha's basket of food was open and empty. The cell door stood ajar. Jessop's arm dangled to the floor inches from the brown bottle of ether.

Belle felt for a pulse. Nothing. She slowly shook her head, picked up the bottle, and smiled. "Rubbing alcohol. Merciful heaven, Retha, you picked up the wrong bottle. You didn't kill him after all."

She passed a gaze over Jessop's body. Blood soaked his breeches and shirt. Using her shears, she cut away the material. The stitches she'd so painstakingly put in had ripped open. The blood loss, coupled with what he'd lost before, was too much.

Footsteps thundered down the boardwalk. Seconds later Paul and Brady charged into the building and to her side.

"Is he dead?" Paul asked.

"Yes," Belle said. "But Retha didn't do it." She held up the bottle. "Rubbing alcohol. His wounds opened during the scuffle. This man died of blood loss."

Brady scratched his head. "Now that's what I call justice."

Belle looked up at Paul. "Does it feel like justice?"

He slowly shook his head. "I honestly don't know."

But she did. Nothing would ever bring back what Jessop stole from him or Retha. Somehow they both had to move on and let the past stay in the past.

Sounds like advice you should take for yourself. Belle cursed her nagging conscience and walked away.

CHAPTER 13

“Ma and Pa just died. Shouldn’t we be wearing black?”

Belle stuck a pin in Pru’s hair while she considered the question. She hadn’t really thought about it. Some people did, some didn’t, and no one seemed to think it disrespectful if they did not.

The practical side of Belle pushed forward. Black was awfully hard to keep clean. It caught dirt just by thinking about it. It also faded something fierce and had to be re-dyed often.

She patted Pru’s shoulders. “The people who matter know we mourn Ma and Pa. Ma would call it a waste of money. And she’d be right. You might be doing well now, but you sure don’t want to squander it.”

Pru plucked at her skirt. “But this seems too...pretty.”

Light blue was definitely Pru’s color. It put a glow in her cheeks the dowdy gray never could. But it certainly took some talking to convince Pru to get it. Susannah and Charity, on the other hand, relished the

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chance to have new clothes.

“What’s this material called again?”

“Seersucker.”

Pru glanced at Belle’s bed where her other purchases lay. “Ma would have a fit over that expense. That’s what she’d do.”

Considering how their mother had hoarded all that money, Belle would agree. But it tightened her jaw to think they’d lived in threadbare hand-me-downs all these years when they could have had better. She understood about being careful, but there were times a person could be too careful.

Belle regretted that thought the instance it crept into her mind. Her conscience didn’t hesitate to remind her that people who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. Her resolve was fading fast. She’d missed having Paul at her side last night. The comfort of his body, the safety, and the lovemaking. Sleep was patchy. Sounds she used to ignore woke her. Each time she wondered—did he miss her, too?

“Belle, we didn’t spend all of that money from Ma’s hatbox, did we?”

She shook her thoughts clear. “Heavens, no. It all goes into the bank come Monday along with Stony’s bank draft.” But Belle was determined to see her brothers and sisters at least had some decent clothes first. “And I’d better get a move on. Paul and Brady will be here any minute to haul Daisy’s trunk to the depot.”

“What about Retha?”

Poor Retha was still in shock. She’d probably been that way since the day Jessop destroyed her life. But her actions haunted her. Even if nothing came about, Retha still couldn’t believe she’d sunk so low she’d kill a person. She’d sat at the kitchen table with Belle until the wee morning hours, staring at patterns only she could see in the smooth wooden surface. She’d cried a lot, talked a lot. Belle had never seen a more tormented soul. All Belle could do was listen.

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"I helped her write a letter to her brothers and posted it this morning. She'll be staying here with us for the time being. It'll give her a chance to start fresh."

Pru frowned. "Doing what? There's only so much work around this place. Certainly not more than Susannah and I can handle. A truly organized person can do it alone."

Belle laughed at her. "Now you sound like Ma. Retha's going to hire herself out as a wet nurse. Maybe we'll hire her as a nanny to keep herd over Mason and Bessie. Don't worry. It will all work out."

"Now *you* sound like Ma."

"So I do." She hugged her and trotted downstairs.

Belle was unprepared for the butterflies that danced in her stomach at her first glimpse of Paul this morning. He stood in the entry hall with Cal and the other rangers. On the surface he looked no different than all the other thousands of times she'd seen him. It was that glimmer, that knowing in his eyes when he glanced her way that stole Belle's breath. And she ached for more intimate contact. As things stood, she couldn't even hug him without arousing suspicion.

She pasted on her brightest smile. "Good morning, gentlemen."

The men returned her greeting in unison.

"I thought you'd be gone by now," she said. With Jessop dead there was no reason for the rangers to remain.

"We've decided to stay on, ma'am," Sid said. "Clarence here got himself a job tending bar at Florine's. Marty's lookin' at buying the old livery stable. And I'm the new deputy. Looks like you've got yourself boarders for some time."

Interesting. "And what about you?" she asked Cal.

She followed his glance up the stairs and saw Prudence picking her way down. Used to boots, her new shoes gave her pause. She lifted her skirt as far as manners allowed and measured each step. Belle tried not to laugh.

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"I don't know what the hell I'm going to do." Cal slapped his hat on and stomped out the door.

Pru didn't look up until she reached the floor. A bright smile signaled her triumph. "Daisy's all ready and chomping at the bit."

Yes, it was time. Pru dashed off to retrieve the small basket of food she'd packed for Daisy's trip. Sid, Marty, and Clarence trudged upstairs for her trunks. Belle swore she wouldn't cry. Tears came anyway.

"Aw, sweetness," Paul wrapped his arms around her, "she's going to miss you, too. You'll write to each other. Keep in touch. It's only two days away. You'll visit."

She nodded against his shoulder. "I just think of her all alone. This happened so fast. A week ago she and Stony just met and now..."

"Some people just know, I guess."

His breath tickled her ear. Seconds later, she felt him rise against her. Belle smiled to herself. There had to be a discreet way for them to be together. Then he kissed her, slow and sweet. Belle's heart hammered with anticipation. Surely people didn't watch them twenty-four hours a day. He could sneak over here at night, sneak back before dawn.

"You two want to go sit in the parlor for a spell?"

They jerked apart. Paul's face was as red as Belle suspected hers was. They glanced up at Daisy. With a sly smile, she tugged on her gloves and trotted down.

"You'll let me know when you're having the weddin', won't you?" she asked with a lift of her eyebrow.

Paul slowly shook his head. "Daisy, I can't convince her to give me a try."

She gave them the once-over. "Oh, somehow I suspect you've already given it a try...or two."

Belle opened her mouth to protest.

Daisy lifted her hand. "Don't bother. It's written all over your faces."

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I suspect marriage will look pretty tempting the first time you're caught."

"Won't be a first time, Daisy," Paul said. "I'm not going to touch her again until she swears she'll marry me."

Daisy's laughter carried her all the way to the kitchen. She was still laughing off and on as they walked her to the stage depot.

Thankfully, Mrs. Cyrus chalked her joy up to her departure. "Goodness, look at you." She cupped Daisy's cheek. "A married lady. I've known you since you were a gleam in your papa's eye. They'd be real proud of you right now. You did write them, didn't you?"

Daisy laughed once more. "Yessum. Seems like I sent them a letter every day this week. I expect they'll be visitin' soon as I get settled."

Belle bit back any comment on the size of Daisy's new homestead. Reality would hit soon enough. She wasn't about to ruin her happiness now.

The stage rattled around the corner. All heads turned in that direction. Daisy's smile faltered. Belle bolstered hers. Someone had to be strong here.

The driver reined the horses to a stop before them. "All out for Cottonwood Bend!" He wrapped the reins around the brake and jumped down to help the passengers out.

"Well," Daisy's chin quivered, "I guess this is it."

Mrs. Cyrus wrapped her plump arms around her. "There now. We'll miss you, too. But a woman's place is with her husband."

Belle lifted a brow Paul's way. *See there. I told you.* But his gaze was on the stage and the man who had just stepped down. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with a full head of red-brown hair. His dark brown suit was wrinkled and dusty from the trip yet his tie and paisley vest looked fresh and crisp. His jacket was unbuttoned, giving him ready access to the weapon holstered to his hips. Gunslinger? Gambler? He could be both. Whoever he was, he made Belle nervous.

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Cold blue eyes scanned the small group. They widened when he caught sight of Paul.

“Aaron?” Paul stepped forward.

A smile deepened the furrows around the other man’s eyes. “Paul.” He stuck out his hand. “It’s quite a shock to see you. I thought you were dead.”

Paul chuckled. “Why would you think something like that?”

“Because your parents told me you were.”

Belle felt Paul’s tension. It had to be the final blow in their relationship. How they could treat their son, their only surviving child this way, was beyond her. She had half a mind to write them a very stern letter.

Paul sloughed the news aside. “This is Aaron Fredericks, my sister’s fiancé.” He made introductions around, then turned back to Aaron. “What brings you here?”

“I heard Frank Jessop was brought here. I wanted to make sure he got what was coming to him.”

Paul clasped him on the shoulder. Aaron flinched. “Jessop died last night,” Paul said.

“Good. Saved me the trouble.” He squared his shoulders, shrugging off Paul’s hand in the process. “It’s been a long trip. I’m not too anxious to get back on that stage. There a hotel around where I can stay a few days?”

“We have two boarding houses,” Daisy told him. “Busby’s on the east side of town. Cyrus’s on the west. As luck would have it, my old room at Cyrus’s is now vacant. I’m sure Miss Marshall here wouldn’t mind renting it to you. She manages the place.”

His gaze shifted between Belle and Paul. “I’d like that, ma’am. Paul, if you’d show me the way, I’d much appreciate it.”

Belle watched them walk away until their footsteps blended with others on the boardwalk. Renting a room to Aaron Fredericks was the

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last thing she wanted to do. But what could she say? That she didn't like the look of him? She'd just met the man. Or maybe it was the old wounds he resurrected for Paul that she resented.

"Boardin' up, ma'am," the stage driver said. The coach bounced with the weight of Daisy's trunk. A few tears, several hugs, and she was gone.

Mrs. Cyrus dabbed her handkerchief at the corners of her eyes. "How 'bout coming over for a cup of tea, dear?"

"Perhaps later. I need to do my weekly check at Fran's." Which was well overdue. Circumstances considered, Belle knew Fran and the girls understood.

The old woman clucked her tongue. "Sakes alive, how can you and Paul go into that place? Bless your kindhearted souls for trying to help those poor girls. Not too many decent folk would walk through those doors."

Mrs. Cyrus would be surprised how many decent people did walk through those doors—the back ones especially. Everything, every customer was treated with the utmost discretion. No one spoke of whom they saw for fear of being discovered themselves.

Belle nearly laughed out loud. Now *that* was an idea. She couldn't, could she? It would be discreet and it certainly would take Paul unaware. But would Fran agree?

There's only one way to find out.

"I'll stop by at four, Mrs. Cyrus, and I'll bring some butter cookies with me." Belle hurried on to Fran's before her courage failed her. The front door opened before she could knock.

Fran greeted her with a soft smile as she always did. "Good to see you, Doc Belle. We were sorry to hear of your loss."

As they wandered into the front parlor for tea and conversation, Belle thanked her. Already her nerves edged for the exit. If she was going to do this, idle chitchat had to wait.

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“Fran, I need a favor.”

She eased into her overstuffed chair of blue chintz and reached for the china teapot. “Of course. Anything for you.” She lifted a wafer-thin cup and saucer.

“I need a room for the night and lessons on how to seduce a man.”

Fran’s jaw dropped. A stream of tea puddled to the carpet at her feet.

* * *

Dead. His parents had told everyone he was dead. The news stabbed a hole through Paul’s heart. Their lack of contact with him over these last four years had made it apparent they wanted nothing to do with him. But to tell people he was dead? Why not simply say they’d disowned him?

He paced a circuit around his small rooms. Part of him longed to demand an explanation; the other part refused to confront them.

“No, damn it! They owe me an explanation!”

How in the world could he get one when they refused to answer his letters? The solution was simple—he’d go to them. They couldn’t very well ignore him when he was standing right in front of them. He’d catch the stage out Monday afternoon. He’d miss church services the following Sunday, but Paul doubted too many people would complain.

The decision still didn’t sit well with him. He hated the idea of facing them alone. Not that he was afraid or a coward, he just wanted to know he had support somewhere. Someone to lean on, to shore him up in the bloody aftermath. He’d ask Belle to go with him. *That* would set tongues wagging.

Paul didn’t care. This wasn’t a game and they weren’t pawns the well-meaning townsfolk could move around at will. This was about two people being in love and supporting each other. They didn’t need a marriage license to do that. They’d been supporting each other for years. Paul refused to let that change now. They were good together—

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friends, lovers. Why ruin that by pressuring Belle to do something she was uncomfortable with? If this was all they ever had, if they never were bound together in marriage, then at least they'd still have more than many others he knew who had been married for years.

Paul charged from the church, determined to find her. The world conspired against him. From Fran's to the Cyruses' she was always with another. By the time he finally caught up to her, she was elbow deep into supper fixings with her sisters. She paused long enough to flash him a smile and invite him to stay. Paul accepted. Afterward when the house died down, they'd slip away to the parlor or the porch swing. Maybe he'd shoo her sisters off and help her with the dishes. They'd sneak into her office for a short while. No one would be the wiser. And if they were, who cared?

Anticipation put Paul on edge. All he could do was wait. By supper his disposition had soured along with his stomach. If he didn't get Belle alone soon, he'd swear he'd explode.

Roast pork, snap peas, boiled potatoes, biscuits, and gravy lay spread on the table. The smell did set his mouth to watering. Belle might not have Daisy's touch in the kitchen, but she could give a good account of herself. A man would be a fool to turn down her cooking.

They were halfway through the meal when someone rapped on the door. Belle dashed off to answer it, returning in what seemed the blink of an eye.

"There's a problem at Fran's. One of the girls is sick."

Retha jumped up, knocking her chair to the floor. "Which one? It isn't—"

"Calm down." Belle waved her down. "Just clean up for me. Everything will be all right."

Paul tossed his napkin to the table. "I'll walk with you."

She smiled. "That won't be necessary. If I need you, I'll send for you."

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She was gone before Paul could think of a valid excuse to go with her. That left him pacing the front porch, waiting for her to come home. An hour passed. Then two. Saturday night at Fran's? Belle wouldn't want to stay any longer than necessary. Something wasn't right.

Paul wandered in that direction, hoping to run into Belle along the way. But he reached Fran's front gate without spotting a trace of her. Light glowed from every window. Soft piano music drifted to him. Fran liked to keep things elegant and tasteful. If they wanted bawdy tunes and trashy women, they could go elsewhere. It looked like a normal Saturday night.

"Fancy meetin' you here, Reverend."

He glanced over at Peg Brant. "I was looking for Doc Belle. I understand someone was in need of her services."

Peg smiled. "That's for sure. In fact, I was just comin' to fetch you. Doc Belle thought she might do better if you were here." She motioned him to the back gate.

Fran tilted a nod his way and pointed him up the stairs. "Last door on the right."

Whoever was sick couldn't be that bad off or she would have been wearing a groove in the carpet. Her girls mattered to her, and not for the money they brought in.

Paul twisted the knob and pushed the door open. Candlelight poured from every corner of the room. A path of rose petals led the way to the bed where dozens more rested. Belle stood with her back to him. Waves of her long dark hair reflected the light as they drifted past her shoulders.

She turned. A sensuous smile curved her lips. Paul's mouth fell open. That smile was about all she wore. A black lace nightgown clung to her curves and left nothing to the imagination.

"Welcome to Fran's." Her voice was deep, husky. "What is your pleasure tonight?"

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His gaze raked her body. "Oh...I think you know." Paul shut the door behind him. Step by step she slinked toward him, a glass of rich red wine extended. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were set on seduction, Miss Marshall."

She smiled. "I am, Reverend Harrington." She waited until he wrapped his fingers around the glass, then seated the bolt. "And you're not going anywhere until I'm done with you."

"I wouldn't dream of it." She could bind him to the bed and have her way with him over and over again if she wanted.

"A toast"—she lifted her glass—"to challenges."

He tapped his glass to hers. "I believe I'll let you do what you will with me, Miss Marshall."

She looked under her eyebrows at him. "I don't recall giving you a choice."

Paul tossed back a laugh and spread his arms. "I'm all yours."

There was that sultry smile again. Little did she know how much she'd already devastated him. One touch now in the right place and she might just find out.

Belle set their glasses aside. One flick of her wrist loosened the black nightgown. When it puddled to her feet, she nudged it aside with her toe. Paul had heard of ancient statues dedicated to goddesses of beauty. None could possibly compare to her. She was perfection, from the swell of her breasts to the hint of fullness in her hips. Her waist was meant to fit his hands.

He reached for her. She slipped free of his grasp, gently shoving him to the bed. This was agony, letting her do as she wished when all he wanted was to clutch her tight and drown in her scent. She knelt before him and tugged his boots free. Then she wiggled herself between his knees.

One by one, buttons fell free beneath her deft fingers. First his shirt, then his breeches. She raked her nails up his chest to his shoulders and

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slid the material away. Belle rained kisses over his neck, across his shoulders, and down his chest. Then she grazed her teeth around his nipple.

Paul gasped as pleasure shot to his groin. She tweaked his other nipple between her thumb and forefinger, doubling his agony. He was going to lose himself if she didn't stop soon. Nothing in this world could make him tell her to quit. He fell back—helpless, and loving every minute of it.

"That's it. Relax," she whispered. She lapped her way downward, to the waistband of his breeches, and nudged her nose in the open fly. One tug bared him. Without hesitation, she pulled him deep into her mouth. A deep groan ripped from his throat.

Belle ached. Seduction was wondrous—powerful, too. But all she wanted was to join him, to feel the hardness deep inside her. Still, to know she could give him this, that he would let her...

She sucked him deep once more, then again, dancing her tongue around the tip while he shuddered beneath her. Everything about him was hard, taut, ready for release. She tasted the first salty drop, then wrapped her thumb and forefinger around the base of his penis and squeezed gently, stopping the rush.

Paul's gaze accused her of torture. She crawled up his body and nestled his erection between the valley of her breasts. Any protest he might have made died with his groan. She squeezed her breasts together, letting him do as he wished until she felt tension lock his body once more.

He muttered a protest as she pulled away, but it lasted only as long as she could straddle his hips. This time he would not be denied. He caught her waist in his fingers and stabbed his body deep into hers. He pressed his thumb where their bodies met, bringing her quickly to his level. They came together with a silent cry, tensed, shuddered, then collapsed exhausted in each other's arms.

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Belle waited until she'd caught her breath, then retrieved the glasses of wine from the bureau. Paul drew her down beside him. Dipping his finger into the wine, he pulled out a drop, painted around her nipple, then licked it up with his tongue. Belle followed suit, choosing a spot just above his navel. And so they played, until arousal overcame them and the glasses were empty. Their lovemaking was less frenzied this time, but just as superb. A simultaneous climax followed a pledge of love.

Exhausted, they nestled side by side. "So...do you concede?" she asked.

Paul twirled a tendril of her hair around his finger. "I conceded earlier today. I just hadn't caught you alone long enough to tell you."

She drew back in mock astonishment. "You mean I went to all this trouble for nothing?"

A chuckle rumbled in his chest. "I wouldn't say that. I applaud your ingenuity. And your newfound skills."

"I had a good teacher."

"Please tell me it was Fran or one of her girls, not one of the customers."

Belle giggled. "I'll never tell."

His feigned hurt made her laugh all the more. "A scandal for sure."

"One to rock the very foundation of this town."

"No more so than when they see for themselves we're a couple." He hoisted himself to one elbow. Nothing else mattered. Not the town's interference. Not his parents. Just Belle and being with her. He locked the door on his past and threw away the key.

Belle pulled back to look at him. He wasn't joking. In fact, he looked downright sad.

"I'm going to see my parents. I think they owe me an explanation. I want you with me. I don't care what anyone thinks. I love you and I want you by my side. If this town can't handle that, then that's too bad.

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We have a right to be together. To live as we see fit. Will you go with me?"

"Of course. I'm with you...wherever that might be." If she said anything else, she just might cry. They were taking a big step, an even bigger risk to their reputations. Belle didn't care. This wasn't about flouting the traditions of marriage, this was about being there for one another. She would have gone with him had they never crossed the line and become lovers.

"The girls can keep things running at the boarding house."

He tucked her close. "Sometimes just throwing food in front of those men is enough to keep them happy."

"Isn't that the way of all men?"

He gave a hearty laugh. "Not quite."

They spent the night wrapped in each other's arms only to awaken before dawn to love again. A tap at the door reminded them that time was growing short. Still, Fran indulged them with a jug of hot wash water and a breakfast of coffee and hot biscuits with jam.

"Jam goes on the biscuits, not somewhere else," she said with a wink.

Paul smirked. "Fran, the thought never occurred—"

"Don't give me that hogwash." She poked his shoulder. "You've got all the girls here wondering what they've been missing all these years. And you..." She grinned at Belle. "I've had several regulars ask for the new girl. Told them they couldn't afford you. That you were a hundred dollar a night girl."

Heat flushed her cheeks. "I guess we were a little uninhibited last night."

"A little?" Fran laughed. "You two were great for business. I haven't had a night that good in years. You're welcome to use our services any time you want. And, judging from what we heard last night, I guess that's going to be pretty often." She gave them another

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wink. “Now get a move on. We have one or two patrons still here. You don’t want to have them catch you coming out of this room. And if they do, it was Peg you were tending to all night. She was on her course and didn’t see anyone last night.”

Much as they hated to leave, Belle knew they at least wouldn’t have to retreat to their former facade of being friends, especially if she was heading off to Dallas with Paul on Monday. People were going to have to accept they had feelings for each other and were going to work on them in their own time, not someone else’s.

They were halfway down the hall when they ran into their first test. Aaron Fredericks stepped from one of the rooms. As before, his gaze shifted between them, then settled on Paul.

“Imagine meeting you in a whorehouse...*Reverend*.”

“The needy reside in all places, Aaron. Good day.” He cupped Belle’s elbow and led her down the stairs and out the building.

“I don’t like that man.”

“He’s been through a lot, Belle. He loved Marissa very much.”

“And yet he’s taken to frequenting whorehouses the second he hits town.”

“Maybe he’s just searching for a little forgetfulness in the only place he knows how. God knows if anything happened to you, I’d be beside myself with grief. I wouldn’t know what to do.”

Belle stopped in mid-stride, pulling him with her. “Oh, Paul, that’s just about the sweetest thing...” She grabbed his face in his hands and kissed him.

Paul laughed. “Well, so much for discretion.”

“Oh, I doubt the neighbors will tell this time.”

He hiked an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t be too sure of that.”

“I would.” She jerked her head toward Mrs. Freebush’s house where Mr. Tucker was sneaking out the side door.

Laughing, Paul caught her hand. “Marriage committee worked

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better than it intended.”

That much was true. People were matched all over the place. At least it had done some good. Belle smiled—a lot of good. They ducked in the back door of the boarding house. Fortunately, no one had risen to start breakfast.

“Looks like we were lucky.” Belle snatched an apron off the peg near the door and tossed it Paul’s way. “But unless we get breakfast started, I’m going to have some very grumpy boarders. You peel some potatoes while I rouse Pru and Retha.”

She found Retha sound asleep between Mason and Bessie. The children cuddled in the cove of her arms. Belle didn’t have the heart to wake them.

Her next stop was her sisters’ room. She strode across the room and yanked open the draperies. Susannah blinked into the morning light. Charity tucked her head under her pillow. Prudence...

“Where’s Pru?”

Both girls looked at the bed. Puzzlement wrinkled their brows.

“Cooking breakfast?” Susannah asked.

“No. But up you go. We’ve got work to do.” Thinking Pru sought a little privacy, Belle checked the parlor. No Pru. Nor was she in Belle’s room or the bathhouse. She cracked open the cellar door where Sid, Clarence, and Marty slept. Only snores greeted her. It seemed she had simply disappeared.

“She has to be somewhere,” Paul said.

Charity stifled a yawn as she stumbled into the kitchen. “Why don’t you ask Mr. Webster? I expect he’s the one who saw her last since I saw them smooching in the parlor.”

“If that lousy...I swear I’ll...” Belle took the stairs two at a time.

Paul was close on her heels. “Just calm down. Getting mad isn’t going to help anything.”

They strode in tandem down the hallway. When they reached Cal’s

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room, Paul whipped open the door. There amid tangled sheets and limbs lay Cal Webster and her sister.

“Why you dirty, rotten...”

Paul snapped his arm around Belle’s waist and pulled her back. “Get up, get dressed, and get downstairs now.”

Paul half dragged Belle to the parlor. In all the years he’d known her, he’d never seen her so angry. Not that he could blame her. Cal had a way with the ladies. He’d left a string of broken hearts behind him. This time he’d gone too far. It was all he could do to keep his own temper in check.

By the time the two came downstairs, Belle’s anger had doubled. A riled tomcat had less spit in him. She let them step across the threshold, then banged the door shut behind them.

“How dare you take advantage of my sister? Who do you think—”

“Why does he have to take the blame?” Pru took a stance between Belle and Cal. “It was just as much my doing.”

That shut Belle up, but not for long. “Cal Webster, you are the last person I’d ever want to have as a brother-in-law, but you’re going to do the right thing and marry my sister. I won’t have her reputation ruined. You’ll be married by sunset.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at her. “Then I expect it’ll be a double wedding?”

Belle stammered for a response. Paul expected Cal’s normal smirk. None came. He was just as mad as Belle.

“We didn’t do anything you and Paul haven’t done,” Pru said. “You force a marriage on us, we’ll do the same to you.”

“If you refuse, we’ll make sure everyone in town knows the two of you have been sharing a bed,” Cal added. “And I believe the two of you have much more to lose than Prudence and I do.”

Belle shoved her face to within inches of his. “Stay away from my sister.” She pivoted on her heel and stomped from the room.

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Prudence looked ready to cry. Cal cupped her cheek. “Go on. I’ll talk to you later.”

Paul waited until Prudence was out of earshot, then faced Cal. “How could you?”

Cal slowly shook his head. “Would it matter if I said I couldn’t stay away from her? Would it matter if I said I love her?”

Paul didn’t know what to say to that one.

Cal snorted. “Yeah...I didn’t think so.” He hooked his thumbs in his pockets and turned toward the door.

“What if she’s carrying your child? How can you say you love her and not do the honorable thing? You’re leaving. We know that. It’s going to hurt her enough when you go. Don’t add the other shame of having a child out of wedlock. If you truly love her, do the honorable thing.” *For once in your life.*

Cal walked on. When Paul checked on him a few minutes later, Cal was standing on the front porch watching the rest of the town wake up.

CHAPTER 14

Belle didn't know what Paul had said to make Cal change his mind, but she would be forever grateful. The world could be a cruel place for a young girl innocently wronged. Of course, Prudence didn't see it that way. She likened her and Cal to Belle and Paul. There weren't enough words in the world to convince her otherwise, and Belle didn't have the heart to tell her Paul would always be around, Cal wouldn't.

Pru led with her heart. She trusted too much. And when Cal got down on one knee at breakfast, all her fancy talk was forgotten. Joy brightened her face. Belle could read her mind. Pru believed she was getting her fondest wish—a marriage as grand as their parents. Sadly enough, that was true. She'd soon discover just what their parents' marriage was like.

At least Cal played the part of adoring groom well. Once the other three former rangers quit choking over their food, he chose Sid to stand up with him. That prompted Pru to select Susannah and the two rushed

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off to get ready.

Belle longed to yank Cal aside and tell him to never hurt her sister. It'd be like talking to the wall. Paul had already warned her—Cal wouldn't be staying. On the off-chance that he did, settling down with one woman would never be enough. He was too much a ladies' man...or so she'd heard.

Belle wished she'd never found them in bed together. Wished she'd had the sense to get calm first before shrieking at them like a banshee. No matter which way she looked at it, Pru was going to be hurt. If Belle had left things alone, Pru would have only had herself to blame for her foolishness. Married and deserted, Belle would be at fault.

"I should help her get ready. Charity, help Retha clean up once breakfast is over."

She had to salvage this somehow. Maybe she could convince Pru she had been right all along, that Belle had been wrong to intrude. She could remind her of the sanctity of marriage and that it bound two people together forever. The words rang hollow in her head as she trudged upstairs, like a worn out speech the stodgy politicians made. She was tired of hearing it, tired of thinking it. It rapidly became her catchphrase and if Belle wasn't careful, just might wind up her epitaph. She could see the words now, carved on her tombstone. *"Mary-Belle Marshall. Lifelong Companion Because She Couldn't Be Sure Of Marriage."*

She heard her sisters giggling long before she reached the bedroom. Belle stopped short of the door and listened.

"Did you lie with him last night?" Susannah asked. "What was it like? Oh, tell me, please. What was it like?"

There was silence. Finally, Pru said, "It was like a million stars all bursting out from me all at once. There's nothing else like it in the world."

No, there wasn't. Belle felt a catch in her throat. Tears wouldn't do.

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Neither would fussing. This had to be a happy day for Pru, one she would remember the rest of her life when everything else crashed in upon her.

Belle saw Cal heading toward his room and followed. He sat on the edge of the rumpled bed fingering a small ring. His free hand was buried in the cat's fur—it seemed Killer had become his constant companion. Cal looked up and gave her an awkward smile.

"Bride's got to have a ring."

"And you just happened to have one handy." Belle regretted the sarcastic tone, but the words just slipped out. Somehow she'd have to find a way to get along with this man. "I'm sorry."

He stood and set the ring on the marble-topped washstand. "It's my mother's. The only thing I have of hers. She died when I was a boy."

Guilt shamed Belle. "Then why are you giving it to Prudence?"

He snorted. "I don't expect you to believe this; I don't know if I believe it myself but...I love her. I'm going to do right by her."

"Would you have done so if you hadn't been caught?"

He stared at her for what seemed an eternity.

Belle tried a different tactic. "A week ago you were after me."

One side of his mouth lifted in a half smile. "A week ago your marriage committee paid me twenty dollars to get you and Paul together. Now...if you'll excuse me, I have a wedding to get ready for." Cal quietly shut the door in her face.

They'd been hornswoggled from the start. Belle should have realized it. At least she could say Cal had certainly earned that twenty dollars. He and Prudence were going to need it. Cal didn't look like a man who had much. But then, part of the money from the sale of the farm and Ma's hatbox belonged to Pru. It was a good start if they used it wisely.

Belle laughed at herself. Pru squander money? She was as tightfisted as the day was long. But then, she was also blindsided by

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love. Her humor faded. Was that what had happened with Ma? Love had made her foolish but the years had made her wise?

She tossed up her hands. Thinking about all this just made her head hurt. They had church and a wedding to get ready for. The least she could do was round up Taber, Mason, and Bessie. Prudence and Susannah seemed to have bridal preparations well in hand, but she honestly couldn't say which one was more excited.

Two hours later, when they took up the first two pews of the church, Belle decided it was Susannah. She sat beside Belle with a smile so wide it just about split her face. And she fidgeted worse than the two little ones behind them, although Retha did have a pretty tight rein on them. Pru was quiet next to Cal, eyes wide as she soaked in the beauty of the church. Charity devoured the contents of the hymnal.

Susannah squeezed Belle's arm. "I'm just about beside myself. This is like a fairytale, isn't it? It reminds me of when Jake married Grace. Don't you think?"

No, it was nothing like that at all, but Belle wasn't about to put a damper on Susannah's unfettered joy. "Yes. Just like."

Susannah's smile widened, if that were possible. For a moment, Belle wondered if she'd actually jump up and down. She placed a hand on her knee. "Sweetie, I think you need to calm down a tad."

"If I do, I'll think of Ma and I can't bear that."

The words came out in a rush. Susannah laced her fingers together to quell their shaking. She said it again softly, as if to herself. And again, faster. Again. Each time her breathing grew more rapid. She squeezed her eyes shut. Tears slipped from beneath her lids.

"Go away. I can't think of Ma. Need to do something. Anything. Think of something else. Something else. Birds. Trees. Gardens."

Susannah struggled for control. Belle watched, helpless. She rambled off her list. Little everyday things that made her happy, anything to chase the grief away.

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She laid her hand over Susannah's. "Grace has the biggest vegetable garden I've ever seen. Herbs. Fruit trees. Tons of flowers, too. But that's more Millie than Grace. You know Grace, always practical. That garden sure does produce a lot of food, but I always wanted one of my own for the boarding house. Never had the time or the green thumb. I was hoping you could take care of it. Is it too late to start? Grace has plenty of seed. She wouldn't mind."

Susannah drew in a shaky breath. "I'll do so this afternoon."

"It's a lot of work."

She turned a smile Belle's way. "I don't mind."

"Good. Looks like Grace's pickles might have some good competition next Fourth of July."

That chased the goblins away. Belle could almost hear plans swarming in Susannah's mind.

Conversation around them died down. Belle watched Paul make his way to the forefront. He left behind him a bunch of smiles from the people he'd taken the time to talk with. They sure did like him. She wondered how many compared him to the old preacher. From what Belle understood, he'd kept to himself a lot and only ventured out to take advantage of people's hospitality.

Paul spread his arms wide and welcomed everyone. There was a modest showing today, not jam-packed, but certainly not empty. To Belle's recollection, she'd never seen the church want for attendees. And who wouldn't want to listen to Paul preach. He had a sweet rhythm to his words, ranging from soft and comforting to downright outrage as the sermon needed.

First came the announcements. Several heads bobbed around her in agreement when Paul told them he was going to visit his parents and there would be no service next Sunday. Belle wondered how agreeable they'd be when they discovered she was going with him. The news of Cal and Prudence marrying created a stir.

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Two pews behind her, Belle heard Brady say, “Seems like that ole marriage committee has gotten everyone but the intended targets.”

Florine shushed him pretty quick.

Belle closed her eyes to shut them out and focused on Paul’s voice. Soft, sweet, soothing. She snapped upright and opened her eyes. Paul stared at her, one brow lifted in amusement as the sermon went on. She prayed no one else had seen her fall asleep. As it was, Belle wanted to crawl into the nearest hole and hide away.

She forced her attention solely on Paul. Still, her mind wandered too much to understand a word he said. Daisy and Stony married. Pru and Cal very nearly married. Pammy and Sid making eyes at each other. All in the space of a few days, one week. When pressed for details, Daisy said she just knew Stony was the one. Here Belle and Paul had known each other for years and Belle was still hesitant. She loved him, laid with him, treasured every aspect of their relationship from friends to lovers. How could she not know in her heart that they should marry?

The answer ripped a hole in her heart. Maybe he wasn’t the right one for her. Maybe she’d let circumstances manipulate them—Doc’s death and his hints about them beforehand, her parents’ deaths and the new responsibility placed in her hands, Florine and Mrs. Cyrus’s pushing them together and Belle’s fear of Cal’s pursuit. She’d turned to Paul for comfort and protection and this is where it had led them.

Belle blamed no one but herself. Paul had suggested caution. She’d enticed him. What man wouldn’t crave what she freely offered—especially a man like Paul. By his own admission, he was a reformed womanizer. Belle had taken advantage of his years of abstinence to prove a point, to have her way. Now all she wanted to do was cry for the disaster she’d created.

Of course Paul wasn’t for her, no matter how very much she loved him. No matter how being near him made her heart sing. No matter

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how deeply he touched her soul when they joined together. If he was, it would be them standing in front of the preacher without doubt, without hesitation. It was a horribly painful thing to realize, but even harder to know she had to end it all immediately before either of them was hurt any more. Before they wound up like Mrs. Freebush and Mr. Tucker sneaking out of each other's homes in the wee morning hours.

Sermon over, she watched Cal and Pru stand before Paul. Belle could feel the smiles around her. It hurt her all the more to know she would never be standing in Pru's shoes, at least not with Paul.

Pru's bright eyes widened in a mix of surprise and pleasure when Cal slipped the ring on her finger.

"It's all I have left of my mother. It rightfully belongs to you now," Cal said, then kissed her.

Paul cleared his throat. "Do you mind if I finish the ceremony first?"

Chuckles followed. Cal's, too. Belle blinked tears from her eyes. This was Pru's moment, she would not ruin it. Then it was done. Well-wishers escorted the couple from the church. Belle stayed back.

"God help them," Paul said.

"Who knows..." Belle slid her gaze his way. "It could actually work out."

He arched his eyebrows as he nodded. "It could. Stranger things have happened."

She watched him snuff out the candles, then helped him collect the hymnals. Mundane tasks, things she helped him with every Sunday.

"You fell asleep during my sermon. Was I that boring?"

Belle allowed herself a tiny smile. "Never."

"Do I hear a note of sarcasm?"

She laughed. "I didn't get much sleep last night. Someone kept me up most of the night."

"And here I thought it was you keeping me *up*."

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She smiled at the veiled reference. She did love the playful banter, the teasing. It made what she had to do all the harder. "You know I love you, Paul."

He stacked the hymnals on the first pew and wrapped an arm around her waist. "I love you, too."

She should pull away, start the break now. Instead, Belle rested her palms against the broad plane of his chest. *Let the sweetness last for just a few more minutes.*

"I...I can't go with you to Dallas."

He cocked his head to one side. "Why not?"

Belle studied his Adam's apple. "It wouldn't look right."

Paul laughed. "We spent the night making wild love in a whorehouse and it wouldn't look right for you to go to Dallas with me?"

Belle pulled away and hugged her arms around her midriff.

"All right," he said. "We'll take Charity with us. Long as she's got a book to bury her nose in she's happy."

"It's not just that. It's..." Why was this so hard? "I don't think we should see each other that way any more."

Dead silence greeted her announcement. What more did she expect? "I...I think we've made a mistake. We've let other people's wishes for us lead us astray. We were caught up in the moment."

Still silence. Belle dared a look around. Paul stood, arms tucked over his chest, a frown pulling his eyebrows together. She struggled to find the right words. Everything came out in a jumble. Belle pulled in a breath and tried again.

"I see Daisy and Stony, Pru and Cal. They know their own minds. They—"

"Stony and Daisy were foolhardy and impetuous. Cal and Pru were caught in a compromising situation. Both are the exception rather than the rule. Most couples I see are together for a while before deciding on

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marriage.”

“But they—”

Paul sliced his hand through the air, cutting off anything further she might say. “Enough. You don’t want to be my wife. You don’t want to be my lover. What’s next? You won’t want to be my friend either?”

She pressed her palms against her eyes to stop the rush of tears. He was angry. She didn’t blame him, but she also couldn’t bear it. Her world was tumbling about her.

“You don’t understand.”

“And you know what, Belle? I don’t think I want to. I don’t think you understand. I don’t know what you want from me. What you want from yourself. If you’re waiting for a great big bolt of lightning to whiz across the sky telling you this is what you need to do, it ain’t gonna happen. Why can’t you just accept things? Why can’t you just trust what is?”

She snapped her arms to her sides. “Because I can’t! If you really loved me...”

He grabbed her shoulders. “Damn it, I do! What more are you going to ask of me to prove it? To let you go? To never touch you? To go back to being just friends? Is that what it’ll take, Belle? Is it? And then what? You’ll lure me to a secluded spot once more?”

He pushed her away from him and raked his fingers through his hair. “You’re driving me crazy, Belle! I don’t know what to do, what to say, what you want of me. Tell me. Just tell me, damn it!”

Belle spun around and ran from the church. It was all too much. Too confusing. Too hurtful. Everything was destroyed. Their love, their friendship. Everything.

She ran home, tears blinding her all the way. People stared. Let them. They could think whatever they wished. This was their fault anyway. She and Paul had been happy before they’d interfered. Why couldn’t they have left well enough alone? She swung open the front

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door to the boarding house and took the stairs two at a time. A resounding slam of her bedroom door shut the world out.

* * *

Paul hurled a hymnal against the wall. The spine split, scattering pages across the shiny wooden floor. He picked up another, ready to send it flying. A movement to his left stopped him. He tossed the book into a pew.

“What do you want, Brady? I’m busy.”

“I can see that.” He motioned to the pages. “Glad to see you’re human after all.”

“I let my temper get away from me, that’s all.” Paul shuffled the mess together. He’d figure out how to fix it later.

“Yep, I can see that. Also got a pretty good idea why.”

He dumped the remnants beside the hymnals. “Belle just...I don’t know...She’s just—”

“Yep. So’s Florine. And yet we still love them.” He scratched his head as he chuckled. “Never could figure that one out. Best I could ever do was give her what she wants.”

“How am I supposed to do that when Belle doesn’t even know what she wants?”

“Give her what she says she wants. You can’t miss then. It’s all on her shoulders.”

Paul jammed his thumb in his chest. “What about me? What about what *I* want?”

Brady tossed back a belly-shaking laugh. “My friend, you’re in love. Don’t matter what you want anymore. Only one part of your body’s doing any thinking for you right now. And it ain’t the head on your shoulders.”

Brady had him there. Paul finished straightening out the church and counting the collection. It gave him time to gather his wits about him before seeing Belle. He needed every ounce of calm he could muster.

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At this point, he doubted she'd see him without a fight. To his surprise, he found her in the kitchen preparing for supper. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, her nose puffy. She barely glanced his way when he walked in.

"I expect you'll be joining us for supper tonight," she said.

"I always do."

Belle kept on kneading dough. Paul covered her hands with his.

"I love you, Belle, make no mistake about that. You want to just be friends, then we'll just be friends. But I need that friendship now. I have to go to Dallas. But I can't face them without you there to support me. I'd be asking you to go with me whether all this other stuff had happened or not. Will you do that, Belle? Will you go with me tomorrow?"

She dropped her head and nodded.

Paul's shoulders sagged with relief. "I'll let Charity know. I think it best we have a chaperone...for appearances' sake."

She nodded once more. "Would it help to say I'm sorry?"

"It wouldn't hurt." Paul thought he saw tears shimmer in her eyes. He left before he could give in to the impulse to pull her close.

* * *

Paul had forgotten how monotonous train travel was. Not that he could go any faster with his own horse beneath him, but at least he'd have control, and fresh air in his face instead of smoke, heat, and sweat. He should have insisted on a private car for the three of them. Belle had considered it a frivolous expense. He'd bet she regretted that now. They were cramped six in their area. He and Belle were on one side with Charity wedged between them. Another couple with a squalling six-month-old sat opposite of them.

The constant screaming, combined with everything else, drove a headache straight through his skull. Judging from the way Belle rubbed at her temple, he'd guess she suffered, too. Charity didn't seem to

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notice. She spent the entire trip with her nose buried in a book. She had what felt like a ton of them in her satchel. According to Belle, Charity carried more books with her than she did clothes.

The atmosphere between him and Belle was strained at best. And as much as Paul longed to blame the miserable traveling conditions, he knew that wasn't the case. Since Belle seemed content to leave things undiscussed, Paul honored that. The first night in Austin they retreated to their separate rooms at the hotel and left things as they were. But if she thought they could slip back into the role of friends, she was sadly mistaken. If it took every last ounce of breath in his body, Paul was going to prove that to her. He just wasn't sure how. Trying to figure it out—figure *her* out added to his pounding headache. If this was any indication of how his visit with his parents was going to go, Paul was ready to take the next stage back to Cottonwood Bend.

It was noon the day they arrived in Dallas. The sun beat down with unrelenting harshness. Belle tried in vain to fan the heat away while the driver unloaded their bags. At least she hadn't complained, God bless her. Of course, their traveling companions had done enough complaining for all of them. Paul was glad to see them slip into the crowd.

"Now what?" Belle asked.

"We'll get rooms at the hotel. I'd like to freshen up before we go on."

Charity glanced up from her book. "You mean we're not there yet?"

Belle looped her arm through hers. "Don't be a baby. Think of it as an adventure. Look at the wonderful big city."

She passed a quick gaze around her. "Too many people. I don't like it."

Paul grabbed their satchels. "Come on. Hotel's just down the street."

Belle snatched the book from Charity's fingers and jerked her head.

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“Let’s go. The sooner we get there, the sooner you can get back to your book. I promise you, we’ll let you hole up in the room while we visit Paul’s parents.”

That seemed to appease her. She followed along beside them without a word and little interest in the world around her. She clearly lived in the fantasy world her books created.

In less than two hours, he and Belle were back in the lobby waiting for a coach to take them to his family home. Belle looked fresh and crisp in an ivory dress trimmed with green ribbon. She even had a hat to match. Quite the lady.

“You look very beautiful.” But then she always did.

Belle smiled. “You look nice, too. Nervous?”

Paul adjusted his tie. Maybe he should have worn the clerical suit. No, his father might think it too self-serving. “Very.”

She smoothed his collar. “It will be fine.”

“Promise?”

“Of course.” She stretched on tiptoe and gave his cheek a peck. A blush covered her face. So...playing friends didn’t work for her either. Paul thought better of calling her on it.

“Ah...there’s the coach.” He gave her a hand inside and they were off.

Yes, he was nervous. The first sight of the three-story house added to that. Everything neat and orderly as always. It looked like he had left the day before. A wrought iron gate sectioned the Harrington property from that which surrounded it. An *H* was shaped in an arch above the gate.

“That’s your family’s house?”

He watched the awe grow in Belle’s face, but got no comfort from it. The big house with its vast gardens felt pretentious, overdone, a waste of money. He’d grown up in a world of privilege. The Marshalls were lucky to be able to put food on the table. His parents could have

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raised him to be snooty and above others. Instead, they'd instilled a hard work ethic and service to others. At least he had that to be grateful for. No matter what happened today, he'd force himself to remember they had helped make him the man he was today. And he had to admit that wasn't half bad.

The coachman drew to a stop before the gate. "Wait here," Paul said. He helped Belle down, then drew her arm through his.

She rubbed his sleeve. "You're shaking."

"I know."

Belle tugged him toward the gate. "Come on. We've come this far. Let's get this over with."

The gate opened without a sound. They marched side by side up the brick path, up the six marble steps that led to the porch. Paul reached the door, pulled in a breath, and twisted the bell ringer. As the door opened so did the old butler's mouth.

"Good afternoon, Brendle."

"Sir, I—"

Paul pushed his way inside. "Are Mother and Father here?"

"Yes sir. The Doctors Harrington have just returned from the hospital. I'll tell them you're here. Make yourself comfortable in the library. Or, did you need rooms?"

"The library will be fine."

Belle stumbled along beside him, mouth agape at all the finery she saw. Paul was embarrassed. No one in Cottonwood Bend lived like this. No one had the money. He probably shouldn't have brought Belle along, but he was damn glad she was here. If not, he would have hightailed it back home before the day was out.

Eyes wide, she took in walls covered floor to ceiling on two sides with books. "Charity would die and think she'd gone to heaven." She dusted her fingers over the embroidered upholstery. "Your family's rich."

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“Yes.”

“Did I hear him say doctor? Your father’s a doctor?”

Paul laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. “My father and mother are both doctors. Daniel and Hattie Harrington.”

The news dropped her jaw further, if that were possible. “I thought I knew everything about you.”

“This isn’t about me, sweetheart. It’s about them.”

Belle nodded and let her gaze travel slowly around the room. She never moved more than three feet from Paul’s side. The double doors opened. Paul braced himself. His parents stood framed by the massive doorframe. The years hadn’t been kind. Streaks of gray shadowed their blond hair. Wrinkles deepened the creases around their eyes—his blue, hers light brown. They stepped inside and shut the doors behind them.

His mother clutched her hands against her throat. Tears pooled in her eyes. His father stared at him, unblinking. No one moved. Did they hate him that much or were they that afraid?

“Mother. Father.” The words sounded harsh to his ears, yet they didn’t deserve the normal greeting. It was had always been Mama and Papa...always...until—

“What brings you here, Paul?” his father asked.

He straightened his back. “I saw Aaron Fredericks the other day.”

His mother stifled a sob. His father grabbed her shoulder.

“He seemed quite surprised to see me. Care to tell me why the hell you’ve been telling everyone I was dead?”

“Because...” His father choked up and glanced away.

“Because Aaron has sworn to kill you,” his mother finished. She rushed across the room and tossed her arms around him.

CHAPTER 15

Paul pushed his mother away to arm's length. "And that's why the two of you haven't spoken or written to me in over four years?" He didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or shout down the walls.

Belle didn't have that problem. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of! How could you do that to your son? Do you know what he's been through these last years? Can you even begin to imagine how he's felt?"

"You must be Belle." His father's eyes misted over. "I don't think there's been a letter without mention of you since the day Paul met you. You certainly made a big difference in his life."

Her frown mirrored Paul's. This was beyond belief.

"You think us cruel and heartless," his mother said. "Well, put yourself in our shoes. We'd just lost our only daughter. We were *not* going to lose our son, too. We fought round the clock to save his life only to have Aaron threaten to take it away."

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“I can take care of myself, Mother.”

She grabbed his face between her hands. “But you couldn’t, sweetheart.” Tears puddled once more. “You could barely function. You were in such a state of shock. Marissa’s death and battling for your own life took their toll. You had such horrible guilt.”

He tried in vain to shrug free of her hold. She wouldn’t let go. “I had every reason to feel guilty.”

“And I didn’t?” The bitterness in his father’s voice made his mother turn to her spouse.

“Darling, don’t.” She dusted her fingers down his arm. Belle had never seen a more tender gesture. The love of all their years shone in her eyes, so did the pain of what they had endured.

He winced as he stared at Paul. “You never would have pulled that trigger if I hadn’t been there urging you on.”

Something shifted in Paul—a knowing, a memory, something. The change was so subtle Belle would have missed it had she not been watching him at that very second.

“I had never known such rage, such utter helplessness.” His father directed his words to Belle. “I had spent my entire adult life tending to the health and well-being of others. But the instant my daughter was taken...”

He lifted his chin and stared into the far corner of the room while he struggled for composure. “I understood so much about my son when it happened. Knew why he’d given up everything to be a ranger. Knew his purpose, his sole purpose, was to save Marissa.”

Calm once more, his gaze returned to Belle. “He was very good at what he did.” He gave a humorless chuckle. “Paul was good at anything he set out to accomplish. But I knew he’d never have the fortitude to do what truly had to be done in order to bring Marissa home. So I followed. Got a horse and rode along with him. I made sure he pulled that trigger even though he told me it was too risky. He

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warned me it shouldn't be done. I urged him on and..."

He turned away and strode toward the glass doors in the back of the room. Paul's mother didn't follow. He stared out the window to the open garden beyond, hands tucked behind his back. A lot like Paul when he was deep in thought. A lot like Paul right now.

The settee hugged Paul's body as he sank into the cushions. He rested his forearms on his knees and stared at the carpet. His mother squatted down before him, placing her hands on his knees.

"You blamed yourself. You were in such a state of shock. Nothing about you was the same. You couldn't protect yourself. You didn't want to. Had you known Aaron wanted revenge, you would have met him head-on. We did what we had to do to keep you alive, even though it killed us to do so. We lost Marissa. We were not going to lose you."

Paul's gaze shifted to hers. "You could have written."

She slowly shook her head. "No. Aaron watched too closely. I guess he never truly believed you were dead. Brendle guarded each one of your letters, each one of your precious letters very carefully. I guess we weren't careful enough."

"You were very careful, Mama." He cupped her hands into his. "He found me by accident. He tracked Frank Jessop to our town."

A gasp drew her back. Paul squeezed her hands. "It's okay. Jessop's dead."

Her whole body sagged with relief. Then she rested her head on his knee. "We love you so much. We've missed you so much."

"More than you could ever possibly imagine." His father rejoined them. "Did Aaron say anything to you? Do anything? Has he been watching you?"

Belle was a breath away from telling them Aaron had rented a room at the boarding house. A look from Paul silenced her. His parents were worried enough. They didn't need this. Paul would deal with it when they got back.

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“I’ve hardly said more than a couple of words to him. Once he heard about Jessop, he decided to stay in town for a few days to rest from his trip. I’m sure he’s long gone by now. And if not”—he gently shook his mother’s hands—“we’ve got my old band of rangers living in town right now. I’ll be safe. You remember Cal, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes. Him we remember,” they said together. Their tone didn’t hint at fond memories.

At least someone else felt the same as she did. Belle snickered, pulling their attention her way.

His mother’s knees cracked as she stood. “We are so very pleased to be able to meet you. We could only imagine the woman who’d captured his heart.” She pressed her fingertips against her lips. “And here you are.” Emotion overtook her. Tears that were sad a few minutes ago now pooled in eyes that shone with love and joy. It was all Belle could do not to join her.

His father cocked his head to one side while he studied her. “Son, your letters simply did not do her justice. She’s more than pretty. She’s a beautiful young woman. Very healthy. Clear skin. Solid. Good bone structure. Intelligent looking. But then she’d have to be on top of things in order to run both a boarding house and a doctor’s office. Impressive. Very impressive.”

Belle laughed. “I’m beginning to feel like a horse.” Or a broodmare? She wasn’t sure whether to be insulted or honored.

His mother clapped her hands. “How thoughtless of me. This is all such a surprise I didn’t think. We should have Brendle prepare rooms. Bring in your things. We could—”

“We have rooms at the hotel.” Paul stretched to his feet. “I wasn’t sure...”

They nodded in unison. Belle covered her smile. In all her years, she’d never seen a couple more in tune with each other.

His father wrapped an arm around his wife’s shoulders. “We’d love

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to have you stay with us. We have so much catching up to do. We want to get to know this young woman who has helped you come back into the world.”

Belle felt Paul’s hesitancy. It was a lot to absorb in such a short space of time. But he needed this. “My sister is with us.”

Their eyes widened. “Grace?”

Goodness, Paul had told them everything. Belle gave them an indulgent smile. “No, Charity.”

“There’s plenty of room,” his mother said.

Belle caught the hidden plea. They desperately wanted to bridge the gap they’d forced themselves to create with their son. They wanted her help. And who was she to judge? They had made the best decision they could at the time and under circumstances no parent should have to deal with.

“Then we’d love to,” she answered with a smile. If Paul had other wishes, he’d have to voice them. Belle refused to do his dirty work for him. His parents had a genuine desire to be with him. All she could do was not stand in their way.

“Marvelous.” His mother clapped her hands. “We’ll have Brendle—”

“We have a coach outside, Mother. We need to collect Charity and our baggage. We’ll return shortly.” He placed his hand against the small of Belle’s back to guide her toward the door, then slowly caressed the area with his thumb.

It was a tender, private show of affection, meant to be shared between them alone. But it wasn’t subtle enough to escape a mother’s sharp eyes.

“We had a feeling that one day we’d hear special news in one of your letters. Have the two of you set a date?”

Belle likened Paul’s grin to one of Cal’s smirks.

“If you mean for marriage...no. Belle and I are just friends. Isn’t

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that right, Belle?”

“Yes...Yes...That’s right.”

Her voice sounded like it came from a stranger a million miles away. Half-dazed, she let him lead her to the front door, down the path to the waiting coach, then inside.

Just friends. The words stung even though she was the one who’d asked for this. Belle didn’t know if it was her pride or her heart that hurt the most...or what she wanted to do about it.

The coach rocked her back to the real world. She glanced up at Paul, expecting to see him watching her. Instead, he stared out the window.

Just friends. That phrase would haunt her the rest of her life. Now wasn’t the time to open this discussion again, especially since she didn’t know what she wanted. But she did know it wasn’t being *just friends*.

“You wrote to your parents about me?”

A deep breath pulled his head her way. “Yes. I wrote to them about everything that went on in my life. I thought it was all rather mundane and meaningless...the letter, not my life.”

“Apparently, they were able to read between the lines.”

“Apparently so.”

* * *

Paul returned to looking at the passing scene. Who would have thought people as educated as his parents would do something so crazy? There were hundreds of ways they could have protected him rather than choose the harebrained course they’d taken. He’d seen grief-stricken people do crazy things in his day. This beat them all.

So now they were back in his life, just as he’d wished. No matter how anxious they were to renew ties, no matter how far-fetched their reasoning was, it still wasn’t enough to mend the hole in his heart.

He felt Belle’s hands on his knees. “You have to give this time.”

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Seemed like he was being asked to do that a lot lately. Hardly seemed fair. But then life often wasn't.

"I know. I'm trying to justify what they thought were good intentions. It's just hard."

"Forgiving sometimes is. But when you love someone..."

Paul snapped his gaze to hers. He got the feeling she was talking about more here than his parents.

She slid her hands to his thighs. "I'm not sorry your parents know about us."

"Is there an *us*, Belle?"

"Well—"

"Because I can't take this waffling from you much longer. I need a decision, a commitment from you one way or the other. Friends, lovers, wife...something." He punctuated each word with a jerk of his hand, like they hovered in the air between them. In some respects, Paul supposed they did. Barriers, watch words.

Belle slipped back into her seat. The ultimatum looked like it had slammed into her with the force of a fist. She blinked mounting tears away. Much as Paul longed to wrap his arms around her and apologize, he forced himself to stay put. Brady's advice rang hollow. Life wasn't a game to be played out. And he was tired of having his heart jerked around. When Belle was ready to make a firm decision and stand by it, she could come to him.

It was a risky move and Belle was stubborn enough to tell him where to shove that gauntlet he'd thrown between them. But Paul had to do it or they'd be torturing themselves for the rest of their lives. He watched determination chase away her shock, and knew he'd lost. Hadn't he realized years ago gambling never paid?

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. And everything lost. Paul pinched the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes against an onslaught of memories. Until Belle said the words, he refused to give up hope. Call

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him a fool. He'd been called worse.

* * *

Tension filled the coach on the short ride to the hotel. At least with Charity along on the way back things were easier. She managed to put her book down long enough to gawk at the big houses they passed. Paul couldn't wait to see her reaction when she stepped into the Harrington library.

Brendle met them at the gate. He escorted them to the front door with a wave of his arm. Maids at the door relieved them of their satchels. His mother engulfed Charity in a hug and swooped them all into the library for tea. Charity took one step over the threshold and froze. Her jaw dropped and her eyes widened with each pass they made around the room.

"My, oh, my. There must be over a thousand books here."

His father chuckled. "At least."

Belle tugged off her gloves. "Just think, Charity. You wouldn't have to talk to a soul. There are enough books here to keep you busy for years."

"Can I...touch one?"

His mother laughed. Draping an arm around her shoulder, she drew Charity to the shelf. "Any one you like. Enjoy yourself. Make yourself at home."

"Home was never anything like this," she mumbled, and pulled a volume off the shelf. She caressed the green leather for a second or two, then tucked herself into the nearest chair. Except for meals, that was probably the last they'd see of her until they left—if they could convince her to stop reading long enough to eat.

"Sit, please." His mother waved them toward the circle of chairs surrounding the silver tea service. A tray of cucumber sandwiches sat to one side; lemon tarts were on a tray on the other side.

"We'll have a light tea while we talk. Belle, we'd love to have you

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go with us tomorrow to our clinic. And we want to hear firsthand about your work and the town.”

Paul studied Belle’s hand as she accepted the cup and saucer. She might have been raised in a crowded one-room shack, but she’d been brought up to be a lady. Wherever she might be, Belle was in her element. She fit in this room. She fit in his life. Why couldn’t she see that?

“That sounds wonderful, Mrs....Dr...uhm...” Confusion knit Belle’s brow. It was hard not to laugh.

His mother smiled and handed her a china plate. “Call us Hattie and Dan, dear. I know it might seem awkward, but to us you are hardly a stranger.”

Belle’s smile returned and stayed. Paul watched her delight grow with every second she spent with his parents. Through the clinic the following day, working by their sides. Again at the hospital, soaking in all the information she could absorb. Her eyes were as wide with wonder as Charity’s had been. Over the supper that night, the conversation stayed with medicine until Belle caught his gaze on her.

She stopped in mid-sentence and hid an apologetic smile behind her glass of sherry. “I’m sorry. I seem to be hogging your parents all to myself.”

“Oh, I doubt he minds all that much,” his father said. “That smile hasn’t left his face all day. And, who knows? We might even tempt him back to medicine.”

Belle arched an eyebrow. “Back?”

Paul traced his thumb against the bowl of his glass. “Seemed only natural to follow in my parents’ footsteps. As time grew closer for me to go to medical school, I realized it wasn’t for me. So I turned to serving the law instead.”

“And then God.”

“And then God.” He lifted his glass in a toast.

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“Any regrets?” she asked.

“One thing I’ve learned recently is that you can’t dwell on regret, you can only learn from it and try not to make the same mistake twice.”

“Don’t you want more?”

“Yes.” He locked his gaze to hers so there would be no misunderstanding his intent. “I want you.”

* * *

A shiver coursed up Belle’s spine. Her breath was stuck somewhere between her heart and her throat. It was bad enough watching him caress his glass. All she could think about was the way his thumb felt against her breast. But this—the hunger, the wanting in his eyes—Belle felt like prey waiting to be devoured. And she liked it.

“Perhaps you two *friends* would like to take a stroll in the garden,” Hattie said.

“A wonderful idea.” Paul pushed away from the table. “We’ll all take a stroll. Come along, Charity. I certainly don’t think it’s wise for us to be alone.”

She frowned up at him. “Why? You’ve been alone before. Belle even slept...”

He slapped a book in her hands and hauled her to her feet. “There’s gas lighting in the garden. You can read while we walk.”

A blush burned Belle’s face as she helped Paul herd Charity to the garden. The girl made it as far as the first bench. Paul plunked her down, grabbed Belle by the hand, and ducked behind a hedge of cedar. There he swung her around, into his arms, and covered her lips with his.

He kissed her until her lips were putty beneath his. And if that pleasure wasn’t enough to drive her insane, his questing fingers found her nipples through her dress and teased them into hard little peaks. She longed for his mouth upon them, his body pressed hard and deep into hers.

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“Where are Paul and Belle?”

Hattie’s question jerked them apart. They ducked out from behind the hedge before Charity could answer. If his mother suspected anything, she was at least polite enough not to mention it. They fell in step beside the older couple. Belle let the night air cool her cheeks, but it was going to take much more to calm the rest of her body.

“We would dearly love to come visit your town,” Dan said. “Would you mind if we traveled back with you?”

“To visit or to make sure Aaron does me no harm?” Paul asked.

Belle tugged his arm. “Don’t fault your parents for their concern.” She ran the occupancy of the boarding house in her head. If Aaron were still there, the Harringtons could have her room and she’d bunk with her sisters. “We’d love to have you visit.”

“Marvelous!” Hattie clasped her hands. “Goodness, Dan, we have a ton of things to do before we go tomorrow.”

“Then we’d best get started.” They hurried away, arm in arm.

Belle waited until they rounded the corner, then draped her arms around Paul’s neck. “Now...where were we?”

He pulled her arms down and laced his fingers through hers. “I wasn’t joking earlier, Belle. I need a decision from you.”

She nuzzled her stomach against him. “If you love—”

Paul pulled her back. “No games, sweetheart. No tricks. You know I love you. I need to know where we’re going from here. I need a commitment one way or the other.”

Why was he being so stubborn? Belle pressed close once more. “I want to be lovers.”

“Fine. Then lovers we’ll be.” He set her away from him again. “But not tonight. I want your decision to be from the heart, well thought out, and not driven by a need for sex.”

Belle struggled for a response. None came to mind.

“Think about what being lovers will mean. Really think about it. If

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you still feel that way when we get home, a thousand wild horses won't keep me from you."

He turned on his heel and started to walk away.

"Why are you being so mean to me?"

Paul glanced over his shoulder. "Because I do love you. And I'll be damned if I'm going to let either of us be hurt by a rash decision. This needs careful thought whether it's to be friends, secret lovers under the darkness of night, or bonded in marriage for the rest of our lives."

"And yet you're the one who pressed me to make a decision."

"Yes, I did. But being with you now, ready to lift your skirts, bend you over the nearest bench, and have you at any cost has made me see myself in a different light. To force a decision now smacks of manipulation. I refuse to sink that low. Love means more to me than that, Belle."

She watched the darkness swallow him. Love twisted her heart. Much as she longed to run after him, Belle knew he was right. The time for games was over. This was their life, their love they were dealing with. Was there ever anything more fragile and precious?

A decision, carefully thought out. It made for a sleepless night. On the ride to the train station the next day, she let the coach rock her to sleep. A squeal from Charity jerked her awake and Belle watched her sister yank open the door and dash toward the platform before the coach had come to a full stop.

"Good heavens, has she lost her mind?" Belle jumped out.

Paul snagged her arm. "Hold up," he said with a smile. "It's Jake and Grace."

Still half asleep, Belle focused on Charity's goal. The girl slammed full force into Jake Tanner's arms, just like Susannah had Paul when they'd arrived at her parents' farm. And like Paul, Jake wrapped a bear hug around her while Grace blinked away her surprise. Belle wished she were fourteen years old so she could do the same. She'd never been

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so glad to see someone in her life.

The children ran off their energy on the platform with Grace's little dog. Even the baby strained against Grace to get down. Finally, she relinquished him to one of the older children. A.J. and Millie were nowhere to be seen.

By the time they reached the Tanner bunch, Charity had rattled off all the news. Grace met Belle halfway and hugged her tight.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get back sooner to help with Ma and Pa."

"There was nothing more any of us could do."

Grace nodded and pulled away.

"From the look of things, I'd say Prudence isn't the only one who should have stood before the preacher," she whispered.

"Did Charity—"

"No. She didn't have to. I can see it in your face."

"Oh, Grace. I'm so confused."

"We'll talk later. Right now Millie could really use your help." Grace tugged her toward their private railcar. "I'm glad you have your healing basket with you. Millie is expecting and the trip is wearing her down. She's been throwing up constantly since we left Virginia. We haven't stopped anywhere long enough for me to find any ginger root. It is truly a blessing running into you."

In more ways than Belle could count. Grace could help her sort out her jumbled emotions. There was nothing she couldn't tell her. The fact that they were together when Belle needed her most was a small miracle. She longed to unburden her heart, her soul. To sit across from Grace, hands clasped in that sisterly bond that meant so much, and cry out her confusion. All of that must wait; another sister, this one of the heart, needed her.

Millie lay in the bottom of one of the sleeping berths. A.J. sat by her side, swabbing her face with a cool damp cloth. Their first child together was definitely overtaking any joy the event brought. Dark

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circles under Millie's eyes highlighted her pale skin. Daylong morning sickness had made her lose weight.

The first sight of Belle widened both their eyes. Rather than question why and how she happened to be in Dallas, A.J. scooted out of the way.

Millie sank into the mattress. "Thank heavens. Wishing really does make it so. I feel better already just seeing you."

"I doubt that will last long once this train starts moving. But I have just the thing to fix you up." Belle steeped ground ginger in hot water until it cooled, then stood by and watched Millie drink it down.

"Can I help you?" There was a challenge in A.J.'s voice. Belle glanced up to see Hattie standing just inside the door to the compartment.

"This is Paul's mother," she said. "She's a doctor."

"And I've just come to see if I could help. But you seem to have things well under control. Paul always said you were a godsend. I can see that's so. I'll see if we can't move these children into our car and give your patient some peace and quiet." She was off before anyone could argue the point.

Grace watched her leave, then turned her gaze back to Belle. "You realize we have a thousand questions."

Belle merely nodded and fluffed the covers around Millie. Within minutes she drifted off to sleep.

As luck would have it, the Harrington car was linked beside that of the Tanners. The families spread out between the two. It gave Belle and Grace a private corner to talk in from time to time. Belle laid out her heart, her fears, and everything else she could think of. In the end, Grace told her the only thing she could.

"You have to make your own decision, honey. It's your life. No one can tell you what to do, especially me."

Belle nodded. There was nothing else to do. She preached

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independence, yet when it came down to the most important decision in her life, she wanted someone else to tell her what to do. She settled back for the remainder of the trip, thinking about her choices.

Being friends? No, Belle knew she'd never be satisfied with that. She wanted Paul, needed him, craved him.

Lovers? What was it Paul had said? Being secret lovers under the cover of darkness? Belle watched the other couples. Jake and Grace. A.J. and Millie. Even Dan and Hattie. Their affection was open, honest, free. She and Paul would never have that as lovers, not like this. The very notion made Belle feel cheated. That left only one choice.

Belle rubbed at her headache. What was so difficult about this? He loved her. She loved him. He was a wonderful man, a great lover. He'd make an excellent father. He'd grown up in a house where the woman had as much independence as she wished.

Who cared that they weren't caught up in the love-at-first-sight madness? There were other couples, more mature and sane, who chose to wait and see. Brady and Florine were one. A.J. and Millie another. A person would be hard put to find a couple more devoted to each other than those two. She and Paul were normal, not mismatched. What more proof did she need?

Images of her father lying with that young woman flashed through her mind. Her mother's love had never diminished even though she had had the means to leave. Belle closed her eyes, shutting it all away. That was their life, their choices, not hers.

She felt a touch on her shoulder and looked up to see Paul standing beside her.

"You've been rubbing at your temples for hours. Would you like a headache powder? Mother and Father are fully stocked if you're missing some from your basket." He added the last with a smile.

When Belle nodded, he not only retrieved the powder, but somehow found a cool compress for her forehead. At some point, Belle drifted

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off to sleep. When she woke, he was still by her side. She got a vision of him holding her hand as she gave birth to their first child.

Warmth spread through her. Peace settled over her shoulders. In that instant she knew. And if they weren't surrounded by what suddenly felt like a million people, she would have told him.

Jake nudged him. "A Texas ranger? You used to be a Texas ranger?"

Paul gave Belle a wink as he straightened. "It's a long story."

Jake spread his arms wide. "I'm not going anywhere. A.J. and I have got nothing but time. It's still a long way to Cottonwood Bend."

Too long, as far as Belle was concerned. The Tanners deserved a prize for having survived the trip to Virginia and back. Marriages were still intact, the children were still reasonably happy. Belle would have been spitting nails by now.

Paul let the men corner him, but he also made them work for the information they demanded. Belle watched the mischief twinkle in his eyes as he toyed with them. It was impossible not to smile, harder still not to laugh.

"Headache gone?" Hattie patted her knee as she sat on the bench across from her.

Belle cocked her head to one side. As a matter of fact, it was. "Yes, thanks to Paul's wonderful care."

She glanced at her son. "Yes. He would have made a wonderful doctor. But..." She shrugged. "A person has to follow their own path. Now, let's talk about you."

She scooted to the edge of her seat and grabbed Belle's hands. "Dan and I have been talking. I know this will be a shock to you, but we feel we know you so well. You have a wonderful healing touch. We would love to send you to medical school."

Belle's mind went blank. It was a dream come true...but not her dream. She was content with the way things were. All that was missing

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was Doc.

"I appreciate the offer more than I can say, but I'll have to say no. I'd rather find a doctor willing to work hand in hand with me like Doc did."

"Dear, if it's the money..." She gave a light laugh. "Paul, come talk some sense into this young lady. Your father and I have offered to send her to medical school and she's refused."

He looked up from his conversation. "Mother, Belle has a mind of her own that she's perfectly capable of using. It's her life. I'm not about to tell her how to live it. One of the things I love about her is her independence. Why would I want to interfere?"

There it was. That magic something she had wanted to hear. How strange and right that it would come *after* she'd made her decision. Like a sign that she had chosen well. Unbidden, a tear spilled down her cheek.

"Now what did I do wrong?" Paul demanded to know.

Belle laughed and walked toward him. "Nothing. In fact, you did everything right."

Wonderment washed over his face as her words sunk in. "That's it? That's what you wanted to hear?"

She draped her arms around his neck. "Yes."

Still half dazed, he wrapped his around her waist. "But I've always felt—"

"Let it go, Paul," Jake said. "You'll never win."

Laughing, he tightened his hold. "I've already won. I'm holding my prize."

"Looks like we'll be finding a preacher in Austin," Grace said.

Belle pulled back. "Considering how much trouble everyone went to getting us together, I don't think it would be wise to cheat them out of a wedding."

"Not unless we want them planning our children. And I think Belle

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and I both agree we'd like to wait a little while for children. Right now I can't stand the thought of her going through all that pain just to bear a child of mine."

Tears she thought gone flooded in once again. "Oh, Paul."

"Did I say something right again?"

"Yes," she said with a laugh.

"Then I think I'll quit talking while I'm ahead."

* * *

Wagons from the Tanner ranch waited in Austin to carry them on the final leg of the journey back to Cottonwood Bend. Belle felt sorry for Dan and Hattie. She was certain they were used to far better accommodations. Neither of them uttered a single word of complaint. They truly seemed happy just to be with their son again. Paul's affection toward them was genuine but reserved. Belle didn't blame him. The years of separation had taken a toll on his heart, even if they were supposed to have been for his benefit. It would take time to mend the rift between them. Thankfully, Dan and Hattie knew that and didn't press too hard.

Darkness was upon them by the time they reached town. Jake scissored the reins back, coming to a pinpoint stop in front of the gate to the boarding house. Lanterns gleamed from the bottom windows. A shadow shifted on the front porch.

"They're here," Cal shouted toward the house, then headed their way.

Paul jumped down. "Where's Aaron Fredericks?"

"Left the day you did. Why?"

"I'll tell you later." He gave Belle a hand down. "These are the rest of your in-laws."

Cal passed his gaze over the wagons. "I'm sure they're plumb tired and not interested in socializing. Pru and Susannah have promised to make their hellos short so you Tanners can get on home. But I expect

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they'll be by as soon as the morning allows."

"We appreciate that," Grace said. "It's been a long trip." She accepted Jake's help down just as their sisters rushed down the walk. While the men unloaded the trunks and satchels, the sisters had a quick visit. Then Grace hugged them all in turn and let Jake swing her back onto the seat.

They had barely driven away when Sid and Pammy strolled down the middle of the street, her arm linked through his. Their heads were bent in conversation. Every so often her giggle and his chuckle echoed off each other.

"They've been sparking all over the place," Cal said. "He's over at her parents' house every night for supper. And every night they take a walk down the street afterward."

Pru clucked her tongue. "It's boastful."

He frowned. "It's dangerous." As if to prove his point, Cal jerked his head toward the couple. Mark Hanson kept pace not more than twenty feet behind. A pistol was strapped to his hips.

"He does this every night?" Paul asked.

"Yep, and Sid just keeps baiting him." Cal slowly shook his head. "It's trouble waiting to happen."

Paul's gaze followed the trio down the boardwalk. "Someone's got to reason with him."

"I guess you're as welcome to try as the next person," Cal said. "He hasn't been doing much listening. Come on, everyone, I've got supper on the stove waiting for all of you."

Hattie looked him up and down. "You cooked?"

Cal smirked. "I'm a changed man, Dr. Harrington."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"We might have bigger trouble brewing than our lovers' triangle," Cal said as Pru led the Harringtons inside. He waited until the door closed behind him then continued. "Brady got word the Jessops are still

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on the loose. Talk is they're looking to spring Frank, so I'm guessing they don't know he's dead."

"But it also means they'll be headed straight for Cottonwood Bend," Paul said.

"Yep." Cal shoved his fingertips in his pockets. "Brady's been debating on whether or not to ask for more ranger protection. He's afraid doing so will bring attention our way."

Belle found herself nodding with Paul.

"Retha's in all her states. Scared to bits they'll come charging into town," Cal said. "Pru's managed to keep her busy with the younguns. She keeps her wits together when they're around. Most of the men in town are armed and on alert. Only ones who have their heads up their ass are those two." He jerked his head toward Sid and Mark.

"Let me see if I can talk some sense into one of them," Paul said.

"It won't be Sid, I can tell you that. He's laughed off warnings from everyone—even his brother."

And Mark was a hothead and a braggart. The only thing that made him halfway decent of late was him thinking he had Pammy. Her rejection cut deep into his pride. Mark was itching for revenge. All the talking in the world wouldn't change that. The sad part was, even if Mark did manage to win back any part of Pammy's affections, he'd see she suffered the rest of her life for her betrayal.

"Well, I've got to try anyway," Paul said.

Cal shrugged. "I'll be inside. If I watch, I'll just get mad again and that won't help anything. Coming, Belle?"

"I'll wait for Paul and be right in." If he failed with Mark, maybe she could reason with Pammy.

"I won't be long... Mark, wait up."

Belle leaned against the gate while he trotted across the street. Mark looked up at Paul, hand on his pistol.

"Aw, leave him alone, Reverend." Sid snickered. "I kinda like

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having the little dog follow us around.”

Pammy smothered a giggle behind her hand.

Everything turned slow, like a dream gone bad. Mark whirled around on the couple. A shot blasted through the night. Pammy screamed and clutched her side. Even in the dark, Belle could see blood darkening her dress.

Sid whipped out his weapon and crouched low. Mark shot again. Sid fell back, clutching his shoulder. Another shot dropped him to the ground.

Paul skidded to his knees beside Sid. Mark aimed.

Belle charged through the gate. “Paul, behind you!”

He grabbed Sid’s gun, rolled, and shot. Mark staggered, hit the hitching post in front of the general store, and fell. A dark stain spread over his chest. The ruckus brought people running from all directions. Belle didn’t have time to do more than react.

“Get these wounded into my office now!”

Footsteps beat a path behind her. Paul’s parents—a godsend right now. “You’re in charge. Tell me what to do,” she said.

Dan pointed to Mark. “Him first. Belle, you’re with me. Paul, bind Sid’s arm. Cal, get that woman in there next. Paul will have to assist Hattie.”

They worked without pause, with few words. Like a team that had operated together over and over again. Mark died before Dan could get him opened up to reach the bullet. They wasted no time mourning the loss, but moved on to Sid. Of the three, his wounds weren’t as life threatening. The shot had lodged in his arm after breaking the bone. The second one caught his thigh.

Pammy beared watching. The bullet had ripped a hole clean through her side, taking pieces of her dress with it. If she’d been wearing a corset, it might have helped keep her from injury. As it was, all they could do was clean and patch. Infection was sure to set in. Two hours

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later they finally sat down to Cal's supper. Somehow he'd managed to keep it hot and relatively edible. Belle blessed his soul. At least he had some redeeming qualities. They ate to please him, but Belle doubted any of them tasted a bite.

"Pammy's parents want to know if they can see her," Pru said as she served them up another hunk of roast chicken. "The undertaker wants Mark."

Belle rubbed her tired eyes. "Let the undertaker in first. He needs to come and go through the back door. Once he's gone, let the Wilsons in. They are not to disturb her. Don't let them stay long."

Pru nodded and hurried off.

Paul shoved his plate away. "I don't understand any of this. I'm a good shot, yes. But I'm not that good. There's no way on God's green earth that a person can grab a gun, roll, shoot, and hit a man square in the chest. It's just not possible unless he's hovering right over you. Mark was a good ten feet away."

They heard boots scuff the floor and saw Brady standing in the doorway. Cal glowered beside him.

"Paul...I..." A deep breath pulled his shoulders back. "Paul, I gotta take you in. I'm sorry, but you're under arrest for the murder of Mark Hanson."

Belle lurched to her feet, toppling her chair in the process. "That's the most..."

Paul slipped his hand around her waist. "It's not going to get resolved tonight, Belle. I'll go with Brady. First thing in the morning, get to Austin and find me a good lawyer."

"No. I won't let this happen." She shoved herself in front of him. "You can't have him."

Brady's shoulders sagged. "The Hansons are talking about lynching him. It's for his own safety. Please, Belle. Don't make this any harder than it already is."

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She felt Paul's touch, that sweet little circle he liked to draw against the small of her back, and did the only thing left for her to do—turned and kissed him good-bye.

CHAPTER 16

Belle fumbled for her chair. It was a nightmare and any minute she was going to wake up. In some part of her mind, she was aware of the world around her moving. The Harringtons comforted each other. Cal and Pru spoke in low tones. Marty and Clarence walked in, followed quickly by Florine and the Cyruses.

Someone said something to her. They might as well have been speaking a foreign language. Belle couldn't understand a word they said.

"Austin. I have to get to Austin and find a lawyer," she said, more to herself than anyone else. What was that man's name? The one Jake had used a few years back. Pearce. Yes, that was it. "If I leave now, I'd be there by morning."

Cal splayed his fingers on his hips. "Now that would be a fool thing to do. It's pitch black outside. We've got enough problems without you getting lost in the dark. This isn't a trip to the ranch and back."

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Hattie touched her arm. "We'll leave at the first hint of dawn."

"Sorry, ma'am," Cal said. "But you doctors need to stay here. Sid and Pammy need you. I'll go with Belle."

Belle forced herself to focus. She needed someone she felt comfortable with. Someone she knew she could depend on, lean on. Cal wasn't that person, despite the good side of him she'd seen lately.

"I'd rather have Jake or A.J. go with me."

"They'll do more good here. People around this town will listen to them long before they'll listen to me." He jerked his head to Marty and Clarence. "Camp yourselves at that jail. No one takes him, understood? I'll be over after I let the Tanners know what's going on." They left before the final word died.

Belle didn't have the energy to argue. Like it or not, Cal was as much a part of her family as the Tanners. And just as inclined to take charge when the need arose. What did it matter...really...as long as Paul was saved?

"This is awful, truly awful." Mrs. Cyrus twisted a handkerchief around her chubby fingers.

"None of this would have happened if it weren't for you ladies and your dang-blasted marriage committee," her husband said. "I told you to leave the younguns alone. To let them work it out. Would you listen to me? No!"

Mrs. Cyrus shook her finger at him. "Don't you rant at me, you old geezer. You were just as much a part of this as the rest of us."

"Stop it. Both of you." Belle gently pulled them apart. "If anyone's to blame, it's me. I'm the one who insisted on bringing the other single ladies into this."

Cal snagged his cowboy hat from the rack in the entryway. "If you're placing blame, lay it at the right doorstep. None of this would have happened if Sid and Pammy hadn't baited a jealous man with a temper. Belle, you coming with me to the ranch?"

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She shook her head. "I'm going to the jail."

"Afraid not." He seated the hat on his head. "If there's going to be trouble, that's the last place you need to be. Paul has enough to worry about without adding you to the pile. You might want to try getting some sleep. We've got a long ride ahead of us tomorrow."

He was asking the impossible.

* * *

Paul lay on the narrow cot, counting the beams in the ceiling. He must have played out the events in his mind a thousand times. When he held a gun in his hand, it became a part of him—almost like an extra eye. Instinctively, he knew when the aim was off or wrong. Hadn't his father just reminded him of that? This was no exception. Paul was one hundred percent certain the bullet had gone over Mark's shoulder. And yet Mark lay dead.

Paul didn't know what shocked him more. That he wasn't hit or that Mark fell to the ground. None of this made sense. He tried to tell himself he'd gotten off an unlucky shot. Each time he wound up shaking his head. He *knew* weapons.

He tested the ricochet theory and discounted that notion, too. There was nothing around but glass, wood, and sky. What could his bullet have bounced off of? And Sid had been lying behind him, unarmed and unconscious, same as Pammy. The only other person around was Belle. None of this made a lick of sense.

The door to the jailhouse opened. Paul glanced up in time to see Brady, Marty, and Clarence draw their weapons. He felt like a sitting duck. If the Hansons were that determined to avenge Mark's death, all they had to do was aim for the cell. He had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

"Calm down," Cal said. "It's only us."

Jake and A.J. walked in behind him. Neither of them looked none too happy.

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“This is foolish, Brady.” Jake sat astride one of the chairs and rested his arms over the back. “From everything I’ve heard, this is self-defense. Unless the law changed while we were in Virginia, I don’t think that’s a hanging offense.”

“It ain’t.” He twirled a piece of straw from one side of his mouth to the other. “But you can’t convince the Hansons of that. You know what a hotheaded bunch they are. They’re saying that our good reverend here is a professional gunman and that Mark never had a chance. They want blood for blood, even if that blood is a preacher’s.”

Paul wrapped his fingers around the cell bar. “But Belle was there. She saw everything.”

Brady didn’t bother to look at him. “Now, I’d hardly call her an unbiased witness.”

A good attorney would rip her testimony apart. She could tell the truth until the cows came home and it wouldn’t matter. No telling how much of their true relationship he’d uncover.

He pressed his forehead against the bars. They might as well string him up now. He was as good as dead. His only hope was that his attorney could outmaneuver the prosecuting attorney. And that the Hansons didn’t take the law into their own hands first.

The tip of Cal’s dusty boots appeared on the floor in front of him. “I’m taking Belle to Austin in the morning. We’ll be back as soon as we can. And don’t worry. Long as I have breath in my body, no one’s going to be hanging you.”

That sounded like trouble brewing. “I don’t want to be running the rest of my life.”

“You’d rather be dead?” Cal snorted. “And here I thought you’d gotten over being a martyr.”

Paul jerked his head up. “I would rather be dead than live without Belle. And I’d never ask her to leave her family and life to run with me.”

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“Did you ever think she might choose you over her family? Paul, that woman loves you.”

He pushed away. “Love is great, but there’s only so much it can stand up to. She might be happy for awhile, but she needs to have her family, too. Belle has to be her own woman. She has to have her own life.”

There were those magical words again—the ones Belle had longed to hear him say. If he’d only voiced them a week ago...

Paul sank to the cot and buried his head in his hands. “Cal, just go. Please. Get Belle to Austin, find that lawyer, and get back here.”

He followed Cal’s step across the room and out the door. He’d tell the Tanners to go, too, but they’d never listen. Neither would the others.

“You know the five of you can’t stay here forever. And it could be weeks before this goes to trial.”

Brady tossed a deck of cards onto his desk. “Not forever. Just until all the lawyers are in place. Three days at the most. Circuit judge will be here Monday. Anyone interested in a little poker to pass the time?”

Jake kicked his chair back and rested his heels on the edge of the desk. “Wouldn’t it be easier to send Pearce a wire to come here? It’d sure save time.”

No one moved. No one answered. They probably felt as stupid as Paul did right now.

Jake stood. “I’ll take care of it.”

That cut a day off Paul’s wait time. It still felt like forever.

* * *

It looked like Belle wasn’t the only one waiting for a lawyer to step off the evening stage. Mark’s two older brothers stood at the far end of the depot bracing up the post while they stared up the street. They may have been twenty feet away, but their presence still gave Belle the willies. The Hansons passed the time glaring at those around them and

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talking under their breath. At least they'd stopped hanging out around the jail.

Belle didn't budge from between Cal and Jake no matter how hard it was to stand still. She could imagine how Paul felt being cooped up in that cell all day. With the Hansons camped out on the jail's front stoop, she'd been forbidden to go near the place. Paul's meals and a book from Charity were all delivered by Cal. She'd reached the end of her patience. The instant Pearce stepped off that stage, she *would* see Paul.

"Stage a-coming!" the depot manager shouted.

As if they couldn't see the thing rattling their way.

Those waiting stepped back as one to avoid the cloud of dust the stage pulled in with it. As the driver stopped, it kept going, blanketing the horses as it settled. Belle heard an asthmatic cough from inside. Seconds later a beefy foot kicked the door open and an elephant of a man jumped down. He teetered for balance. Belle prayed he could hold it. It'd take more men than they could muster to help him back up. Through squinting eyes he surveyed the people on the depot porch, then mopped his brow with a damp handkerchief and waddled forward.

"I'm looking for the Hanson family."

The brothers didn't come forward until Cal pointed them out.

"That'd be us," one of them said.

The man stuck out his hand. "I'm Bertrand Farnsworth, the attorney you sent for."

Dread crept up Belle's spine. The man's reputation preceded him. Word had it he never lost a case. He came at a dear price, too. She didn't know how the Hansons could possibly afford him. They huddled off to one side in deep conversation while they waited for his valise.

Another, younger man stepped off the stage, looking as crisp and fresh as when he'd boarded. A bowler hat topped his head. He reached to take his satchel from the driver, thanking him with a smile. His steel

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gray eyes surveyed all around him. Belle guessed he didn't miss much. He stepped into the shade of the depot porch and right up to them.

"I presume one, if not all, of you good people are the Tanners."

"I'm Jake Tanner. Why?"

He clasped his wrist. "I'm here to assist you. My name is Carter White. I'm Mr. Pearce's nephew."

"Where's Pearce?" The desperation in Cal's voice mirrored Belle's. Sharp and neat as Mr. White appeared, he also looked like he was fresh from school and hardly experienced.

"He's visiting our nation's capital. I've been handling business in his absence."

Cal snorted. "Between feedings at your mama's breast?"

Jake poked an elbow in his side. "One thing I've learned from being married is when to keep my mouth shut."

White hiked his chin a notch. "Don't let my looks or my youth fool you, Mr..."

"Cal Webster...I'm Miss Marshall's brother-in-law."

His gaze shifted to Belle. "And I will presume you to be Miss Marshall. You are related to..."

Farnsworth lumbered over. "She's the only witness, White. And I don't think I take kindly to you hovering over her. I want her words and her testimony to be untainted, despite her involvement with the accused."

White cocked his head Farnsworth's way. "A good attorney will pierce any subterfuge, Mr. Farnsworth. Good day to you."

He gave a subtle jerk of his head as he passed Belle and the men, giving them no choice but to follow. He led them directly to the jailhouse across the street, then stopped outside.

"I'd like a brief rundown of events and relationships before I speak with my client."

He got just that. Belle suspected he catalogued every word he heard,

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everything he saw. He might be young, but his mind was as sharp and crisp as his attire. The one thing they left out, he picked up on immediately.

"Miss Marshall, I get the impression your interest and relationship with Reverend Harrington is more than casual."

She glanced away from his know-it-all gaze.

"If you and Reverend Harrington are secretly wed, I need to know, ma'am."

"If we were, why should it matter?"

"Because a wife cannot be compelled to testify against her husband."

* * *

Belle burst through the door to the jailhouse and found herself staring down the barrels of four pistols. One by one, the men holstered their weapons.

Brady did so none too gently. "For pity's sake, Belle, ain't you got sense enough—"

"I need to talk to Paul."

He jerked his hand toward the cell. "Well, he's right there. I don't suspect he can get away from you."

She ignored the sarcasm and rushed to where Paul stood, hands curled around the bars, waiting for her. A furrow drew his eyebrows together. Smiling, Belle smoothed the ridges away with her thumb.

Paul pulled her hand away and wrapped it under his around the bar. "You are a sight for sore eyes, but it's not safe here. The Hansons—"

"We need to get married...right away."

His lips moved. The words were slow to follow. "Are you...with child?" He finished the last in a voice for her ears only.

She quickly shook her head. "If we marry, I cannot testify against you."

Paul braced his forehead against hers. "Belle—"

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“We don’t have time to discuss this, Paul. This is your life we’re talking about. We’ve already decided to marry. Why should we wait? We love each other. Everyone knows it. They knew it before we did.”

His shoulders rose and fell on a heavy sigh. His hold on her fingers tightened. “As much as I want to marry you, doing so now... Belle, honey, it’ll look like I’m guilty. Like I’m trying to shut you up.”

“He’s right, Miss Marshall.” White strode toward them, hand extended. “Carter White...I’ll be defending you in court.”

Paul glowered at him. “What are you? Twelve?”

White didn’t bat an eye. “Fifteen, at least. I assure you I will leave no stone unturned to see you are cleared of any and all charges. We’ll need to move quickly. The circuit judge is due here Monday. That only gives us two days to gather evidence for you so this goes no further than a preliminary hearing. If it does, Farnsworth will ask that the trial be moved to Austin in order to get an unbiased jury.”

Belle closed her eyes. This was becoming more of a nightmare with each minute that passed.

“By tomorrow this time, this town will be crawling with newspaper reporters. It seems Mr. Tanner’s telegram to me and the one to Farnsworth from the Hansons generated quite a bit of interest in Austin. It’s not every day that murder occurs in Cottonwood Bend. Put in the name Harrington, sign the name Tanner to the telegram and...” White snapped his fingers. “News.”

He rubbed his hands together. “We have a lot to do. First, I’d like some time alone with my client. Then, with the sheriff’s escort and permission, I want to see where this all happened. And I want to speak with the couple who instigated this whole mess.”

* * *

Paul had to admit he was impressed. Carter White might look like a fuzzy-cheeked boy, but he sure didn’t act like one. He was born to lead. He gave orders and expected them to be carried out. And they were.

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His confidence was his shield. Paul hoped it wasn't also his undoing.

They sat together on Paul's narrow cot. White balanced a large notepad on his lap and wrote down every word Paul said. Then he went back over it again and again and yet again. Afterward, he did the same thing to Belle, finding a niche in the corner of the jailhouse where they could speak with relative privacy.

Belle's eyes were rimmed with dark circles, puffy below that. She looked like she'd spent the night worrying. He knew that feeling well. Having her by his side would have made things easier to bear. Once this business was settled, if it was settled, Paul vowed they'd never spend another night apart again.

With Brady tagging along, Paul took White to the place where the whole nightmare began. There they played out the scene—where Paul had been, where Belle stood, how dark, how light, the positions of the other three. Again, in painstaking detail, White asked the same questions again and again. He scribbled notes, sketched out the scene, paced the distances until he drew a small crowd of onlookers, including the Hansons and the man Paul presumed was their lawyer.

White glanced up and smiled. "Ah, Mr. Farnsworth, just the man I was hoping to see. If you'd be so good as to accompany me to the funeral parlor."

The big man narrowed his eyes. "What are you up to now, White?"

"Justice, Mr. Farnsworth. Justice. Care to make another wager?"

Farnsworth actually chuckled. "I'm still smarting over the loss of my diamond stickpin. I think I'll pass this time. I'll meet you in front of the funeral parlor in fifteen minutes."

Paul didn't know what astounded him more—that the two would wager on something so serious or that White had actually managed to beat Farnsworth. There might be hope for him after all.

"Very well." White flipped the pages shut on his notebook. "Sheriff, if you'll ensure the safety and well-being of my client, then

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meet us there, it would be greatly appreciated. And if you, Reverend Harrington, would make a list of all your friends, family, and associates, I'll pick that up upon my return."

Belle gave a small laugh. "That's going to be the whole town."

He lifted a brow. "Then the whole town it is, Miss Marshall. As I said, I shall leave no stone unturned. Reverend, start with those closest to the incident and work your way out."

Instructions given, White marched up the boardwalk toward the funeral parlor. The crowd slowly dispersed. In less time than it took to think about it, Paul was behind bars again. Isolated. Alone. A cruel reminder that this was how he had been living all these years. He might have given of himself and his time, but he'd shut his emotions away. Never again. All he had to do was survive this trial. All he wanted was a second chance to get things right.

How many second chances do you expect God to give you? his conscience nagged.

Paul cast his gaze heavenward. "Just one more."

* * *

Paul blotted the water and shaving cream from his face. A little privacy might have been nice while he prepared for the preliminary hearing. White refused. He didn't want anyone trying to dish out vigilante justice. Paul had to stay where he was.

Newsmen and gawkers crowded the town. If the Jessops wanted to sneak in and wreak havoc, now was the perfect time. They could melt into the crowd and no one would be the wiser until it was too late. Brady claimed he had everything under control, but Paul didn't see how when someone was either watching over him or tagging White.

The hardest part was not being able to see Belle. White forbade that, too. He wanted no one to have any cause to question her testimony. He was stuck with what little company Clarence and Marty provided and the few visits from Cal and the Tanners.

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Brady was also scarce. He spent his time dogging White and said little about what they did while they were gone. White, too, kept his plans to himself. All Paul could do was trust him.

He shrugged into his shirt and inhaled the fresh-washed scent. Belle might not be allowed to come over, but it didn't stop her from seeing to his needs. She sent meals over twice a day along with paper and pen, and books. For the hearing today, his shoes were polished to a high shine. His best gray suit was clean and pressed. Again, White directed no clerical garb. He felt the judge would see it as a play for sympathy.

"You 'bout ready?" Brady asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be." He needed action of some kind, even if it wasn't in his favor. Something besides the mindless existence of life in this cell.

Brady led the way. Clarence and Marty flanked him. Cal took up the rear. It felt like a walk to the gallows. Outside Florine's saloon where the makeshift courtroom took place, a throng of people jockeyed for position. Paul didn't recognize most of them.

"Where in the world are all these people staying?" he asked.

Marty snickered. "Let's just say that the whorehouse is making extra good money these last few days. Fran is charging them triple the goin' rate."

At least someone was getting something out of all this. Fran probably considered it her way of getting even for what Paul was going through.

If outside the saloon was crowded, inside was worse. The noise level alone was enough to bust a man's eardrums. The heat was unbearable. Mop boys cranked the overhead fans full force. It did little good. Sweat trickled down Mr. Cyrus's face. His wife blotted hers away. Belle sat up front between Grace and Pru, trying to dredge up a little breeze for herself with a small fan. Jake and Cal flanked them. His parents were next to Cal, in equal distress.

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By the time Paul reached the tables in front, sweat pooled down his back. Mr. Farnsworth looked like he was ready to die. He tugged at his collar, trying to catch a decent breath. The only person he saw who looked cool and collected was Carter White. He prayed that was a good sign.

They'd barely taken their places when the circuit judge strode to the forefront. "It's hot and miserable. Let's get this over fast, gentlemen. No courtroom shenanigans. Since this is a preliminary hearing, cut to it. What happened? Where are the witnesses? Give me the evidence."

Farnsworth held on to the edge of his table for balance. "Yes, your honor, we shall. Reverend Paul Harrington has been charged by the Hanson family in the murder of Mark Hanson. Only witness is Miss Belle Marshall, the accused's fiancée."

White stood. "Your honor, I have evidence that proves not only did Reverend Harrington not murder Mark Hanson, he did not even shoot him."

The judge shifted his gaze between the two men, then pointed at White. "You first."

Farnsworth sagged into his seat.

White called Brady forward and swore him in. White pulled an envelope from his sheaf of papers. "Sheriff Brady, do you recognize this?"

Brady nodded. "It contains the bullet the undertaker pulled out of Mark Hanson. Mr. Tucker put it in the envelope, sealed it, then you, me, and Mr. Farnsworth signed the flap."

White passed the envelope to Farnsworth, the judge, and back to Brady. "Open it, sheriff, and tell us what type of bullet that is."

He dumped the contents in his hand. "It's from a Winchester rifle."

"And what weapon did the reverend use?"

Brady smiled. "A Colt .45."

White turned back toward the table, gave Paul a wink, and grabbed

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a second envelope. "And this, sheriff?"

"You had me dig it out of the rafter in front of the general store. Again, the three of us signed it."

"Open it. And the contents?"

Brady smiled again. "From a Colt .45."

White nodded. "One more." He retrieved a third envelope.

"It's from the upstairs storeroom over the dress shop," Brady said. "Four casings from a Winchester rifle."

"No more envelopes, Mr. White," the judge said. "We get the picture."

White tucked his hands behind his back. "Not quite, your honor. The bullets removed from Sid Tewes are also from a Winchester. And although we can't find the one that struck Pammy Wilson, I suspect it was as well. Your honor, not only is my client innocent of murder, but so is Mark Hanson not guilty of attempted murder. All individuals were shot by whomever fired that rifle from the dress shop."

"And you waited two days to bring this evidence to light?"

"I wanted no mistake, no rumor twisting this around. I wanted complete and utter innocence proven for my client. I wanted there to be no doubt in anyone's mind. And I wanted the chance to find the person responsible. Unfortunately, he seems nowhere to be found."

Mark's father jumped to his feet. "Then who killed my boy?"

White looked his way. "Someone who wanted the reverend dead—the others simply got in the way. Someone who made his intentions quite clear."

"Don't play your lawyer games with me," Hanson roared. "I want a name."

"And you'll have it once the culprit is caught," the judge said.

That didn't sit well with any of the Hansons. They stormed from the building, shoving people aside as they left.

"Unless there are any further cases..." The judge arched an

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eyebrow while he waited for a response. When none came... "Court adjourned." He smacked his gavel against the table and left.

Paul was free. Half dazed, he shook White's hand. "I can't thank you enough."

"My fee will be sufficient," he said with a smile. "Sorry I couldn't have gotten you out sooner, but with Aaron Fredericks still on the loose we thought you'd be safer where you were. Sheriff Brady has every available man hunting for him. Besides...I had a point to make."

Paul laughed lightly. "And you made it very well."

A swarm of well-wishers surrounded them. Someone called for a celebration. There was only one person Paul wanted, needed to be with. Amid handshakes, claps on the back, and a hug from his mother, he made his way to Belle. She hadn't budged from her seat. Tears of relief drifted down her cheeks. Paul cupped her elbows and drew her to him.

"It's okay, sweet love. It's over."

"I love you," she choked out. "I love you so much. I don't want to waste another second."

Laughing, he held her at arm's length. "And I'm going to hold you to that. Surely there's got to be a preacher somewhere in this crowd."

Belle flicked away tears. "Then find him quick." Wonder widened his eyes. Joy lit hers.

"Come on, you two." Cal gave Paul a nudge. "Haven't you heard? It's a celebration. Everyone over to the boarding house."

"You find us a preacher, then we'll celebrate." Paul kissed Belle's fingers. "I'm going to settle up with the lawyer and meet you there."

"I'll be waiting."

He kissed her again, motioned White to follow, and the two walked on to the church. They said nothing. Paul soaked in the world around him, reveling in the gift he'd been given. Suddenly, the sun didn't seem so hot. Everything, everywhere, everyone was nicer.

"Belle is quite a lady," White said as they trotted up the church

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steps. “Any more like her at home?”

Paul laughed. “You’ve been at the boarding house for almost three days. Didn’t you notice her sisters?”

A sheepish grin spread over the other man’s face. “Frankly, no. When I’m working on a case, I’m a little shortsighted.”

“Which obviously is to your client’s benefit. I’ll see you’re properly introduced.” He whipped open the door and waved White in.

Movement flashed off to his right. White grunted and fell to the floor. Paul jerked back. The barrel of a gun held him in place.

Aaron Fredericks peered around the door. “Not a word, *Reverend*. Just step inside and shut the door behind you. If you don’t...” He aimed a second gun at White’s head.

Paul eased inside and lifted his hands. “I’m not armed, Aaron.”

“We’ll take care of that in due time.”

CHAPTER 17

Belle was giddy with excitement. The nightmare was over. Reality seeped in slowly. They still had Aaron to worry about. He had probably hoped Paul would hang for Mark's death. Once he discovered that hadn't happened, he'd be back. He'd lived too long with his hate, his need for revenge. He wouldn't give up now. They'd be looking over their shoulders, always on the edge until he was caught. But at least they'd be doing it together—best friends, husband and wife.

Giddiness overwhelmed her again. It was all too good to be true.

"Are you going to stand there all day?" Florine draped a one-armed hug around Belle's shoulders. "Everyone's starting to drift over to the boarding house. If we don't hurry, we'll be stuck with all the work and none of the fun."

Belle peeked through the swinging doors. A small crowd of friends slowly made their way across the street. The Cyruses led them, chatting as they went. If she hurried and ducked through the back alleys, she

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might reach the house before them. She noticed Pru didn't waste any time heading home. The second Cal uttered the words about a celebration, she'd shot out the door.

Clutching her hat to her head, Belle rushed home. She beat her friends by a block. Not enough to make a difference, but at least she could say she tried. The door opened as she crossed the backyard. Pru's stance reminded Belle of their mother's disapproving glare whenever they stayed too long at the river.

Belle laughed at her. "Don't be such a prune-face."

Pru gave a barely noticeable shake of her head. Her wide-eyed gaze darted to the door. Fingers clamped around her upper arm and yanked her inside. Belle jumped back, but Pru's warning came too late. A grizzle-faced man with a hairy hand filled the doorway. Sweat and the stench of dirt mixed with liquor poured off of him.

"Get her in here now, fool," a voice snarled from inside.

The brute snagged Belle's wrist, shoved the pistol in her ribs, and yanked her in. Two other men stood there, looking and smelling as road-worn as the first. Susannah and Retha huddled together against the far side of the kitchen.

The barrel of a gun pinned Pru to the sink. "They're looking for Frank Jessop," she said.

Belle willed her nerves to stay steady. "You must be his brothers."

A gap-toothed grin spread over the second one's face. "You're real smart. Right purdy, too."

He reached out to touch her. Belle bit back revulsion and forced herself to be still. These men lived off fear. She refused to feed it to them.

Grizzle-face slapped his brother's hand away. "We ain't got no time for that now. We came to get Frank and that's what we're gonna do. You still got the itch after that, we'll take one along to scratch it."

She suspected telling them Frank was dead wasn't a good idea. "I

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think you should know that half the town is on the way over for a get-together."

"Then see they don't come in here," the second one said.

"The doctors will want to get—"

He shoved the gun in her face. "What didn't you understand?" he said through clenched teeth.

Belle nodded. "Ladies..." She wouldn't give these men the advantage of knowing their names. "Fill the urn with coffee. Put out the tea service and get every dessert you can find on the dining room table. And hurry. They'll be here soon."

No one argued.

"Not so fast." The first brother grabbed the blueberry pie from Pru as she tried to pass. "We could use a taste ourselves."

Belle blessed Retha for the plan rapidly taking shape. Now all she needed was the chance to carry it through. Finding the courage wasn't a problem; her family's life gave her that strength.

She tied an apron around her waist. "Pru, get some plates. Susannah, fetch that jug of hard cider from the basement."

She pulled out a chair. "Sit, gentlemen. Once I have the guests settled I'll take you to your brother. We'll head out the back. Everyone will be occupied in the other room. No one will know you're here. Now...may I get to the injured in my examining room?"

They gave their consent with a joint nod. "But leave the door open," the second one said.

Belle slipped behind the privacy curtain. She quivered with each breath. Her hands shook as she slipped the bottle of ether into her apron pocket. All she needed was the chance.

She heard Susannah's footsteps on the cellar steps. "Could you bring that in here? Sid's come around and is thirsty as all get out." Hopefully, the Jessops would think nothing of giving an injured man hard cider.

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Belle pulled the cork the second her sister rounded the corner. She held her finger to her lips to indicate silence, then poured a bottle of laudanum into the jug. Susannah shook it once, gave a nod, and marched back to the kitchen. They'd be lucky if she didn't bust it over their heads.

Voices and laughter drifted from the other room. Retha seated the bolt. As Belle hoped, the food and drink kept anyone from venturing any farther than the dining room. The Jessops dove into the pie like they hadn't eaten in days. Susannah set the jug in the center of the table and stepped away.

The door handle rattled. The men snatched up their pistols. Retha stifled a squeal. Belle waved everyone down.

"Stay out. We're...we're fixing a surprise," she called out. "We're not coming out until it's ready or it'll be ruined."

"I've got a surprise for you, too," Cal said. "Preacher's waiting and the marriage committee is chomping at the bit." He chuckled as he walked away.

Belle released a shaky breath. "Drink up, gentlemen. You might as well enjoy it while you can. We'll give things a bit to settle in the next room, then we'll leave."

One by one, they eased back and hoisted their cups.

Belle counted the seconds, the minutes. These were hard-living, hard-drinking men. Maybe the laudanum and hard cider wouldn't work.

They just need to be relaxed. Just a little drowsy.

How long was that going to take? How long before Cal grew impatient and came around back? Or maybe Paul would come through the back to avoid the crowd. They couldn't wait much longer. The men were distracted. It was time to take a chance. If she misjudged, the commotion would bring people running anyway.

She slipped a towel from the sink board, folded it, doused ether on it, and shoved it into Pru's hands. Retha's eyes widened. A warning

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glare kept her quiet. Belle shoved another towel into Susannah's hand, then prepared one for herself. By unspoken command, they took two steps forward, picked their targets, and clamped the cloths over the men's faces.

Susannah's man fell in less time than it took to think about it. Pru wasn't so lucky. Tiny as she was, she was no match for the man. He fumbled for his pistol while she held on, hand under his chin, cloth over his face.

Belle's arms shook from the effort to keep the third brother covered. "Help her!"

Susannah grabbed the man's wrist too late. His finger found the trigger. The shot shattered the china plates lined on the shelves.

"What the hell!" Cal beat at the door.

"In here now, Cal!" she shouted.

The door burst free of its hinges, crashing to the floor just as the last Jessop fell. Belle tossed her towel into the basin and braced herself against the sink to keep upright. Her sisters did the same while Retha still cowered in the corner of the room.

Cal seated his gun in its holster. "Ladies, this is some surprise."

"Just get them out of here." Belle yanked the apron ties free and tossed it to the table. "Where's Paul?"

"Still at the church."

How long did it take to pay someone? "We'd better get over there. The Jessops might have gotten to him first before they came here. He could be hurt and need help."

* * *

Paul watched the blood pool beneath White's head. He'd yet to move. Neither had he or Aaron for that matter. It wasn't hard to guess who Aaron was waiting for. Just as it wasn't hard to believe Belle would eventually come looking for him. He had to talk some sense into Aaron before that happened.

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“The man needs help. At least let me call someone to take him away.”

Aaron laughed. A harsh sound filled with evil, madness. “And alert your friends? No. This is just between you and me.”

That’s why one person lay dead and two...three others were injured? “Then why involve Belle? She’s not the one you want.”

“No...she’s the one *you* want. I want you to know the pain of losing the woman you love.”

Paul prayed for the right words to reason with him. “I loved Marissa. You know that. She was my sister.”

“And yet you played with her life. Gambled it just like a game of cards.” His face crumpled with grief.

Paul dared a step closer.

Aaron jerked the gun up. “Not too close. That would hardly be fair.”

He opened his palms. “You aren’t the only one who suffered, Aaron. I’ve lived the nightmare a thousand times over. And my parents... Can you imagine the torment they’ve been through all these years?”

“She was carrying my child,” he pushed out through clenched teeth. “You destroyed my future.”

“And now you intend to destroy mine.”

His evil leer grew. “I guess that depends on you.”

Belle’s footsteps scuffed against the stairs. Paul drew breath to warn her.

Aaron shoved the pistol against White’s head. “Utter a sound and he’s dead.”

Keep quiet and Belle was. The handle turned, a shaft of light shot across the floor, blinding him. He heard Belle’s sharp intake of breath. The door slammed. Aaron hauled her against him.

He kicked the second gun toward Paul. It skittered across the floor,

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coming to rest at his toes. "Pick it up."

Paul stared at the weapon, then glanced into Belle's eyes. Where he expected fear, he saw faith. She trusted him to do the right thing, whatever that might be. He'd truly been given a second chance. But this time he had to earn the right to have it.

"No. We are in a house of worship. You might wish for your soul to be damned to hell, but I don't intend for mine to go there."

"You sacrilegious bastard!" Aaron dragged Belle to the door. "Open it. We'll take it outside. In the street."

"He won't shoot you there either," Belle said, her voice calm, assured. "That's what you want, isn't it? To die. To end your misery. You don't want to kill me. Or to see me die. You want to be with Marissa."

"Stupid woman. If I wanted to die, why would I hide in the dark waiting for the chance to kill him?" He jammed the gun against her head. "Now open that door. Pick up the gun, Paul, or she dies right now. I'm giving you a chance, something my sweet Marissa never had."

He was buying time for Belle. That was the only thing that made Paul pick up the weapon. The instant they stepped outside, others would size up the situation in less time than it took to think about it. Paul just had to keep Belle and himself alive long enough for that to happen.

Aaron kept his back to the wall, facing Paul every step of the way. Paul backed into the street. Word rippled from person to person like wildfire. People filtered to the edge of the street. It looked like the reporters and gawkers were finally going to get the spectacle they came for.

The Hansons charged to the forefront, guns drawn. The Tanners shoved them back.

"A wise idea, don't you think?" Aaron asked.

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Paul merely nodded. Cal and the rangers were nowhere to be seen. That could only mean good news. Time. He just needed a little more time.

“What are you waiting for?” Aaron shouted. “The whole town’s waiting to see the sharpshooter. The big hero.”

“You know I won’t shoot. I won’t risk Belle’s life.”

“You already are because I’ll kill her, then I’ll kill you.”

“And then you’ll die. Look around you, Aaron. You’ve already killed one man. Do you honestly think this town is going to let you go?”

Paul saw Cal edge along the crowd behind Aaron. The cat was tucked under one arm. It batted at the bag clutched in Cal’s hand. Just a few more minutes. He had to get that gun away from Belle’s head.

“Face me like a man, Aaron. Only a coward like Jessop hides behind a woman. Is that how you want to be remembered? As a coward? Or as a man avenging the death of his woman?”

Aaron’s grip on Belle loosened, but the barrel remained lodged against her temple.

“Is this what Marissa would want?” Belle asked softly.

Paul didn’t know how she could keep her voice so steady.

“She loved you both. Don’t you think seeing this would break her heart? It would mine. Family should grieve together and learn to be strong.”

“I’m not *his* family,” Aaron ground out through bared teeth.

“You were close enough to being so.” Belle stroked his arm. “He was uncle to your child. His was the hand that dried Marissa’s childhood tears. How could you—”

“Enough!”

He shoved her to the ground. Belle scrambled for the safety of the sidelines.

“Now you die.” He squared off at Paul. “Draw!”

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“No. You might have no regard for my sister’s feelings, but I do.”

“Then you’re a dead man.” He raised his weapon.

A mouse skittered across his path, followed by a streak of orange. Aaron stumbled back. Paul and Cal charged him from opposite directions. A hard tackle brought him down.

Aaron sobbed into the dirt. “I miss her. I miss her so much. Why? Why did she have to die? I miss her and I’m too big a coward to pull the trigger on myself.”

They tugged him to his feet and shoved him into Brady’s care. With each step he took, Aaron descended further into madness.

That could have been me. It was me for awhile. But that was the past and that’s where Paul intended it to remain.

“Brady’s got himself one crowded jailhouse.”

Paul questioned Cal with a lift of his eyebrow.

“The Jessops are in there. Looks like Prudence, Belle, and Susannah captured them.”

Puzzlement screwed up Paul’s face. “How?”

Cal clapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll tell you later. Your parents have White. His head’s killing him, but he’s going to be all right.”

The cat trotted over with the mouse firmly in its jaw. Cal picked her up and scratched her behind the ears. “Good cat. Come on, Paul, I’ve got that preacher waiting.”

Paul strode to the boardwalk and tucked Belle under his arm. He didn’t know who shook more—her or him.

“Ready to get married?”

She buried her face in his chest. “More than ready.”

* * *

While friends toasted the final success of the marriage committee, the newlyweds took a few minutes to spend with an old friend.

Belle lay the bouquet of pink roses fresh from Mrs. Freebush’s garden on Doc’s grave. “I’ll bet you’re smiling now, aren’t you?”

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Paul draped his arm around her waist. "I'll bet he is. You know, Brady said the three of you are in for a hefty reward for capturing the Jessops."

She hugged his arm. "I know. Susannah's planning to buy land for a huge farm. Cal and Pru are going to see if the Cyruses will sell them the boarding house."

"And you?"

Belle smiled. "I thought I'd use it to build us a house right next to a real clinic."

He kissed her forehead. "Sure you don't want to use it for medical school?"

"I'm sure. I'm happy with things the way they are. Your parents said they'd visit often and work with me. And they might know of a young doctor who'd be willing to move here. That's all I ever wanted." A satisfied sigh snuggled her closer until the crunch of footsteps pulled their heads around.

Cal patted Pru's fingers. "See. I told you this is where we'd find them."

She gave him a look so filled with love, Belle could feel it.

"I'll be leaving in the morning with Brady, Clarence, and Marty to take the Jessops and Aaron up to Austin," Cal said. "Brady hoped you could help keep an eye on things here while we're gone."

"Not a problem," Paul said.

"And we thought we'd better let you know." He jerked his thumb toward the house. "They're talking babies back there. We hightailed it out of there before they decided to form another committee."

"Thanks for the warning."

They walked away still holding each other.

"We should have known that was coming," Belle said with a sigh.

He squeezed her backside. "Hopefully, it'll die down by morning."

"Where do we hide until then?"

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Paul nuzzled her ear. "I know a place where no one will ever think to look."

Belle tossed back a laugh. "But this time *you* give *me* a hundred dollar night."

"Let's make it two."

CATHERINE SNODGRASS

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