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Romance

LOVE'S SWEET SURRENDER

Sandy Sullivan

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LOVE'S SWEET SURRENDER

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DEDICATION

I want to say thank you to a few people for making this novel come alive:

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SANDY SULLIVAN

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Chapter One

My whole life has been a lie. Her heart twisted in her chest. Why hadn't they told her? Her parents had kept it a secret for twenty-two years, and if she hadn't found that all-informative piece of paper, she might never have known. Tears of betrayal sparkled on her lashes as she stared out the window.

The green trees, brown bushes and small towns flew by. Day in and day out she traveled further and further west, but the scenery never changed. First it was by train, with the black smoke billowing from its stack, trudging along, putting more and more miles between her and the pain in her heart. Then came the stage with the dust, horse manure and threat of robberies, and now back on the train again.

When she had set out on this journey, she hadn't really thought about the landscape, the weather or the rough people she might encounter when she reached her destination. All she wanted was to get away from the memories and leave behind the man who no longer wanted her. She understood Edward and Kathleen's reasons behind their decision, but it hadn't made it any easier to accept, and when her fiancé called off the wedding, she couldn't bear the looks of pity she got from former friends.

The scenes out her window began to blur, and tears clouded her vision until she angrily brushed them away. It wouldn't do any good to continue to cry over what might have been. She would have to live with the fact that she could no longer call Edward and Kathleen her parents. Now she would have

to make it on her own. *And make it I will. I will use everything I have to live my own life, and damn anyone who stands in my way.*

She pulled the crumpled piece of paper from the satchel at her feet and thought of the events that had brought her to the train headed west. Smoothing the paper out on her lap, she bit her lip and read the words again.

Teacher wanted. Parkville, Texas. House and monthly stipend for one year commitment. Must be unmarried or widowed, and of good character.

Two days after Arthur had called off the wedding, she'd found the advertisement in the paper lying on her father's desk. The small town of Parkville's advertisement for a teacher spoke to her, and her heart raced at the prospect of starting over somewhere else. She quickly wrote a letter to the mayor, outlined her qualifications and put it immediately in the post.

Then she waited. She checked the mail every day, but nothing. Two months after sending her letter, she finally received an offer for the job.

Edward and Kathleen were upset, but she had made up her mind. Now she sat on the train chugging west to start her new life in a small Texas town she knew nothing about.

"Ma'am?" The conductor approached her seat. "Are you all right?"

"What?" Caught by surprise, Lily jumped when the man spoke. "I'm sorry. Yes, I'm fine. Just tired, I guess."

"You've been traveling a long time then?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I have." Lily relaxed against the seat back. "More than a week, but I'm almost there."

"You let me know if you need anything, ma'am. I'll come to check on you from time to time." He tipped his conductor's hat and moved on down the aisle.

"Thank you." She turned around in her seat to watch him leave. "What a nice man."

As the conductor disappeared through the sliding door between the cars, Lily's gaze moved to a figure resting against the back wall. Several times over the last couple of hours, she had found herself peeking at the man, and curiosity rushed through her with each passing glance.

He had come aboard in Houston with several other passengers, and he had stood out amongst those boarding. His eyes swept the car before he poured his lithe frame into the seat as the chair groaned in protest. He pulled his hat low across his brow and rested his back against the wall. Lily's eyes were riveted to the chambray material stretched over his rippling muscles for several moments while he settled down and appeared to go to sleep.

When she realized she was staring, she spun around and quickly sat in her own seat.

The landscape flew by her window in a blur of color as she settled herself for the remainder of her trip to Parkville. After a moment, she cocked her head as the noise of thundering hooves reached her ear. Shifting slightly in her seat, she peered outside just in time to see a rider grab the bar protruding from the side of the rail car before he swung aboard the speeding train.

A moment later, gunshots pinged against metal in the car in front of her as women screamed and men shouted. Lily clutched her purse to her chest and trembled as the noise got closer.

The door flew open, and several men burst into the car with masks over their faces and guns clutched in their hands. They shouted at the passengers to hand over their purses and wallets, ripping them from their hands when they didn't comply.

One of the bandits approached her and demanded, "The purse, lady."

"I'll do no such thing." Her heart slammed against her ribs when his eyes narrowed over the top of his mask.

"Give me the purse, lady, and I won't hurt you," he snarled, pointing the revolver directly at her face.

No longer feeling so bold, Lily held the bag out, and the man grabbed it from her hands. The eyes that were mere slits before twinkled as the gunman tipped his hat and moved on to the other passengers.

All the patrons handed over their possessions to the robbers—all except one.

The man against the back wall was now alert and watching the scene around him, his crystal blue eyes weighing and assessing the situation. The muscles in his arms bunched and rolled, flexing against the long sleeves of his shirt, and a nerve in his jaw jumped, giving away the tension in his body. Briefly, his gaze swung to Lily, and his frown deepened. Her breath caught

in her throat for a moment when his gaze raked over her before returning to the bandits.

Two of the robbers approached him and demanded, "Hand over the wallet, mister, and no one will get hurt."

"I don't think so," the stranger growled. "You'd best leave with what you've collected, and you might just make it out of this car with your life."

The masked man laughed a full, hearty laugh and turned to his companion. "Do you believe this cowboy? He says we should just leave before we get hurt." His partner snickered for a moment before turning his attention back to the cowboy. "You're funny, mister. Now give me the wallet, and I won't shoot you where you sit."

In a split second, the cowboy uncoiled from his seat, pulled his gun and fired two shots. Both bandits, their eyes fixed in the blank stare of death, fell to the floor in a rapidly growing pool of blood.

Lily, her jaw slack with astonishment, dropped into her seat with a dull thud as the stranger holstered his gun and approached the two lying on the floor. He grabbed their guns from their hands and relinquished them to a male passenger nearby.

The train came to a shuddering halt on the track causing him to rock back on his heels before he moved toward her.

He paused briefly next to her, and their eyes met for a split second. The pain in his gaze was so deep that her heart ached for him. She blinked, and the look was gone as he tipped his hat and disappeared into the next car.

Indecision rippled through her for a moment as the terror of the last several minutes raced through her mind. Unable to sit in her seat a second longer, she shakily rose and approached the door.

Her hand on the steel handle, she was poised to open it when she heard the ping of more bullets over the screams and curses of the passengers. Not wanting to startle anyone, she peered through the glass and watched the cowboy hold two more men at gunpoint while another male passenger bound their hands.

Before she could slide the door, a strong arm snaked around her waist and pulled her tight against the solid chest behind her. Cutting off any chance of a scream, a hand clamped down hard over her mouth.

As she struggled against the man behind her, a gravelly voice whispered in her ear, “Don’t fight me, or I’ll break you in half. Open the door and we will join the party.”

While she did as she was told, the man holding her slowly walked her into the next car. She held her breath in anticipation of her rescuer finding her in this newest predicament.

“Drop the gun, mister, or this lady will meet her maker,” the man behind her growled.

Her heart thumped, and her throat went dry. She held her voice in check while the scene unfolded in front of her.

The cowboy slowly turned around but didn’t drop his gun. The gunman pushed the barrel of his firearm into her side even further, and she gasped.

“I said drop it.”

The eyes that now stared at her from the handsome man’s face were cold and clear as a glacier she once saw in a book. The deadly stare sent shivers down her spine as the robber behind her pulled her tighter against him.

“Do you really think I care what happens to her?”

He spoke to the armed man behind her, but his eyes said something else. She knew instinctively he wouldn’t let anything happen to her.

“Just put the gun down, cowboy, and we’ll all walk out of here with our lives.” The gunman holding her seemed to be trying to bargain with the cowboy. His grip on her waist tightened.

“I can’t do that.” The stranger addressed the gunman with a tolerant smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “You’re trying to take what doesn’t belong to you, and I won’t allow it.”

With his last statement, the gun in his hand barked in response to the pressure of his finger on the trigger. Lily screamed when she was thrown to the floor. More shots rang out before she saw the robber disappear out the door behind him.

He rushed to her side, but instead of helping her to her feet like she thought he would, he stepped over her body and rushed to the door. She brushed the dirt from her skirts, after several other passengers helped her to her feet.

When he returned to her side, Lily lifted her chin to look into his face and realized her head only reached his shoulder. “Thank you.”

His gaze raked over her as if to ensure himself she wasn't hurt, before he tipped his hat without a word and moved toward the back of the train.

The trembling started at her toes and before long, her whole body shook, forcing her to take a seat. The thunder of horse's hooves echoed in her ears seconds ahead of a black streak zipping by the window. Her rescuer was riding hell-bent for leather in the same direction the robber had taken.

Within moments, the conductor moved down the aisle toward the group. "All right, everyone, please take your seats, and we'll be on our way to the next station."

An older gentleman stood guarding the two robbers hogtied at his feet. "What do you want to do with these two?"

"We'll drop them in Parkville with the local sheriff when we get there. We'll be there in about an hour." The conductor approached Lily where she sat in stunned silence. "Ma'am, are you all right?"

"Yes," she answered absently. "I'll be fine. How long before we reach Parkville?"

"About an hour, ma'am. Is that your final destination?"

"Actually, yes it is."

"Nice little town, Parkville is. Are you visiting family?"

"No. I left my family in Boston."

"Ah, I see. Well, I'm sure you'll find it a right nice place to settle down."

"Thank you," she whispered as he disappeared through the door. *Parkville. What will I find when I get there? The conductor had called it a nice little town. Well, obviously the town jail will be home to the two robbers sharing our compartment.*

In no time at all, her thoughts scattered when the train began to pull into the station. She was aghast at the large sign hanging over the center of town saying, "Welcome, Mrs. Backman."

"Oh my," she whispered, noticing the large crowd gathering to greet her when she stepped off the train.

The mayor stood on the platform looking around, apparently watching the passengers disembark. He appeared disappointed when he didn't locate the person he sought.

"Ma'am, was there a middle-aged woman traveling alone on the train with you?"

“No, sir. I’m sorry there wasn’t. May I ask who you are looking for?”

“Our new schoolteacher, actually. She was to be on that train.”

“Mr. Mayor, I am your schoolteacher.” Heat crawled up her neck and splashed across her cheeks.

“You?” he bellowed. “That’s impossible. The letter gave me the impression the woman was older. You, my dear, couldn’t be more than twenty.” He looked behind her.

“Actually, sir, I’m twenty-two, and yes, I am your new schoolteacher.” She stuck out her hand in the hope that he would take it in greeting. “Lily Backman, at your service, Mr. Mayor.” He ignored her, turned on his heel and left her standing there alone hanging her head in rejection.

“This is going to be harder than I thought,” Lily sighed. When the weight of her situation became apparent, she trailed the grumbling crowd back toward town.

Feeling dejected, she walked to the center of town to look for somewhere to stay for the night. Not knowing if she could convince the mayor to allow her to stay, she needed to make plans. First things first. She needed a roof over her head, food in her stomach and her trunks out of the train station.

Noticing a young boy near the general store, she approached and asked if he would retrieve her trunks for her.

“Sure.” He squinted when he looked up. “Are you really the new schoolteacher?”

“Well, that depends on whether the mayor will allow me to be, but yes, that is my plan.” She smiled and bent down so she could look into his eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Johnny, Johnny Sanford. My pop has a place outside town.” He pushed his chest out with pride. “I’ll be right back with that trunk, ma’am.”

“Can you take it to the boarding house over there?” She pointed to a building on the corner.

“Yes, ma’am.” He broke into a run toward the train station, his small legs churning quickly as he disappeared around the bend.

Walking in the direction of the neat house with a sign on the front advertising rooms available, she smiled while she surveyed the little town around her. *I think I’m going to like it here.*

When she finally reached the boarding house, she opened the front door, and the little bell tinkled in response.

"May I help you?" An older woman looked over her wire-rimmed glasses from behind a small desk with ledgers piled so high that Lily almost couldn't see her.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm looking for a room for a few days. My name is Lily Backman."

"Ah! The new schoolteacher." The woman stood, held out her hand and grasped Lily's. "Welcome, my dear. I'm sure I have a nice room available I could rent you for a few days, but I thought the town was giving you the old widow Allen's house?"

"I'm not sure as of yet, ma'am, and I want to make sure I have a place to lay my head tonight."

"Of course, my dear. You can have the room at the top of the stairs to the right. I'll even have my nephew bring up some water for a bath. I'm sure you are exhausted after traveling clear from Boston."

"Yes, ma'am. I sure could do with a bath right now. Thank you. I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"I'm Madge Roberts, but you can just call me Madge."

"Thank you, Madge. You've been a godsend." Lily smiled in return for Madge's kindness. She wearily took the stairs to the room the woman had referred to, anticipating the warm bath that would soothe her tired muscles.

* * * *

Listening closely while the two women talked, Daniel Roberts stood outside the door. *It couldn't be her. Damn! If she realizes who I am, there will be hell to pay.*

He needed to make sure she didn't recognize him from the train. He didn't think that she had gotten a good enough look at him, but he wasn't sure. The jail would find him a permanent resident if it became known he was involved in the robberies that had taken place. He didn't want to eliminate her if he didn't have to.

After all, she was a pretty little thing, with her big green eyes and dark brown hair. She was rather tall for a female he'd noticed, when he held her against his chest. She was about four inches shorter than he, and he stood

almost six feet in height. His body began to react to his thoughts as he remembered her tight little butt pressed against him. He wondered for a second what it would be like to have her beneath him.

Shaking his head at his amorous thoughts, he waited until the young woman disappeared up the stairs before he made his presence known. His Aunt Madge had been such a loving influence in his life since his parents had died, but he needed—no wanted—money, lots of money, and she was only able to support them with the boarding house.

“Aunt Madge?”

“In here,” she called. He entered the kitchen to find her standing near the counter. “I’m just making our newest guest something to eat. I’m sure she’s starving. I need you to take the tub to her room so she can have a nice bath.”

Son of a bitch! If she sees me, she might recognize me. “You want me to do what?”

Chapter Two

Johnny arrived with her trunks, struggling to haul them up to the second floor, and Lily had to smile when she heard him banging up the stairs. She opened the door when he reached the landing and stopped to catch his breath.

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, placing the promised nickel into his hand after he had pulled the heavy trunks into her room. "Thank you so much, Johnny. You've been so sweet."

Color splashed across his cheeks, and he ducked his head. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am." He turned on his heel and almost ran down the stairs again.

She moved the trunk to a spot near the end of the bed, so she could get some clean clothing, eagerly waiting for the hot water for her bath. Sorting through her things looking for some undergarments, she dropped the clothing on the bed when she heard a loud knock. The sound came again, shortly after the first, and she ground her teeth together in annoyance.

"I'm coming," she insisted, a little exasperated at the insistent rapping.

She pulled the door open to find a man standing with what appeared to be a large tub behind him. "Yes?"

"I brought the tub, miss," he mumbled, looking at the young woman before him with a startled expression.

"Oh, yes, please come in. You can put it over there near the bureau." She stepped aside to allow the man to enter.

The man struggled with the large tub, pushing and pulling, until it was where she had shown him. "I'll be right back with the water, miss."

"Thank you." She frowned when he quickly left the room. *Strange.*

After the man made several trips back with buckets of steaming liquid, the edge of the water rode precariously close to the top rim of the tub.

“That should do it. Just let my aunt know when you are finished, and I’ll come up to empty it,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Of course. Thank you so much.” Once the door closed behind him, she quickly stripped her clothes and stepped into the steaming water with a heavy sigh.

Lily thoroughly washed her hair, leaving bubbles floating in the water around her. Once she’d finished washing up, she reclined against the edge of the tub and attempted to relax. It had been a long trip from Boston, but it made her happy to be finally here. Now she had to figure out how to convince the mayor and the rest of the town that she was capable of teaching their children. She had always loved tutoring some of the local aristocrats’ boys and girls during her teenage years. She hoped this love of teaching would help her win the battle to keep her job.

Edward, the man she had known as her father, hated it when she taught. He always felt it beneath her and made sure she knew it. “You needn’t do that type of menial labor, Lily,” he would tell her. As the daughter of a wealthy Boston family, she should have been “knitting and doing needlepoint with the other young ladies, rather than helping children with mathematics and English.” Nevertheless it was something she had a talent for, so she continued, much to his chagrin.

Kathleen, the woman Lily had called mother, understood and encouraged her, even helping her at times. She’d called Lily a nurturer on several occasions. She told Lily often that she was proud of her, but she also warned her to be careful, otherwise she might get her heart broken in the process. Lily wondered if Kathleen thought she would get too attached to the children.

Tears welled up in her eyes when she thought about her family, or the family she had believed to be hers until recently. The nightmare in her life had unfolded not long ago when she found out she wasn’t a Backman after all.

* * * *

The afternoon sunlight filtered through the gauze curtains on the window as her father prepared for his business meeting.

"Lily, can you fetch me the papers in my study for the Hoover account? I need them for my meeting."

"Of course, father."

She had taken over the accounting for his business when he caught his accountant skimming profits the previous fall, and she loved it. The business fascinated her, and her father encouraged her involvement although her fiancé hadn't. Several arguments had ensued with Arthur over her "working".

"As my wife, you will not work outside of the home. You will tend to the staff, have my children and be my hostess. Those will be your only responsibilities." She shook her head when she thought of his words from the night before while she stood at her father's desk, the strong box in front of her. *However am I going to get Arthur to understand my need to feel useful and not just be the token wife on his arm?*

She sighed and opened the lid to retrieve the paperwork her father had requested. A faded, yellow paper scroll tied with a pink ribbon caught her eye, and she reached inside with shaky fingers. She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment before pulling off the ribbon and unrolling the paper. The worn parchment crackled in her hands.

"Born this day, April 23, 1861, a daughter, Lillian Elizabeth Flannery, to Robert and Elizabeth Flannery in this great city of Boston, Massachusetts," it read.

Reclining in the warm water in Parkville, Texas, she recalled how she had stood in complete silence behind his desk. Her hands trembled so hard, she almost didn't have the strength to continue to stand as she looked at the birth record for what seemed like hours.

The next thing she remembered was her father's voice, "Lily, sweetheart. I can explain."

She lifted her eyes from the yellow sheet to stare at the man she had called father for so many years.

He dropped into the chair across from her, his hands on his knees and fear in his eyes. "Lily," he started again as the tears began to roll down her cheeks.

"You aren't my father at all, are you? Just who are you? And Mother? She's not my mother either?"

A moment later, Kathleen stood in the doorway. "Lily. Sweetheart, please let us explain."

"All this time I thought you were my parents, when all along it was a charade!" Her heart beat wildly in her chest. "How could you keep this from me? Where are my real parents?"

"Lillian!" Kathleen demanded, moving closer to Lily, claiming her hysteria. "Please listen to us so we can explain. We did what was best for you, and we are not ashamed. We love you with all our hearts, and that will never change, no matter that you are not of our blood. Now, please sit down so we can tell you what happened to bring you to us."

With her legs unable to hold her any longer, she sank down in the chair behind her, while Kathleen took a seat near Edward on the other side of the desk.

Tears welled up in Edward's eyes when he started to speak. The story unfolded in her mind with each word, but all she could focus on was the fact that her real mother didn't want her.

"Where is she now? My mother."

"She left Boston a few weeks after you came to live with us permanently. She wrote a few times from somewhere in California, but after that, the letters stopped. We don't know where she is now."

"We love you, and we have cared for you as if you were our own. That will not change even though I did not give birth to you."

"I am not angry you are not my blood parents. I'm angry because you did not tell me this sooner. I am twenty-two years old, and you've kept this from me the whole time. How could you think that this would change my feelings for you?" Lily focused on the two people across the desk.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I should have listened to your mother long ago when she wanted to tell you, but I was stubborn. I was afraid, afraid you would have hard feelings toward us, or would want to go off and find your natural mother. I'm just a stubborn old fool," Edward said, lowering his eyes and resting his head in his hands.

Lily immediately stood, rounded the desk and knelt at their feet. "You have raised me as your own. I do love you, and that will never change."

Forgiving Edward and Kathleen had come easy, but she couldn't forgive Arthur for turning his back on her and calling off their engagement.

The next afternoon when he had come to call, she had taken his hand and told him she needed to tell him something.

"What is it, my love? If there is a problem, we'll work it out together."

The strength of his arms around her waist while she stared out the window gave her the courage she needed to tell him the truth. What she hadn't been prepared for was his reaction.

"Edward and Kathleen are not your parents?" His arms dropped from around her, and he stepped back.

A sigh left her lips in a rush of air, and she turned to face him. "Apparently not."

"Who are your parents then?"

"A couple with the last name of Flannery."

"Irish? Irish immigrants?"

"That is what it would appear although I don't have the particulars. Edward said my father worked at the shipyard but died in an accident. My real parents had become friends with the Backmans. When my father died, they took in my mother and helped her until my birth. My real mother left soon afterward and gave me to Edward and Kathleen to raise." The stunned look on Arthur's face sent her heart racing in her chest, and she stepped toward him. "Arthur? Is there something wrong?"

His gaze ricocheted around the room as if he were searching for something. "I forgot I had a meeting this afternoon, Lily. I will see you later."

"Oh. All right then." She laid her hand on his chest and tipped her face up for a kiss, but when one didn't come, trepidation rippled down her back. He moved away from her, and she didn't like the look on his face. "I love you, Arthur."

He grasped the door handle. "Me too. I'll see you later." And he was gone.

Later that afternoon, she received a note telling her he had called off the engagement. He gave no reason other than that he had realized he didn't love her and they wouldn't be happy together, but she knew in her heart the real reason. The wealth and privilege that had come from being the daughter of a prominent Boston family were no longer hers to claim. She was the daughter of a Irish immigrants, and as such, she needed to assume her proper station

in life. This didn't include being married to an up-and-coming young lawyer like Arthur Welmington.

Recalling the incident that seemed so long ago, she let the tears flow while she continued to soak in the big tub in her room. Wiping her tears, she stood and let the water stream down her body in the afternoon light. She grabbed the towel near her as a soft knock sounded at the door.

"Just a moment." Lily stepped from the tub and quickly dried herself off. She grabbed her dressing gown and slipped it on before she cracked the door open. Madge stood on the other side with a tray heavily laden with food.

"My goodness, what's all this?"

"I thought you might be hungry, my dear, so I fixed you something to eat. May I come in?"

"Of course, but you didn't need to do this." Lily moved back from the door to allow Madge to enter.

"Oh, it's nothing. Food is part of the room and board. Besides, you look like you could put on a few pounds." Madge set the tray on the small table near the window. "Did you enjoy your bath?"

"It was absolutely heavenly. It's been at least a week since I was able to bathe properly, so it felt wonderful. Thank you so much for arranging it for me."

"You are quite welcome, my dear. I shall leave you to eat and rest. I'm sure you are exhausted from your long trip. I shall send up Daniel to retrieve the tub."

"Oh, that's quite all right. I think I shall take a nap after I eat, so he can get it tomorrow if that's all right? Unless you need it for another guest."

"No, not that I know of. If you want it removed later, just let me know." Madge pulled open the door and moved out into the hall. "Enjoy your meal."

"Thank you. I will."

Lily closed the door behind her and walked back to the small table. The enticing smells of her dinner made her stomach growl in anticipation. She hadn't eaten since early that morning, and it hadn't been much. Her funds had begun to run low with the long trip, not affording her many luxuries. She really did need this teaching job, and she didn't want to have to wire for money. That wasn't acceptable to her now that she needed to be independent

even though she had no doubt Edward and Kathleen would send her some if she asked. She needed to convince the people of Parkville she was very capable of teaching their children and could do so responsibly.

When she had finished the delicious meal, she placed the tray in the hall so that it could be picked up and retreated to her room. The afternoon sunlight had begun to fade into early evening so she decided to go on to bed. Grabbing one of her favorite books, she took a seat in a large, comfortable chair near the window and decided to read for a bit.

A few hours later, she opened her eyes to complete darkness outside. The small lamp continued to burn on the table next to her.

My goodness, I must have fallen asleep in the chair. She stretched her tired muscles for a moment, then leaned over and blew out the lamp. The cooler night air permeated the room, and goose bumps flittered across her skin. Rubbing her arms, she retreated to the bed, pulled the downy coverlet and crisp sheets back and crawled underneath.

Her tired eyelids fluttered as she sighed and snuggled into the soft mattress.

Bang, bang, bang. "Open this door!"

Lily gasped and sat bolt upright in bed, grasping the blanket to her chest.

"Open this damned door, I said."

Chapter Three

The next morning found her up bright and early, in the dining room on the first floor of the boarding house, eating a hearty breakfast.

"Everything tasty, dear?"

"Excellent, Madge. You're a wonderful cook."

"Well, thank you." Madge frowned. "I'm really sorry about the noise last night."

"It's quite all right." Lily giggled. "I've never been mistaken for a prostitute before."

Madge grasped her hand. "And you never should! Anyone who looks at you would know you to be a fine young woman. I'm not even sure how Clayton Marshall managed to get inside the boarding house, much less to your door."

"He obviously thought his woman was entertaining someone else in that room."

"Unfortunately, he didn't realize he had stumbled into the wrong house."

The two women laughed. "To think he actually mistook your boarding house for the brothel up the street."

"Too much drink will do that to a man."

"I suppose so."

"Where are you off to this beautiful morning?" Madge asked while Lily gathered her things.

"I need to talk to the mayor." Her voice trembled slightly, giving away her nervousness. "He really wasn't happy with me yesterday, I think."

"Oh?"

"Yes, you see I had answered the advertisement for the teaching position here in Parkville, but it said the town wanted someone older. I'm pretty sure I stated my age, but when I stepped off the train yesterday, he

wasn't happy when he realized I'm only twenty-two." She frowned. "Maybe I forgot to tell them."

"I see. Well, if your abilities are up to the task, I don't see why your age should make a difference." Madge stacked the dishes and picked them up in her arms.

"Thank you for the vote of confidence. I love children, always have. I used to tutor some of the local businessmen's children in Boston and enjoyed it immensely, which is why I answered the ad for the position here. I wanted to earn my own living, and doing something I enjoyed would make it that much better."

"If you don't mind me saying so, my dear, your speech indicates someone of breeding. Why would you come to a little, backwater town like Parkville for a teacher position?"

Lily's stomach lurched with trepidation. She didn't want to stretch the truth, but Madge had obviously picked up on her apparent breeding, which made her question Lily's reasons for being here. Thinking it was better to give some information, but maybe not everything, Lily began to explain.

"I was raised by a prominent family in Boston, yes, but I've recently discovered my background wasn't what I thought it was."

She had never been married, but she didn't want this town to think she was a loose woman, thus she did not mention her marital status in her inquiry. Unfortunately, she had traveled all the way here without a chaperone.

"I'm sorry to hear that. You seem like a very nice young woman, and with your apparent good background, I was curious, that's all. No need to explain it to me. You have my vote for the teacher position. Now go convince that stuffy old mayor of ours. He is also our local banker, so you'll find him at the bank, more than likely, this time of the day." Madge smiled as she all but pushed Lily out the door.

Lily smiled at her new friend and turned on her heel to do just that. As she walked out the door of the boarding house and headed in the direction of the bank, she was surprised at the bustling little town that greeted her eyes.

She hadn't realized the town was that large when she had stepped off the train the day before. There were several little shops, including a dress shop and the general store where she had met Johnny Sanford. A livery sat several feet away, as well as three saloons, Madge's boarding house, the

sheriff's office and the bank. A church sat at the end of the main street, a mill clanged noisily on the other side, and what appeared to be a cattle-loading area jutted out from near the train station.

Birds flittered from tree to tree in the bright morning sun. The temperature had already warmed up and promised to be even warmer by the afternoon. *I will have to get used to this heat.* Her gaze surveyed the crowd around her busily scurrying about town, doing their daily business.

Approaching the bank, she read the gold letters etched in the door glass: 'First Bank of Parkville, Harland Robert Fisher, banker'.

Madge mentioned the banker was also the mayor, so Lily hoped to catch him this morning and convince him to give her a chance. She knew that if she could show him her abilities with children, he would be more likely to let her stay.

The bell over the door tinkled in response to her entrance, and all eyes turned to greet her. She felt a small flush creep up her cheeks at their stares but squared her shoulders and approached the door with Mr. Fisher's name on the outside. Knocking firmly on the door, she heard a commanding voice tell her to come in. She took a deep breath, reached for the handle and pushed open the door.

"Yes? Can I help you?" His gaze met hers and he grumbled, "Oh, it's you. What can I do for you, miss?"

Lily shut the door behind her and approached the large carved desk. "Mr. Mayor, or shall I call you Mr. Fisher?"

"It doesn't matter. I answer to both. What can I do for you?"

Seeing dismissal written all over his face, she knew her task wouldn't be an easy one, but she wasn't about to give up. "Mr. Fisher, I'm sure you remember me from yesterday at the train station. I wanted to talk to you about the position for which I had applied." Lily squared her shoulders again and stood her ground.

"Yes, well, you applied under false pretenses, madam, so the position has been reposted." Mr. Fisher's gaze returned to the paperwork on his desk as he dismissed her.

"Sir, you offered me the position as teacher for your community. I'm certain I told you my age in my query if you didn't notice. You assumed I was older, which is not of my doing. We have a signed contract, sir, for my employ. I am very capable of doing what is required of me, and I have

experience teaching at my home in Boston. All I ask is that you give me a chance, sir.”

He set his pen down on top of his paperwork and brought his squinting gaze up to her. “I see. Yes, well, we do have a contract, that’s true. Whether you stated your age in your query, I can’t say, but I will look into the matter. I will call a town meeting this evening and ask for the vote of the people. They will decide the fate of your staying here or not. If you’d like, you may be present to state your case. Be at the church at seven this evening if you so choose. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have things to do.”

Feeling completely dismissed and rejected, Lily left the bank and headed toward the general store. If she could make a good impression around town to the locals, she might stand a chance in retaining her position.

For the rest of the day, she walked from business to business talking with the owners and customers. She felt it important that they knew she was the new schoolteacher, and she wanted to assure them she looked forward to teaching their children. Everyone seemed very receptive as she stopped and shook hands with several people on the street. The sun began to dip low in the sky when she returned to the boarding house for supper and to await the meeting later.

By sundown a large crowd had accumulated within the church with many finding it hard to find a seat while Lily watched from her place near the front.

There were a few of the matrons in town, with young daughters, who didn’t really care to have her there, she was sure. She heard whispers from many of them behind their hands when she walked by. Animosity rippled through the room although she didn’t know why some would feel that way.

From her seat she could hear several conversations, but one in particular caught her attention.

“I’m not sure it would be such a good idea to have her here.”

“If she can teach, what difference does it make?”

“Well, I don’t want her here,” one pretty teenage girl who sat next to her mother blurted, not caring whether Lily heard her or not.

“Abigail! Come now. We must be civil,” her mother scolded.

“Well, I don’t,” the girl said with a pout. “What if all the young men in town are attracted to her? That would leave that many less for me to choose from.”

“There are plenty to go around, young lady, and you needn’t worry about the young men just yet.”

Lily just shook her head at the conversation. She wondered if she had ever been that shallow growing up.

A few moments later, the mayor walked up to the front of the crowd, and Lily watched with trepidation. She was worried the town would vote to ship her back to Boston without giving her a chance.

“Welcome folks.” Mayor Fisher stepped up to the podium and held up his hand to quiet the group. “Can I have your attention please? I’ve called this meeting tonight because we have a bit of a problem. As many of you know, we advertised for a teacher for our town in some of the newspapers back East. We had one woman send us her information, and we all voted right here a few months ago to hire her. The woman hired is here.”

Applause could be heard throughout the church.

Holding up his hand again, he made the room grow silent. “Our problem now, folks, is that the woman we hired is a lot younger than anticipated. Most of you wanted someone who was unmarried or widowed, in her forties, but the woman, who we actually hired, by no fault of my own, is a very young woman. She is only twenty-two. Now we need to take a vote. Shall we allow her to teach our children, or start another search? All those in favor...”

“Excuse me.” Lily stood up from her place near the front and approached the mayor. “I would like to address the wonderful people of Parkville before a vote is cast.”

“You would, would you?” He obviously didn’t think she would be present, judging by the look on his face.

A deep, rich, masculine voice called from the back. “Let the lady talk, Harland. She has a right.”

Lily turned to see who had spoken in her defense, and her startled gaze met the stare of the handsome stranger from the train. He stood lounging against the back wall, completely relaxed, with his arms crossed over his broad chest. When their eyes met, his hand reached up, and he tipped his hat in greeting.

Well, she had her answer. *He obviously does live near here.* Heat crawled up her neck and splashed across her cheeks from his intense look. Pulling her gaze away from his, she turned to approach the podium. She

lifted her skirt and took a deep breath to calm her nerves before she addressed the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen of Parkville, I want to thank all of you for attending the meeting tonight. I’ve met many of you today while I walked around town, and I’m happy to see some familiar faces in the crowd. My name is Lillian Backman. My friends call me Lily.” Her gaze scanned the crowd in front of her before it came to rest on the gentleman in the back again. Goose bumps rose on her arms as his gaze skimmed over her almost like a caress. Fighting the urge to sigh, she continued with her speech. “I am indeed twenty-two years old, but I assure you, I have the qualifications you seek in a teacher for your children. I was raised in Boston and did quite a bit of tutoring over the last several years. My situation changed, thus requiring me to find employment to support myself. I love children and would greatly appreciate the opportunity to teach yours in this quaint little town. I’m sure I will grow to love this town as you all have and hope to stay for a long time to come. You can verify my references with several of the prominent families in the Boston area. I taught many of their children there and loved all of them like they were my own. All I’m asking is a chance to prove to you that I can do the job you require of a teacher. Thank you.”

Stepping down from the podium to return to her seat, she met the blue eyes of the man in the back, and he gave her a small, sad smile as he nodded in encouragement.

The mayor returned to the front of the church. “All right, you’ve all heard her side of things, so let’s vote. All those in favor of sending her back to Boston say ‘Aye’.”

A few ‘Aye’s’ could be heard amongst the crowd, but when the mayor asked for those in favor of keeping her, a resounding ‘Aye’ reverberated through the church, and Lily smiled.

“I guess it’s settled then,” the mayor admitted, frowning. He’d voted to send her home. “Mrs. Backman, if you will come with me after the meeting is adjourned, I will give you the key and show you the house set aside for your use. We will expect classes to start by Monday.”

“Thank you, Mr. Mayor. You won’t be disappointed, I promise.” She shook his hand while several of the crowd came over to congratulate her and welcome her to town.

Peering over the crowd of heads to the back of the church, she was surprised to meet the appreciative stare of her savior one last time before he tipped his hat and was gone.

Chapter Four

Mayor Fisher escorted Lily to her new home. She loved it from the moment she saw the small house, perfect for just her. The town had worked together to clean it up, whitewash the outside and plant pretty flowers around the front. Her home, at least for now.

The mayor opened the door as he explained, "I know it's not much, especially compared to the homes in Boston, but it's quiet and cozy. Come, I'll show you around a bit."

Lily followed him through the house while he pointed out the living room, with the furniture still draped with white sheets and a little bit of dust on the tables. Next, they went through the small dining room, with a nice table and a couple of chairs if she cared to entertain. The next room was a small bedroom which he said could be used as an office or study for her to grade papers and such. Finally, he showed her the door to her bedroom. She could tell that he didn't feel comfortable escorting her into her bedroom.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Mayor. It's perfect, and I'm sure I'll be quite comfortable here."

"Yes, well, I hope so. Just make sure you do a good job with the children, and there shouldn't be a problem. Good-night." He made his way out the front door, shutting it firmly behind him.

Lily smiled thinking about her new life while her gaze wandered around the living room of her new home. Her thoughts lingered on how wonderful it would be to be useful here, and she couldn't wait to get started. She walked around the room, pulling the sheets from the furniture and looking in drawers. The townspeople had donated dishes, pots and pans, towels, sheets and cleaning supplies from what she could tell. She grabbed a cleaning cloth and started dusting furniture while she whistled a soft lullaby.

After a couple of hours, Lily walked to the boarding house to make sure Madge was aware she would be moving into her little house. She also wanted to ask if her nephew could help in moving her trunks over.

“Of course. I’ll have him bring them right away.” Madge disappeared as Lily headed back to her little home to finish cleaning.

Before she knew it, the sun had gone down behind the hills, and the moon was high in the sky. She stepped out on the front porch to get a breath of air before retiring. The town was quiet now, except for the bawdy music coming from the saloons down the street. They were far enough away that the music could barely be heard.

I better get some sleep. There is church tomorrow and then school on Monday, and I need to be prepared. She had great plans for the children of this town, and she just hoped they were as receptive as their parents had been at the town meeting tonight.

Her thoughts drifted back to the meeting and the blue-eyed stranger in the back of the room. He had stood up for her, and she wondered who he was. “Why was he so willing to support me in front of the town? He doesn’t know me, except for the encounter on the train, and he didn’t let on to anyone that we had met before, or sort of.”

Obviously, he was an upstanding citizen here. No one seemed concerned by his presence. When he had spoken up for her, they had listened.

The pain in his eyes on the train made her wonder what, or who, had made him so sad.

“And the gun.” Lily remembered with a shudder. He had drawn his gun so fast that she hadn’t even seen him move, much less draw it.

Surely at some point we will be properly introduced, and I can thank him for saving me.

She moved back inside and locked the door before she headed for her bedroom to change into her nightgown. She sat in front of the small dressing table and brushed her hair out until all the tangles were gone. When she wore it down, it usually curled wildly around her head. When she had finished, she tucked it into a bun and went to the bed to pull the fresh covers down.

Sliding under the sheets, she leaned over and blew out the lamp on the bedside table. Lying there in the dark, watching the shadows dance on the

ceiling of her bedroom, she thought about her parents—her real parents. What were they like? Did her mother have big green eyes like hers? Had they been tall? When she had asked where the few letters from her mother had been postmarked in California, they said they didn't remember and that the letters had been discarded.

Maybe someday she would find her mother, or try to, but for now, she needed to concentrate on her future in Parkville. She drifted off to sleep with questions rolling around in her mind.

The next morning found her quietly humming in her kitchen, fixing herself something to eat and getting ready for church. This afternoon she would work in the little flower garden the ladies of the town had planted in front. She had always loved gardening while she lived in Boston, and since there were several weeds popping up around the pretty flowers, she would have to take care of them before they got out of control.

With the mornings still cool, she grabbed her shawl and purse before she headed for church. She was startled to find Madge on her front steps when she opened the door.

"Madge, it's nice to see you." Lily stepped aside and let Madge in out of the cold.

"I came by to see how you were doing." Madge's gaze swept the room. "I'm glad the town decided to let you stay. My goodness, you've been busy in here."

Lily smiled at her friend's remark. "Yes, well, I was up late last night getting things in order. I'll probably be busy most of this afternoon getting lessons ready for the children tomorrow."

Madge patted her arm. "No, that won't do. Sunday is the Lord's Day and a day of rest. You need to relax today."

"I know, but I have so much to do before school starts tomorrow. I'm hoping to meet some of the children today, so I might have some idea of their ages before then."

"I'm sure there will be several at church. Just about everyone in town comes every week. If you are ready, we can walk over together."

"That would be very nice. Thank you." They walked through the door together, and Lily locked it behind her.

They walked in silence toward the church, but Lily's thoughts drifted to her savior from the train, and she wondered if she could ask Madge about him.

After several minutes she asked, "Madge, can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course, my dear. What's on your mind?"

"Were you at the town meeting last night?"

"Yes. I was sitting near the back. Why do you ask?"

Perfect. Madge should have seen the man in the back since she sat near there.

"There was a man standing near the back of the church during the meeting. I believe that I might know him. Can you tell me his name?"

"Near the back of the church, you say?" Madge tapped her fingers to her lips. "Let me see if I remember who was back there. What did he look like?"

"Tall, with blond hair, blue eyes, a broad chest, and he was wearing a brown shirt and trousers, with a gun tied to his thigh." After she gave her description, she realized she had described him perfectly, much to her embarrassment.

A knowing smile rippled across Madge's mouth. "Ah... that, my dear, is Seth Sanford. He is one of the most eligible bachelors in our little town."

"Sanford?" Lily questioned, testing the name on her tongue. "I think the boy that I sent for my trunks at the train station the other day was a Sanford. Johnny, I think."

"Yes, he's one of Seth's children. Johnny is the eldest of three. Seth has two boys, Johnny and Jarod, and one little girl named Anne. They live outside town to the east. Seth runs cattle out there, but don't expect those children to be at church today, even though they need to be—poor dears." Madge obviously thought the children needed the Lord's guidance, but Lily wondered why they wouldn't be there.

"Why is that?" *Children need religious structure in their lives too.*

"Seth hasn't set foot in church since his wife died about six months ago."

When they reached the churchyard, they were swallowed up in the crowd waiting for services to start. All further conversation was cut off concerning Seth, much to Lily's disappointment.

After church, she received several invitations for Sunday supper, and she wasn't able to get to the weeding in her garden until much later in the

day. Once she had returned home, she quickly changed into one of her more worn frocks in order to not ruin her good Sunday clothes. She wandered out to the garden and pulled up a small stool that she had found in the pantry so that she could sit comfortably while she pulled weeds.

Two hours later the weeds were gone. A tired sigh rushed from between her lips as she stood and arched her back, trying to relieve the kinks.

* * * *

With a load of supplies in his strong arms, Seth Sanford walked out of the general store toward the wagon parked nearby. His attention snagged on the new teacher across the road when she stood and stretched her back. Her back arched, pushing her breasts against the front of her dress, outlining them perfectly for his gaze. He stumbled over the step and almost dropped the supplies.

Johnny sat in the wagon waiting, but when Seth almost tripped, his eyes widened, and he asked, "Pop, are you all right?"

He pulled his gaze from the beautiful woman and turned back to his son, "What? Yes, I'm fine, son. I just tripped. Are you ready to go?"

"Yep, just waiting for you. Hey, isn't that the new schoolteacher over there?" Johnny pointed across the street.

"I think so, son. Why?"

"I helped her with her trunks the other day," Johnny beamed as color splashed across his cheeks. "She came in on the train the day before yesterday, and she gave me a nickel for helping her with them."

"I'm glad you were there to help her." Trying not to look across the street again, Seth loaded the staples in the back of the wagon. The outline of her pert breasts pushing against her dress made his groin just a little too tight in his breeches.

"She's real nice, Pop. Pretty too." Johnny pushed his chest out a little farther, and Seth almost laughed. His son obviously had a crush on the new teacher already. "Maybe we could invite her out for supper sometime."

"Well, I'm sure she would like that, son, but let's not rush things. She just arrived, and she has a lot to do to get things ready for school."

Seth climbed into the wagon seat next to Johnny and grabbed the reins before he flicked them over the rump of the horse.

* * * *

Lily caught sight of the wagon when it rolled past her house, and Johnny waved enthusiastically. She lifted her hand to return the gesture, noticing how Seth didn't even look in her direction. *Well, that's a fine how do you do.* Shielding her eyes from the sun, she frowned as she watched the wagon roll out of town. Grumbling under her breath about how rude some people could be, she grabbed the stool and headed toward the door. The sun had already started to set in the evening sky, and she really wanted to make use of the tub she had found earlier in the day. She needed to be refreshed and alert the next day when she met the children. Once the water sat on the stove, she pulled the tub out and gathered her toiletries. A nice, long, hot bath would feel wonderful.

After the water had boiled and she had filled the tub at least three quarters full, she sank into the steaming water with a heavy sigh. She had always loved her bath with all the smelling salts and bubbles. It had been her one weakness growing up. When she felt her muscles relax from the warm water, her mind drifted to Seth Sanford.

On the train he had been so chivalrous in making sure she was all right after their encounter with the robbers. Even though she was sure he remembered her from the train, now he seemed so distant.

At least I know his name, and Seth is a nice name. It seems to fit. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts of the man, she pulled herself from the tub, dried off and slipped on her nightgown. *I'll empty the water in the morning. I'm too sleepy to do it now.* She pulled the covers down and turned to blow out the light. Sleep claimed her almost before her head hit the pillow, but her dreams were haunted by visions of sad blue eyes.

Chapter Five

The next morning Lily was up bright and early, flittering around her house like a butterfly, getting her things together to go to the school. The sun had hardly peeked over the horizon, and she was already out the door.

It was more like an attachment to the church than a school, but it would do. From what she could gather, there were only about fifteen children in the entire town, so it wouldn't be too trying on her to start with, but she hoped others would come. She knew there were probably several that lived nearby who didn't attend school.

As the sun rose a little higher in the sky, she started to hear the chatter of children coming closer. She'd already prepared lessons for the first few days, but she would have to judge the children on their abilities and their ages in order to plan further out. Having met a few of them in church the day before had given her some insight, but there were several she hadn't met. They would be the challenge.

When it appeared that there wouldn't be any more, she rang the bell on the outside of the door to tell the children it was time to start. Bright-eyed faces entered the schoolroom while she stood near the door to greet each one.

"All right, children. Some of you already know my name, but for those who do not, I'm Mrs. Backman. I am your new teacher, and we will be learning so much together but also having fun while doing it. I want each of you to tell me your name when we go around the room." Lily smiled to herself at the expressions on the faces of the curious children as each said his or her name, until it came to the three in the back.

Lily recognized one as the boy, Johnny Sanford. She correctly assumed that the other boy was Jarod and the little girl, Anne. Jarod was a cute boy of about nine years of age, and Anne appeared to be about six or seven, but she

didn't talk. Johnny told Lily her name while Anne sat silently with her eyes downcast.

That's odd.

She would have to get to know these children, all of them, very well if she was to be able to teach them accordingly. She wanted this job to last for a long time, so she had to do her best, and that's exactly what she planned to do.

Lily spent the entire day talking with and learning about each child. Many of them were well within what she considered to be their expected learning stage when the day was over. She had made notes on each child to keep it all straight and filed them alphabetically by last name.

As she packed up her things to head for home, the little girl named Anne tugged at her heartstrings. During the day, Anne hadn't said a word, and at lunch Lily had pulled Johnny aside and asked him about her.

"Johnny, I don't want you to think I'm trying to be hurtful toward your sister, but I need to know so I can teach her. Has she been able to speak before, or has she always not spoken?"

"Anne used to be a chatter box. Pop could hardly keep her quiet sometimes. She used to tell stories and read to Momma and Poppa when she was even just a little girl. She's very smart, but since Momma died, she doesn't talk."

"What happened to your mother, Johnny?" Lily was afraid to hear the sad story, but deep in her heart she needed to know.

"Momma was out riding her horse one day. A rattler spooked the horse and threw Momma to the ground. Poppa said that she broke her neck. It's been real quiet at home since then. We have Carmen who helps Poppa with the cookin' and stuff, but it's not the same." He sniffed slightly and rubbed his eyes.

Lily tried to put her arm around the boy's shoulder in comfort, but he pulled out of her embrace.

"It don't matter no more. Poppa says that we'll be fine." He jumped off the porch and ran out to meet his friends in the yard.

Lily sat there for a few minutes before she retreated to the schoolroom. It would be difficult to teach the little girl if she didn't speak, but maybe she could reach her a different way.

As she slowly walked back toward her house, thoughts of how to reach the little girl raced across her mind. The other children in the school were very independent, and with some encouragement and direction they would do fine, but Anne she wasn't so sure about. That small child needed something more, but she wasn't sure she would be able to help her.

I need to talk to Anne's father. Maybe I can go out to their place this Saturday to speak to him. Or maybe I'll send a note to him through Johnny, to come into town to talk to me. That would kill two birds with one stone since I wanted to thank him anyway.

Her mind made up, she quickened her steps as she got closer to her little house. When she had reached it, she was surprised to see Madge sitting on her porch.

"Madge," Lily said, smiling at her friend. "It's nice to see you. What can I do for you?"

"I need your help, Lily." The tone of Madge's voice made Lily worry.

"Help?" Lily took the seat next to her. "What can I do to help you?"

"I hate to even ask since you've only been here in town for a few days. Actually, never mind." Madge started to rise from her place next to Lily until the younger woman grabbed her arm and pushed her back down in the chair.

"What is it, Madge? I'll help you any way I can. I hope you know that. You've been more than kind to me since my arrival here, and I want to repay you somehow."

Madge sighed in a rush of air. "Well, you see, it's my nephew. He's a good man and all, but he never had a real education. You know, going to school regularly. His parents died when he was just a boy, and then he came to live with me since I'm his only kin. His name is Daniel, and well, I'm not much help to him since I don't have the patience to teach someone, so I wondered if..." Madge's voice trailed off, and she chewed her lower lip.

"Wondered if what?" Lily asked even though she was pretty sure she knew what her friend wanted to ask.

"Can you help him? I mean, learn to read better and do numbers and such? He's a fast learner. He's been such a help to me at the boarding house with the repairs and things, but I really want him to be able to better himself, and I don't think he can do that with his limited education."

“Of course. I would be glad to help him if I can, but he has to want to learn it. Many times adults aren’t willing to learn new things.”

When she remembered the man who had brought the tub to her at the boarding house, she recalled he was a fairly big man, standing taller than she and with handsome features. He had big brown eyes, brown hair, a slim jaw line and a hawk-like nose, and he’d talked very softly. He had pretty much whispered the whole time he had been near her.

“I’m sure he’ll be delighted to have you help him, but he’s a proud man, so I need to be very careful how I approach him with this. I need him to think it’s his idea, if you know what I mean.” Madge winked, and Lily grinned.

“I know exactly what you mean. You just let me know when he wants to start, and I’ll give it my full attention, but, of course, you understand, the children come first.”

“Of course, of course,” Madge assured her. “I wouldn’t want it any other way. The children of this town are our future, and we must protect them at all cost.” Madge spoke with such fever that it took Lily by surprise because she knew Madge had said she had no children.

“Yes, well, I should be getting on inside. I have a lot of work to catch up on this evening before classes tomorrow. I have a notebook full of notes on each child I need to study.” Lily stood, ready to make her way into the house.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have taken up so much of your time. Thank you for being so willing to help my nephew. I’m sure he’ll be delighted to have you teach him.”

Madge stepped off the porch and headed back toward the boarding house as Lily watched.

* * * *

“Daniel? Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, Aunt Madge.” Daniel swung the hammer in his hand, nailing a loose board on the stair.

“Wouldn’t you like to be able to do better with your reading and sums?”

“I’ve never thought about it, why?”

“I just thought you might want to get better at them.”

"I guess so." He shrugged and began hammering again until Madge interrupted.

"Well, with the pretty new teacher here, you might be able to get her to help you if you wanted to."

"I suppose I could." *That's the last thing I need. Getting anywhere near the schoolteacher was the worst idea I've ever heard. The more I'm around her; the more likely she is to figure out who I am.*

"I think you should ask the new schoolteacher to help you with your reading and numbers, Daniel. She's a very sweet girl, and I'm sure she could help you tremendously. I want you to be able to do better for yourself than just helping me here, but to do that, you need an education."

"I'm too old to learn those things, Aunt Madge." He began to pace while he tried to think of some way out of this, now that he was sure his aunt was serious. He needed to figure out how to convince her it would be a bad idea to have the pretty new teacher anywhere near him.

"You are not, Daniel. You seem to have a knack for building things, like furniture and such, but she could help you so maybe someday you could sell them and make some real money."

"All right. I'll think about it, but no promises, and don't try to convince me every day for the next month or two."

"That's all I ask, Daniel. That's all I ask."

She retreated back into the kitchen, leaving him alone to contemplate her words. *This just won't do. There is no way I can be that close to the woman. Sooner or later, she would figure out who I am, and then there would be trouble, big trouble. I'll have to think of some way to get out of this hair-brained idea Aunt Madge has to get me educated.*

"Educated, hell!" He knew all he needed to know to make a decent living robbing trains, but that damned Seth Sanford would have to be taken care of. So far, he didn't think Seth had been able to recognize him behind the mask he wore while robbing the train, but Seth had ridden after him on that big black gelding of his and had almost caught him. Daniel had only been able to avoid him by mere minutes the other day, and it had scared the hell out of him. He would definitely have to be more careful.

* * * *

The next day dawned bright and cold. Lily had to bundle up before she headed off to the schoolhouse. She sure hoped it would warm up a bit in the coming month. Thinking that it would be much warmer in Texas, she hadn't packed much of her heavier clothing from Boston. When the crisp morning air hit her face, she was glad she had at least brought one of her heavier cloaks.

As she made her way along the street toward the school, a horse and rider came galloping full speed up the street to her right. Her foot connected with the edge of the boardwalk in front of the general store as the horse came skidding to a halt on its rear haunches when Carl pulled back on the reins. Startled, she lost her footing and nearly fell into its path. The next thing she knew, she was scooped up in a pair of strong arms and pressed tight to a muscular, broad chest while the dust and dirt flew around them.

"Damn it, Carl! You just about ran down the new schoolteacher." The anger in the voice took her by surprise before she realized it was Seth Sanford holding her tight. The pleasant smell of musk and man met her nose and filled her senses.

After a moment he gently set her back onto her feet. Lily stood there for just a second longer with her head buried against his chest. She finally stepped back and with a shaky breath looked up into the deepest, bluest eyes she'd ever seen. *Sapphires. They are the color of sapphires.*

"Sorry, ma'am," Carl said, tying his horse to the rail. "I didn't mean no harm, Seth."

"Well, next time, be more careful, will you?" Seth's angry glare while he reprimanded the man riding the horse was obvious to her even in her stunned state of mind. "It was hard enough finding this one. We don't need to be looking for a new one so soon."

His gaze met hers, sending her heart to her toes.

"Thank you," she whispered, and then swallowed, trying desperately to coat her parched throat. Stepping back, she looked down at her dress and brushed some of the dirt from her skirt.

"You're welcome, ma'am." His gaze skimmed over her, warming her flesh with his look. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine." Her voice warbled just a little as a tremor rippled through her. "Just a bit shaken up, that's all. How can I thank you?"

She looked back at the man and noticed how he had somehow lost his hat. His blond hair curled against the dark fabric of the shirt he wore. Her fingers itched to feel the texture of those curls before his voice pulled her out of the fog that had encompassed her brain.

"No thanks needed, ma'am." Seth picked up his hat and started back to his wagon.

"Wait!" She turned to follow as he made his way toward the wagon.

He turned at the sound of her voice. "Yes?"

"At least let me introduce myself," she said, stumbling over her words. "I'm Lily Backman."

"Yes, I know." Seth turned his back to her, pulled his lean body into the front of the wagon and settled into the seat.

"And you are?" she asked, hoping he would take the hint and introduce himself.

"Seth Sanford, ma'am. I believe you have my three children in your class." He bent down and grabbed the brake, releasing the wagon wheels.

"Oh yes, Johnny, Jarod and Anne. They appear to be very well-mannered children."

"Thank you. Their momma did a good job with them. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get home to get them ready for school." Seth snapped the reins, and the wagon jerked forward.

Lily stood in stunned silence as she watched the wagon pull away from her and head out of town. Not sure what to make of Seth Sanford, she picked up the basket she'd been carrying when the horse scared her, and she headed back toward the school. She had plenty to do without thinking about him and how nice it had felt being held against his chest. *It was just because I was startled, that's all.*

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she approached the school and stepped inside. There were lessons to prepare, and she had the daunting task of separating the children into groups according to their learning abilities and their ages today. She had hoped to be able to spend some one-on-one time with Anne, but it didn't appear that was going to happen in the next few days. She needed to get the children on a schedule and figure out how to incorporate some games into their learning to keep their attention. Not having much time to prove her worth to the people of Parkville, she would have to create some vast improvements in the structure of the curriculum. It

was a daunting task, to say the least, but she felt exhilarated just thinking about it.

* * * *

Seth woke early the next day to a cloudy, almost rainy, morning. When he headed out to the barn to saddle his horse, the sight of the woman with her big green eyes floated in front of him. Trying to block the memory of her against his chest, he wiped his hand over his eyes.

Damn, it has been too long since I have been with a woman, that's all. He shivered at the memory of her in his arms.

Six months. It's been six months since... since Victoria died.

The dimness of the barn fit his mood this morning as he saddled his horse to fix some fencing in the east pasture. Mounting the big gelding, he jammed his heels into the side of the powerful animal, and the horse broke into a full gallop within seconds. The gelding's hooves pounding into the dirt beneath him and the rush of air in his ears, usually helped to quell the memory of his wife, but today nothing seemed to dissipate the guilt surrounding him.

Victoria haunted him last night in his dreams again, calling to him to help her, but he couldn't reach her. She was always too far away with her hand outstretched, beseeching him. He had dreamt the same dream almost every night since her death, but last night it was different. No longer was it Victoria crying for him to help her. After the first few moments of the dream, the image changed. Now, it was the big, green eyes of Lily, the beautiful teacher, which disturbed his sleep.

Rain fell from the sky as he flew across the hills and valleys of his property. Pelting him with big drops, the rain soaked him to the skin in a matter of minutes. Instead of heading to the fence he knew he needed to repair, he headed to the hill with the big oak tree just past the river.

The horse skid to a halt beneath the tree and its rapid breathing filled the silence. The rain continued to come down in large drops as Seth slowly approached the stone resting beneath the tree.

He touched the cold marble and knelt beside it then traced the letters with his fingers while hot tears scalded his cheeks. "Victoria Marie Sanford. Beloved wife and mother. Born 1851. Died 1883. Aged 32 years."

She had gone riding that morning in the south pasture as was her usual routine. Victoria loved to ride alone in the mornings. She said it helped her to clear her head.

When she hadn't returned home by early afternoon, he went looking for her. He had found her not far from where her grave now stood. Victoria had been lying on the ground in a pool of blood, her horse nowhere to be found. He picked her up in his strong arms and cradled her against him, then rode as fast as he could without hurting her back to their house.

During the ride, she whispered how she'd come across some men squatting on their land. They had built a campfire and were laughing and joking as they passed around a jug of whiskey. When she had approached them, she could see lots of money on the ground. She said she must have startled them, because one of the men became enraged, pulled his colt revolver and shot her in the chest. They had taken her horse and left her for dead.

Seth's eyes glazed over with the hatred he felt and the pain in his heart. It was so unfair! She had everything to live for, and everything had been taken when they killed her. She was no longer there to be his loving partner or a mother to their children.

For several months after her death, he spent days with his gun tied to his thigh. He set up rocks on fence posts, and he would practice, practice and practice some more, until his aim was just right. Before Victoria's death, he hadn't much use for guns, but it had become a part of him. The cold steel of the revolver in its holster never left his side. One day, he would find the men who were responsible for her death, and he would make them pay with their lives.

He sat next to her grave for some time before he realized the rain had stopped, and the sun was beginning to set in the sky. When he had gone over the events in his mind again, he could hear her voice crying for help. God he hated that sound! He should never have let her go off alone that morning. If he had been there, if only he had been there, he might have been able to stop it. It was his fault, and now he would pay for the rest of his life, as would his children, who would now grow up without a mother.

The sun had set before Seth rode back into the yard of their home. Walking through the front door, he didn't even notice the children playing on the floor until Jarod came up and wrapped his arms around Seth's waist.

Unable to give Jarod the reassurance he needed, Seth pulled himself from his son's grasp, grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the sideboard and retreated to his office.

Chapter Six

The next morning found Lily already at the school as the children began filing in. *It is cloudy and raining again today, so the children will be restless.*

When Johnny, Jarod, and Anne came in the door, it was obvious something was wrong by the looks on their faces. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to get them alone to find out what was bothering them before the other children arrived. The three children were very quiet and pensive throughout the day. There were no smiles from any of them, so Lily made it a point to talk to them after school.

"Johnny, may I speak with you and your brother and sister before you leave?" Lily stopped them as the other children began filing out of the schoolhouse at the end of the day.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Children." Lily bent down to look into their eyes. "Is there something wrong?"

All three kept their silence.

"I can't help you if you don't tell me what the trouble is," Lily prodded, taking Anne's hand in hers.

Still the children were silent, until there was a sound from the back of the room, and all four sets of eyes rested on the tall, handsome man who now stood formidably in the doorway.

"Children, wait in the wagon," Seth ordered as Lily watched him approach.

"Yes, Poppa," the boys said in unison, scrambling toward the door. Before he turned and fled the room, Johnny stopped momentarily at the doorway and looked back at Lily with eyes that pleaded for her to understand.

“Mr. Sanford.” Lily rose to her feet and turned her back on Seth as she retreated behind her desk. *He is very intimidating when he’s angry.* A chill rolled down her spine, and she shivered.

“Mrs. Backman. I believe that we need to get a few things straight relative to my children.”

“Oh?” Lily questioned, turning back around to face him when he stepped closer to her desk.

“Yes. I will thank you not to pry into our business, ma’am. The children have been through a lot in the last six months with their mother’s death.”

“I understand that, Mr. Sanford, but you need to allow them to grieve as well. If they aren’t allowed to grieve, they will not be able to move past it.”

“Mrs. Backman,” Seth growled with anger bright in his eyes. “I understand you must have lost your husband around about the time I lost my wife, but that doesn’t make you an expert on how to deal with grieving children.”

“I don’t proclaim to, Mr. Sanford, but I do know children, and yours have kept their feelings bottled up inside for six months. Your daughter won’t speak. Do you know why?”

“No,” Seth admitted. “She hasn’t spoken since her momma died.”

“Precisely, Mr. Sanford. Has she cried for her mother? Have you talked to her about her mother? Have you allowed her to cry with you over the loss? You need to get those children to open up to you about their feelings concerning her death. From what Johnny has told me, it was rather tragic, and I’m sorry for your loss, but it would be better for all of you if you were all able to grieve. You would be surprised at how much better you would feel.” Lily finished her speech and sat down in her chair, completely worn-out by their conversation and trying to make Seth understand.

“What I do with my children is my business, Mrs. Backman, and I’ll thank you to remember your place.” Seth seethed with anger, and Lily saw the irritated sparks flashing in his eyes. “You are their teacher, and as their teacher, you are to teach them to read, write and do sums, not counsel them on how they should be feeling or acting.”

When he was through, he turned on his heel and stomped out of the building. The door slammed behind him with a resounding bang.

“What an infuriating man!” Lily jumped to her feet after Seth slammed the door behind him and started to pace across the floor. “He’s going to be

impossible to deal with." After a moment she grabbed her things from her desk and headed toward the door only to find Madge's nephew standing in the doorway. He pulled his hat from his head and water sluiced from the brim onto the floor.

"Sorry ma'am. I didn't mean to disturb you, but my Aunt Madge insisted I come over and talk to you."

Lily returned her things to her desk. "Ah yes, Daniel, isn't it? Your aunt told me that you might be interested in some tutoring."

"Yes, ma'am, Daniel Roberts. My aunt raised me after my parents died when I was a kid, and because I had to help her with the boarding house, I didn't get a full education. My readin' and writin' ain't the best."

"I would be happy to help you." *He looks vaguely familiar.* "Do I know you from somewhere? I mean, not just the boarding house when you brought the tub up, but from somewhere else? Did you ever live in Boston?"

"No, ma'am. Never been out of Texas," he mumbled, and his face turned a little paler under his tan.

"Well, I'm sure it will come to me. I'm usually really good with faces and such. When would you like to start?"

* * * *

Daniel had heard her argument with Seth when he approached the schoolhouse. *Nosy little misses. She needs to keep out of other folks' business if she wants to stay on here.*

She hadn't been unaware of his presence in the back of the room until she was ready to leave, and it gave him a chance to study her. Her big green eyes and slightly curly hair made her a pretty piece to look at, but he was afraid of spending too much time with her, afraid she would recognize him. Their sessions would have to be short and to the point, just enough to satisfy his aunt.

"Could we just do maybe an hour or so, just so we can start slow, that is?"

"Yes, of course. You do realize that if we only spend an hour at a time, and if that is only a couple of days a week, it will take some time for you to relearn everything you should have learned in school."

"That's all right, ma'am. I ain't in no hurry. How's about we start tomorrow afternoon?"

"That would be fine, Mr. Roberts. I have some things to do tonight anyway for the children, so tonight wouldn't be a good idea. If you'll come by here about three tomorrow afternoon, we can start then."

"I'll be here at three then. Thank you, miss," he said, turning his back on her and heading for the door.

Once he reached the outside, he cursed under his breath. *Damn it! She's going to catch on for sure if I'm not careful.* He slapped his hat on his leg before he slammed it back on his head and quickly headed toward the nearest saloon.

He pushed through the swinging doors and swaggered up to the bar. Holding up a finger, he motioned for the barkeep to bring him a drink. Moments later a shot glass full of whiskey appeared in front of him. He wrapped his hand around the glass and brought it to his lips when another man slid up next to him. His gaze met the man's in the mirror over the bar for a split second before he tipped his head back and threw the contents of the glass into the back of his throat.

"We hittin' the train tomorrow?"

Daniel hissed out of the corner of his mouth, "You fool! Do you want to get us locked up? Don't talk about this here!"

"Sorry, boss. I just wanted to make sure 'fore I head home tonight."

"Check with me tomorrow." He turned to his right and pinned the man with an angry stare. "If you ever approach me in public again, I will blow your brains all over the floor."

The other man held up his hands and backed away. He spun on his heels and disappeared through the swinging doors, and Daniel turned back toward the bar and motioned for another drink.

* * * *

With her thoughts zipping across her mind in quick secession, Lily walked back to her little house. Thoughts of Edward and Kathleen crossed her mind; the parents she had thought were hers who turned out not to be, in reality. She couldn't hate them for what they had done, but she was still angry with them for not telling her all these years. They weren't happy when

she told them she had taken the teaching job here, but they said they understood. When Arthur had called off their engagement, news spread like wildfire. He'd told her it had been because he didn't love her, but her other friends made sure she knew the gossip being spread around the community. By the next afternoon, the entire town of Boston knew about her real parentage and of her broken engagement. *What a hypocrite!* She sighed. *It's probably best.*

Then the strange man, Daniel Roberts, tripped across her mind. He seemed nice enough, she supposed. His aunt came across as the most vivacious, talkative, exuberant person she had ever met. Madge had such a bubbly personality that it shined bright in everything she did. Her nephew seemed to be just the opposite. He also seemed to be very jumpy. When he had talked to her about the tutoring, he constantly shifted his glance around him. Very strange indeed.

The Sanford children. She had almost gotten them to open up to her, that is, if their infuriating father hadn't come in with his snapping blue eyes and angry disposition. He had obviously been very upset with her for prying into their business, but he just wouldn't listen when she tried to explain her actions. *I'm only trying to help, for heaven's sake.* Pulling out her key when she reached her house, she unlocked the door and pushed it open.

She dropped her purse on the table and turned up the wick on the lamp to illuminate the room. A strong arm snaked around her waist, and a hand clamped down on her mouth not allowing her to scream. She struggled and squirmed against the arm holding her tight against the solid chest behind her, trying to break the firm hold.

When her booted foot delivered a well-placed kick to a shin, the hand came off her mouth and the arm disappeared.

She grabbed the lamp and swung around.

"Damn it, woman!"

The lamplight spilled across the threshold, and she was surprised to see Seth Sanford hopping on one foot, holding his shin in his hand.

"What the hell did you do that for?"

Anger rippled down her back and she shouted, "What are you doing?"

His eyes snapped while he stood rubbing his shin. "I came over to apologize."

Hands planted on her hips, she snorted, “You have a funny way of doing it then. Since when do you come up behind someone, put an arm around her and cover her mouth if you are here to apologize?”

* * * *

Seth really hadn’t come to frighten her. When he reached home, his behavior with the schoolteacher had embarrassed him, so he dropped the children off and drove back to town with the intention of apologizing.

She’d been completely unaware of anyone around her while she walked in the rain. He was afraid that if he startled her, she would scream and alert the whole town to his presence in her house. He really didn’t want anyone thinking there was something going on between him and the pretty teacher, not now, not ever.

The infuriated female in front of him now, with her chest heaving from exertion and fright, caught his male attention. Anger made her face flush and her eyes sparkle, and he wondered what she would look like sated after making love. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. *I don’t need her kind of female.* “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I knew you hadn’t heard me come up behind you, and I didn’t want you to shout in surprise, that’s all. You seemed to be lost in thought.”

Her anger seemed to deflate, and her shoulders relaxed.

“I’m sorry, too. How is your shin?”

“Probably bruised pretty good, but I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Well, since you are here, please come in so I can close the door. The rain is coming down much harder now.”

Seth moved inside the little house and closed the door behind him to shield them from the rain.

“Would you like some coffee?”

He caught himself watching the sway of her hips beneath her frock when she moved toward the kitchen.

“This rain will chill you to the bone even if it’s still rather warm outside.”

“Sure. Thanks.” His eyes began to wander about the front room of the home. *She’s done a lot with it in just a few days.* It had been very dark and dingy when he had been here before, and the people of Parkville had tried

their best to spruce it up a little for the arrival of the new teacher. Lily had hung some pretty curtains on the windows, and her books lined the shelves along each wall that he had built himself. She returned from the kitchen a moment later, bringing his attention back to the beautiful woman in front of him.

"The coffee will be ready in a few minutes. Did you take the children home before you came back? I hope they are not sitting out in the wagon still."

"No. I took them home. It's not a very long ride out to my place from town." He shifted from foot to foot, unsure of what else to say. *The safest topic would be the house.* "You've been busy in here, I see."

"Yes, well, I've tried to do a few things to make it a little brighter in here. It's a pretty house. It just needed a woman's touch."

"Yeah, well, it looks nice. It was rather gloomy in here before."

"Thank you." Lily's eyes shifted to the books lining the wall. "I especially like the bookshelves. They've come in very handy with all the books that I brought with me from Boston."

"I'm glad you like them. They weren't that hard to make."

Their eyes met, and one eyebrow shot up when she asked, "Oh?"

"I made them for the house." He shifted slightly, embarrassed at her look. He had never felt nervous around a woman, but this one made him almost uncomfortable.

"In that case, thank you again. They are perfect." A whistling noise came from the kitchen. "Let me check the coffee."

He stood in the middle of her house and raked nervous fingers through his hair. When he had first seen her on the train, he could feel her eyes rest on him on several occasions when she thought he was sleeping. He wouldn't tell her, but he rarely slept anymore except for fitful rest now and then. Always on high alert, he kept his ears open for any information that might help him track the men who killed Victoria. When he'd seen Lily on the train, her beauty and kindness drew his attention like a moth to flame.

At the town meeting, the mayor talked about making Lily leave because of a misunderstanding about her age, and for some reason he had stood up for her. He had even gone to a few of the townspeople and talked to them about letting her stay. He didn't know why, but he wanted her to be here, needed her to be here.

Her voice interrupted his thoughts when she asked, “How do you take your coffee, Mr. Sanford?”

“Just black, ma’am.”

Lily returned a short minute later, carrying two cups of steaming coffee. “Please, have a seat.” She handed him the cup, and their fingers brushed, sending shivers down his back at the contact. The cup wobbled in her hand, almost splashing the hot liquid over the rim. “I’m sorry. Please, sit down.”

She moved across the room and took a seat on the small settee near the window.

“Thanks. Please, call me Seth. Mr. Sanford is too formal around here.” He moved toward a larger chair and took a seat.

“All right then, Seth.” She sipped her coffee for a moment, and, returning her cup to the saucer, she said, “Have you thought about what I said earlier?”

“You mean about the children?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, I have, and I do want to apologize for my behavior this afternoon. I was out of line, and I’m sorry, but my wife’s death is a very touchy subject with me and the children.” Seth sipped his coffee and watched her over the rim.

“I realize it hasn’t been that long ago, and I’m sure it’s still a very fresh wound but...” Lily started, but he cut her off, raising his hand to silence her.

“You have no idea, Mrs. Backman, what it’s been like.” Changing the subject back to her, he asked, “How did you lose your husband?”

“I well, uh... he was killed in an accident at my father’s shipyard.” Her gaze shifted around the room a moment before it returned to her cup.

“I’m going to tell you something that no one else knows, Mrs. Backman, so you can understand where this all stems from.”

“Lily, please. Call me Lily.”

“All right, Lily. I’m going to tell you how my wife died, so you can understand why it is extremely difficult for me to talk about and for my children to understand. You see, I told them that their mother had fallen from her horse and broken her neck, but that’s not the whole truth. She did fall from her horse, but only after she had been shot in the chest.”

“Oh my!” Lily exclaimed and raised her hand to her throat.

"I couldn't let the children know she had been shot because I don't want them harboring the same hatred burning in my soul for the men responsible. I can never tell them what really happened."

Seth placed his now empty cup on the table near him before he rose and walked to the nearby window.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. Seth, I still really think you need to tell the children what happened."

"I can't!" He spat before his fist connected with the wall next to the window. "Don't you understand? If they were to know their mother was murdered, they would never be able to forgive the men responsible, just as I can't. I don't want it to consume their lives like it has mine for the last six months."

He swung around and met her gaze only to find sympathy and understanding shining brightly in her eyes.

"Seth." She stood and moved toward him "You have to let it go. This rage will kill you if you don't."

"There is no way I can let it go. I have to find them and make them pay for what they've done to my family. My children will now grow up without a mother because these men have robbed them of her." Not wanting to see the pity in her eyes, he swung back around to stare out the window again.

He could feel her behind him as her warmth tried to penetrate the chill surrounding his heart. When her hand came to rest on his shoulder in comfort, he couldn't help but stiffen. He didn't want her to try to console him, didn't need it, and if she continued down that path, he was afraid she would be hurt in the process. Her kindness and gentle personality sparkled brightly in her eyes, and it was clear she had this need to make people feel better. He was beyond her help. The darkness encompassing him these days wouldn't leave him alone, and he didn't want her to get swallowed into the black hole his life had become.

When he turned to face her, he could see the trust in her eyes, and he couldn't, no, he wouldn't allow that trust to penetrate the hate in his soul.

"Let it be, Lily." he whispered before he turned and headed back into the afternoon rain.

Chapter Seven

The next afternoon found Lily lost in thought. The pain surrounding Seth hurt her heart, and she wished he would let her help him. If he would just talk about the pain, she was sure he would feel better, even just a little.

When the children arrived at school the next morning, she asked Johnny what had happened when his father returned home.

“Nothin’,” he replied. “Why?”

“I was wondering, that’s all. He came by to apologize for his behavior yesterday, and we talked some. I just didn’t know if he mentioned it when he got home.”

“Nope.” Frustration seeped from the boy with every clipped word. “He just went off to his study to drink whiskey again.”

Concern zipped through her mind. “Does he do that often?”

“Couple times a week, I guess. Seems like something sets him off during the day, and then he goes in there. I’m not sure. Carmen says he needs to grieve, whatever that means.”

Lily thought Johnny defended his father with a little too much wisdom for a child his age.

“Carmen seems like a very wise person,” Lily muttered absently. Her mind focused on the fact that drinking was the way Seth dealt with his pain.

“She is very good to us and has been with us for a long time now. Ever since before I was born. Momma hired her to help around the house when she was gonna have me. She’s been like a momma to us since ours is gone now.”

Lily watched the other two Sanford children sit alone near a tree. “Thank you, Johnny.”

“You’re welcome, ma’am.” Johnny shuffled off to join his siblings before school started.

It was late afternoon and almost time for the children to leave for the day. Lily anticipated seeing Seth again when he came to pick up the children and her stomach did a little flip in her belly. Her hand slipped over her abdomen to try to calm her nerves. *This is silly. He's not a stranger, after all.* He'd been to her home just last night and told her something he hadn't told anyone. That should at least make them friends.

"All right, children. It's time to go. You may pack your things, and I'll see you all Monday. Have a nice weekend." When the children scrambled to grab their things and head for the door, she scolded, "Walk, children, walk."

Johnny, Jarod and Anne were the last to gather their schoolbooks and head for the door. Lily made it there before all the children were dismissed in an attempt to make their departure less chaotic. When the doorway cleared from the scurry of anxious children, she could easily see that Seth hadn't arrived yet.

At least today the sun has returned.

Just as the schoolyard cleared, Seth's wagon came around the corner of the church. When the wagon finally rolled to a stop in front of the school, Seth set the brake and wrapped the reins around it and jumped down.

He tipped his hat and said, "Ma'am."

The children raced down the stairs, and he turned to help them into the wagon. This gave Lily an enticing view as the muscles of his arms bunched and rolled under his shirt.

"Mr. Sanford," Lily replied in greeting, but when his eyes swung back to her, she corrected herself by saying, "Seth. Can I speak with you for a moment?"

"Uh... sure. I guess so." Seth moved toward the stairs to follow her into the school. "Wait out here, children."

* * * *

Seth had seen Lily standing with his children when the wagon rounded the corner of the church and desire zinged down his back as he let his gaze roam over her frame. Her dress fit snugly across her chest and tapered out from her small waist, emphasizing to him that he could probably span it with his hands. Her big green eyes watched as he stopped the horses with a soft "whoa".

Uneasiness squeezed his insides when she requested to speak to him, but as he followed Lily up the stairs, he gave her backside an appreciative look. Her hips swayed beneath her frock, and he quickly pulled his gaze away, giving himself a mental reprimand. He really didn't need a woman in his life, especially not a woman like her.

Once they entered the school, he shut the door behind them and turned to face her. "What can I do for you?"

"We need to come up with some kind of plan for your children."

She tipped her head to the side, and her openly curious gaze met his across the small space separating them. A blush crept up her cheeks, and he wondered if she knew where his thoughts centered when they were in the same room.

"I told you, just let it be. They'll be fine soon enough. This will pass."

"Seth, I'm afraid it won't if they aren't allowed to grieve."

Running his hands through his hair, he began to pace the floor. *Why can't she just let it go?* "Constantly bringing up the fact their mother is dead isn't helping them either, Lily. They don't need to be reminded of their mother's death over and over. It was bad enough the first time."

Her mouth opened to answer as the back door of the room swung open, and Daniel stepped inside. Seth watched as the other man approached Lily from behind. He'd never liked Daniel, even when they were growing up. Daniel had always been a bit of a bully and constantly teased and taunted the other children. He'd even tried picking on Seth a few times until Seth socked him square in the nose one afternoon. Daniel left him alone after that, and he'd never picked on the other children again, at least when Seth was around.

"Daniel," Seth growled low in his throat.

"Seth." Daniel propped himself on one of the desks nearby.

"I'll be right with you, Daniel," Lily said before she returned her attention to him. "We'll have to discuss this another time, but you need to think of the best thing for the children."

"I am," Seth grumbled as Lily walked him to the door.

"I'm not sure you are. You are thinking with the hatred you feel in your heart, and it's clouding your judgment concerning them." Her hand came up to rest on his arm, stopping him from leaving her standing alone in the doorway. He looked down before his gaze returned to her face. The warmth

from her skin penetrated his shirt and spread up his arm to settle in the pit of his stomach.

Fighting the urge to pull her to his chest and kiss the daylights out of her, he changed the subject as he focused on the man sitting nearby. "What's he doing here?"

She turned and looked at Daniel and then swung back to Seth. "That's really none of your business."

"Is he courtin' you?"

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. He mentally kicked himself. *It doesn't matter to me what she does, or does it?* "I'm sorry. That's none of my business either."

He quickly turned on his heel and headed down the stairs to his waiting children.

* * * *

As they drove away, Lily shielded her eyes from the sun's glare and wondered to herself what the heck his statement meant. What difference did it matter to him if Daniel was or wasn't courting her? Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she turned to go back inside so that she could begin her tutoring.

"What was Seth doing here?" Daniel asked, when she came back in the room.

Lily rolled her eyes. *What is going on with these two? Men! What difference does it make who was here and what they were doing here?* "He was here picking up his children, and we were discussing a problem that they are having, that's all."

She approached her desk to get the materials she had set out to help Daniel with his studies and then turned back to where he sat at one of the desks. "Now, shall we begin?"

For the next hour, Lily worked with him on some of the fundamentals of reading and writing. He was indeed a quick learner as Madge had suggested. He still knew most of the basics, so she felt she could jump right in and give him some of the harder lessons.

Questions still plagued her about where she'd seen him before. "Are you sure you've never been out of Texas? I'm sure I know you from

somewhere." She tapped her finger on her lip. "Were you on the train last week? Maybe I saw you in one of the cars."

His face turned white as a sheet, and she frowned. "N-no," he stammered. "I was right here in Parkville."

She shrugged. "Oh well, I'm sure I'll think of it." She packed the books away and asked, "When would you like to get together again?"

"Maybe next week sometime. I'll come by one day after school, but I'm not sure what day." He stood quickly and backed toward the door.

"That's fine. I think things went very well today, don't you?"

"Yeah, I mean you are a real good teacher, Mrs. Backman. I'll see you later." He turned and bolted for the door.

That was really odd. She packed her things and headed toward the door as weariness settled on her shoulders. The odd behavior of Daniel and the heated conversation with Seth had just sapped all her strength, and she still needed to walk home. *A nice warm bath would do me a world of good.*

At home, after she'd fixed herself something to eat and heated the water for her bath, she settled back in the tub to unwind. Her muscles relaxed under the heat of the water and the bubbles as she sighed and closed her eyes. Seconds later, visions of Seth's heated look swam before her, and her eyes popped open. Water lapped over the side of the tub when she sat bolt upright.

Looking around, she chastised herself for even thinking about the impossible man. She grabbed the soap and began to lather her long hair with so much force her head started to hurt.

"This is ridiculous!"

She doused her hair until it was completely free of soap, then lathered every other part of her body and rinsed clean. *So much for a nice relaxing bath.* Climbing from the tub, she dried herself off and slipped on her nightgown. She decided to grab a book and read herself to sleep.

Once she reached the living room, memories of Seth standing there telling her about his wife's death clouded her mind. She could still see him standing near the window and remembered how when she had touched his shoulder, he'd stiffened against her touch. He wasn't going to allow her to get close enough to help him. *If he would only tell the children what happened, maybe they could all move on and live their lives. Right now, they are all being eaten alive with grief.*

"I know. I'll take a ride out to his ranch tomorrow so we can talk more. Maybe if I met him on his own land, he would open up a little. Surely he wouldn't kick me off his property even if I were intruding," she murmured aloud. Kathleen had always told her she had such a big heart and that someday she would be hurt if she weren't careful, but she felt this overwhelming need to help this family to heal.

Midnight blue turned to purple then pink as the morning sun struggled to crest the hillside. The sky had barely lightened before Lily stood at the livery borrowing a horse and buggy. She had plans to visit Seth's place to talk to him, but she didn't know what to expect once she got there. Would he send her away? Would he be drunk this morning? Would he even talk to her? Those questions she couldn't answer, and they left butterflies in her stomach. Her plan had to do with convincing him to tell the children how their mother really died.

"Thank you, Carl, for helping me with the buggy." He helped her climb aboard the black, single horse buggy and handed her the reins.

"You're welcome, ma'am. I need to apologize again for the other day when you almost got runned down."

"No harm done, really, but thank you for the apology."

Carl patted the horse on the nose and said, "I'm just glad Seth was there to keep you from being hurt."

Her cheeks flushed when she thought about how it had felt being held against Seth's strong chest for just those few seconds. Even with the fear of nearly being trampled by the horse and rider, her whole body had warmed to his touch when he had pulled her into his arms.

"Yes, well, I am too. Thank you again for your help with the buggy. I'll have it back before nightfall." Heat crept up her neck, and Lily flicked the reins over the rump of the horse, sending the buggy lurching forward out of the livery yard. Once she had relaxed, she was able to get the feel of the buggy, and the horse settled down under her experienced hand.

She had been taught very early in Boston to handle a rig by Edward, and she sent up a silent "thank you" as the horse clipped along the road headed out to the Bar S Ranch.

It really is beautiful here. The trees were in full bloom now, and the grass glistened in the morning sun while the dew dried on the tall stocks of field grass and flowers along the roadway. The heat started to climb as she

rode along at a good clip, and she realized the weather would be warm today.

Seth mentioned the ranch wasn't that far from town when he'd visited her house, so she didn't expect the trip would take long.

In no time the ranch house came into view around the bend in front of her, and she was surprised to see the many flowers around the front. She hadn't thought there would be any feminine touches to the home with his wife gone, but it appeared someone kept up the flowers and such. She could see there were pretty curtains blowing in the breeze at the kitchen window. When she stopped the buggy, she could hear a soft, womanly voice humming. *Carmen*. She'd almost forgotten about the woman whom Johnny had mentioned helping around the ranch.

Johnny came bounding out of the front door in greeting. "Mrs. Backman! What are you doing out here today?" He grasped the reins and wrapped them around the railing for her.

"I came to talk to your father, Johnny. Is he up and about yet?" Lily swept her skirts aside and stepped from the buggy.

"Yes, ma'am. He's been up since early this morning, I think. Let me go find him for you. I think he's in the barn." Johnny grinned and took off at a full run toward the barn.

Lily took a seat in one of the rockers sitting empty on the front porch. A moment later, the door opened suddenly and a large-busted, sturdy-looking woman appeared wiping her hands on her apron.

"May I help you?"

"Hello," Lily replied. "I'm Mrs. Backman, the teacher from in town. I came by to see Seth, I mean, Mr. Sanford."

Carmen approached Lily and held out her hand in greeting. "I'm Carmen. I help around the house and with the children for Mr. Seth. It is nice to meet you, ma'am. Is there a problem with the children?"

Lily took Carmen's hand in hers, feeling the warm calloused palm. "Well, in a way, yes, but I need to speak to Mr. Sanford about it even though I know you are very close to them. They speak very highly of you."

A smile spread across Carmen's face at the mention of the children, and Lily could see the love she held for them in her heart reflected in her brown eyes. She knew they were in good hands with this loving woman.

"I will see about something to drink for you then, ma'am. Have you had breakfast?"

"Don't go to any trouble on my account. I'm just fine, thank you."

"I need to prepare breakfast for the children anyway, so I'll just make some extra." Carmen headed into the house before Lily could tell her not to bother fixing anything for her.

Lily stood, watching Seth and Johnny approach from the barn, so she was not quite at such a disadvantage when he came bounding up the steps.

* * * *

Seth had risen early, anticipating the long work day ahead with stalls to repair and tack to clean. He retreated to the barn, the welcoming quiet a balm to his restless soul after his encounter with Lily yesterday.

Seeing Daniel in the schoolhouse tore at his gut. He didn't want to think of her with his nemesis in any fashion, much less in the scenes running rampant through his mind this morning. When Johnny came rushing into the barn to tell him Lily was there, Seth's blood rushed in his ears, and those very scenes changed. Now he imagined himself with her, and desire raced through his body, making it a little hard to breathe. He started toward the house with Johnny trying desperately to keep up. "She wants to talk to you, Pop."

"I'm sure she does," Seth replied, his eyes fixed on the pretty young woman gracing his front porch.

"Mrs. Backman, to what do we owe the pleasure?"

He let his gaze caress her form, and he noticed she looked quite fresh, even with the ride in the dusty buggy. Her spring frock, with the short sleeves and rounded neckline, was quite appropriate for the climate. However, it just left that much more to his overly vivid imagination of late.

"Seth, I mean, Mr. Sanford, we need to discuss the children."

Hearing her words, he pulled his mind back to the sound with an almost audible groan. *Here we go again.*

"I didn't mean to intrude, but since we were not able to finish our conversation at the school the other day, I thought we might be able to today."

"Ah yes—our conversation that was interrupted by your... company."

“Company, yes, I mean no. Mr. Roberts is, I mean, was not my company. He came by to give me a message, that’s all,” she stammered slightly.

She doesn't want to me know about her acquaintance with Daniel.

“Johnny, leave us, please. I’m sure Carmen probably has breakfast ready by now.”

“Yes, Poppa. Is Mrs. Backman joining us?” Johnny asked before he shut the door.

“She can if she likes, son.”

“Thank you. That would be nice.”

Frown lines appeared between her eyebrows, and he wondered at the expression. *Did she think I would deny her food after she came all the way out here from town?* “Please join us then, Mrs. Backman.”

He really shouldn’t care about her relationship with Daniel, but he did. *Lord, this woman can get under my skin.*

When the family sat down to eat, all eyes were fixed on Lily. Seth could tell the children were very tense during breakfast. Their normal behavior consisted of talking every chance they got during the meals. This morning, the silence was deafening as Lily, picking at her food, sat next to him.

“If you would like something else, I’m sure Carmen would be happy to fix it for you.”

“Oh no, this is wonderful. I’m just not much of a breakfast eater. Carmen is a very good cook.”

Silence prevailed until he finished and the children picked up their plates, took them into the kitchen and scrambled away.

“Would you like more coffee?”

“Yes, please.” Carmen appeared at her side to refill her cup. “I’m sorry I didn’t eat much. I hate to be so wasteful with your food, but coffee and something light usually satisfies me.”

“What else satisfies you, Mrs. Backman?”

Lily nearly choked on her coffee before she quickly looked up, and he gave her an innocent smile.

“Ah, well... um... why don’t you tell me more about your life here in Texas, Mr. Sanford?”

Seth wanted to keep her off guard. He didn’t need for her to get too involved with his life and the lives of his children, but unfortunately, that’s

exactly where she was headed. She had made a trip specifically to his home to talk to him, especially about Anne. He wished he could get her to understand he was doing what he felt best for them.

“My parents moved here before I was born. They were some of the first settlers in the area when there wasn’t much here except tumbleweeds and bluebonnets. They never had any more children, and after I turned ten, they contracted cholera and died within a few days of one another. I had it too, but I survived. A local family took me in, and Jack Sanford—that was his name, taught me everything about ranching.”

“So how did you meet and marry your wife?” Curiosity shone bright in her eyes, and he attempted to stab her with a piercing look to dissuade this line of questioning.

He tried to conceal the pain, but it was impossible when thoughts of Victoria rippled across his mind.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry,” she whispered, and he vaulted to his feet. He grabbed both of their cups and took them into the kitchen, but she followed close behind. “Seth,” she murmured behind him when they reached the kitchen and he stopped to place the cups in the sink.

He braced his hands on the counter when he started talk, and his eyes focused on some unimaginable thing in the distance. “We were sweethearts from a young age. We kind of grew up together, and when we were old enough, I asked her father if he would allow me to marry her.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t bring up things that are painful for you, but I need to understand how things happened if I am to be able to help your children, especially Anne. She is such a sweet girl, and I know she needs you, but you have to be able to let go of your own pain and guilt before you can help her.”

“I wish you would understand, Lily. It won’t do any good to bring up her death, not for me, nor for the children.”

* * * *

Even though Lily felt him stiffen against her touch, she continued with her questions. “Did you love her that much?” She really didn’t want to hear all the details of his love for his wife, but she had to ask. He obviously cared very much for her if he continued to grieve, even now.

“You obviously loved your husband enough to want to spend the rest of your life with him.” He didn’t look at her. “Yes, I loved Victoria. I never thought of being with anyone else.”

“Yes, well... my marriage was almost one of convenience, you could say. My father picked him out for me.” Lily winced at her white lie. She really couldn’t let anyone know she hadn’t ever been married. They would send her out on the first train back East. The town already had issues with her age, and if they knew she had never been married and traveled unchaperoned all the way to Texas, it would be the end of her tenure.

“You weren’t in love with him?”

“No, I guess I wasn’t,” she replied, averting her eyes so that he couldn’t see the truth.

Chapter Eight

His curiosity was piqued.

“Why don’t we go out on the porch? I’d like to hear more about you and your life in Boston.”

He took her arm with his big hand and steered her out the door to the nearby chairs waiting for them. “Tell me about your family.”

“You are quite clever, you know.”

“Me? I don’t know what you mean,” Seth said with a bit of a sheepish grin, sure she hadn’t realized he was changing the subject to avoid discussing his relationship with Victoria.

“Yes, you. I know what you are trying to do. You’re trying to change the conversation around to me so that I quit asking questions about you and your wife. That’s fine for now, but we will discuss this later.”

She stepped to the railing of the porch and stared out into the yard. The sunlight danced on the ground while the leaves on the trees around the house filtered through the beams. The breeze rustled the trees overhead and lifted several tendrils of hair that had come loose from the matronly bun fastened to the back of her head.

He wished she’d worn it down. The tight knot did nothing to disguise the strands of red reflected in her hair when the sun hit it. The palms of his hands itched to run his fingers through the silky mass.

“A few months ago, I found out the parents I thought were mine really weren’t.” The strain in her voice from the pain in her heart whispered loud and clear. “A wonderful prominent family in Boston raised me, but one morning, I went into my father’s study to retrieve some papers for him, and I came across my birth record. It didn’t have Edward and Kathleen’s names as my parents. Come to find out, my real parents were friends of theirs. My father died shortly before my birth, and when I was born, my mother couldn’t take care of me. She asked Edward and Kathleen to raise me and

then left the area. I don't know where she is now, but my parents were actually Irish immigrants, so I guess that explains the green eyes."

"So in another words, we were both orphans, so to speak." When he looked at her now, it was like he was seeing her for the first time, or as if he saw her in a whole new light.

"I guess you could say that, yes. Anyway, after I confronted them about it, they told me the whole story. I was so upset at the fact that I was no longer a Backman, but actually a Flannery, that I applied for the position here. When the mayor accepted my application, I took the job, and here I am. Now you know my life's story." She finished with a sigh before she turned back around, and their eyes met.

After a moment he said, "There is just one thing that confuses me." His gaze locked on her with great intensity.

"What's that?"

"You said your adoptive parents' last name is Backman, correct?"

Lily's face drained of color, and her voice squeaked. "Yes."

"Then how is it that your last name remains Backman now?" Seth asked with a raise of his eyebrow. "Unless you really had never been married at all."

* * * *

"Uh... well, you see..." Lily said, trying to figure out how she was going to get out of this one.

"You never were married, were you, Lily?" Seth's eyes narrowed in distrust.

Bowing her head to hide the terror in her eyes, she whispered, "No."

"Why did you lie?" he growled and bolted to his feet, coming to stand directly in front of her, forcing her to look at him again.

"I couldn't tell the town that I was a twenty-two year-old woman wanting to come to a place I'd never been before because I'd found out my parents weren't really my parents, Seth! They would have never let me come here. How would they have felt if I told them my fiancé broke off our engagement because I'm nothing more than the daughter of an Irish immigrant family?" she cried, standing toe-to-toe with him.

His height put her at a disadvantage, requiring her to tip her head back slightly to look him in the eye.

"Your fiancé really broke your engagement because of your heritage?"

"Yes."

"Why? That seems so cruel. He sounds like a cur."

"Arthur Welmington has a pedigree longer than your arm. To be married to a woman not of a blue blood, Yankee family just wouldn't do. I'm sure he thought my heritage would harm his business dealings or some such nonsense."

He sighed. "You're right. The townspeople wouldn't have entertained your application, much less offered you the position."

"You aren't going to tell them, are you? Please? You can't tell them! I know that I've only been here a week or so, but give me a chance!"

He turned his back on her to look out over the yard and ran his hands through his hair. Now he was faced with the white lie she had told to secure the position here. Would he keep her secret? She didn't know.

"Seth, please. You can't say anything to anyone," Lily pleaded, moving next to him and placing her hand on his arm.

* * * *

Now what was he going to do? If he kept her secret, it would surely come back to bite them both in the end, but he was beginning to realize he wanted her to stay for his own personal reasons, and revealing her lack of widowhood could be detrimental to her position here.

His gaze moved to her hand on his arm as the heat of her touch burned through his shirt like a branding iron on his skin.

Damn! Not even Victoria's touch could scald me like hers does. His eyes moved from her hand to her face again, and she stared at him with those big green eyes brimming with tears. He knew he wouldn't, couldn't, say anything to anyone in town. He needed her here. His children needed her here.

"I won't say anything, Lily," Seth answered in almost a whisper.

"Thank you!" She threw her arms around his shoulders and hugged him like he was her savior.

Lost in the feeling of her in his embrace again, he set his hands on her hips to pull her close. He could smell the sweet scent of lavender in her hair, and it felt so good to hold her. He had almost forgotten what it felt like to hold a woman, and this one seemed to fit too well. *Too well for my sanity.* He brought his hands up to her waist and gently pushed her back until she let go.

“Oh! I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that,” she murmured, embarrassment coloring her cheeks.

“It’s all right.”

She was just a mite too close for his comfort right now as his body cooled from his reaction to holding her close.

“Now that you’ve managed to change the topic of conversation to me, we need to change it back to the children. After all, that’s why I’m here.”

When he stepped away from her, Lily moved toward the chair and sat down, relaxing against the back.

“What? Oh yeah, the children,”

He had been lost in the sway of her skirt when she turned toward the rocker, so he had almost missed what she said. “Maybe this is not the right place for this conversation.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t want the children to overhear something I’m not prepared to tell them just yet.”

“What do you suggest then?” Her big green eyes widened. “We could always have this conversation at my house.”

Lily’s suggestion was innocent, and he thought for sure she wasn’t aware being alone with her was the last thing he wanted to do. “No! I mean, it wouldn’t be proper for me to be alone with you at your home.” It sounded ridiculous even to his ears after their conversation the other night, but it was the best thing he could think of right at this moment.

“Why not? The town thinks I’m a young widow, and having my students’ parents to my home to discuss their children’s behavior isn’t out of the ordinary, I would think.” Lily stood and placed her hands on her hips. “I think that would be perfect. How about tomorrow evening? You could come to church and then come over for Sunday supper.”

“Uh... well... I don’t go to church.” Seth sighed and tried to think of a reason to avoid this situation she was determined to put herself in.

"Well, you don't have to go to church, just come over in the afternoon for supper then. We can discuss the children in privacy. I think it's a perfect idea." Lily's face brightened at the idea, and Seth closed his eyes before he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I just don't think it's a good idea, Lily. Are you sure about this?"

"It's perfect. I really should be going now. I have several things to do this afternoon. Thank you so much for breakfast and keeping my secret. I'll see you tomorrow."

She swept down the porch, untied the buggy from the railing and climbed in. When she pulled away from the house, she waved to him and with a huge smile turned toward town as Seth sank into one of the rockers on the porch.

"Now what the hell am I going to do?" he grumbled and raked his fingers through his hair again.

Carmen came out of the front door, and he jumped in response to her voice. "Mr. Seth?"

He hadn't heard her at all while his thoughts centered on the brown-haired woman who had just turned his day upside down.

"Sorry, Carmen. I didn't hear you. What can I do for you?" He stood again, ready to head back toward the barn. He had work to do, and hopefully it would keep his mind off Lily.

"That's quite all right. You are preoccupied by the new schoolteacher, yes?"

"Yeah, you could say that," Seth replied with a sheepish grin.

"She is a pretty one. You could do worse."

"It's not like that, Carmen. She's concerned about the children. That's all, nothing more." Seth dodged her curious look a little too convincingly and was afraid Carmen saw right through his facade of indifference.

"Of course," Carmen replied with a wide grin.

"I'm going to the barn. Make sure the children stay near the house, please. And wipe that grin off your face. She means nothing to me."

Seth stepped off the porch, and with a swift stride he arrived at the barn but not before Carmen's hearty laugh reached his ears.

Damn meddling woman.

The dimness of the barn surrounded him, but he truthfully wasn't sure if he meant Carmen, or Lily. Both of them needed to stop trying to make him

do things he didn't want to do. Not that he didn't like Lily--he liked her a lot, probably too much if he were to be honest with himself, but she was going to be nothing but trouble. He didn't need her type of woman in his life, the type who wanted to help all the time, a fine, upstanding woman. He was fine just the way things were. Carmen took care of the children, and he could concentrate on finding the men responsible for killing Victoria.

Lily wanted him to open his heart and let the flood of emotion out he'd kept hidden for so long. He could feel it in the warmth of her hand on his arm or on his shoulder. He could see it when she looked at him with those green eyes with the little flecks of gold, the same ones he had found so easy to drown in. He could hear it in her voice when she spoke in a whisper for only his ears. She was trouble. He had known it from the first time he had seen her on the train. She had spunk when she'd stood up to all of the townspeople and asked them to let her try to teach their children. Her kindness was breaking down his resolve in small little pieces and tearing down the iceberg around his heart. If he wasn't careful, she would burrow herself there before he knew what hit him.

The wall he'd put between himself and all the other people around him, even his children, had started to crumble, but he would just have to build it back up, that's all. She had chipped a good-sized hole in it, that's for sure, but he would fix it. He had to make the men pay for what they'd done, and that was all he lived for now. Until that was accomplished, nothing else mattered.

The sun started to set in the evening sky, and Seth realized he would have to leave soon. He had dreaded this evening all day, even while he tried to occupy his mind with chores around the house. When the children had found out he would be having dinner with their teacher, they talked about it continuously. Carmen had quickly informed them after Lily's visit that their Poppa would be calling on Mrs. Backman. It had put them in a twitter all afternoon and first thing this morning. He knew he had to go through with it, since Lily wouldn't take no for an answer, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

When she opened the door, his eyes widened, and he took in her appearance. She had not put her hair up on her head tonight, and he hadn't realized how long her hair really was. It settled at her hips with a bit of a curl, and she'd pulled it back in a pretty ribbon. The dress she wore was

satin brocade that hugged her curves, showing off her perfectly rounded bosom and the nice flare of her hips. She looked absolutely beautiful!

This is going to be one hell of a long night. Blood rushed through his veins and settled between his legs as he stifled a soft groan.

She brushed her fingers across her nose. "Is there flour on my nose or something?" She chuckled and said, "Please come in."

"Uh... sorry." He dropped his gaze and stepped inside the house.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Lily asked, closing the door and following him into the living room. "I've made coffee, but I also have some tea or water. I think I even have some whiskey left by the previous occupant here somewhere."

"Whiskey? Really?"

"Yes. It was hidden in one of the kitchen cupboards up in the corner. I'm not one for liquor, so I thought I would save it for company. Would you like some?" He searched around him for somewhere sturdy to sit and decided on a sofa off to his left. "You can sit on the sofa if you like. It's sturdy enough I think."

"Thanks. And yes, I'll take a little of that whiskey." He eased himself down; hoping the piece of furniture would hold his weight.

"Coming right up. Dinner will be ready shortly. I just need to finish the gravy. I'll be back in a moment."

When she returned, she handed the small glass to him, and he gulped it down in one swift motion. Her eyes widened in shock, but she didn't say anything. She took the glass and disappeared to the kitchen.

She returned a moment later and said with a teasing smile, "You might need to take this one a little slower. The bottle isn't that big."

"Sorry." He brought the glass to his lips and sipped the amber liquid slowly.

"It's quite all right. Please excuse me. I'm going to put dinner on the table if you'd like to go into the dining room."

Seth stood, and his head began to swim just a bit with the change in position. *Whiskey on an empty stomach does bad things to my mind.* He took a deep breath and followed her pretty little backside into the dining room. Finding an empty seat at the table, he eased into the chair.

The good china was out, with some nice silver and even some pretty wildflowers in a glass vase to compliment the tablecloth. He hadn't sat at a

regular dining table in a long time. It made him a bit uncomfortable when he eyed all the delicate things in the room, from the curtains to the china and the cloth napkins on the table. He'd forgotten a well-to-do family in Boston raised her, so she would be comfortable in a setting like this, but he wasn't.

Lily came back through the doorway of the kitchen, carrying a heavy serving tray with chicken, beautifully fried to a perfect golden brown, and placed it in front of him. While she bent over the table to set the dish down, his eyes took in a wonderful display of bosom revealed to his appreciative male gaze. The dress obviously had been made specifically to catch a man's attention, and catch it, it did.

She stopped at the back of her chair and he scrambled to his feet to hold it for her. Positioned behind her this way, he caught the hint of lavender again, and he groaned softly.

Peeking over her shoulder, she asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"Uh... no, everything is fine," he mumbled, sitting back down in his chair. "This looks wonderful. I didn't know you could cook."

"Actually, I'm a pretty good cook, if I do say so myself. I used to bother the cooks back home to teach me, so I've learned to cook several things. I love to experiment in the kitchen."

His gaze moved to her lips, and his mind raced to a conclusion he was sure he shouldn't be thinking at all with her innocent words. She didn't mean what his mind conjured up, and he almost groaned aloud again. "Would you mind if I have a little more of that whiskey?"

"No, of course not." She reached for the bottle and refilled his glass before handing it back to him. His hand shook slightly when he reached for it.

This is going to be a very long night. He took the glass and swallowed the entire contents in one gulp.

She placed her napkin in her lap and grasped her fork as he set the glass back down on the table. "Now, shall we discuss the children?"

"Children?" he squeaked, his voice rasping like he hadn't spoken in a very long time. His mind had gone completely blank. He tried to pull his scattered thoughts back to the matter at hand instead of on how her lips might taste.

"Yes. The children, your children." She looked at him with a patient smile. "You know, Johnny, Jarod and Anne?"

"Yes," he said, trying to focus on his meal. "The children. I'm sorry. My mind was elsewhere."

"Why don't you tell me more about your wife? I'm actually very curious about her. Johnny has told me a few things, but maybe you could shed some light on her personality and such."

He shot her a piercing glance. *Damn it! Why does she have to prod? Why can't she leave well enough alone?*

Standing quickly, he moved toward the window and stared out into the darkness. He really didn't want to share things about Victoria, but before he knew it, he was telling Lily everything.

"Victoria was a very beautiful girl with her long, blonde hair and pretty blue eyes. All the men in the area sought out her attention, but she only had eyes for me. We had been sweethearts for so long. It seemed only natural for us to be married, so when we were old enough, we did. I bought the land out where our house now stands right before we got married and started building our place. She was so excited to have her own house. Her parents had been kind of poor, so she didn't have much growing up. She had several brothers and sisters, and there was never enough to go around, but when we got married, I made it up to her. She had everything she wanted, pretty clothes, a nice place and lots of things that made her happy. When she found out she was with child, she was so excited. She would tell me all the time that she wanted nothing more than to be a mother, and she would dream of having a baby to take care of. Everything was perfect. We had our place, we had our children, and we had each other. Then it was all gone. In one swift motion, it was gone. She was gone." Tears burned his eyes as the words spilled from his mouth. The pain was still so raw and so real.

He hadn't realized it, but Lily stood behind him, and when he stopped talking, she slipped her arms around him and just held on. She placed her head against his back, and he could feel her warm skin through his shirt and something else.

He loosened her arms and turned around only to see tears streaming down her cheeks as she looked up at him.

Tears for me?

He brushed the tears from her cheek with his thumb. His thoughts scattered when he looked into her eyes still shining bright with more unshed

tears. All thoughts of Victoria faded into the background of his mind as the woman before him began to capture his heart.

I need to taste her. He captured her lips with his in a soft but all-encompassing kiss. The salty tang of her tears on her lips shot straight to his heart. They were tears she had shed for him, and the feeling that engulfed him was beyond anything he had ever felt before. No one had ever cried for him.

With a soft moan, he deepened the kiss, sliding his arms around her and pulled her tight against his chest, losing himself in the taste of her mouth.

* * * *

Before she'd been able to comprehend what was happening, his lips were on hers. The pressure on her mouth increased, and she felt the tip of his tongue slip along the crease of her lips. She opened to him and allowed the intimacy he asked for. She'd never been kissed like this before, but the feeling spreading through her was like a wildfire. Heat consumed her to the point that her whole body began to warm to his touch.

A loud knock on the door interrupted their kiss, and they jumped apart guiltily. His gaze moved across her face in almost a caress.

When the knock came again, she stammered, "I... uh... I need to see who is at the door."

She sucked in a ragged breath to calm her shaking nerves before she headed toward the front door. With trembling hands, she smoothed her hair back and straightened her skirt.

Opening the door, she saw Madge standing on her porch with a bright smile on her face.

"I came to invite you for supper. I know you and Daniel have been spending a lot of time together. I thought it would nice if you came over to spend the evening."

"I... uh ..."

"I know it is late notice and all, but I hate to think of you eating all alone every night." Madge stepped through the doorway, and Lily stepped aside.

Lily felt him before he touched her. She knew with every nerve ending in her body that he stood behind her, and when she heard Madge exclaim in surprise, it confirmed her suspicions. His warmth penetrated her very soul.

* * * *

Why in the devil did I kiss her? His mind raced, and he ran his fingers through his hair. That was the last thing he needed to do right now, and he sure didn't need to get involved with her. When he heard Madge mention Daniel Roberts and Lily seeing each other, he moved to make his presence known to the woman at the door. With a possessiveness he didn't quite understand, he laid a hand on Lily's shoulder.

"Hello, Madge, nice to see you."

"Seth. What a surprise." Madge's gaze swept from him to Lily and back again. "I'm sorry, Lily. I didn't realize you had company."

"I should be going anyway." He moved toward the door and grabbed his hat from the rack nearby. "Thank you for dinner. We will have to continue this... uh, conversation another time."

"But..." Lily's voice reached his ears just as he pulled the hat down on his brow.

"Night, Madge. Lily." He walked out the door and tipped his hat to the two women. He swung into the saddle and turned toward home.

Once he reached the outskirts of town, he chastised himself for what had happened. *I should never have kissed her. What the hell was I thinking?* He couldn't betray Victoria like that. He wouldn't be able to move on with his life until he found her killers, and to encourage Lily was just wrong. He would have to set things straight with her immediately.

His mind ricocheted to Madge's comment about Daniel and Lily seeing each other, and he wondered if her words held any truth. He knew Daniel had dropped by the schoolhouse the other day, and they had seemed friendly enough, but he couldn't help wondering. Were they romantically involved? He wasn't sure, but he didn't like the thought of her kissing Daniel like she had just done with him moments before. She felt so soft in his arms and her lips on his... he needed to stop thinking about it, or he wouldn't get any sleep when he returned home. The uncomfortable bulge behind the fly of his pants made him squirm in the saddle as the house came into view in the distance.

Chapter Nine

The two women watched Seth mount and ride away before Madge turned back toward Lily and apologized. "I'm sorry, Lily."

"Don't worry yourself, Madge. He only came over so we could discuss the children, nothing more. There isn't anything between us except friendship."

Madge had been startled to see Seth at Lily's when she stopped by, but when she followed Lily into the dining room, she noticed the two place settings at the table. *Obviously there was more to this evening than Lily was letting on.* Madge picked up a couple of the dishes herself to bring into the kitchen.

"Are you sure I didn't interrupt something?" She placed the dishes in the sink and smiled when Lily blushed "After all, Seth is a very handsome man and a very eligible bachelor."

Lily avoided looking at her and said, "Really, Madge, it was nothing."

"It didn't look like nothing to me when he put his hand on your shoulder."

Lily shrugged. "We're friends, Madge. It was just a friendly gesture."

"All right, if you say so. There is nothing wrong with being attracted to the man. He's a fine specimen, if you ask me. I may be old, but I ain't dead." Madge smiled when the pretty blush returned to Lily's cheeks.

"Obviously not, Madge." Lily returned her smile. "He is very handsome at that, but he's very much still in love with his wife."

"He'll have to move on sooner or later. Nothing wrong with you helping him move on, you know."

"I'm not sure he ever will. He is still harboring a lot of grief, guilt and anger right now." Lily grabbed more dishes and returned to the kitchen again.

"Very true, but it's a start if he's willing to spend time with you, even if it's under the pretense of discussing his children." Madge pulled the tablecloth from the table and began folding it.

"It's not a pretense, Madge. His children need some guidance and to be able to grieve for their mother. I'm trying to convince him to help them with it. In order for him to allow them to grieve, he has to himself. He has so much anger and guilt from her death, I just don't know if he'll ever be able to move past it." Madge followed behind as Lily slid the dirty dish into the water and began to scrub it clean. Lily quickly changed the subject. "How is Daniel doing?"

"He's fine. He enjoys your afternoons together with his tutoring."

"He's a very smart man, but he needs to focus more." Lily gave her a questioning look. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Has he always whispered? I mean, is there something wrong with his voice?"

Madge was shocked. She had never thought about it, but no, Daniel didn't whisper. "Why no. Why would you say that?"

"He always seems to talk very softly when he's around me, and I'm not sure why. I guess at some point I'll ask him. I just thought maybe there was some medical reason for it, that's all."

"That's rather odd. His voice tends to be a bit gravely, I guess, but nothing that would cause him to talk in a whisper. Maybe he's attracted to you, Lily, and it's his way of getting your attention."

Lily's gaze turned back toward her with shock bright in her eyes. *No, Lily only has eyes for Seth.* That fact was obvious, even if it wasn't to her friend.

"I doubt that, Madge." Lily shook her head in denial. "Daniel doesn't seem the type to be attracted to a simple teacher like me. He's more for the adventurous type, I would think."

"Maybe." Madge added, "He always seems to be spending a lot of time with the local girls, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I'm afraid I do."

She helped Lily finish up the dishes and put everything away.

“Well, I guess I’ll say good-night, then.” Madge headed for the door. “I’m really sorry I ruined your evening, Lily. Had I known you were entertaining, I wouldn’t have come over at all.”

* * * *

Lily tried to keep the conversation light, but Madge wanted to bring things back to why Seth was at her home. She really didn’t feel the need to discuss it with her friend, and truth be told, she didn’t want to examine her feelings at the moment. When Madge apologized again, she sighed.

“It’s quite all right, Madge. No harm done. I think the evening was winding down to an end anyway, so you didn’t really ruin anything.” Lily tried to hide the blush that had crept into her cheeks at the thought of Seth’s lips on hers.

“Yes, well, I hope you get to finish your conversation another time then.” Madge opened the door and stepped out onto the porch.

“I hope so too, Madge. I really hope so too,” Lily murmured, with a small, secretive smile.

“Good night, then. Maybe some other time you can come for supper. I’m sure you have a lot to do for school tomorrow.”

“Actually, yes I do. Thanks for reminding me. I do have several papers to grade tonight. Good night.”

Lily moved back inside the house, closed the door and leaned against it. A heavy sigh escaped her lips in a rush of air before she blew out the lamp on the side table.

Taking a deep breath, she carried her now weary body toward the back of the house while she contemplated what had happened between her and Seth this evening.

Even Arthur hadn’t sent her heart racing in her chest at the touch of his lips, and most of the men she’d been exposed to were not that ruggedly handsome, hardworking type with calloused hands. They were not the “up at dawn and in bed by sundown” kind that seemed to envelop her in a warm cocoon of need that spread from the center of her being. The men back East had been very prim and proper, the “kissing your finger tips” type of men. If they took you to the opera or out to dinner, they would never think of kissing you until you were breathless, like Seth had kissed her tonight. They

would never have let their beards grow to a two-day growth before they shaved. Come to think of it, Arthur had never been anything but perfectly groomed. When Seth kissed her, the whiskers on his face had scraped the delicate skin on her chin. She hadn't minded. In fact, she hadn't minded the feel of his lips on hers one bit.

"This is ridiculous." She shook her head to clear her thoughts and pulled out the tub before she put some water on to boil. "He's obviously not ready for any kind of relationship with anyone, much less me. Why he kissed me, I don't know, but it didn't mean anything, nothing at all. He probably just felt bad, because, like a ninny, I was crying. That's it. I'm sure of it." She poured cool water in the tub in preparation for her bath while more water boiled on the stove.

She stripped off her gown and walked into the kitchen to pull the water from the stove, mentally chastising herself again for overreacting to Seth's kiss. Retrieving the hot water, she poured some in the tub and let it cool for a moment while she stripped off the rest of her clothes. She slipped beneath the warm water with a satisfied sigh. Her head rested against the back of the tub, and she closed her eyes. *I really should have finished the children's papers before I got tired, but I can finish them while they are reading in the morning.*

The water started to cool when she finally pulled her tired body out and toweled herself dry. Her nightgown slipped down her body to settle at her feet. She stared at the tub with distaste, realizing she would have to haul the water out back and dump it before bed. She grabbed the bucket and dipped it into the tub, trying not to get water all over the floor, before she headed for the back door.

She hoped the town wasn't busy tonight since her back door faced the saloon down the street. She really didn't want anyone to see her out here in her nightgown. *I will have to get some bushes to plant around the back so I can't be seen, but that is going to have to wait.*

When she had made her third trip with the bucket, she stopped as she realized there were several men watching her from the saloon's front doors. Whistles and crude comments floated to her on the wind and made her blush before she hurried back into the house and locked the door behind her. She didn't want any uninvited guests sneaking around her house tonight.

“The rest of the water will have to wait until morning.” She placed the bucket on the floor and hurried to the front to check the lock.

She would have to be more careful. It would be too easy for any one of those men to pay a late night call, and without a man living with her; she would be ripe for the picking. She hadn’t realized how easy it would be if someone wanted in, so she decided she would have to do something to protect herself.

Contemplating what she could do, she decided she would buy a gun, but who could she get to teach her to use it?

Seth. He was very handy with a gun, and if she told him why she wanted him to teach her, she was sure he would do so without a second thought.

“That’s exactly what I’ll do. I’ll ask him tomorrow when he comes by school to pick up the children,” she said out loud with a satisfied smile. Crawling under the clean sheets of her bed and tucking the thick blanket around her, she drifted into a sleep filled with dreams of a blue-eyed devil with lips as soft as rose petals drifting along her skin.

It was almost impossible for her to concentrate the next day while her thoughts kept drifting to Seth and his lips on hers. Her nerves seemed especially taut, and it seemed like every little thing had her blood boiling. By the end of the day, she was relieved when the children began to depart for home.

She stood on the porch waiting for Seth to pick up the children, and when his wagon pulled around the corner, their gaze met across the expanse of the yard. Heat crawled up her neck and splashed over her cheeks at the heat reflected in his eyes.

After he stopped the wagon, he jumped down, walked around the front and tipped his hat. “Ma’am.”

So we are back to that again. Even after the kiss we shared last night, he’s going to be distant now.

“Mr. Sanford,” Lily said her voice cold and distant.

His gaze swung around to meet hers, and her whole body tingled from the look in his eyes. *So he’s not as unmoved by me as he tries to pretend.*

“Can I speak with you, please?”

“Yes, of course. Out here or in private?”

“In private, if you please. I would like to ask you something personal.”

Even though he raised his eyebrows at her request, he simply swept his arm in the direction of the stairs and said, "After you."

She turned her back to him and proceeded up the stairs, only to feel the heat of his gaze on her back as she reached the cooler interior of the school. When she turned around to face him again, she was surprised to see him right behind her. "Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were right behind me."

Lily took a step back. She needed to put a little space between them if she was to focus on what she wanted to ask. When she looked into his eyes again, they had turned that smoky grey color she had come to recognize in his gaze.

* * * *

When her nose had almost pressed against his chest, he took a deep breath to still the raging desire that began to heat his veins to molten lava.

"What can I do for you?"

Her scent wrapped itself around him and made him want to press his lips to hers. The soft wisps of her hair brushing against her neck pulled his attention from her words to the desire to feel her skin under his mouth. The neckline of her gown lay soft against her bosom in almost a caress. His fingertips tingled with the need to touch her. *Focus man, focus!*

"I need to ask you a favor. Will you to teach me to shoot? A pistol to be exact, I would think."

Her words penetrated the fog surrounding his mind at the mere sight of her. "You want me to do what?"

"I want you to teach me how to shoot. I think I need to keep a firearm with me at the house for protection."

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he replied, "You can't be serious."

"I'm perfectly serious. You're very good with a gun, as I've seen first-hand, and I need someone to teach me. I could ask someone else, I suppose, but..." He didn't let her finish her sentence.

"Why do you think you need a gun? Has someone tried to hurt you? Tell me who, and I'll take care of it. If someone has tried to hurt you, I'll..." He growled as thoughts of anyone hurting her just about drove him insane.

"No. No one has tried anything, but you know the back of my house faces the center of town. The other night after you had left, there were some rowdy-looking men hanging around near the saloon. It made me a bit nervous, and thought that I should have something for protection."

"But why a gun? They aren't toys, you know. They are dangerous and shouldn't be taken lightly. A woman packing a pistol is a bad idea." How else would she protect herself should someone try to break into her house?

"I'm fully aware they are not toys, Seth, but I know you are very handy with one. That's why I want you to teach me."

When she flashed one of those looks at him, it was over. He was done. He couldn't tell her no if he wanted to, and he was sure she knew exactly what she did to him. *She probably learned that in boarding school.*

Running his fingers through his hair in frustration, he knew he was in a no-win situation. "All right. I'll teach you, but only enough that if you had to use one, you would know which end to point. It's not like you need to become a gunslinger or something."

He didn't like this idea at all, but he didn't think he had much choice, especially when she batted those big green eyes at him and stuck her lip out in a pretty pout.

"Oh, thank you!" She threw her arms around his shoulders and hugged him.

His arms went around her without any conscious thought. When she stepped back slightly, his gaze met hers, and the world disappeared. Her lips parted in silent invitation, and his head dipped to take them with his own. When his were a mere hairsbreadth away, Johnny's voice penetrated the void around them, and he groaned.

Embarrassment flushing her cheeks, she stepped back out of his embrace.

Johnny shouted from the wagon. "Pop, are you coming?"

"In a minute, son." His gaze held Lily's for a moment longer before he turned back toward the door. He stopped near the threshold and said, "If you'd like, you can come out to the house tomorrow evening after school, and I'll set up a target."

"That would be perfect. Thank you for helping me."

"You are welcome."

How had she managed to penetrate his being to the point where he could hardly keep his hands off her?

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Yes. I'll rent a buggy to ride out after school."

"No use doing that. I have to pick up the children anyway, so you can ride back with us if you like. I'll bring you home later." When the words were out of his mouth, he mentally kicked himself. *Now I'll be alone with her again while I take her home. Dumb ass!*

"That sounds like a good idea. That way I wouldn't be on the road alone after dark or anything. Thank you for the offer."

They both turned as the back door of the schoolhouse opened and Daniel came inside.

"Hello, Daniel. I'll be right there."

Seth's eyes narrowed when he saw the other man enter. Seth didn't trust him, and Lily was spending time alone in the schoolhouse with him. "Are you going to be all right?"

"Of course. I'll be fine. I'll see you tomorrow." Her dismissal grated on his nerves as he watched her turn to walk back into the classroom.

He shot a glance over Lily's shoulder at Daniel. The other man gave Seth a mocking cock of his eyebrow before his gaze returned to the beautiful woman in front of him.

Seth studied the pair for a moment before he walked out, slamming the door behind him.

* * * *

Lily tried to concentrate on the lessons for the children, but Seth kept creeping into her thoughts. She couldn't understand why it was so easy to forget everything around her when he was near. When he kissed her, it was like her whole body caught fire, and the blood in her veins turned to hot liquid as it raced through her.

Squirming slightly in her seat at the front of the class, she checked the clock on the wall again, hoping that it was three already but groaning softly when she saw that it was only one.

"Mrs. Backman?" Walter Carter approached her desk.

Attempting to clear her thoughts and refocus on the tasks at hand, she pulled her attention back to the child in front of her. "Yes, Walter?"

"I don't understand this." He moved around the back of her desk and showed her the arithmetic problem he was working on.

"All right, Walter. Here. I'll show you."

When three o'clock did arrive, she almost wasn't ready for it, but the children were. They were very restless but tried desperately to sit quietly in their seats until she said they were dismissed. Lily had already informed Daniel she wouldn't be available to tutor him today, so when all the children left, she'd be free to spend the afternoon with Seth.

Spending time with him at his home intrigued her. True, she'd been out there last Saturday when she had tried to talk to him about the children, but this time, it was for her. She needed him, and the thought sent shivers running up her arms.

Her plans included spending at least the afternoon there since she didn't know exactly how long it would take for him to teach her to shoot.

As the wagon pulled to a stop in front of the steps, her gaze met his, and those same goose bumps skittered across her flesh.

"Poppa!" the boys cried when he pulled to a stop. They skipped excitedly down the stairs.

"Are you ready to go home?" His gaze slid over her face in a caress even though he spoke to the children.

"Yes, Poppa. Mrs. Backman is coming with us, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is, Jarod. She'll be having supper with us tonight, and I'm going to show her around the ranch a bit."

He lifted Anne into the wagon bed before he turned back to her. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." Lily moved down the stairs and met him at the bottom. "I just need to bring this with me so when we come back to town later I don't have to stop by here to pick it up. It's the children's papers I need to grade."

Seth took the basket from her hands and placed it in the back with the children before he turned to her and spanned her waist. She squeaked "oh" as she placed her hands on his shoulders, and he lifted her effortlessly onto the wagon seat.

He walked around the wagon and hopped onto the seat next to her. When his thigh brushed up against hers, she inhaled sharply. Heat raced up

her leg and settled between her thighs. *Oh Lord, this is going to be a long ride.*

The road stretched in front of her in an endless expanse. She focused on how his hands gripped the reins lightly while he effortlessly guided the horses along. *He doesn't seem to notice how intimately his leg is pressed against mine.* She cleared her throat, fighting feelings she knew would get her nowhere.

Lily tried to keep the conversation light. "How was your day today?"

"Busy. I have a couple of mares read to foal and one that gave birth this morning, so I've been keeping an eye on her." His eyes never left the road in front of him.

"I bet that was exciting! I've never seen a horse being born before."

He glanced her way for a moment. "If you'd like, I'll show him to you. He is going to be a nice stud for the ranch some day."

"That would be wonderful."

"How did the children do in school?"

"Very well, actually. Jarod got a perfect score on his arithmetic test, and Johnny and Anne did very well on theirs, too." Lily turned to smile at the children in the back of the wagon.

"That's really good. You must be a really wonderful teacher. I don't think that they have ever gotten grades that good before."

"I don't think it's so much me as it is them. They learn very quickly."

* * * *

This light banter between them was refreshing, but it did nothing to relieve the sexual tension zinging through him. Her body next to his on the rough wagon seat drove him crazy. All he could think about was the heat creeping up his leg to settle between his thighs, and he shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, I'm sure you had something to do with it. I don't believe they liked their other teacher very much." Seth grasped the reins a little tighter in his hands while his mind and body absorbed the heat of hers.

"She was mean," Jarod said from the back.

“She never let us do any kind of outside things during the day like you do, Mrs. Backman,” Johnny added. “Mrs. Backman takes us outside so we can study the trees, the leaves, the soil and the animals, Pop.”

“It sounds like you have made quite an impression on my children.” He shifted slightly and gave Lily a sideways glance.

“They are good children and very easy to teach, so that helps. Although we need to work on talking out of turn like we did today, right Johnny?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Johnny reply sheepishly.

“I’m sure you’ll remember next time to raise your hand and wait for me to call on you before you speak.” Lily looked at him over her shoulder.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Seth stared at the remarkable woman sitting next to him while he listened to her talk to his son. Johnny had always had a bit of a wild streak in him ever since he was little. Lily managed to get him to speak respectfully and listen to what she had to say, and it was quite extraordinary. Even Victoria hadn’t been able to completely tame their son’s wild spirit, yet this little bit of a woman managed to curtail his willful nature in such a short time.

What else does she have up her sleeve for my children? How has she so easily managed to infiltrate my life that I’m taking her out to my house? She treats the children wonderfully, that is obvious, but lately it seems a day doesn’t go by when I’m not thinking of her in some way.

Chapter Ten

Lily bumped along on the seat of the wagon, fully aware of the man next to her. She'd never really gotten to talk to Kathleen in depth about things between a man and a woman. The feelings Seth aroused confused her more each day.

He seemed to be completely still in love with Victoria and her memory, but Lily knew that he was attracted to her, or at least that's the way it seemed. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts, when the house came into view.

The boys were off the back of the wagon before it had come to a complete stop and ran for the house as Carmen came out of the door.

"Ah! Mr. Seth, you have brought company?" Carmen smiled when she saw Lily in the wagon with Seth. "Nice to see you again, ma'am"

Seth stopped the wagon, hopped down and walked around the other side to help Lily down.

The exchange between Carmen and Seth made her wonder if there was a problem. "Nice to see you too, Carmen."

"Will you be staying for supper?"

The question vanished from Lily's mind when Seth reached up and swung her down from the wagon seat. She stared into his eyes for a moment, lost in the feelings that zipped across her heart.

Seth dropped his hands from around her waist, where they lingered just a bit too long for propriety's sake. "I... uh... have a target set up near the barn. Come with me, and I'll show you where."

"Of course." She smoothed her skirts in an attempt to calm her shaking hands.

The two of them walked together in the direction of the barn, and she could see the whole area around the large building was fenced off.

She wanted to keep the conversation light, so she figured horses and cattle were a safe subject. “Do you raise a lot of cattle and horses out here?”

“I run probably a thousand head of cattle a year. It keeps us eating and gives us a roof over our heads, you could say. It certainly won't make me rich by any means. I do break horses, too, and sell them to some of the local folks. I guess you could say ranching is in the blood, so to speak, even though my real father didn't teach me. I consider Jack my father.”

Curiosity pushed her to ask while she studied the man in front of her. “What about your adoptive family? Are they still around here?”

“Jack and Jennifer still live in the area. They have some land on the other side of town, although Jack doesn't do much ranching anymore. He hurt his leg pretty bad some years ago and now can't walk very well. They hire out for most of the work these days. Maybe someday I'll take you to meet them. They are really amazing folks.”

“That would be nice. I would like to get to know more people around here if I plan to stay for a while.”

The shirt stretched across the muscles of his back when he set a couple more bales of hay behind the target for her to shoot at. She had to fight the urge to smooth her hands over the tempting flesh.

“Are you?”

“Am I what?” She was confused. His broad chest under his shirt was doing nothing to fix the situation either.

“Are you planning to stay on here?”

“Well, I'm not quite sure yet. Would you like me to?” Embarrassment flushed her cheeks. “Never mind. I really shouldn't have asked. That was totally inappropriate for me...”

She didn't quite finish before Seth's response tripped across her heart, and her breath caught in her throat.

“Yes.” Seth looked at her for a second and then turned his back to her to finish setting up the target.

“Yes?”

One shoulder lifted in a half shrug. “Yes, I'd like for you to stay.”

“Well then, maybe I will.” Lily said, blushing at her confession. “Shall we get started with the lessons?”

* * * *

When Seth turned back around, his thoughts scattered to the wind. She stood in front of him so prim and proper in her dress, but when she moved, he could see the outline of her long legs under her skirts. He sucked in an unsteady breath in a fleeting attempt to curtail the raging desire running rapid through his veins.

Clearing his throat in case his voice came out in a squeak, he instructed her, "Move over here in front of the target. I'm going to get behind you so I can show you how to hold the pistol."

Seth handed her his gun, and she almost dropped it on the ground because of the weight of the firearm.

"My goodness. I didn't realize they were that heavy."

"They can be heavy if you're holding a six-shooter, which is what that one is. There are smaller guns for ladies you can hold in the palm of your hand. That might be an option for you, but if you want to get off more than one shot, you need something bigger."

Their fingers brushed when he took it from her. Her touch sent tingles of electricity crawling up his arm and settling in his chest. Stepping behind her, he tried to take a calming breath before he moved to put his arms around her.

"Now, turn toward the target. Take the pistol in both hands. Raise it so you can look down the barrel of the gun and sight your target."

His hands shook when he slipped them around her waist and placed them over hers so he could steady her grip with his.

This is a big mistake. The lavender scent he would forever associate with her drifted to his nose while the hair that had come loose from its pins tickled softly along his jaw.

Clearing his throat, he murmured, "Steady the gun with both hands, aim at the center of the target and pull the trigger."

The gun barked, and she jerked back against his chest. Screaming, she dropped it on the ground, causing the gun to go off again. She swung around wide-eyed and frightened.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize it would be that loud."

"It's all right. Scared the daylights out of me the first time I shot one, too."

“Really?”

“Yes, really, now let’s try again. Your muscles will be very sore tonight. You’ll have sore spots where you didn’t even know you had muscles by the time we’re done.”

Seth stood behind her and braced her arms while he held onto her hands tightly with his to steady the gun. “Remember the kick. Aim at the target, and pull the trigger lightly. You don’t have to pull it very hard.”

The gun barked again, but this time she was more prepared. She didn’t hit the target at all, but the bullet didn’t go completely wild.

“Better,” he praised, taking the gun from her hands.

“But I didn’t even hit the target. I think I hit the side of the barn and scared the heck out of the chickens.” The gorgeous smile gracing her mouth when she spun around drove the blood straight from his brain to his groin.

A small sheen of perspiration gathered on his top lip, and he had to stifle a groan threatening to slip from his mouth.

“For the most part, sweetheart, you aren’t here to learn to kill anyone. You’re here to learn how to defend yourself if someone breaks into your house, correct?” The endearment rolled so easily from his lips, he had to bite back the urge to correct himself and bring her attention to it.

“I... uh... yes.”

“Shall we try it again?” He felt her shiver, and he asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Sorry. I’m fine. My ears are just ringing a bit I guess from the noise.”

“It can do that to you if you aren’t used to it. Now hold your arms straight out, bend your elbows just slightly to absorb the recoil, sight down the barrel at your target and slowly pull the trigger.”

Fighting the desire rushing through his blood, he attempted to give her instructions even though his mind was wrapped in the woman in his arms. He found it extremely difficult to concentrate on the target and not on the smell of her skin, the softness of her hair or how perfectly she fit against him.

The gun barked a third time, and he knew Lily was completely stunned to see she had hit the target.

“I did it!” she squealed, twirling around in his arms and with a self-satisfied smile on her pretty mouth, she threw her arms around his neck.

Not quite sure what else to do, he held on tight, making sure he took the gun from her fingers first.

"That was perfect," he whispered, inhaling her scent, letting it swirl around in his head.

"Supper is ready, Mr. Seth." Carmen smirked with an I-told-you-so look while her eyes danced with mirth.

He smiled and held out his arm. "Shall we?"

"Thank you, sir," Lily answered with a wide smile as she took his arm and they headed into the house.

He held out her chair, and tried desperately to rein in his raging desire before everyone in the room knew where his thoughts centered.

"How'd she do, Pop?" Johnny asked from his place at the table.

"Very well for a woman," Seth replied, waiting for the reaction he was sure would come, and he wasn't disappointed.

"A woman!"

He gave her a wide grin, and she smiled in return when she realized he was teasing.

Lord, how she can make my heart pound. He sucked in a ragged breath and took his own seat next to her.

"Johnny, would you care to say grace for us?" Lily asked, and Johnny began a small prayer that gave thanks for the food they were about to share, to their new teacher for coming here to help them, to his pop for taking care of them all and finally, to his momma, "May she rest in peace."

The smile that had graced Lily's lips after Seth's teasing was now gone.

* * * *

The sobering prayer made Lily think of her own mother, the one she didn't know but would hopefully someday find.

The rest of the evening passed quickly while she joined the family in some games around the living room. When the evening sun started to set behind the hills, she found herself reading a story to the children before they were to head off to bed. Daylight came early for the ranch, and the children were no exception to the early rise.

Seth tucked them all into bed, and when he entered the living room, Lily sat in one of the large wingback chairs. "I have a request from one of the children for you."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Anne would like for you to tuck her in."

"Really? I'm surprised, but of course I will. I would never let those children down." She rose and asked Seth to show her which room belonged to Anne.

Lily walked silently into the room, where Seth had left the lamp burning on the bedside table, and approached the bed. The little girl was all snuggled under the covers pulled clear up to her chin.

"Anne, your father said you want me to tuck you in. Is that correct?" Lily asked, sitting on the bed next to the little girl.

Anne just shook her head with a quick nod as her big blue eyes looked straight into Lily's soul.

"All right, then. Let me get these covers tucked around you so you'll stay nice and warm tonight." Lily bent down to kiss her softly on the forehead before she turned to go. "Sweet dreams, princess."

"Can you be our new mommy?"

The words the little girl whispered reached her ears, and shock rippled down Lily's back. "What did you say?"

"Can you be our new mommy? We need a mommy real bad, and then maybe Poppa won't be so sad all the time."

Lily pushed the curls from Anne's forehead and smoothed her fingers down her cheek. "Sweetheart, I'm so glad you've decided to talk to me, but let's see what happens in the future, all right? No one can tell what the future brings."

"I can't talk to anyone else. I'm scared that if I do, they will go away too, like my mommy did," the little girl whispered, terror lacing her words.

"Oh, sweetheart, they won't go away if you talk to them, but for now, we'll keep this our little secret, all right?" Lily assured her before she bent to kiss her forehead again. "Now, you get some sleep, and I promise, I won't tell anyone."

"All right," Anne whispered sleepily. "I love you."

Lily stood and looked down at the precious little girl. She was so frightened and alone, and to have her give her love so freely brought tears to Lily's eyes.

"I love you too, sweetheart. Everything will be all right, you'll see."
Please Lord, don't let this angel get her heart broken.

* * * *

When Lily returned to the living room, Seth was concerned by the look in her eyes. "Everything all right?"

She took a chair opposite him. "Yes, everything is fine. Why do you ask?"

"The look on your face is a bit strange, that's all. Is there something wrong with Anne?"

"No. I just told her good night and kissed her on the forehead, that's all. She really is a sweetheart, Seth. You should be very proud of her."

"I am tremendously proud. She's smart as a whip, and she looks exactly like her mother."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up memories that you aren't willing to share." Lily stood and said, "It's getting rather late, so I suppose you should take me home now."

"Yes, of course. Let me get your shawl." He grabbed her shawl from the hook and swept open the door. "Shall we?"

He grabbed her firmly around the waist and lifted her onto the wagon seat before he went around and jumped up himself. Grabbing the reins in his hands, he snapped them over the horses' rumps, and Lily clutched the side of the seat.

"Sorry. I guess I should have told you to hang on. This wagon ain't quite the smooth ride of a smaller buggy like you had the other day." Seth slowed the horses to a walk.

"It's quite all right, really. I should have thought to hold on, that's all."

"Are you sure you are all right? You seemed preoccupied?"

"No. I'm fine. Thank you for teaching me how to shoot today. It doesn't seem to be all that hard."

"You do realize that it will take more than one lesson for you to become proficient." *Why did I say that? It means she'll need me longer, and I'll have to spend more time with her.*

"Really?" Lily answered, surprised. "I thought I did quite well today."

"You did very well for someone who has never held a pistol before, but if you want to be able to hit whatever you are shooting at, you need to practice. I don't think the townspeople would be too pleased if you went around shooting at the side of saloons or the livery, just so you could practice with a gun. Somehow I don't think their teacher, packing a pistol strapped to her thigh, would give them a very big sense of security." He grinned, amused at the thought.

"Why do you strap yours to your thigh?"

That sounded an awful lot like she had been paying attention to him a little more than she wanted to. "It makes it easier for me to draw quickly if I need to, like on the train."

"Ah yes, the train. I do want to thank you for helping me. I had truly forgotten about the whole incident until now."

"You're welcome. I really do have a problem with people taking what doesn't belong to them, if you hadn't noticed. For a bunch of lowlife, gun-toting scum to accost innocent people who are traveling from one place to another, or a nice schoolteacher going to her first job, it just doesn't sit right with me." Anger reverberated through him.

"I suppose the feeling probably stems from what happened before."

"No, not really. I've always felt that way, even before Victoria was killed."

"Maybe you should run for sheriff," she replied half jokingly.

"No. Too much dealing with drunks and people acting like children for me. I'll stick to ranching. At least with cows you know they ain't that smart and will only do what nature tells them to do. People have a brain. They just don't use it all the time."

"That's very true." They hit a large rut in the road, nearly bouncing her off the seat, but Seth grabbed her hand to steady her.

"Sorry. I didn't see that one."

Their banter kept his thoughts from how warm her body felt next to his on the wagon seat, but now he looked scared. The pulse beat rapidly at the base of her throat while she held onto the wagon seat with one hand and

held onto his arm with the other. He pulled his gaze from the slim column of her throat and the pulse beating like a wild bird in a cage to refocus on the road. A few moments later, they rolled into town and headed toward her small house.

"Here we are." He stated the obvious, stopping the wagon in front of her house and wrapping the reins around the brake. He jumped down and made his way around the other side of the wagon to help Lily. Taking her hand, he pulled it from the death grip she had on the wagon seat. When he looked up into those pools of green, he almost lost himself in the desire reflected in her gaze. Chastising himself for his thoughts and knowing she had probably never been with a man before, he couldn't bring himself to pursue things further with her. *She doesn't know what she's doing to me with the looks she keeps giving me.*

"You need to stop looking at me like that," he said, grasping her around the waist and swinging her down from the wagon seat.

"I'm sorry?"

He let her go once her feet were solidly on the ground.

"You need to stop looking at me like that," he repeated, slipping her hand into the crook of his arm, grabbing the basket from the back of the wagon and escorting her to the door.

Confusion skittered across her eyes, and he fought the urge to show her exactly what she did to him.

She slipped her hand loose and reached inside her bag to remove the key but froze when her gaze fixed on the window.

"Something wrong?"

"I didn't leave any lamps burning when I left this morning. I never do. It's too much of a fire hazard, but there is one burning on the table there now," she said in a small, frightened whisper.

Seth became instantly alert to the possible danger that lurked in her house. He pulled out his gun and tried the front door. It was still locked.

"Stay right here. I'm going around back to check things out," Seth demanded in a ragged whisper. She nodded, and he silently scooted along the side of the house until he could see around the back.

When he reached his destination, he could see the back door of the house still stood open and creaking in the small breeze blowing through the trees. He scooted along the back until he could see inside. He couldn't see

anyone moving about as he slowly pushed the door open and slipped inside without making a sound.

He realized once he was in the house, he'd entered through the door leading to the kitchen area. Peering around corners and peeking through doorways, he checked the entire house and found no one about. He walked to the front door, unlatched it, and Lily screamed when he swung it open. Having already put away his gun, he quickly grabbed her around the waist and put a hand over her mouth.

"Shhhh," he said, and she stopped squirming. "It's me. If I let go now, will you not scream?"

She nodded, and when he let go of her mouth, she chastised him. "You scared me half to death!"

"Sorry. I didn't want you to scream again and alert the whole town. There isn't anyone here. I checked the entire house, but the back door was still open when I went around."

The bright flush to her cheeks and the anger sparkling in her eyes drew him to her.

"Well, you could have warned me! For all I knew, whoever was in here hit you over the head and now was grabbing me to drag me back inside the house."

When he let her go, she moved into the house and lit the lamps. She gasped when she saw the damage left by the intruders. "Oh my! Look what they've done!"

She reached the living room, and tears started to roll down her cheeks. A porcelain sculpture lay shattered in hundreds of pieces on the floor. "It's my ship!" She sank down on the floor amongst the pieces, picking up each one in turn and putting them into her skirt.

"It's just a sculpture, Lily. You can buy another one."

"It wasn't just a ship, Seth. This was my prize possession. I brought it with me from Boston. It was a sculpture of one of the ships like my real father worked on before he died. I found it shortly before I left, and it meant the world to me. Now it's shattered in a hundred pieces."

Seth felt totally lost. Her tears stung his heart as she sat on the floor crying over a piece of porcelain. He couldn't understand her attachment to this particular piece when it appeared that there were several pieces broken.

She only seemed to see this one sculpture that obviously meant so much to her.

Even Victoria's tears hadn't had this effect on him. She had learned years ago to turn on and off her tears to get him to do what she wanted, but this girl, this woman's tears sliced his heart to ribbons.

"Come on, Lily," he murmured as he walked over to where she sat carefully picking up each piece on the floor. "You need to get up off the floor before you cut yourself with all this glass."

"I can't! Don't you see? I have to pick up all the pieces so I can try to put it back together!"

"I'll help you then. Look. Your hands are bleeding," Seth said tenderly. Once she stood next to him, they walked to a small table nearby to place the pieces she had gathered in her skirt.

"How could anyone do this, Seth? How could someone invade my home like this and maliciously break my things? They had no right!"

He took the small pieces of porcelain and placed them on the table. "No, they didn't, Lily, but it's done now." He picked up the remaining pieces from the floor and placed them on the table as well.

Her eyes pleading, she turned her terrified gaze to him and clung to his shirt. "But what if they come back? What if they come here when I'm sleeping?"

"I'm sure they are done for the night. Remember, this is exactly why you wanted me to teach you to shoot."

"I know, but I just don't know whether I could shoot anyone, even if it meant my own life."

"You wouldn't have to shoot anyone, sweetheart. You would only have to shoot at them, and they'd probably leave you alone." He tried to relieve her fears, but in his heart, he knew the kind of men who would invade a woman's home would be after more than just a few trinkets.

"But what if they didn't leave when I shot at them? What if they were after more than just the few things I have here? What if they were after..."

He felt her shudder at the thought as she continued to cling to him in her fright. "It's going to be all right," he whispered, pulling her closer to his chest. She buried her head against his shoulder. "I won't let anything happen to you, I promise. I'll post a guard by your house day and night if you want me to."

"I'm so scared. I never thought I'd have to be frightened, but I am. A young woman living alone in this lawless town wasn't a good idea. Maybe I was too quick to make a decision about moving here. Maybe I should have stayed in Boston."

Her terrified words cut his heart. "Don't say that, Lily. You haven't made a mistake by coming here. I think you just came here with blinders on, and now they are off. You are a strong woman, and I know you'll do fine. It's just going to take some time to get used to how things are done around here."

He needed to reassure her and himself. He didn't know what he would do if she left, but when she tipped her head back and he looked into her eyes, his heart slammed against his ribs.

"Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," he murmured, brushing the tears from her cheek. "It will be fine, I promise."

He lost himself in the pool of green that her eyes had become. The tears glistened on her lashes like diamonds in the sun, and the soft sigh that escaped her lips while she stared up at him was his undoing. He couldn't stop himself from kissing her even if he wanted to. Remembering how soft her lips were under his made the temptation just too much to bear. He slipped his hands in her hair, letting it wrap itself around his fingers as the pins holding it in place scattered on the floor around them. He waited for her to stop him, step away, anything that would give him the notion she didn't want this, but nothing came.

He slowly dipped his head and took her mouth, caressed her lips, and slid his softly over hers. They stood in her living room with scattered glass all around them, and he was lost in the feeling of her lips. He deepened the kiss while his mouth continued its onslaught. When her soft moan reached his ears and her lips parted slightly, his tongue took advantage and began to dance with hers as he pulled her even closer.

Lord, how I want this woman! Even Victoria wasn't able to stir my blood to this fevered pitch. His mind raced back to his wife, and he pulled himself away from the woman in his arms.

"I... uh... I better go. I'll post a guard," was all he said before he turned to leave.

"Seth, wait!"

After he had reached the front door and pulled it open, he turned back to look at her. She stood there in the lamp light, with her hair mussed and tangled around her shoulders and her lips swollen from his kisses, and all he could mutter was, "I'm sorry," as he turned and walked away, softly closing the door behind him.

Once he reached the wagon, he pulled himself up into the seat, grabbed the reins in his hands and turned the wagon toward home. He knew having her around was a mistake, but he couldn't seem to help himself these days.

Before he left town, he quickly stopped the wagon at the sheriff's office to report the break in at Lily's and asked him to post a guard. He had a bad feeling about this, and he didn't want her hurt. If nothing else, he cared that much about her.

"Hey, sheriff," Seth said, jumping down in front of the office.

"What are you doing out this time of night, Seth?"

"I was bringing Mrs. Backman back home. Believe it or not, she asked me to teach her how to shoot."

"She what?"

"Yeah, she got a little nervous the other night with a saloon being so close to her back door, so she asked me to teach her how to shoot." Frustration zipped through him and he turned his gaze toward the saloon. *I could sure use a drink right now. That would certainly cool my ardor, but then again, so would a very willing woman. Problem is, I don't want just any woman, I want the beautiful one I just left behind.*

"Could you do me a favor and post a man at her house?"

"Why? Is there a problem?"

"Yeah, her place got broke into tonight."

"No one was hurt, were they?"

"No. There wasn't anyone home at the time, but some of her things got broken, and the place was torn up pretty good. I would just feel better if someone watched her place tonight."

"Not a problem, Seth. I'll have my deputy go over there."

"Thanks. It would make me feel better about leaving her alone."

The sheriff raised a questioning eyebrow in Seth's direction, but Seth chose to ignore it as he turned to hop back onto the wagon seat. Tipping his hat, he pulled the wagon around and headed for home.

Chapter Eleven

Lily stood in stunned silence when the wagon pulled away from her front door. She lifted her fingers to her lips, which still tingled from Seth's kiss, and then slowly dropped her hand to the lock on the door and slid it into place.

In somewhat of a daze she wandered around the house picking up the things that had toppled over. There was a chair turned over, a drawer lying on the floor with scattered papers nearby, and broken glass. She took the broom and swept everything into a pile.

Her thoughts were not her own now as she wandered mindlessly about the house. All she could think about was the kiss Seth had left on her lips before he turned his back on her and walked out the door. Her wanton behavior ricocheted around in her head, and she got angry, very angry. Angry at Seth? Angry at herself? She wasn't sure, but she knew one thing. *How dare he treat me like some harlot to be played with and then toss me aside like I have no feelings at all?*

The more she pondered it, the angrier she got.

Several minutes later, a soft knock sounded at the door, and she jumped.

Nervously, she peered through the curtains near the door and sighed when she realized it was the deputy.

"Evening," he said when she peered around the door.

"Evening."

"Seth asked me to watch your house tonight. I just wanted to let you know I will be around back off and on to keep an eye on the place."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

She shut the door and pressed her back against the hard surface. *At least he asked someone to watch the house tonight.*

After she picked up the mess and made sure the doors and windows were locked, she headed for her bedroom to try to sleep. The feel of his

mouth on hers heated her body in ways she wasn't familiar with. She continued to relive the feeling over and over, and it became impossible to sleep.

Near dawn she finally gave up going to sleep and got out of her warm bed, tossed on work clothes and went outside to work in the morning sun. Maybe working with the soil, planting new seedlings and cultivating the earth would soothe her restless soul today. Maybe it would help her keep her mind off Seth Sanford.

Lily managed to keep her thoughts on her tasks for most of the morning. They hadn't wandered to the taste of his lips on hers, or how his hands rested on her back and pulled her closer to deepen the kiss. No. She hadn't thought of that all day!

"Liar," she grumbled. She stood and brushed the dirt from her skirts before she looked around at the milling people as they moved from their homes toward the church.

"Church! Oh no! I totally forgot it was Sunday." She scrambled into the house and started rummaging through her wardrobe to find something suitable to wear. She wouldn't be able to take a bath this morning since she didn't have time. *I'll just have to sponge off with some tepid water in the basin.* Grabbing a dress of emerald green with little pink flowers scattered across the skirt, she quickly pulled her hair back in a pink ribbon, slid on her shoes and swept out the door. Quickly heading toward the church at a fast clip, she didn't see the wagon until it pulled up to an empty spot nearby.

"Howdy, Mrs. Backman."

She turned her head just in time to catch Seth's appreciative glance in her direction as he tipped his hat before he went to the back of the wagon to help the children down.

"Well hello, Johnny. I'm surprised to see you here," she said, keeping her eyes glued to the big man at the back.

"Pop said we needed to start coming to church again, so here we are."

"He did, did he? Well, I'm glad to see you, all of you."

"May I escort you into the church, ma'am?" Johnny asked politely.

"I would be so honored, young sir." Lily slipped her hand through his outstretched elbow and walked up the stairs.

* * * *

Not sure why he wanted to, he'd forced his somewhat reluctant children into the wagon for church this morning. He was sure it had absolutely nothing to do with wanting to see Lily again. *Liar*, his heart screamed as he pulled the wagon into the open spot in front of the church just in time to see the object of his imagination reach the steps.

Amusement made his mouth lift at the corners when his son held out his arm and asked Lily if he could escort her into the church. Seth shook his head with a wiry smile before he picked up Anne in his arms and followed them inside.

He shook his head when he thought about Lily's lips against his. *I don't need these kinds of things running through my head in church.*

When he entered the building for the first time since Victoria's death, he could see Johnny had escorted Lily to the only empty bench in the building. With a frustrated groan, he slid into the seat next to her. All eyes turned to the group, and the congregation went completely silent.

The pastor walked down the aisle to where Seth sat and said, "It's so good to see you, Seth. I'm glad you've decided to join us again."

Feeling uncomfortable when the eyes of the entire town rested on him, he mumbled, "Yes, well, it's nice to be back, Father."

"Shall we get started?"

"Please do," Seth murmured, and the pastor smiled.

Pastor David walked back to the pulpit at the front of the church to begin his sermon.

It seemed like the entire morning dragged for him as he sat snuggled next to Lily on the bench. The heat of her thigh pressed against his did tormenting things to his mind, and his thoughts drifted back to the night before. He found it extremely difficult to focus on the sermon, and when it finally ended, he almost bolted for the door.

Lily put a soft hand on his arm and said, "Would you all like to come to my house for supper?"

"Could we, Pop? Please?" Johnny and Jarod asked. Anne put in her opinion with a doe-eyed look at her father until he relented and finally agreed.

A moment later, the rest of the congregation surrounded them to welcome the family back to church. Some of matrons of the town were

curious as to the relationship between their most eligible bachelor and the new schoolteacher. Seth heard several comments being made behind him when he spoke with some of his longtime acquaintances. He smiled to himself when Madge put the two women in their place, but frown lines settled between his eyes a moment later when Madge made her obvious wishes known.

"The two of them seem awfully familiar, don't you think, Mildred?"

"Yes, I think so, too."

"Well, I think they are cute together," Madge piped in standing behind the two old women. With that statement she swept by them and nestled up to Lily's side. She put her hand on Lily's, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek and said, "How are you, dear?"

"Hello, Madge."

"Seth. It's nice to see you again too. I'm glad you came." Madge moved around in front of them. "And sweet little Anne. How are you, sweetheart?"

Anne didn't say anything, but instead buried her head in the crook of her father's neck.

Seth said, "Hello, Madge. How are things at the boarding house?"

"Just wonderful, thank you. Daniel is keeping things in tiptop shape. He's been so handy with the repairs and such. I just don't know what I would have done without him."

Jealousy rippled through him when he heard Madge ask, "Oh, and Lily? How are things going between you and Daniel?"

"Just fine, Madge."

"If you'll excuse us, Madge, I see the mayor over there. I need to speak with him for a moment." Seth excused himself and hoped Lily would follow his lead. He hoped that they could make their way out of the mob and away from all the good townspeople who wanted to question him. He wasn't ready for any kind of speculation concerning his relationship with Lily or the return of the family to church right now.

"I will see you later, Madge. It was nice to see you again. You'll have to come over for supper one day." Lily called over her shoulder as she followed Seth through the pews and out into the sunshine with Madge on her heels.

* * * *

Seth walked toward the mayor with Lily following close behind and the children bringing up the rear, but right before he reached him, he changed directions and headed toward the wagon. Confused, Lily continued to follow him.

“Seth, I thought you needed to talk to the mayor about something?”

“No, I just wanted to get away from Madge,” Seth replied. “Come on. Up in the wagon, children, so we can go.”

Seth lifted Anne over the side and into the wagon bed before he reached around to grab Lily around the waist to put her in the front wagon seat.

Surprised at his handling of the situation, Lily had to laugh a little to herself, but then the silent chuckle turned into full-blown, giggling laughter as Seth climbed into the wagon beside her.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

She couldn’t help it. Seeing this grown man scurry off to avoid the meddling women of town was too funny. She sat in the seat holding her stomach, and tears rolled down her cheeks while she continued to giggle.

Lily blurted out in laughter, “It’s just... I’m sorry... I just think... it’s hilarious that you are trying... to get away from Madge... and the rest of the matronly women... of town before they could corral you.” Lily tried to speak, still giggling between syllables.

“I’m not trying to get away, I just didn’t want... okay. So I didn’t want to have to explain myself to them today.” A small smile graced his lips, and he picked up the reins before he set the wagon in motion, headed toward Lily’s house.

She continued to giggle every few seconds as they took the short trip to her home from the church.

When they reached her front door, the children jumped out of the back of the wagon and Seth came around to help her down. She turned and scooted to the edge so she could reach his shoulders, but she slid too far on the seat and fell face forward into his arms, causing them both to tumble to the ground. Seth landed on his back with Lily sprawled on top of his chest.

She looked down into his eyes, and the world faded around them. Before their lips could touch, the children came running over to see if they were all right, and the fog surrounding them disappeared.

“Oh my goodness, Seth. I’m so sorry!” Heat crawled up her neck and splashed across her cheeks when she tried to pull herself off him. She

wiggled, trying to remove herself from on top of him only to hear him hiss through clenched teeth.

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. Just stop squirming, please," he whispered, and she saw beads of sweat appear on his upper lip.

"Are you sure you aren't hurt?"

She finally pulled herself off his chest, and he was able to sit up. Pulling himself to his feet, he said, "I'll be right back." He then turned to walk toward a grove of trees nearby.

"Are you sure you are all right?"

She started to follow him but stopped when he raised his hand in a gesture that meant not to follow. Confused, she gathered the children up and walked toward the house.

"Well, let's go see what we can find to hold you all over until supper is ready, shall we?"

After about fifteen minutes and with Lily frequently peeking out the door, Seth finally returned to the house. When he came through the front door, the children were sitting on the floor, and Lily was reading them one of the many books she had on the shelves of the living room.

"There you are. I was just reading to the children. Johnny, why don't you continue where I stopped? I'm sure you can read this just fine while I get supper started." Lily handed the book to the boy and walked over to where Seth stood in the doorway.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" Seth asked, following her into the kitchen. "I'm a pretty fair cook."

"All right. Will you peel those potatoes for me?" Lily handed him the knife before she checked the chicken frying in the pan on the stove. "Seth, are you sure you are all right?"

Her eyes raked him over from head to toe to make sure there wasn't anything she missed, any injury that she hadn't been aware of.

* * * *

When Lily landed on top of him, he had been surprised, but as she wiggled in an attempt to remove herself from his chest, the desire whipped through him like wildfire. Once she got up, he was on the verge of

exploding. His hardened shaft pressed insistently against the front of his jeans. Now she was checking him over with her innocent gaze, and his blood began to boil in his veins again.

"I'm fine, Lily. I just needed a few minutes. That's all."

Damn! How does she do that? This woman can set my blood boiling with little more than a look. He failed to pay attention to his task, sliced into the potato and cut his thumb.

"Damn it!" He dropped the potato and the knife as the blood seeped from the cut.

"For heaven's sake, you're accident prone today. Here, let me see it." Taking his hand in hers and turning it over to inspect the cut, she said, "It's not bad. Let me wash it with some water."

Without a word he stood like a schoolboy and let Lily tend to his thumb. She clucked over the wound as if he'd actually cut the entire thing off.

"I think it will be fine. Just try to keep it clean. Why don't you go in the other room with the children while I finish supper?"

Her face tilted up and her gaze met his, but he couldn't think of anything else except tasting her mouth.

* * * *

His lips claimed hers, sliding over the surface in a feather light caress that weakened her knees until she clung to the front of his shirt in a desperate attempt to stay upright. The kiss continued until Lily became aware of tiny little feet pitter-pattering across the kitchen floor and Anne pulling at her skirt.

The two adults jumped apart guiltily, but the little girl only smiled, held her hand to her stomach and shuffled her feet, giving Lily the impression she needed to use the outhouse. Heat crawled up her neck, and she dropped her gaze to the floor.

"Excuse me." Lily took Anne's hand, and they rushed outside.

When they came back in, Seth had retreated to the living room, where the boys were, and sat listening to Johnny read. After leaving Anne with the boys, Lily slid a glance at Seth, who watched her intently. She ducked her head and headed back into the kitchen to finish supper. Methodically peeling the potatoes, she let her mind wander back to the kiss. *I wish I knew*

what he thought. He had kissed her several times, but almost every time he'd said he was sorry, and then he would leave. She didn't know what to think anymore. Being around Seth confused her more and more each day, and now her heart had gotten involved. *I'm going to have to find out what is between us, if anything, and soon, or I'm going get hurt in the process.*

Tonight wasn't a good time to bring this up since the children were around, but soon. Soon, she would have to tell him how she felt and find out if he felt anything for her. *That's it. Next weekend we'll talk. We have to talk so we can get this out in the open before I get my heart broken.*

Dinner was served, and the children were so well behaved, Lily was hardly aware they were there. The looks passing between her and Seth kept her jittery and tense. The gleam in his eyes made her squirm in her chair, and the heat in the room seemed to increase ten-fold with each passing glance.

The meal was over quickly, and with a little prodding from their father, the children were nice enough to wash the dishes after they had finished eating. Unfortunately, this left Lily and Seth alone in the front room, sipping coffee in silence while they struggled to think of something to talk about. They could hear the children bickering in the kitchen over who would wash and who would dry the dishes.

At one point, Seth got up from his chair, walked into the kitchen. After several moments of low murmurs of words, all was quiet and then she heard only the tinkling of dishes.

He came back into the room and took his seat across from her. "What did you say to them?"

"I just made sure they understood they were to do the job without argument, and the first one to break a dish was in big trouble." A slight smile graced those lips she remembered, oh so fondly, on hers. With that thought, she jumped out of her seat and quickly walked to the window, where she glanced outside at the people still milling about town, even though the sun was on its way down.

The chair squeaked, and Lily knew Seth had walked up behind her. "Is there something wrong?"

"No. Why would you ask?"

"You seem rather jumpy suddenly. That's all."

Heat radiated from his body, warming her back, and she fought the urge to lean into his embrace. She cleared her throat and turned around but refused to look into his eyes for fear of what she might find. “Well, I didn’t want to say anything with the children here tonight, but I think we need to talk, just the two of us.”

He didn’t move. Silence stretched for several moments before he sighed in a rush of air that ruffled the hair near her ear. “You’re right. We do need to talk, but I don’t want to discuss the things between us with the children present.”

When she dared to look up, blood rushed through her veins at the raw desire reflected there. Her lips parted. His gaze fastened on her lips, and it looked like he might kiss her again until the sound of the children arguing in the kitchen brought them back to reality.

“I need to check on them. I’ll be right back.” Lily retreated, scooted around him and headed for the kitchen.

* * * *

After Lily left the room, Seth took a deep breath, wiped the sweat glistening on his upper lip and placed his forehead against the coolness of the glass windowpane.

This has got to stop.

If she didn’t quit looking at him like she did, things were going to go way beyond what he was prepared for. He definitely desired her, and he wanted her in his bed, but he knew she wasn’t the type to bed and forget. Even though everyone else thought she was a widow, he knew she’d never been with a man before, and he wasn’t prepared to fall in love with anyone. He still loved Victoria, and he couldn’t move beyond that. Not yet, maybe not ever, and Lily had to understand, otherwise there would be hell to pay. A hell he didn’t want any part of.

By the time the foursome returned to the front room, Lily had come up with a game for them all to play. She suggested hide-and-go-seek in the house, and she was determined Seth would play too. He reluctantly agreed when the children begged him. It had been a long time since he’d spent a nice evening with them, so he finally gave in. Each one took turns being the seeker, while everyone else hid in different spots in the house. The last

person to be the seeker was Anne. Of course, since she wouldn't talk to anyone but Lily, she didn't count out loud. By the time she began looking for everyone; Seth had hidden behind a long drape in the front room. Lily rushed into the room with the intention of hiding in the same place. Anne came walking up the hallway, and Lily realized Seth was hidden in her spot. He reached out with strong arms and pulled her to him behind the drape, covering them both to hide from Anne. A startled squeak left her lips, and he decided to silence her with his mouth.

Seth deepened the kiss and let his hands slide up Lily's back. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. His whole body cried out for release from the raging desire that all but consumed him as he continued to ravish her mouth with his. She moaned softly under his onslaught. His mouth left hers to rain small kisses along her jaw, and she arched her neck to give him better access. Begging for his touch, she pushed her breasts harder against him.

Vaguely, he heard a child's voice as the blood rushed in his ears and down his body to settle between his legs.

"Where did you say they were?"

Johnny's voice brought Seth out of his pleasure-induced fog long enough to stop what he was doing before the children found them.

Placing his forehead against hers, he looked into her eyes and said, "I think we'd better head for home before this gets out of control." He lifted his head and ran his fingers through his hair. Lily tried to straighten hers before they came out from behind the curtain to face the children.

* * * *

Good Lord! You'd think I am some kind of harlot the way I behave when this man is around. She felt heat splash across her cheeks, and she knew she had to be blushing to the roots of her hair.

"We should be heading for home." Seth ushered the children toward the door. "It's getting dark, and I don't want to be on the road very much past that." He turned toward Lily once he reached the door. "Lily. Thank you for supper. It was absolutely wonderful, and I'm sure the children enjoyed the evening just as much as I did."

"You're welcome. Thank you for coming over. It's been a pleasure, and I hope we can do it again soon." Lily brought up the rear while they hustled outside. They reached the wagon, and the children clamored in back, settling down for the ride home. "Thanks again. I'm glad you came over." She followed as Seth walked around to climb up into the wagon seat. "Can you come by tomorrow, maybe after school, so we can talk?"

"Uh... yeah... sure. I'll take the children home first then come back into town."

"That would be fine. How about if you meet me here at the house?" She knew it was probably a bad idea for them to be alone, but she couldn't help herself. She wanted him alone when they talked.

"All right. About four?"

"Four it is. I'll see you then."

"Make sure you lock up. I'm sure you don't want uninvited visitors this evening. The deputy should be around a little later to watch the house."

"No, no, of course not. Thank you for reminding me. I'll make sure everything is locked up tight."

She waved when the wagon pulled away, and the children waved back as they headed out of town.

Retreating inside the house, she locked the front door tightly behind her, walked into her bedroom and sank onto the big mattress. She touched her lips swollen from Seth's kisses and thought about what had happened between them. *He's wound my heart around his little finger, and I don't know if he is even aware of it. He still loves his wife. How can I give my heart to a man who probably doesn't return my feelings?* She shook her head and rubbed her arms when goose bumps flittered across her skin. Her feet found a path across the wood floor from the door to the window. She was wound tighter than a spring, but she somehow managed to read for a few hours before she sank into disturbing dreams.

The crash of broken glass woke her up somewhere around midnight. Terror gripped her heart, and she jumped from her bed as she raced for the pistol she kept in the bureau. She grabbed it with both hands and shrank into the corner by her bed when she heard footsteps coming up the hall.

"Where'd you say her bedroom was?" A man's voice whispered loudly as heavy steps neared her door.

"Right there, but I don't think it would be a good idea to mess with her."

She stood with the pistol, cocked and ready to fire, between her shaking hands. As she listened for more sounds, Seth's voice whispered in her head, "Hold the gun steady, look down the barrel at your target and slowly pull the trigger." She kept repeating his words silently while she waited for the door to open and the men to invade her private domain.

The two men argued outside her door. "But she's a might pretty piece. I sure wouldn't mind getting some of that fluff."

"Yeah. That she is." The doorknob turned, and she whimpered. She waited until she saw the two men enter quickly, but when they approached her bed and realized she wasn't there, she sighted her target and pulled the trigger. The gun exploded in her hand, and she heard the first man yell out in pain when the bullet struck him in the thigh.

"Shit! She's got a damned gun!" The second man scrambled out the door, leaving his buddy yelling behind him.

"Damn it! Wait for me! I'm hit!"

Lily stayed where she was until she heard both men bolt out the front door, which they almost ripped off its hinges.

When she could no longer hear a sound, she slowly sank to the floor with her back to the wall. She stayed there for the rest of the night, ever vigilant, lest they return to finish the job they came to do.

* * * *

Early the next morning, Seth drove into town with the children in the wagon, but when they approached Lily's house, he noticed the front door hanging off its hinges. Fear gripped his chest, and he quickly turned the wagon, stopping in front. He didn't even wait for the wagon to come to a complete stop before he yelled at the children to stay where they were and jumped down, running for the door.

"Lily!" he yelled as he scrambled over the door and began searching each room. "Lily!" He headed for the last room he hadn't searched. Silence continued to greet him. When he reached her room, he saw the door stood partially closed. He grabbed the knob, called her name again and pushed it open, fearing what he'd find on the other side.

Tangled sheets lay across the top, but no Lily. His eyes scanned the room in a desperate search, until he glanced in the corner near the back.

“Lily?” He approached cautiously. The terror in her eyes scared the hell out of him. He saw the gun in her hands, and he wasn’t sure if she’d heard him.

“Lily, sweetheart, it’s me, Seth.”

He slowly walked toward her and knelt down in front of her, reaching for the gun.

She screamed and pulled the gun up between them. Her hands shook as she tried to cock the pistol again. Seth was able to take it from her before she could shoot. Her nails dug at his arms, and her hair flung wildly around them while she fought him like a wildcat. He was able to take the gun away from her and fling it across the bed with one hand while he attempted to keep her from scratching the hell out of him with the other.

When he could grab her with both hands and pin her arms down at her sides, she started kicking. She wasn’t able to hurt him with her bare feet against his shins, but she kept twisting and turning, making it nearly impossible to hold on to her.

“Lily, it’s me, Seth,” he tried again, but she didn’t seem to hear him.

Not knowing what else to do, he released her with one hand and grabbed the back of her head to hold her still before his mouth took hers in a searing kiss. For a moment she fought against his mouth. When she finally seemed to understand held her, she relaxed and began to cry under his kiss.

She cried uncontrollably and buried her face in his chest while he held her tighter than he’d ever held any woman in his life. They sat that way for a long time, while he stroked her back and her hair and said nonsensical things like he was soothing a child.

“Pop?” Johnny whispered behind Seth.

“Johnny. Go get Madge, and tell Jarod and Anne to stay in the wagon.”

Without a word Johnny scurried out the door and disappeared.

Chapter Twelve

Her tears finally subsided, but he continued to hold her in his arms like he'd never let her go. *God, how could I have been so stupid! I left her here alone in this town I know can be very dangerous. She's a woman alone, a very beautiful woman and a very desirable one, yet I expected her to be able to defend herself against someone who obviously wanted something from her. Where the hell is the deputy?*

A few moments later he heard Madge come through what was left of the door in the front, and he yelled, "Back here, Madge."

Madge entered the bedroom and moved to where he and Lily still sat, locked together like two puzzle pieces. "Seth? Oh my! What happened here? My goodness. Lily, are you all right?"

"I'm not sure what happened yet, but I'm damned sure going to find out," he growled and ran his hand through his hair. "What I need you to do is go by the school and dismiss all the children for the day, hell, make it two. If the parents have a problem, tell them to come by and see me. Also, can you have my children just play in the yard until we get things settled down in here?"

"Of course, Seth. I'll be right back." Madge disappeared back out the door to do his bidding while he continued to cradle Lily in his arms.

Madge returned a short time later, but he still sat in the same spot with Lily. "Let me. I'll help her get washed up." Madge tried to pry Lily's hands from Seth's shirt, but the frightened woman wasn't about to let go. "Lily, dear. Let go, and I'll help you get cleaned up," Madge said in her ear, trying to reach where Lily's mind had now retreated.

"I'll do it." Seth told Madge then softly whispered to Lily, "Sweetheart, come with me. You need to get dressed."

"Seth, you know it's not proper. You two aren't married."

"At this point, I don't care what's proper."

He managed to get Lily to let go of his shirtfront, and then he put his arm around her shoulders before they walked into the kitchen. Forcing her to sit on one of the chairs, he moved around the kitchen and put some water on the stove to heat. "Madge, can you grab her something to put on?"

"Of course." Madge headed back into the bedroom to look through the armoire for a dress.

Once she'd returned, he said, "Thanks, Madge." He poured the now warm water into a bowl, took a washcloth from the stack of clean linens sitting on the table and lathered it up with some soap he found nearby.

The scent of lavender surrounded him. It was the same smell he'd now come to associate with Lily.

"Sweetheart, here, I'm going to wash your face and arms," he said as he began to move the cloth over her cheeks, across her nose and down her neck. He took a deep breath, rinsed the soap off the cloth and then started rinsing the lingering film on Lily's skin while desire rushed along his nerve endings.

He managed to curtail his lingering lust when he thought about who could have come into her home so violently. She must have been so terrified; she'd taken out the gun he'd taught her how to shoot to protect herself.

Seth washed her arms and rinsed them clean. "Go ahead and get the dress ready to pull over her head while I work her nightgown loose."

Lily raised trusting eyes to his as his hands stopped at the first button on her nightgown and began to unbutton it. He unbuttoned each one until it was loose enough to slip off her shoulders. The tops of her breasts peeked out when the material slipped down, and the lump in his throat grew bigger by the second. He slipped her arms out and held the nightgown to her chest. Madge slipped the dress over her head and down so he could loosen his grip and let it slip down to her waist. He got her to slip her arms into the dress, but he stifled a groan when his fingers brushed against her breast.

He cleared his throat, moved around behind her and buttoned up her dress. Her hairbrush lay nearby, so he picked it up and sat behind her. He slowly ran the brush through the tangles, smoothing it down her back. She had such beautiful hair. It hung in soft shiny curls down to her waist, and it curled around his hand like it had a mind of its own.

"Pack her a satchel with some clothing for a few days. I'm taking her out to my place."

"But Seth..."

"I don't care whether it's proper or not, Madge. She can't stay here, and I have Carmen at my place, so it's fine. She can stay in the guest room, but I'm not leaving her here. Whoever was bold enough to do this just might come back to finish what he started."

"You're right, of course," Madge replied, before she headed back into Lily's bedroom to pack her some things.

"Sweetheart," Seth said as he knelt in front of Lily. "I'm going to take you out to my place for a few days. You can't stay here, all right?"

Lily nodded.

Seth mumbled, "I need to find you some shoes."

* * * *

Lily cleared her throat and said, "By the front door." Those were the first words she'd spoken since Seth had found her in that frightened state of mind.

"Ah yes... by the door," he replied and walked toward the front door where he found her small boots.

When he returned, Lily had risen from the chair she had been perched on since he'd brought her from her bedroom.

Her voice cracked. "Thank you for what you've done for me. I... I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't found me this morning."

"It's what every good friend would do. Here. Let's get these on your feet." He guided her back down on the chair.

"Here are the things you asked for, Seth," Madge said, returning with the satchel.

"Thank you, Madge." He helped her stand and put his arm around her shoulder. "Now. Shall we go?"

She nodded, and they headed for the door.

Madge followed them out the broken door to the wagon. "Are you sure this is such a good idea, Seth? I mean, she could come to the boarding house with me."

"I'll be fine with Seth, Madge. It will only be for a few days. Please let the parents of the children know I'm fine, but I need a few days to recover from this. I'm sorry, but I need to be away from town right now. You understand, don't you?"

Madge looked startled when Lily spoke.

"Yes... I... of course. You do what you feel is the best thing, my dear."

The children came running around from the back of the house and hopped into the wagon while Seth helped Lily onto the seat and put her bag in the back.

"Madge, can you keep an eye on the house today? With the door broken, I don't want anyone taking anything of Lily's. I'm going to stop by the general store and have Jonathan bring some wood over to board it up."

"Of course. I'll stay here until Jonathan comes over."

* * * *

Madge had been terrified when Johnny came running up to her door saying something had happened to Lily. When she had found her friends locked in an embrace on the floor of Lily's bedroom, she was confused. Seth explained what had happened, and it saddened her to think her friend had to endure such an event. Madge really didn't think it was a good idea for Seth to take Lily out to his place. Unfortunately, he wasn't the type of man to argue with.

Shaking her head at the events of the day, she went back inside and tried to pick up around the house for Lily. She knew her friend was a very meticulous person and would want things just so when she came home. Working her way through the house, she finally reached Lily's bedroom and began straightening her bed when she saw a folded piece of paper lying on the floor near the door. Madge picked it up and opened it. It looked like a map of some sort. She could see several landmarks etched on the paper as she turned it one way and then the other. The borders of Seth's ranch were traced on the paper with marks of what appeared to be X's.

Well. This is odd to find in Lily's bedroom. Maybe Seth dropped it when he was searching for her earlier. Madge shrugged and slipped it into her pocket. *I'll give it to one of them next time I see them.*

A few moments later, she heard Jonathan knocking on what was left of the front door and calling her name.

"Jonathan. I see Seth found you. Come in."

"Yes, ma'am. He wanted me to see if I could at least board up the front of the house and the broken window. What happened? Is Miss Lily hurt?"

"She's not hurt, just shook up a mite," Madge answered. "She'll be fine, but we need to make sure no one comes around here while she's away and messes with anything."

"Of course. Does Seth know who did this? I mean, it's kind of strange that someone would break into her house like this just to scare her."

"I don't think he knows, and I think you're right: it is strange. I don't believe we've ever had anyone's house broken into in this town since I've been here. I do wonder, though, did Seth talk to the sheriff about it yet? He needs to be aware in case there are other homes broken into. You know, most folks around here don't always lock their doors at night or when they're gone. I'll have to make sure Daniel keeps an eye out around my place, too. It wouldn't do for my boarders to have their things taken. In fact, if you are set here for now, I'm going to walk over to my place for a bit. I'll be back in a little while. I did tell Seth I'd keep an eye on the place."

"I have everything with me to take care of the door and window, so you go on, Miss Madge. I'll be here for a while doing the repairs anyway." He walked outside with her to gather his tools. "Take your time, ma'am."

"Thank you, Jonathan. Can I bring you some lunch or something when I come back? I imagine you might be hungry by then."

"That would be nice, ma'am. Thanks." Jonathan pulled some of the wood from the back of his wagon and headed back toward the house with a soft whistle.

"Of course. I'll be back in a couple of hours then."

* * * *

The wagon rolled into Seth's ranch with the children and Lily as Carmen, wiping her hands on her apron, stepped out on the porch.

"What happened, Mr. Seth? Those children should be in school, and what is Miss Lily doing with you?"

"I'll tell you in a bit, Carmen. For now, can you make up the guest room for Lily? She'll be staying with us for a day or two."

He hopped down from the wagon seat and went around to help her down as the children scattered, excited about having the next couple of days off from school.

"Yes, of course." Carmen shot them a questioning raise of her eyebrow and then disappeared back into the house.

Seth helped her down from the wagon, but when he released her, she stepped back quickly, and he frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

She'd clung to him at her house like she would never let go, and now she was pulling herself away from him, and he didn't really understand why. He'd been nothing but a concerned friend.

"I'll grab your things from the back if you want to go on into the house." He stepped around her, reached for her bag and then swung it over the side. "After you."

She headed for the house, her gaze focused on the ground, ashamed of her behavior at the house earlier. She had clung to him like a frightened child. He had washed her like she was completely out of her mind, and he had even helped Madge dress her. *It's just not done. Why, we don't even know each other that well, and there he was, dressing me, for gracious' sake. Now I am here staying at his home with him, without a chaperone except for Carmen and the children. Where has my mind gone? Gone completely crazy, that's where. Thank goodness the children didn't see the whole spectacle this morning.* When she turned to look at Seth, finally, he didn't seem to be the least put off with her there, or troubled by the events of the morning.

"I'll take this into the guest room."

Seth gave her a pensive look and then headed down the hall toward the back of the house with the bag Madge had packed.

Lily stood in the middle of the front room, not exactly sure what to do. *Kathleen would be completely appalled at my behavior and the current situation.*

When Seth returned, she still stood in the same spot, and he stopped directly in front of her. "Are you sure you are all right, Lily?"

"I'm fine," she said, keeping her eyes downcast. She just couldn't look him in the face.

He placed his fingers under her chin and forced her to meet his gaze. She wasn't prepared for the depth of pain reflected in his eyes. It wasn't the same pain she'd seen before. This pain was for her and for what she went through the night before, and there was guilt, but she wasn't sure why he should feel guilty.

"You aren't fine, Lily." His voice was laced with sadness. "I can tell by your eyes. You're scared, no, terrified, and you don't have to hide it from me."

Seth tried to get her to open up and face her fear. He stopped talking, gathered her to his chest and just stood there, holding her as she wrapped her arms around him and buried her face against his shoulder, trying hard not to cry.

After a moment she pulled away and said, "I'm sorry, Seth. Yes, I was scared, but that's no excuse for my behavior afterward."

"Your behavior?"

"Can we not talk about this now?" She walked away twisting a piece of her skirt in her hand. "I really don't want to bring this up right now."

"Bring up what? I don't understand?"

Rolling her eyes, she wanted to make him understand her need for discretion. Finally, she turned around and said, "Seth, I'm really uncomfortable talking about this at the moment with the children and Carmen so near. Can we discuss this later?"

He ran his hands through his hair in what she had come to realize was a sign of frustration. He obviously didn't understand what she was talking about when he said, "Fine. I'm going to the barn. I have work to do."

Watching him leave, sorrow ripped through her. She hadn't tried to tell him what was on her mind. She wanted to have this conversation in private, and with three children and a housekeeper nearby, it wouldn't be very private. *Maybe later I'll follow him to the barn, and we can talk once the children are in bed.* She really wanted to thank him for all he'd done for her throughout the day and for letting her stay in his home, but something held her back. He felt guilty. She could see it in his eyes, but she needed to make sure he knew the attack on her wasn't his fault. He already harbored enough

regret for Victoria's death. He didn't need the guilt of her attack on his mind, too.

Choosing to stay in the house for now, she went off into the guest room to unpack her things as best she could for the short time she would be there.

It really was a beautiful home. There were just enough feminine touches, but not enough to be overwhelming. It was clear the home didn't have a mistress per se. *Carmen probably lives here all the time, but she must not feel it's her place to give it a feminine touch.*

The guest room was small, but it suited her just fine. It had a fair-sized bed with a pretty bedspread adorned with intricate patterns of flowers and birds that were done by needlepoint. Having done some of that with Kathleen, she knew how long this must have taken someone to do, and it was magnificent!

The bureau appeared to be very sturdy although clearly handmade. Running her hand over its top, she wondered if Seth had made it. A moment later, she noticed the rocker in the corner. Its hand-carved seat gleamed in the sunshine streaming through the lace curtains on the window. Lily stopped to smooth her hand over the shiny surface when she saw the small pillow gracing the back of the seat. She picked it up to examine it, and her heart sank when she read the letters stitched into the fabric.

Seth and Victoria. Married May 21st, 1871.

The pillow was so pretty and each stitch exhibited so much love, she couldn't continue to hold it. It hurt to see how much love the two of them had shared here in this house.

The rocker had to have been made by Seth for his beautiful Victoria to rock his newborn children in.

Lily suddenly felt completely inadequate when it came to womanly skills when she realized she had never been very handy with needlepoint. She had been too busy working with Edward on the numbers and just couldn't be concerned about needlepoint or sewing. Kathleen had tried to teach her, she really had, but Lily hadn't been interested. Numbers fascinated her as well as the records Edward kept for his shipping business, so if given the choice, she would always choose to follow Edward to the shipyard. She could get by with cooking and mending, but when it came down to the finer aspects of womanly crafts, she felt she'd failed miserably. She would in no way be able to compete with the pretty things that

surrounded her in this room, especially the things that screamed of a woman's presence. This house held the presence of the one woman she hoped she would never have to compete with for Seth's affection, Victoria Sanford.

Lily spent the rest of the day in the guest room while she tried to come to terms with her feelings for Seth. She knew she cared for him more than she should at this point, but she couldn't stop the way her heart fluttered in her chest when her eyes met his. She couldn't stop how she leaned into his kiss whenever his lips met hers and he traced her mouth with his tongue. When he'd actually invaded her mouth, the heat pooling between her legs had almost been her undoing.

He had also been her saving grace in this crazy town, even before she had arrived. Seth had been responsible for saving her on the train from the robbers, saving her from the townspeople who wanted to send her home, and saving her from the men who tried to attack her the night before. Now she was here, in his home. What was he doing? He was here to save her from herself so she could muster her courage to return and continue to live in her home by herself.

It was so clear that he loved Victoria with all his heart and probably would never be able to love anyone else. He had said so himself hadn't he? He'd told her he would never be able to move on until Victoria's killers were found, so why didn't she listen? Tears rolled down her cheeks while she stared out the window.

The afternoon wore on, and the sun began to slip behind the hills when Carmen came to the guest room to tell her supper was ready. She pulled herself up from the rocker where she had dropped when she realized her feelings for Seth ran deeper than they should. Her heart lay heavy in her chest as she walked down the hall toward the dining room. The smiling faces of the Sanford children met her gaze when she headed for the table. The love she felt for them overwhelmed her, and she had to fight back her tears.

Johnny pulled out her chair and said, "Mrs. Backman, you can sit here by me."

"Why thank you, Johnny. That's very kind of you." She took the seat next to him, which also put her at his father's elbow, since Seth sat at the head of the table.

* * * *

The afternoon had been a long one for Seth. He'd spent the day doing small chores in the barn to avoid Lily. It probably hadn't been a good idea to bring her here, but he couldn't leave her alone, not after the attack last night. The guilt he harbored was enough to bring him to his knees. If he hadn't already shown her how to shoot, she could have been seriously hurt or killed, and the thought brought a knot to his stomach.

The look on her face when she entered the dining room was disconcerting and made him frown. Before he could comment, Johnny said, "I'll say grace."

"Thanks, son," Seth murmured as he looked from his son back to Lily again.

After grace everyone started eating, and conversation was limited between the two adults while the children chattered aimlessly. Talk around the table centered on work around the house and what the children had done that day.

Lily stayed very quiet during supper, Seth noticed. She kept her head down and picked at her food, and it bothered him. It wasn't like her to be so quiet.

When supper was finished, she quickly began picking up the plates and dishes and taking them to the kitchen to help Carmen clean up.

Seth sent Johnny and Jarod out to finish feeding the animals and Anne off to get ready for bed while he picked up the final dish and carried it to the kitchen.

The two women were chattering about the proper way to can beans, or something, but when Seth walked in, all conversation ceased.

"Carmen, can you put on some water for Anne's bath, please? She's been out in the dirt all day and really could use a good cleaning."

"Of course, Mr. Seth. It should be warm in just a few minutes since the stove is still hot from supper."

"I'll help her, if it's all right with you." Lily met his gaze for the first time since she'd come out for supper.

"I know she'd like that." Suddenly he felt uncomfortable in his own home. "I'm going out to check the mare." He turned on his heel and quickly headed out the front door.

Out in the barn Seth paced. The mare was fine. It had just been an excuse to get out of the house. With Carmen and Lily in the kitchen talking, he felt like he was intruding in his own home, in his own kitchen. *Why all of the sudden do I feel uncomfortable? Maybe it's how easily Lily fits in my home, Victoria's home? It is still Victoria's home, isn't it? Maybe I need to finally let her go. No! She's only been gone six months, six long and lonely months.*

He continued to tread up and down the floor of the barn until the mare started to shift back and forth in her stall. His attention returned to the horse and the coming foal.

"Easy girl," he said, moving into the enclosure with her and stroking her with his hands, trying to calm her as the contractions gripped her.

* * * *

Lily had helped Anne with her bath and settled the little girl down to sleep. She'd sat in her room and read a story while Anne drifted off into what Lily hoped was a peaceful sleep. When she had returned to the front room, she was surprised to see Seth hadn't come back into the house from the barn. The boys were playing quietly in their room.

The minutes ticked by and Seth didn't return, so Lily peeked out the front curtains and could see a lantern lit in the barn.

The horse must be doing poorly. Grabbing her shawl, she opened the door to head to the large structure. Dark was fast approaching, and it was still fairly cool in the evening air as she pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders.

Approaching, she could hear Seth talking softly to the mare. The low hum of his voice sent shivers down her arms while she listened to the calming whispers.

"Easy girl. I know this is hard, but you'll be fine. Just relax."

Lily followed his voice to a stall near the back, where she could see the mare lying on the soft straw, bathed in sweat and breathing very hard.

“Is she all right, Seth?” Lily kept her voice in a low whisper while she leaned on the wall nearest her.

“She’ll be fine. She’s having a bit of a hard labor, that’s all.”

She could hear the worry in his voice although he tried to appear calm. His hair clung to his brow when he wiped his face with his shirt. Shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows revealed strong, muscular arms heavily corded under the skin. His hands moved tenderly as he stroked the laboring horse.

“Is there something I can do?” She was afraid to approach, lest she spook the horse and make her to hurt herself.

He motioned to the room across from where he now sat, crouched with the mare. “It’s starting to cool off outside. Could you grab one of those blankets that are rolled up in the tack room over there? I need to keep her warm.”

“Of course.” She was only too happy to leave his side for a moment to catch her breath. Watching him stroke the mare with his big hands was doing things to her breathing she didn’t want to identify.

When she returned, she gave the blanket to him, but when he looked up at her and smiled, her breath caught in her throat.

* * * *

The smile slid from Seth’s lips while he continued to stare at the beautiful woman before him. She was perfect. It made him cringe to think of what must run through her brain that he could never comprehend. She knew exactly what to say to his children, whether they were misbehaving, or just needed a little encouragement. She didn’t even have to say anything to make his blood rush through his veins to the point where he could hear it pulsating in his ears.

The mare began to thrash and tried to rise to her feet, drawing his attention back. “Oh hell.”

“Something wrong?” Her voice came out with a squeak while her chest rose and fell with her rapid breaths.

“Yeah, you could say that,” he grumbled, moving down near the back end of the horse. Pulling her tail aside, he started to curse. “The foal’s trying to come out nose first.”

"Is that bad?" She stepped closer while he tried to focus on the mare.

"Yeah. It needs to come out feet first, so I'm going to have to try to help her. I need you to help me get her to stand. Grab her halter."

He tried to push the nose of the foal back into the mare's birth canal, but it didn't work. Lily went to the front of the mare, grabbed her halter and tried to pull her to her feet, without much success.

"Talk to her, Lily. She'll listen."

"Come on, girl. You need to stand up." Lily coaxed softly, tugging on her halter again, and the mare rolled more onto her stomach, pulling her feet under her. "That's it, pretty girl. Come on. Stand up for me." Seth was amazed as Lily continued to tug more and the mare managed to struggle to her feet.

"All right, now get her to walk a little. Lead her by the halter around a bit so the foal will slide back into her birth canal."

He positioned himself behind the mare to make sure the foal slid back in as Lily continued to walk her around the barn. Lily lead her back into the stall, and the mare went down on her knees, then onto her side, while the contractions rippled along her stomach.

"Now, let's see if this little one will make its appearance without any more help from us." He moved back to his position at her hind end to see if the foal was now coming out correctly. "That's it, girl. You've got it now." A moment later, two hoofs protruded from the back of the horse. Lily moved around to stand next to him while he continued calmly to encourage the mare. The mare's belly continued to ripple with each contraction, and Lily stood with her mouth open while the new foal slipped from the mare into the straw at their feet.

When it was all over, she sank down next to the mare's head. Lily stroked her nose and talked softly to her while Seth cleaned the birthing sack from the new colt. Soon after, the mare struggled to her feet and turned around to nuzzle the pretty new baby.

While the new baby and mother bonded, Seth wiped the fluids from his arms and then noticed Lily sitting with tears on her cheeks and a soft smile to her lips. The sight left him speechless for a moment.

When he held out his hand to her, she slipped hers into his palm and pulled herself to her feet before she wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"It is pretty amazing to watch, isn't it?" They turned to see the new mother and her baby standing quietly in the stall. After a moment they shut the stall door behind them and moved out into the main barn.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life. It was just amazing. And to watch you help her! I just couldn't believe it."

Uncomfortable with her praise, he changed the subject. "Are the children in bed already?"

"Yes, I hope you don't mind. I tucked them all in, and they settled down quite nicely. I left the boys playing in their room, but I see their lamp is out now, so they must be in bed."

The moon hung high in the sky and illuminated the yard as they walked toward the house. The light reflected like diamonds, sparkling on the tears still lingering on her lashes, and he fought the urge to wipe them away.

"I don't mind. They can sure be a handful at times. Thanks for taking care of them for me while I was tied up with the mare."

"Of course, they are good children. I don't mind at all."

They stepped onto the porch and unconsciously moved together to sit down to enjoy the night air. "Have you thought more about telling them how their mother actually died?"

He hesitated momentarily before he said, "Not really. I still really don't think it's a good idea."

"But Seth, you really need to tell them. You need to help them."

"I realize you think they should know, but I'm not convinced yet it is the best thing for them. I mean, you've been with them for a few weeks now. Do they really seem that bad? Anne hasn't talked to anyone, even though people have tried." His voice trailed off, and he turned to look blankly out into the yard in front of him.

"Yes, she has."

* * * *

Big mouth! You promised Anne you wouldn't say anything. Before she could retract her statement, Seth asked what she meant.

"Did she talk to you?"

“Yes, but I promised her I wouldn’t tell because she wanted to keep it a secret. It’s not like we carried on any significant conversation, Seth, she only said a few words.”

She tried to skirt around what Anne actually said. The last thing she wanted to tell him was his daughter had asked if she could be their new mommy. She didn’t want him to know the little girl’s secret wish, but he wasn’t having any of it. He wanted to know.

“What did she say?”

“Really, Seth, it wasn’t anything important.”

“Tell me what she said,” he demanded.

Embarrassed to say, but knowing he wouldn’t leave it alone until she told him, she replied, “She asked if I was going to be their new mommy.” Lily stood and walked to the nearby railing before she murmured, “I told you it wasn’t anything important.”

Chapter Thirteen

Seth didn't say anything, but his mind whirled. Anne wanted Lily to be their new mommy--that was obvious. As her words echoed in his mind, the thought intrigued him. He wondered if he could possibly marry the beautiful woman standing in front of him to give his children a mother. She was very good with them. She was patient, loving, and smart. And the town thought of her as a widow, so it wouldn't be that strange to them, even though he knew differently. Of course, it would only be for the children. He knew there could never be a real relationship between them since he hadn't found Victoria's killers. Could he live with her in this house under the ruse of a platonic relationship? Could he see her every day, live with her every day, without touching her?

"Seth?"

The sound of her calling his name brought him out of his musings. She moved back to the chair near him.

"I'm sorry," he replied. "I was just contemplating something. I'm glad Anne talked to you, although she obviously asked you something that was somewhat silly."

"Silly? I really didn't think it silly. Those children need a mother figure in their lives. Carmen is good with them, but she's not like their mother. It's a different type of relationship a mother has with her children. Don't get me wrong: she loves them like they were hers, but it's just not the same for them. If they had been younger, maybe it would have been easier but now..." Her voice trailed off while he let his gaze move over her face in a caress.

* * * *

Seth looked at her with a peculiar emotion in his eyes, and it made her nervous. He'd never stared at her like that before.

"Lily, would you marry me?"

Her mouth dropped open in shock. *He didn't just ask me to marry him, did he?* "You—you can't be serious! We don't even know one another that well. And well, you don't love me, and I don't love you. Really, this is absolutely ludicrous," she said, her voice starting to crescendo. She jumped to her feet again during her tirade and turned to face the yard.

Once she finished her speech about why they couldn't or shouldn't marry, she realized Seth had risen to his feet and was now standing directly behind her. He took her by the arm and swung her around to face him. She watched his head come down before he captured her mouth with his in a heart-pounding, puddle-on-the-floor kiss that caused her toes to curl in her shoes.

He stood there for several minutes, caressing her mouth while her hands rested on his chest and his arms encircled her waist. When he finally lifted his head and stepped back, her heart still slammed against her ribs, and her legs felt weak.

"I think we get along well enough. Even though we aren't in love with each other, we can at least stand to be in the same room together. Besides, I'm thinking of the children, Lily. You agree they need a mother figure in their lives, and who better than someone they care about, trust and listen to? Could you marry me for the children's sake? It would be a completely platonic relationship between us, of course. Folks around here wouldn't think anything of it, since they believe you to be a widow. They would just think I've taken you in, especially after the attack last night. They would think I offered to care for you, a single woman in this harsh environment." He went on and on as if he hadn't just kissed the daylights out of her.

She stood there for a moment looking at him as though he had just grown horns. When she could speak again, all she could say was, "You can't be serious, Seth."

"I'm perfectly serious. Are you saying you won't marry me?" He sounded almost hurt, like a spoiled child who had just gotten his toy taken away.

"I... well... I... uh..." Lily stammered, trying to decide how to answer him. *Could I possibly marry him?*

She wasn't in love with him, or at least she didn't think she was, but she'd never been in love before, so how would she know? She liked him well enough, and she adored the children, but could she make the sacrifice to marry him for their sake? They couldn't even agree on whether to tell the children the truth about their mother.

Lily's mind whirled as she remembered that his kisses did do terribly wonderful things to her body. Would they have a real relationship eventually? He said it would be a completely platonic relationship. Could she live in the same house with him and not touch him or want him to kiss her?

"I just don't know, Seth," she answered in a daze. "I'll have to think about this for a bit. I can't just jump into marrying anyone. Can I give you an answer tomorrow?"

"Of course, there isn't a rush. I know you could help so much with the children, and living with me, you wouldn't have to worry about any more trouble in town." He pulled out the big guns, she realized, when he referred to her love of the three in the house and her scare from the night before.

"Well, let me sleep on it, and I'll let you know tomorrow." She turned to retreat to the safety of the guest room—Victoria's room.

She couldn't sleep. Thoughts of Seth's kiss rippled across her mind, and she tossed and turned while her body burned with each thought. She contemplated spending the rest of her life with him. Would she ever be able to touch him? Would he ever kiss her again? Probably not, and the thought left her heart feeling like it was breaking in two.

She finally fell into a fitful sleep about dawn, but when the children were up and about, Anne bounded into her room to wake her for breakfast.

Lily groaned and rolled over, trying desperately to ignore the bubbling child bouncing on the bed next to her.

Anne said in her ear, "You must get up, Miss Lily. Carmen's making pancakes this morning."

Lily pulled the blanket off her head, and Anne giggled at the sight of her hair. It was a tangled mess about her head, and as Lily peered at the child with one opened eye, Anne laughed out loud.

* * * *

Seth was walking down the hall toward the dining room when he heard a child's giggle coming from Lily's room. He stopped at the open door and peered in to see Lily and Anne as they rolled on the bed. Lily was tickling Anne until she giggled heartily.

He smiled while he watched, amazed at how easily Lily had fit into their lives in such a short time. He had heard her pacing during the night for quite some time before he finally fell asleep. Now here she was, wrestling on the bed with his daughter like neither of them had a care in the world.

"Are you two going to wrestle all morning, or are you going to get dressed and come to breakfast? I might just eat all the pancakes myself if you two don't hurry up." He laughed at the pair while he lounged against the doorframe, watching them.

Lily's face turned bright pink after she brushed the tangled mass of hair out of her face and realized Seth stood in the doorway.

"We'll be there in a moment. We certainly don't want your father to eat them all, do we, Anne?"

The child sat in the middle of the bed and smiled at her father before she shouted, "No. Pancakes are my favorite!" She jumped down from the bed and scurried out of the room, not the least bit aware of the shocked expression on her father's face.

He stood there for a moment staring at Lily when the realization struck that his daughter finally had spoken after all this time. Lily had told him she had, but to hear her voice almost brought tears to his eyes.

"She spoke," he whispered in awe.

Lily got out of the bed and now stood in her nightgown in front of him.

"I told you she had," Lily reminded him. "She was scared, Seth. She was afraid everyone she loved would disappear if she talked to them—like her mother. I guess she had talked to Victoria right before she left that morning, and Anne was afraid it was something she said that made her leave."

"She spoke!" He grabbed Lily and swung her around in circles.

Seth realized at the same time as Lily, her state of undress when he could feel her bare breasts pressed against his chest through her nightgown. The blood roared in his ears when he looked into her eyes and saw the same desire in hers.

Lord, how I want this woman. He let her slide down his body to stand on the floor in front of him. He bent his head to take her lips with his until he heard the boys come running through the front door, which they slammed soundly behind them.

“Excuse me. I’m sorry. I need to get dressed.” Lily stepped back and drew her nightgown up around her neck as she retreated farther into the room.

Embarrassed at the reaction he was sure was still written across his face, he replied, “I ... uh ... I’ll see if breakfast is ready.”

Desire boiled in his veins and continued to grip him in its clutches when he closed the door behind him and leaned back against it. He was amazed at how fast Lily could cause the desire to rage out of control. Not even Victoria could do that so quickly. Maybe it was just because he hadn’t been with anyone since she died. *That has to be it.* He inhaled deeply and headed for the kitchen.

* * * *

Lily stood holding her nightgown to her throat until she finally heard Seth’s footsteps heading down the hall. She took a deep breath to still her heart and then pulled her clothing out of the bureau. She slipped out of her nightgown and into her clean clothes in preparation for breakfast. She grabbed her brush and ran it through the knots in her hair until it was tangle-free and shiny. She pulled it back in a ribbon and slipped on her shoes before she grabbed the doorknob with trepidation. Today she would need to tell Seth whether she would marry him. Today might be the answer to the rest of her life, if she accepted. Or perhaps she would end up alone, alone and lonely, without him by her side and without his children to love. She headed for the kitchen to face either her new family or the end of her existence in their lives.

The bright faces of the children at the table met her eyes, and she couldn’t help wondering what it would be like to have them around her forever. Anne had come such a long way in the few short weeks since she had been in Parkville, and both Johnny and Jarod had become brighter and more talkative. Even Seth seemed to be in a better mood the last couple of

days. Johnny hadn't mentioned Seth drinking, so maybe in a way, he was healing, too.

"Good morning." She sat down next to Seth in the empty seat that had quickly become her place at the table.

"How did you sleep?"

"All right, I suppose."

"It sounded like you paced a lot last night."

A knowing smile quirked at his lips, and she raised an eyebrow as she wondered, *how would you know unless you were up, too?*

"What are your plans today?"

"I really don't have any, but I'm not used to being idle."

"I need to ride out and check some fences. Would you care to join me? Of course, you'd have to ride straddle, since I don't have any side saddles around." He gave her that small, sexy smile that made her heart skip a beat.

"That might be a little difficult since I don't have any trousers in my wardrobe."

"That can be remedied. I'm sure we have something around here you can wear if you'd like to go. You can ride a horse, can't you?" His teasing made her relax. At least this was a safe subject, unlike whether she would marry him or not.

"Yes, I can ride a horse," Lily retorted. "We did use buggies most of the time in Boston, but my father, I mean Edward, made sure I knew how to ride, too. He didn't hunt, like most of the elite, but we did ride in the park sometimes. It might be a little difficult to get the gist of riding like a man, but I think I can get it."

"Good. You might find it interesting to see some of the land around the ranch. I wouldn't want you to be bored while you're here."

"Bored? Somehow, I think that you will keep me very busy." She shot a saucy little smile at him.

* * * *

Keeping her very busy could be a task he was ready for, but making sure his heart didn't get involved was another thing. When she flashed him that smile, his stomach tightened, and he had to clear his throat to dislodge the lump threatening to choke him.

"It's a date then." A moment later he remembered Victoria's clothing. "Actually, I believe they're some of Victoria's clothes around here still, and she used to wear trousers when she rode. You might be able to fit in hers."

"I'd rather not, thank you," Lily replied. She shifted her gaze back to her food.

"You know, come to think of it, you are taller, and probably a bit smaller in the hips than she was, so they probably wouldn't fit, but Johnny's might since he's a tall boy. Carmen, can you grab a pair of Johnny's and bring them out here so we can see if they might fit Lily?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Seth," Carmen answered from the kitchen.

Carmen returned a few minutes later with an older pair of the boy's trousers. "You can try these, Miss Lily. I think they should fit," she said before she retreated into the kitchen.

Lily had finished eating, so she picked up the jeans, stood up and held them up to her.

"I think they might just fit after all. What do you think?" she asked the children who'd begun to giggle at the thought of their teacher wearing Johnny's pants.

"I think they'll be just fine," Johnny said with a large grin.

"When are you leaving, Seth?"

"In a bit. Why don't you go try them on?"

"I'll do just that."

When she returned a few moments later wearing the trousers and a blouse, he couldn't breathe. His mouth went dry, and his jaw almost dropped to his chest at the picture she presented. The pants hugged her hips perfectly; showing off her nicely rounded buttocks, and tapered down her slim legs to her feet. When she turned around to show him how well they fit, thoughts of those legs wrapped around his hips fluttered across his mind, and he almost dropped his coffee cup.

She stopped at the table and turned around for inspection. "Well?"

He fought a groan.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked again, turning back around.

"I... uh... they're perfect." His voice squeaked, causing his children to turn and look in his direction. Jumping to his feet, he set his cup down. "I'll go saddle the horses," he grumbled, quickly heading out of the house toward the barn.

When he reached the barn, he almost dropped to his knees as he tried to calm the desire racing through his veins. He braced his palm against the wall and took in great gulps of air while he bent his head and squeezed his eyes shut.

This is going to be a long day. He opened his eyes again and pulled the tack from the wall to saddle the horses.

* * * *

Lily raised an eyebrow at how quickly Seth retreated out the door. She turned on her heel and walked back to the bedroom to grab her shoes. She picked them up and studied them.

"This won't do. I can't ride a horse in these." She headed back out into the kitchen to ask Carmen if maybe there were an extra pair of boots around she might be able to wear.

"Yes, ma'am. You have some tiny feet. Johnny or Jarod's boots might fit. Let me go get a pair." She left the kitchen to dig through the boys' boots to find some that might fit, and when she returned, she triumphantly carried a pair of boy's boots.

"I think these will do." With a smile she handed them to Lily to try on.

Lily sat down on a kitchen chair and slipped them on. They were a little big, actually, in the toes.

"Thank you, Carmen. They are perfect. Would you mind packing Seth and me a lunch? I'm not sure how long we'll be out, and I wouldn't want to see that man hungry."

"Sure I will. I'll just be a minute. You might want to ask Johnny for one of his hats. That sun can get mighty bright and hot on your head while you are riding."

Lily went back down the hall to the boys' room to ask about a hat, and they were more than willing to allow her to borrow one of theirs.

"You look mighty nice, Mrs. Backman," Johnny said when he noticed her attire.

"Well, thank you. I never thought that I'd be out riding in boys' trousers, but why not, right? It will be a new adventure. Wish me luck."

Seth stood waiting near the porch with two horses saddled and ready. When Lily came out the door with some things wrapped in linen, he asked, "What's this?"

"A picnic, of sorts. I asked Carmen to make a few things since I wasn't sure how long we would be gone. Can you put them in a saddle bag or something for us to take?"

"Yeah. Hold them for a moment, and I'll get one from the barn." He handed the reins to her as he headed for the barn.

When he returned, he carried an old saddlebag that had seen better days, she was sure, but it would do in a pinch, and in a pinch they were. He slung it over the back of his horse, took the sandwiches and placed them inside.

Seth walked up toward the front of the horses and asked, "Can you mount, or do you need some help?"

"I think I can do this. Let's see." She handed the reins to Seth, walked to the side of the horse, slipped her foot into the stirrup and lifted herself into the air. Her leg slipped over the other side of the horse, and she settled quite comfortably in the saddle.

"That wasn't too bad, I suppose."

"Uh... no. You did fine." He slipped the reins over the horse's head and handed them to her. He walked around his own horse to mount but stopped for a moment, and she cocked her head to the side and wondered what he was doing. Opening his eyes, he must have realized she was staring so he cleared his throat and mounted his own horse.

"Shall we?" he said as he turned his horse to head out. She followed not far behind.

They rode for some time in silence while she enjoyed the scenery around her. She really had started to love the area. It was very pretty with all the wildflowers growing in waves across the plains. There were so many different colors, and when they would whip back and forth in the breeze, it resembled ripples on the water in Boston harbor.

Seth's voice broke into her musings. "What are you thinking?"

"I was just admiring the flowers and how they move in the breeze. It makes me a little homesick. That's all." She slid a glance in his direction admiring the way his shirt fit across his broad chest.

"You aren't thinking of going back to Boston, are you?"

The anxious tone of his voice gave her pause. "No, my life is here now. I love the people who raised me, don't get me wrong, but I just feel that my whole childhood was a charade of sorts. I just don't feel like I fit in Boston anymore. I enjoy the simpler life here."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Are you?"

"Yes." The relief in his voice was clear. "Have you come to a decision about my offer yesterday?"

"I think so."

She stopped her horse and looked into his face. He'd stopped next to her, and she could have sworn he held his breath.

"I really don't know if this is such a good idea. I mean, it's very sudden, and with everything that happened the other night at my house, I'm scared. I'm afraid to be alone there now. Yes, you taught me how to shoot. I actually did shoot one of the men, but I don't like having to do that—having to protect myself that way. I like being independent, but life is rough here for a woman alone." She took a deep breath and focused on the fluffy white clouds rolling by over their heads. "And, as far as the children go, I know they need a mother in their lives, that's obvious, but I don't know whether I can be that for them. I've never had any experience raising children, Seth."

"No, but you're a schoolteacher. You have a natural ability with children. I've seen it many times with my own and with others at the school."

"I suppose, but it's not the same when you are responsible for bringing them up to be healthy, happy adults, who obey the law and will raise a family of their own someday. And what about us? I don't mean there is an 'us'. I'm just confused about how this is supposed to work. I know how marriage is with two people who love each other and want to be together for the rest of their lives, but we aren't those people."

"We can work things out. We get along well enough."

"What will we tell the children? They aren't going to believe we are in a regular marriage if we don't sleep in the same room."

"True," he admitted. "They'll figure out something is amiss if that is the situation. Why can't we just sleep in the same room?"

She sucked in a ragged breath. "You aren't serious? You said this would be a platonic relationship. Sleeping with you doesn't make this platonic."

"I didn't say we would be making love, Lily. I said sleep. That would still make it a platonic relationship." A small smile crossed his lips, and she had to fight the urge to sigh in disappointment.

"Oh."

"So? What do you say?"

He brushed aside her concerns. It drove her crazy that he sounded so nonchalant about the whole thing. She turned her gaze to the waves of rolling hills to her right while she thought about living the rest of her life with this man and caring for his children. Did she really want to live like he was suggesting? Would he ever desire her enough to want to be in a regular marriage someday? What if he never found Victoria's killers? Would he be able to let go and come to care for her like she was beginning to care for him?

When she turned back to see him staring at her intently, waiting for her answer, she said, "All right, yes, I'll marry you, but we will have to lay down some ground rules about presenting this charade to the children. Shall we go sit by that tree? We can eat the lunch Carmen packed and discuss this." Expecting him to follow, she turned her horse in the direction of the tree.

Apprehension slithered down her back when they settled on the ground to eat, and she knew it had to be written all over her face. Lily didn't like agreeing to such harsh terms, but she didn't see any choice in the matter. She only hoped some day he would come to want a normal marriage.

After their discussion, they finally remounted their horses and headed out to return to the house. They continued to ride in silence, each with their own thoughts about their upcoming nuptials. A small cabin appeared in the distance, and Lily asked, "What's that?"

"It's a line shack. There are few scattered down the fence line, just in case someone is stuck out here in bad weather, or whatever—a place to take shelter. Some cowboys just riding through will use it, even though it's on my land. I don't mind, as long as they replenish the supplies they might use. It's not much, really. There's a bed, some shelves and a table with a couple of chairs."

"How interesting. You'll have to show me one someday."

Each consumed again with thoughts of what lay ahead, they continued to ride in the direction of the house. When they reached the wide front

porch, they dismounted and Seth took the horses to the barn. Lily went on inside the house to change. She had enjoyed the freedom the trousers had afforded her even though she wasn't completely comfortable with the close-fitting material. She returned to the dining room to find Carmen preparing supper.

My goodness! Where has the day gone? Her mind wandered back to the afternoon ride, and she blushed when she thought about how she had jumped to conclusions when Seth mentioned sleeping together.

That just won't do. Obviously, he doesn't want any kind of normal relationship with me; otherwise he would take advantage of the situation. He made it very clear he wasn't interested in that type of relationship. Her heart sank at the thought.

The supper hour approached, and everyone returned to the house to eat. Uneasiness settled around her heart when she thought about the coming announcement. She feared how they would react. She knew Anne would be happy, but she wasn't sure about the two boys and how they would feel. She certainly didn't want to take their mother's place in their lives, and hopefully they would understand.

They all sat down to eat with the children chattering about what they had done during the day and what interesting things they'd found in their explorations while the adults sat quietly listening.

When everyone had finished their meal, Seth cleared his throat and slid a look at Lily. "Children. I need your attention for a minute."

All eyes turned to look at Seth.

"I know you all like Miss Lily very much as your schoolteacher."

"Yes, sir." Johnny's reply echoed through the room while the other two nodded their heads in agreement.

"Well, how would you like it if she came to live here with us?"

Lily held her breath waiting for some reaction from the children.

"Live here?" Jarod asked.

"Yes, live here with us, all the time." Seth waited patiently for the next question.

"How would that be, Pop?" Johnny asked, his gaze ricocheting back and forth between Lily and Seth.

"I've asked Lily to be my wife, and she's agreed. We will be married in the next few days, I expect." Seth took her hand in his and looked at her. She stared back when the "next few days" part sank in.

"You are gonna be our new mommy?" Anne asked from the end of the table, and all eyes turned to her.

"Yes, I guess so, sweetie." Lily had to pull her hand from Seth's grasp when Anne bounded around the table and jumped into her lap. The child hugged her around the neck, and Lily had to smile.

"No!" yelled Jarod, jumping to his feet and storming off to his bedroom, where he slammed the door behind him.

"I'll go talk to him." Seth rose to his feet and followed his son.

Lily was astonished at the terribly hurtful cry that was ripped from Jarod's throat when he denied what was happening to his family. It hurt her to think Jarod didn't want her here.

Johnny said, "It will be all right. He was very close to our mother, that's all. I'd be happy if you would live here with us. Maybe you can make Pop happy again."

"I'll do my best, sweetheart. I'll do my best." Lily continued to watch the closed door as she heard Jarod's heated voice from behind.

Several minutes later Jarod and Seth returned to the table. Jarod slowly approached Lily to apologize, but she knew it wasn't over yet by the anger reflected in his eyes.

After he made his apology, he asked, "May I be excused now?"

"Sure, son. We'll talk later," Seth answered. "He'll come around. Don't worry about it."

"I hope so."

Later that night, after everyone had gone to sleep, Lily lay in the bed in the guest room, wide awake, with nothing to do but think about what lay ahead for all of them. She finally got up, slipped on her bathrobe and opened her door slowly. She crept through the house and out the front door. The night air was chilly, so she drew the robe tighter around her. She didn't succumb to the chill and did not retreat into the house. The sounds surrounding her were soothing tonight while she stood on the porch looking out over the yard, watching the moonlight wash across the ground.

* * * *

Seth had stepped out onto the porch a little while earlier and sat in the chair to the side of the front door, but he knew Lily was completely unaware of his presence. He watched her several minutes as she stood at the porch railing. A man would be a fool not to want her—and want her he did, with every fiber of his being. His body had a will of its own when she was near, and while he sat there in the silence, his body reacted feverishly to her presence. The thin nightdress outlined her figure and her unbound hair lay in waves down her back and made his fingers itch to touch it. He knew the scent of her hair, even without standing near, and he groaned silently in his misery. How he planned to be married to her, sleeping in the same bed without touching her, he didn't know.

Maybe this marriage thing isn't such a good idea.

Waves of desire washed over him, and another groan rumbled through him. He wasn't aware he had let the groan slip from between his lips until he saw Lily turn at the noise.

"Seth. I didn't know you were out here."

"I know. I didn't want to disturb you, so I stayed silent. You looked lost in thought." He didn't rise from his chair. At this point, he wasn't sure his legs would hold him.

"Couldn't sleep?" she asked, stepping closer.

He had to clear his throat in an attempt to dislodge the lump that had formed when she walked toward him and the moonlight outlined her body beneath the nightdress. The material was almost transparent. With a bit of a squeak to his voice, he said, "No, I was a bit restless, that's all."

The scent of lavender clinging to her hair made matters worse, and he stifled a desperate moan.

"I know how you feel. I just kept tossing and turning in the bed, so I thought I might as well get up. She sat in the chair next to him making him wonder if he was going to lose his mind with her being so close. "I hope things are all right with Jarod. He seemed so upset with us being married."

"He's very upset, but he'll come around. It's not that he doesn't like you. It's just hard for him to accept anyone else in my life, or his, other than his mother. That's all." He took a deep breath, trying to calm his raging desire before he did something stupid, like take her in his arms again.

"I hope so. He's a good boy, and I don't want to do anything to upset him." She focused on Seth's face and put her hand on his arm while he tried not to flinch.

She really has no idea what her touch does to me. Sparks zipped down his arm to settle in his groin.

"Everything all right? You almost sound like you are in pain."

He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth while he tried desperately to conceal the desire raging through him at her touch. "Yeah, I'm fine," he said in a near whisper.

"Are you sure? You don't sound fine. Is there something I can do to help?"

His mind raced. He knew only too well just what she could do to help his condition, but he couldn't tell her. "No. I think I'll just go back to bed." He scooted to the edge of the chair but had to stop for a moment to regain control of his body while his rock hard shaft pressed insistently against the front of his trousers.

"I should return to bed as well. I guess I'll see you tomorrow then. Good night."

"Night," he squeaked in return.

Before she opened the door to go inside, she looked back over her shoulder, and he almost threw caution to the wind and followed her to her bed.

Chapter Fourteen

With the rise of the morning sun, the two adults sat at the breakfast table, reluctant to talk about the events of the previous night, especially in front of the children.

"We'll have to make a trip into town today to get your things from the house and talk to the preacher," Seth said as he finished his food and sipped his coffee. He watched her over the rim of his cup.

"I suppose so. I'm sure we can do this quickly and silently in town. Maybe just have Madge there. She's really my only friend here," she sighed, and sadness passed over her features for a moment. "It's too bad we couldn't wait a little and have Edward and Kathleen come out, but it would take them time to get here."

"We will do this as quietly as you wish."

He was certain this wasn't exactly the way she had planned on getting married. Didn't every woman wish for a nice wedding ceremony with all her family and friends around? Did he really want to take that from her? Hadn't she mentioned being engaged before she came to Parkville?

"It's fine. I never really wanted a big wedding anyway. I'd always kind of thought it would be a nice, small affair." She smiled, and her whole face lit up with mirth. "The matrons and eligible young ladies in town are going to be very upset, you realize. You're one of the most eligible bachelors around these parts, from what I'm told."

Eligible bachelor? I don't want a wife, much less any of prudes in town. So why in the hell am I marrying Lily? The children. I have to keep telling myself, it's for the children. "Of course, the children will be there. We can talk to the preacher and then figure things out. I'm sure Madge would love to be present. When would you like this to take place?"

“Uh... maybe in a day or two. Let’s see what the preacher has available. Not like we need to rush, really, except that it’s not proper for me to be staying here,” she said, lowering her eyes.

“Well, I don’t care much for propriety anyway. Why don’t you get whatever you need to take into town, and we’ll leave shortly then?”

“All right. I’ll be ready in a minute.” She headed off into the guest room while he went out the front door to hitch the wagon.

A short time later found them side-by-side on the wagon seat heading for town, with uncomfortable silence stretching between them.

“Are you really sure you want to do this, Seth? I mean, it would be fine if you’ve changed your mind.”

“Yes, I’m sure, and no, I haven’t changed my mind. I know it’s not exactly the kind of situation that you’d like to find yourself in, I’m sure, and if someday you meet someone else that you fall in love with, then I’ll be happy to step aside.”

“You’d do that?” Lily asked, surprised.

“If that’s what you wanted. Neither of us is coming into this marriage in love with the other, so if later, you know, after the children are grown, you want to leave, you can. I won’t stop you.” He dared not look at her, otherwise she’d realize her leaving was the last thing that he wanted.

Silence fell between them for the remainder of the trip.

* * * *

When the wagon rolled into town, Seth stopped at the boarding house so Lily could talk to Madge. “I’m going over to the store to get some supplies. I’ll meet you here in about an hour so we can walk over and talk to the preacher.”

Seth didn’t wait for her response but went back around the wagon after helping her down. He quickly jumped back in, obviously in a hurry to get away from her.

“Lily,” Madge excitedly called from the door. “Is that you? What are you doing here?”

“Hello, Madge. Seth dropped me off a moment ago. I need to talk to you, if you don’t mind. Is there somewhere private we can go?” Lily stepped onto the porch surrounding the front of the boarding house.

"Yes, of course, my dear. Follow me." Madge led her to the front parlor and closed the door behind them. "How about we go in the back where my private area is?"

"That would be wonderful."

After they had moved into Madge's private parlor, she closed the door and indicated for Lily to have a seat. "Now, what can I do for you? You seem to be in a strange mood." Madge seemed to be able to pick up on things Lily wished she couldn't.

"Madge, I need to ask a favor. Will you be a witness for me? Like a maid of honor, I suppose."

"Maid of honor? I don't quite understand." Madge's eyes opened wide, and she asked, "Are you and Seth getting married?"

"Yes. I guess you could say that."

Madge jumped up, lifted Lily to her feet and hugged her. "That's wonderful! I think you two will make a beautiful couple. When's the wedding?"

Relief washed over her. "Probably in a day or two, depending on the preacher."

As a worried frown pulled down the corners of her mouth, Madge fired the questions at Lily in rapid succession. "A day or two? Is there something I should know? Seth didn't take advantage of you, did he?"

Lily tried to reassure her as she placed her hand on Madge's arm. "No, Madge, that's not it at all. Nothing has happened between Seth and me. He just asked me to marry him the other day. It's protection for me after what happened the other night, and I can be a mother to his children."

"You mean you two aren't in love?"

The two women sat back down on the settee, and Lily tried to explain.

"No Madge, it's not like that. Maybe that will come someday, but for now, it's just a marriage of convenience, for the children's sake."

* * * *

Madge listened to Lily talk of the arrangements between her and Seth, and although Lily tried to assure her that she didn't love him, Madge knew better. She had seen the way Lily looked at him sometimes and how she had so readily accepted his help after the attack. No, this young woman was very

much in love with her soon-to-be husband, even if she didn't realize it herself just yet.

"I'd be happy to stand up with you," Madge said, in answer to Lily's original question. "Are you having a nice, big wedding? I'm sure there are many people who would come, even on short notice."

"No, nothing like that. It will be just you, the children, Seth and me, of course. We just want something small and quiet."

"You do realize everyone will be twittering about this for some time, you two getting married so quickly and all. There will be talk."

"I know, and I personally don't care. I don't think Seth does either. When I don't give birth in nine months, they'll find out that it's not because I am with child. I'm sure that's what will be said for the most part."

"You are probably correct. I will beat down the gossip as best I can, Lily. I hope you know that."

"I knew you were my friend, Madge." They heard the bell over the front entrance tinkle in the distance.

"That might be Seth. He was coming back after he finished at the grocer."

The two women walked out from the back to find Seth standing in the center of the front parlor.

"Well?" Seth asked, directing his query to the two women as they walked in.

"She agreed," Lily responded to his unspoken question.

"I'm happy for you, Seth. I think it's wonderful you two are getting married."

Raising a questioning eyebrow at Lily, he remarked, "She does understand what this is all about, right?"

"Yes, she knows."

"Yes, I know all about your reasons behind this marriage of sorts, but I still think you two make a nice couple. Just let me know when, and I'll be there."

"Well, we should head over to the church to talk to the preacher. Thanks again, Madge, for understanding."

"Of course, Seth."

* * * *

Seth stood for a moment looking at Lily. He hadn't really thought how strange this would be, talking to the preacher about marrying someone other than Victoria. The marriage between them had been almost expected, but now here he stood, approaching the preacher about marrying someone else, and it felt outlandish, odd but right. Seth picked up her hand from where it rested at her side and folded her fingers into his own as they turned to walk toward the church.

When she looked at him with a wide-eyed questioning look, he just said, "We need to keep up pretenses, of course. We can't just ask the preacher to marry us without giving him the impression we want to get married, right? Besides, the folks in town will start talking soon. See how those two women are spying on us from near the dress shop? It will be all over town by sundown that we were walking holding hands."

"I see."

Approaching the church, they took a deep breath, walked up the stairs and opened the door to go inside the cool interior. The preacher watched them enter with a curious expression. "Well, hello you two. Is there something I can help you with?"

They walked up the aisle toward the preacher. "Actually, yes there is. We would like to be married."

The preacher almost dropped the plate he was holding in his hands. "Married?"

He and David had known one another for a very long time. In fact, they had attended school together right here in this town, so David had known both him and Victoria, and when the two of them got married, David was in attendance.

"Yes, David. Marry. Lily and I." He was a little amused by the look he was getting from one of his long-time friends.

"This is rather sudden, isn't it?" David shifted his look back and forth between them. "I mean, Lily, you've only been in town a few weeks."

"I know, but Seth and I literally met before I even got here, on the train, and it was an instantaneous attraction, you could say," Lily told him, which

wasn't totally a lie, but it surprised Seth all the same to hear it come from her lips.

"Is there a problem, David?" He let go of Lily's hand for a moment so he could pull her to his side and wrap his arm around her shoulder.

"No. I suppose not. I'm sure six months or so from now would make a lovely wedding." David turned to grab his appointment book sitting on the pulpit.

"Six months? No, David. Two days. Or tomorrow, whichever is easier for you."

David almost tripped over the stair as he moved back in front of the couple. "Tomorrow? You aren't serious, Seth?"

"I'm dead serious, David. We want to be married tomorrow or the next day. What do you have open?"

"I... well... let me see." He scanned the pages in front of him, shifting his eyes to look at Lily, and then back to his book. "I believe either day would be fine."

"Which would you prefer, sweetheart?" Seth asked Lily.

* * * *

While they stood in front of the preacher discussing the ceremony arrangements, Lily felt a slight panic rising in her chest. Seth had asked her which she preferred, tomorrow or the day after, and when the endearment slipped so easily from his mouth, it gave her goose bumps.

"Why don't we say the day after tomorrow? That will give us a little more time to get things together." The realization of her upcoming marriage to the man standing next to her was becoming overwhelming, and she felt the panic rise further.

"All right then, the day after tomorrow. Shall we say about one o'clock?" Seth asked Lily, then David.

"That would be perfect, Seth. Thank you." She flashed him a brilliant smile while she played the part of the blushing bride and then gave him a quick brush of a kiss on his lips before she turned back to David.

"Is that all right with you, David?"

"Yes. That's fine. I'll see you two then."

Holding out his hand for David to shake, Seth said, "Thanks."

"No problem, Seth. Anything to help." He returned the handshake before she and Seth made their way back out the door to the waiting wagon.

After they had left the church, they stopped by her house to gather her belongings. It made her pause when she realized all her possessions in life would now be in his home, soon to be her home.

With all of them dressed in their Sunday best and Lily wearing a very pretty white gown she'd brought from Boston, she and Seth soon stood in front of David saying their vows.

"Seth Allen Sanford, do you take Lily to be your wife, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health from this day forward, 'til death do you part?"

"I do," Seth said, slipping the simple gold band on Lily's left hand.

Here she stood in front of God and everyone taking marriage vows to a man she hardly knew, but one she cared about more than she wanted to admit. David turned to her, told her what to say, and panic set in.

"Lillian Elizabeth Backman, do you take Seth for your husband, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health from this day forward, 'til death do you part?"

Lily stood quietly for a moment. She looked deep into Seth's eyes and realized she was marrying him and would stay married to him for the rest of her life, no matter what. She straightened her shoulders and took her vows. When she slipped the band on his ring finger and said in a whisper, "I do," she realized she really did want to be married to him. She wasn't going to give in to Victoria's memory so easily.

"By the power vested in me by the State of Texas, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride, Seth."

A sexy smile spread across Seth's lips before the twinkle in his eye caught her attention. He slipped his arms around her, pulled her close, and his mouth came down on hers in a kiss that made her toes curl and her knees buckle.

David and Madge congratulated them with warm hugs while the children cheered from their place in the pews.

"Shall we head over to the boarding house? I've got a small party for you two over there. Nothing fancy, just cake and some food," Madge said with a twinkle in her eye when Lily gave her a look saying she shouldn't have. "Stop giving me that look. You know I couldn't resist."

“Yay, a party,” Anne said clapping her hands joyfully as she jumped down and ran over to take Lily’s hand.

Even though the walk from the church to the boarding house was short, the obvious wedding party drew many an eye from the crowd nearby. There were several whispers as they made their way down the street, and protectively, Seth pulled her closer to his side.

Approaching the boarding house, the little party made its way inside. Seth, Lily and the children were totally surprised to see so many people there who yelled, “Surprise!”

She and Seth both turned to look at Madge.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she grumbled good-naturedly before they were immediately swallowed up in the excited crowd. There were several of the students there with their parents, the mayor and his wife, the preacher who had followed them over from the church, and several of the other townspeople they both knew.

Madge had arranged everything from a nice cake to food for everyone as they all celebrated the unusually quick wedding.

* * * *

Making his way around the room, Seth noticed Daniel standing in the corner with a glass of whiskey, and when Daniel lifted his glass in a mocking toast, Seth scowled. He didn’t bother to respond to the gesture before he turned back around to look for his wife.

His wife. Now that was odd to think of. When he’d first seen Lily on the train, the last thing he would ever have thought just a short month or so ago was that she would be his future wife.

He spied her across the room, chatting with several of the women, and he had to smile. She had to be explaining to them how they had become so enamored with one another; they just *had* to get married although they hadn’t known each other long. The smile she gave them when she placed her hand on her heart and told them the story was brilliant. When she saw him over the shoulder of one of the woman she was speaking with, her smile got a little wistful.

He held her gaze the entire time it took him to cross the room to her side, and then he bent to whisper in her ear, “Ready to go home?”

She shook her head in agreement, turned to the ladies she had been talking with and said, "Ladies, you'll have to excuse us."

"Of course, my dear," one of them said with a large smile.

Lily turned and slipped her arm through Seth's.

"Now go on, you two. I've taken care of everything, so don't worry about a thing," Madge said, ushering them out the door. As they walked out, the crowd pushed behind Madge to send them on their way.

Seth helped Lily onto the wagon seat and went around to the other side while the crowd yelled good wishes.

She waved from the wagon as they pulled out of town, until the throng of people disappeared around the bend in the road. A moment later, she turned around in the seat, and her smile faded.

"Anything wrong?"

"No. I'm just not sure what to expect from here, I guess, but that shouldn't be anything new since this has been such a whirlwind anyway," she said, studying the gold band on her left hand.

"Nothing has to change, Lily. We can just keep on the way we've been."

"I suppose you're right. It's just strange."

"Strange? Why?"

"I don't know. I just never imagined myself in a marriage of convenience. I know it's done—it's done all the time in Boston—but I always thought that I'd be able to find someone that I loved, who loved me in return."

He kept his eyes on the road in front of the wagon while he absorbed her words. A pang of guilt ripped across his heart, and he frowned. Silence surrounded them for the rest of the ride until they pulled into the yard at the ranch and he came around to help her down. Instead of letting her go right away, he stood there for a moment, holding her waist and looking into her eyes before he said, "You didn't have to do this, Lily."

"I know, Seth. I didn't mean for you to think I didn't want to."

He searched her face—for what, he wasn't sure—before he said, "I'm sorry. I just don't think that I can give you what you want." He dropped his hands and turned on his heel to head to the house while Lily was left standing in the yard alone.

The office door opened to the pressure of his hand. He grabbed the whiskey bottle and poured a hefty amount into a tumbler on the desk. He hadn't felt the need to drink in a few weeks now, not since the night he had spent following the afternoon at Victoria's grave, but tonight he needed one. More than one, probably. The look in Lily's eyes when she stood so innocently in the yard had told him all he needed to know.

God help us both. He ran his hands over his eyes before he took another large drink from the glass. Sitting back in the big chair, he contemplated what the hell he would do now.

* * * *

Lily silently walked into the house and shut the door softly behind her. When she passed the mirror in the front hall, she was stunned at her reflection. The dress fit her perfectly, with its beautiful skirt and scooped neckline, and the flowers Madge had put in her hair made her look like a real bride.

A bride who will never know her husband's love. She shook her head and turned from the reflection before she moved down the quiet hall toward her bedroom.

She didn't bother to shut the door behind her as she moved toward the window. She stood looking outside while the sun began to fade in the evening sky. A soft sigh escaped her lips, and she reached up to pull the pins from her hair, letting it cascade down her back. She put the pins on the top of the bureau, but when she set them down, she looked up to see Seth standing in the hall between his office and her room. He watched her with a hooded expression and a smoky gray color to his eyes.

Everything had happened so quickly that later she would wonder if she'd just imagined it. One minute he stood outside her room, and the next he was in front of her, his mouth coming down hard on hers, taking her breath away.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders while he ravished her lips with his, invading her with his tongue. His hands wandered down her back before he wrapped them in her hair. When he finally lifted his head, his lips traveled down her neck, licking and nibbling as he went, and she moaned under his touch. After a moment he cupped her face with his hands and

looked deeply into her eyes. "I need you, Lily. Please, let me make love to you."

She didn't know what to say. She was now married to this man, and he had every right to take possession of her body. He had said he wanted only a platonic relationship, but now he said he wanted to make love to her.

His warm whiskey-scented breath fluttered across her lips and made her tingle all over, as he whispered, "Just say yes, Lily, please."

Inhaling sharply, she did the only thing she knew. She pushed against him until he let her go. "I'm sorry, Seth. I can't do this. You said you wanted only a mother for your children, nothing more." She stepped farther away, putting as much distance between them as she could.

She wasn't sure which was worse to see, the pain flickering across his face, or the rage that took its place. He spun on his heel, walked out of her room and slammed the door behind him.

Shortly afterward, she heard the office door slam shut too and a glass shatter when it hit the wall. With dread grasping at her heart, she slid to the floor and buried her face in her hands while she wept. *This was such a mistake. How am I going to survive being married to him like this?*

The long night was hell. She sat in the rocker near the window watching the clouds roll across the moon and listening to the crickets in the distance. Lily didn't know how she was going to stay away from him until he fell in love with her. She had come to realize during the night, she was indeed in love with her husband. The realization only made things much more painful to endure.

"God help me." She didn't want to be just a mother to his children; she wanted to be his wife in every way.

After she finally got dressed in a working frock, she headed for the kitchen. She knew Seth had given Carmen the day off, so she made her way there to prepare breakfast. When it was almost done, she heard him come out of the office, where he'd evidently spent the night.

When he came around the corner, squinting at her from bloodshot eyes, she asked, "Coffee?"

"Yeah, I guess I should."

* * * *

It had been one hell of a long night while he tried to make himself comfortable in the chair in his office. He could have moved to his own room, but guilt over his behavior made him stay where he was, drinking heavily throughout the night. When he was finally roused by the banging in the kitchen, he opened the door and walked a little unsteadily toward the noise.

He knew his eyes were bloodshot, and he knew he looked like hell, but when Lily met him at the door, he couldn't help smiling a little sheepishly. She never turned around until she'd filled the cup and handed it to him.

"Thanks." He lifted the hot coffee to his lips and took a tentative sip.

"You're welcome. Breakfast?"

His head felt like it wanted to split wide open when he peered up at her from his seat. "I'm not sure my stomach can handle it."

"Actually, Edward used to say a good breakfast could cure any previous night of too much inebriation, so here, eat." She placed the heaping plate of food in front of him and then disappeared back into the kitchen to fix her own. She returned a moment later and took the seat next to him.

He ate slowly, and when his stomach didn't completely rebel at the food, he ate more. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until the entire plate of food had disappeared and he felt a hundred times better.

"About last night." He paused for a moment and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I'd already had too much to drink at the party, and then when we got home..."

Lily stopped him with a raised hand and said, "It's all right. I'm sure it won't happen again, right?" She stood, picked up their plates and returned them to the kitchen.

"Uh..." He furrowed his brow while her statement rolled around in his mind. Maybe she didn't want to make love with him, but then again, she returned his kisses every time their lips met, and she had moaned in response to his touch. Now he wasn't sure what to think.

She returned to the table with more coffee. "I mean, we don't have a real marriage, so we just need to keep it simple."

"Tonight when the children come home, we'll have to share my bed though."

"I know. We'll just deal with that when it comes."

He didn't like where this was going. He'd told her he wanted to be just friends, yes, but after last night, it would be nice to hold her and make love to her each night, in his big bed. He wanted her, Lord knew he wanted her, but he had to figure out how he could make that happen without falling in love with her. He stood and said, "I guess we should hitch the wagon and go get the children then."

"I suppose so, unless you want to go alone. I'll stay here and straighten up a bit since Carmen is off today."

"That's fine, if you want to."

He grabbed his hat and swung open the door, only to realize he'd never gone back out last night to unhitch the horses when they'd returned.

"Damn it!"

"What's wrong?"

"The horses never got unhitched."

He walked out, unhitched them and took them into the barn, grumbling the entire time. When he returned, he walked back into the house and hung his hat back on the rack.

"I won't be able to go until later now. Those horses need to rest since I was stupid and left them out last night."

"I'm sorry. I guess that I should have said something when I came in."

"It wasn't your fault, it was mine. I guess I was a little preoccupied." He looked at her, standing there in front of him, and he ached to kiss her, but he kept his distance.

"I have some things I need to work on in the office today anyway. I'll see you later."

* * * *

She watched him walk down the hall with an ache in her heart. She wanted a regular marriage now, but she wasn't sure how to get it. Maybe tonight, when they had to share a bed, she might be able to convince him he cared for her, even just a little. Love would come in time if he could just open his heart to someone other than Victoria.

Lily spent the rest of the day cleaning up around the house and preparing things for when the children came home.

She had even taken a big step in trying to make Seth see her for the loving woman she was. She had gone into the guest room, where so many of Victoria's things were kept, and had packed them away in a trunk. Seth hadn't seen it yet, and she was almost afraid of what he would say when he found out, but this was her home now too, and although she didn't want to take Victoria's place in the children's hearts, she did in Seth's. If that meant erasing Victoria from his life in small ways, then so be it.

During the day, Seth hadn't come out of the office except to eat lunch when she'd called him. They ate in uncomfortable silence until he returned to the office and she felt she could breathe again.

He left around three to pick up the children from Madge's place, so she worked on getting supper ready and tried to focus on some lesson plans for the children. She would have to return to teaching no later than Monday, she'd decided. She had talked to the mayor during the party, and he had said it was fine to wait until then since she and Seth had just gotten married. Her contract said she couldn't marry, but since Seth was a prominent member of the community, the mayor said he would overlook the little detail.

Shortly after five Seth returned with the children, and Lily was glad to see them. A big smile spread across her face. Some of the tension between her and Seth lightened when the children came bounding in the door, chattering away, telling Lily what they had done with Madge all day. They were so full of energy, she had to laugh because she knew it would be several hours before they would settle down and be able to go to sleep, which was fine with her. The more time she could avoid crawling into Seth's bed that evening, the better. She needed to formulate a plan.

When the children finally settled down and she had tucked them all in for the night, she headed back down the hall to Seth's office. He'd retreated there again after supper, but she wanted him to kiss the children good night.

She knocked on the door, opening it without waiting for his reply. "Seth?"

As she slowly opened the door, she could see him bent over what appeared to be ledgers of numbers. When she entered, he raised his head, scrubbed his eyes for a moment and ran his fingers through his hair.

She wanted so much to finger-comb those curls back into place, and her hand rose almost instinctively when their eyes met across the expanse of the room.

Her hand dropped back to her side. "I... uh... the children wanted you to kiss them good night."

"Oh, yeah, all right. I'm finished for tonight anyway," he replied before he got up from his big chair and blew out the lamp on the corner of the desk.

His gaze never left hers as he walked toward her. He stopped next to her, and his stare dropped to her half parted lips. Her heart started to pound wildly in her chest. In the next instant he sighed and walked out the door without so much as a backward glance.

She stood frozen to the spot after he left and put her hand on her chest to try to calm her racing heart. When she was finally able to breathe again, she turned around to follow him back toward the front of the house. Their bedroom loomed in front of her, and she moved toward it with only one thought: she knew it was going to be a long night.

Seth said good night to the children while she paced. She hadn't been in his room before now, and she was surprised to see the lack of feminine things in comparison to the room in the back.

It was obviously a man's bedroom. The furniture was large, the room expansive in comparison, and the furniture fit perfectly although it was somewhat bulky in nature. A very large bed sat near the window, centered in the room with two dressers and an armoire to hang clothes in. She hadn't moved her things in as of yet, but Seth had apparently moved some of his things around in preparation for hers. There were empty drawers in one of the bureaus. His clothes had been pushed aside in the armoire to make room for hers, and the top of one of the dressers was cleaned off in order for her to put her small, personal things on it. No frilly coverlet graced the bed, there was no rocker in the corner, and no lace curtains were on the window, as in the other room.

She stood there, studying the layout and staring at the big bed, realizing she and Seth would be sharing it that night. A moment later she felt Seth's presence behind her.

* * * *

After Seth had said good night to the children, he headed toward his room. Once he reached the doorway, he stood for a moment behind Lily, to study the room himself and try to visualize what she saw. He realized how

impersonal it appeared to him. He and Victoria had shared this room their entire marriage, but she'd never really made it hers. She'd decorated the back room with her feminine things, leaving their bedroom bare. Now that he thought about it, it seemed a little odd.

"I see you haven't moved your things in yet."

"No. I was busy with other things today, so I hadn't really thought about it until now. I'll move them tomorrow, I guess. I need to get something to sleep in, though, so I'll be right back."

He watched her retreating figure and then moved quickly into the room. He normally slept nude but he hadn't thought about how it might make her uncomfortable until now. He undressed quickly and slid between the sheets before she returned.

She entered their room a few minutes later, already dressed in her nightgown. She'd pulled the pins from her hair and brushed it out before she had returned. He almost wished she hadn't. Her hair fascinated him. He would have loved to watch her brush it. The lamplight reflected off the long waves when she moved.

She stood chewing her lip by the dresser before she took a long, deep breath and moved toward the vacant side of the bed. She pulled the sheets back and slid in beside him.

He rolled over and blew out the lamp on his side of the bed. His body screamed for contact with hers, but he fought the desire rushing through his veins with each breath. "Thank you for taking care of things today with Carmen gone," Seth said quietly in the darkness while the moon shone brightly through the rough curtains that hung on the window.

"My pleasure. I don't mind cooking and cleaning. It keeps me busy when I'm not working on lessons for the children."

"When are you going to start classes again?"

"Monday, I think. That will give me some time over the next couple of days to get some things together. I already talked to the mayor at the party, and he said that would be fine."

"Good. I know our children are getting restless already, so I'm sure the other parents are feeling the strain, too, with their children at home."

Silence stretched between them, and he struggled to find something else to say. "Well, good night then." He rolled onto his side and settled down to try to sleep.

"Good night," she whispered, and he fought the urge to gather her to his side and hold her close.

The next morning, he woke before Lily, slipped out of the big bed, grabbed his boots and headed for the barn. It had taken him quite a while to fall asleep as he lay there thinking about the beautiful woman lying next to him and how much he wanted her. His body ached with his attempts to keep his desire in check, and he needed release soon, otherwise, he would surely go mad.

At some point in the night, she had curled up behind him with her hand resting over his stomach. When he'd opened his eye that was the position he found the two of them in. The desire to roll over and take her right there was almost his undoing. He nearly bolted from the bed when she moved in her sleep and snuggled deeper into his backside, and slid her feet over his. He had to lie there for several minutes, trying to control his rapid breathing, before he attempted to slide out of her grasp without waking her.

It will be a cold swim in the pond above the house this morning.

* * * *

In the coming days, things settled down to somewhat of a routine for the makeshift family as Lily helped Carmen around the house, played with the children and slept beside Seth each night. Her heart craved the man next to her while they lay side-by-side in the big bed, never touching, hardly talking, but always hoping he would come to love her someday.

The next day Seth discovered she'd packed all Victoria's things away, and he flew into an absolute rage.

They stood toe-to-toe in the middle of the room. "What the hell have you done?" he yelled.

She tried to reassure him. "I didn't throw anything away, Seth." His rage scared her, but she wasn't going to back down. "I only packed them in the trunk over there."

"How could you? Those were her things!"

"I realize that, but this is our home now. Not yours and hers. If you want them out, then take them back out yourself, but I'll not be faced with your memories of her haunting where I live." He began to pace, and fear gripped her heart. "Just remember who asked whom to get married."

His angry hiss reverberated around the room. “Don’t throw it back in my face, woman. You know the reasons behind that, and you could have refused.”

“I know, and I didn’t, but this is my home now too.”

He glared as the fire in his eyes scorched her to her very soul. “Fine! Do whatever you wish.” He raked her body with his gaze, then spun around and slammed out of the house.

When the front door banged shut, she slumped into the rocker, and all the fight drained out of her. If they didn’t get some things straight between them soon, this was going to be a very long and unhappy union.

Chapter Fifteen

The turbulent days ended when Monday finally arrived and Lily could get back to teaching. The wagon was a little harder to maneuver than a small buggy, but she figured it out when she took the children into town for school.

Excitement rippled on the air when they all took their seats, almost bouncing in their enthusiasm. It didn't take any time at all for them to start calling her Mrs. Sanford. She liked the way it sounded.

The days became routine. Lily took the children in each day for class, and Seth worked around the ranch breaking horses and doing chores.

On Wednesday Daniel shuffled into the schoolhouse after the children had left for the day.

He slipped in through the back door and moved toward her with a slow roll of his hips. "Mrs. Sanford." The sound of her name coming from his mouth sounded almost like a sneer.

"Daniel. I'm surprised to see you. What can I do for you?" She was uncomfortable with him near her now as she silently compared him to Seth.

"I thought we might continue with our lessons." He seated himself on the corner of her desk, crossing his arms.

"Yes, well, I suppose that would be all right. But I can't today. I need to make arrangements for the children on the days we are to meet so that they are not stuck here in town until we are finished. How about tomorrow?" The children stood in the doorway waiting for her to gather her things and heard every word of the conversation.

"That would work fine. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon." He flashed a quick smile and a wink in her direction before he turned and walked out the back door.

She sighed and headed for the front door. The children scrambled out of the schoolhouse and into the wagon while Lily locked the door behind her

and scurried to get into the wagon seat herself. At times like these she wished she were able to wear the trousers she had claimed the day she and Seth had gone riding. They were much easier to move about in when she had to climb in and out of the wagon. She smiled when she thought of how the town would react to her wearing trousers every day to school. *I can hear the matrons already!* A giggle burst from her lips, and the children shot her a confused look.

When they got home, Seth came out from the barn to take the horses and unhitch them for her. His hot stare warmed her back as it followed her into the house.

That night at supper Jarod blurted out, much to Lily's chagrin, "Pop, did you know Miss Lily was giving Mr. Roberts lessons?"

Seth's gaze swung around to her with a questioning raise of his eyebrow. "Is she now?"

Lily turned to Jarod, giving him a frown, and he bowed his head. "It is nothing, really."

"Nothing?" Seth questioned, waiting for her to explain.

"I'm just doing some tutoring for him. In fact, can you pick up the children after school tomorrow? I have an appointment with him."

After a moment he said, "All right," but the look he gave her told her he wasn't happy about the situation.

* * * *

Nothing more was said until later that night, when they were lying in the big bed. "I don't want you seeing Daniel."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her head snap around to stare at him in the darkness. "Excuse me?"

"I don't want you seeing Daniel."

"I'm not *seeing* Daniel. I'm tutoring him."

"All right. I don't want you tutoring him either."

"I didn't realize you had any say in the matter," Lily snapped.

"I am your husband, am I not?"

"Yes but..." Lily started, but he interrupted.

"I am telling you not to tutor him anymore." He was angry. The rage at her defiance burned in his gut until he thought he would be sick.

Sitting straight up in the bed, she said, "Let me get this straight. You are forbidding me to tutor a student who needs my help."

He snorted. "No. I'm forbidding you to tutor Daniel. How hard is this to understand, Lily?"

"Well, let me tell you something, husband of mine," she replied angrily. "I will do as I please when it comes to teaching someone in that fashion. I am a teacher, and as a teacher, I will teach, whether it be a child or an adult who needs my help, Daniel or not."

She settled back down next to him and turned on her side away from him.

She was supposed to do what he told her, wasn't she? He was learning more and more each day about this woman he had married. Now he was learning how stubborn and bullheaded she was while she defied his order not to tutor Daniel. He knew enough now to know that she would do whatever she wanted, no matter what he said, so he would just have to keep a close eye on her. The thought of his wife and the other man together gnawed at his gut. A scene of the two of them making love flashed across his mind and just about ripped his heart out. He had told her if she found someone to love, he would let her go, and that thought now was like a knife to his chest as he rolled away and lay there in the silence.

* * * *

Daniel appeared through the back door precisely at three fifteen. Lily had laid out several lesson plans and tried to get him to focus on where they'd left off previously. He obviously wasn't interested in learning what she put in front of him. His goal was to find out what type of relationship she had with Seth.

"How are things with you and Seth?"

"Fine. Now can you read this line for me?" Lily tried to change the subject in an attempt to get him to focus.

"I was a bit surprised when Aunt Madge said you two were getting married. I hadn't realized you'd become so close," he replied, refusing to concentrate on the book.

"I know it was rather sudden, but we care a lot for each other, and it just seemed natural, I guess. You know, I really don't want to talk about my relationship with Seth. Can we focus on the lessons, please?"

"You know, I'm a little disappointed."

"Why's that?"

"Because I wanted to get to know you a little better myself. You're a very beautiful woman, Lily." He put his hand on her face and slid it up into her hair.

"Daniel! This is completely improper. I'm a married woman. Now please, let go." She grasped his wrist and tried to pull it back from her face.

"Aren't you the least bit interested in comparing me with Seth? Victoria certainly was." His mouth swooped down on hers, brutally taking her lips in a grinding assault.

She placed her hands on his chest and attempted to push him away. Before she could, he was jerked back and flung out of the seat next to her, landing on the floor several feet away.

Lily turned to see Seth standing over her with an enraged look in his eyes. "Did I interrupt something?"

"Seth." Her voice sounded breathless even to her as she tried to stand on shaky legs. "It's not what it looks like."

"Isn't it? He appeared to be kissing you. Am I mistaken?" His eyes narrowed into slits as Daniel stumbled to his feet and stood with fists clenched at his sides.

"What's between me and Lily is none of your business, Seth."

"It's not? That's strange, since she's my wife! Keep your hands off her, Daniel, before I have to kill you," Seth growled, straining his words through clenched teeth. His hand hovered near the pistol he kept at his side whenever he was away from the house. "Get your things, Lily, we're going home."

Daniel stood almost toe-to-toe with Seth as they each measured the other. Lily grabbed her things and then she touched Seth on the arm and said, "Let's go, please. This is insane. You don't want to kill each other."

* * * *

The pressure of her hand on his arm reached the rage that had clouded his mind when he entered the school house and saw them. He put his arm around her shoulder, and they walked out, leaving Daniel standing in the middle of the room. Silence enveloped them on the ride back to the house. Anger held him in its claws while he gripped the reins with white knuckles and fought the feelings rippling through him.

When they reached the yard, he stopped and jumped down, walking around to help her out of the wagon. Her feet touched the ground, but his hands didn't leave her waist. He was sure thinly veiled fury reflected in his gaze when he stared down at her face. Without a word, his mouth came down on hers, hard. She whimpered softly under his assault. The sound reached inside the anger that encompassed his mind, and he softened the kiss as her arms came up around his neck.

He finally raised his head and said, "You are my wife. Remember that."

She stumbled when he let her go and grabbed the horses to head for the barn.

Later, when he had finally followed her into the house, he passed their bedroom and headed for the office and the whiskey. He could hear her crying softly, even though it was muffled behind the closed door, and it tore at his gut. He hated a woman's tears. Victoria always knew how to get what she wanted. All she had to do was turn on the tears, and he would do anything she wanted. Now it was Lily's turn. She had learned to turn him inside out every day, and he had no way to stop it. When he had gone into the schoolhouse and saw her kissing Daniel, he had almost lost his mind. He knew the pistol at his side would take care of the other man, but he'd never wanted to kill another person in cold blood until that moment. When they had stood toe-to-toe, he'd almost pulled the trigger. Lily's voice had penetrated the anger boiling in him and snapped him out of pulling the gun.

He poured himself a large glass of whiskey, downing it in one gulp before he poured another and let the heat warm his insides.

Jealous? Is that what was happening to him? Was he jealous of Daniel? He didn't know. All he knew was he didn't want Lily with anyone other than him, and when he sat down in the big chair, thoughts of their last several days together ran across his mind.

He heard Lily tucking the children in while he sat in the office. He hadn't come out all afternoon because he didn't want to face her. He

couldn't, not after what had happened at the schoolhouse. He had acted like the jealous husband, and he wasn't sure he liked the idea at all. He didn't know when she had gotten under his skin, but he knew she was there, like a burr under a horse blanket, and he bucked at every turn.

He finally blew out the lamp in the office and headed off to bed, hoping she had already fallen asleep. He wasn't sure right now if he would be able to stop himself from making love to her, no matter what she said in protest. Approaching their door, he breathed a small sigh of relief when he saw no light shining beneath.

He walked to his side of the bed and sat down before he pulled off his boots, stripped down to bare skin, and slipped under the sheets beside her.

"Seth?" she said in the darkness. "I think we need to talk about what happened earlier."

Damn. He really didn't want to talk about what happened, not now, not ever, but she obviously wasn't about to let it go.

"I don't know how much you saw, but it wasn't what you thought it was."

"It wasn't? It sure looked like it to me."

"You clearly don't believe me, but I wouldn't lie to you. There is nothing between Daniel and me, although he sounded like he wanted there to be."

"That wouldn't surprise me in the least. Question is, do you?" He held his breath and waited for her answer.

"No. I don't want to be anywhere but here." Honesty laced her words as she rolled toward him. "I only want to be with you, but right now, I don't know what you want from me."

Seth didn't know how to answer. He wanted her with every fiber of his being, but could he love her? He wasn't sure. He didn't know if the feelings growing between them were love. He thought he was in love with Victoria, but what he felt for Lily seemed completely different. He ached for his new wife, even when she wasn't there. He longed to see her smile at him with the loving expression she so lavishly gave to their children. He wanted her to touch him, kiss him and give herself to him of her own free will, but they had made a deal. He would give her the security of marriage while she took care of their children. Could he go back on it now? Would she let him?

With his mind racing, he could feel her eyes on him waiting for—no, *wanting* an answer. He slowly rolled toward her. “I’m not sure I can give you what you want.”

“All I want is you,” she said, moving closer and laying her hand on his chest. She wound her fingers through the mat of hair and tipped her head before she locked her lips with his.

It was like the dam had broken. He pulled her to him and plundered her mouth with his. His tongue and lips were everywhere and nowhere at the same time. He explored the inside of her mouth, down her neck, alternating between nibbling and licking while he traced the pattern with his hands. She moaned softly. He needed to feel her skin. Desperate for the feel of her next to him, he grabbed the neckline of her nightgown and ripped it from her body in one tug. She gasped when his mouth surrounded her nipple and flicked it with his tongue. It puckered to a hard nub, and she moaned again, her hands grasping at his shoulders.

He was almost out of control. *Slow down.* She wiggled beneath him, and he almost lost what little self-restraint he possessed.

He slowed his assault on her breast to a soft caress of his tongue while his hand skimmed her flat belly and traveled down her hip.

“I want to touch you,” she murmured. “Let me.”

* * * *

She had no idea what she was doing, but she knew she wanted to touch him, to feel every inch of his work-worn skin with her palms. She felt a flush creep up her chest and across her cheeks when he rolled onto his back. Settling herself over him, she ran her hands over his chest and arms until she heard a rumble of a groan in his chest. While her breasts pressed against his chest, she kissed him and ran her lips along his jaw like he had done to her. She flicked her tongue around his ear, swirling and dipping before taking the lobe between her teeth and nibbling softly. She inhaled his unique scent of sunshine and male.

“Oh God, Lily,” he whispered before he rolled her over onto her back and pinned her hands above her head. He kissed her with all the pent-up passion the constant closeness had created in him over the last month. His

lips slid along hers, soft as rose petals, stealing her breath away while a moan worked its way to the surface.

She felt his body slide its way down her front, his masculine hair scraping along her skin when he moved, sending currents of passion to settle between her legs. He kissed and caressed each inch he touched until he reached the apex between her thighs and the soft curls nestled there.

“Open your legs, sweetheart. I want to taste you.” She moaned softly when he settled himself between her thighs and his mouth found her core. She thought she would lose her mind as her blood turned to liquid fire in her veins. She wasn’t sure exactly what was supposed to happen, but she did know what his tongue did to her was not on that “prim and proper list” most young girls were given. Every young woman had the talk with her mother about submitting to her husband, but *oh God! Submission? Is that what this is?*

All coherent thoughts fled when the roughness of his tongue found the hard nub at her center. *Oh Lord, his tongue is...* The thought disappeared almost the moment it surfaced. One, two flicks, and she was lost when blood rushed in her ears and stars flashed behind her eyelids. Her whole body shuddered in release, and she thought her heart would burst from her chest.

She lay there for a moment; languishing in the satisfaction of her release as her senses returned and she realized Seth was still kissing her. He worked his way back up her body, licking her belly and inching his way up to settle his mouth on her breast. Her blood began to pulse in her veins. He moved to the other breast, giving it the same quality of attention while he slipped between her thighs. She could feel him hard as a rock between her legs while he worked his magic on her body. His lips returned to her mouth, and his tongue plunged between her lips when he pushed inside her. The pain of his entrance swept the fog of desire from her mind for moment, and she whimpered beneath him.

He pulled his mouth from hers when he heard her whimper. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. It will only hurt for a moment.” His fingers swept the tear from her cheek before he began to move. A groan rumbled deep in his chest, and she realized the pain was gone as heat flooded her center. He opened his eyes to look directly into hers, and she wiggled beneath him. “Sweetheart, please hold still for a minute. It’s been too long.”

Unsure what he meant, she held very still until she felt him move within her. The friction was like nothing she'd ever felt before. She wrapped her legs around his hips, and he started to move faster and faster. His tortured groan reached her ears, and she opened her eyes to see his face contorted like he was in pain. The pleasure curling in her belly did nothing for her sanity as she felt liquid spill from within her, sliding down between them, coating them both, making the friction all the more pleasurable.

When their climax came, he groaned and surged within her as hard as he could. Stars began to burst behind her eyelids as she arched toward him and he shuddered above her.

After a moment he rolled off, relieving her of his weight, but pulling her with him. She snuggled against his side and rested her head on his chest, her hand winding through the hair beneath her cheek.

Inhaling a steadying breath, she couldn't hold her feelings in any longer. She had to say it. Telling him would leave her heart wide open to whatever he would do to it once he knew.

Chapter Sixteen

“I love you.”

Sighing heavily, he shifted away from her and sat up on the side of the bed, holding his head in his hands.

He felt her sit up behind him, wrapping her arms around him while she laid her head against his back.

“You don’t have to say anything. You don’t have to feel anything. I just needed you to know.”

He wasn’t sure what he felt for her, this beautiful, caring and passionate woman he now called his wife. What had just happened between them was nothing like he’d ever felt before. He was afraid to put a name to it, afraid to open his heart to her, but he wasn’t sure he had a choice anymore. His heart had taken to behaving of its own free will these days, and no matter how hard he tried not to love her, he did. Lord help him, he loved his wife with all of his heart and soul, and nothing could change that.

She pulled away from him and rolled onto her side of the bed. Pain emanated from her very being and hung like a cloud over the entire room. He wasn’t about to let her go, and when he curled up behind her and whispered in her ear, the pain lifted from her shoulders and the room became bathed in love.

“I love you, too. I just didn’t want to admit it, even to myself, but you worked your way into my heart before I even realized it, and now I can’t live without you.”

“Really?”

Tears sparkled on her lashes, and he wiped them away with his fingers.

“Yes, really.” He took her mouth with his again in a kiss she felt clear to her toes. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as he began to work his magic all over again.

Come morning, it was apparent to all those in the household, the children especially, that something had changed in the relationship. They waltzed out of their room later than usual for breakfast, with Seth's arm wrapped around his wife's waist and a pretty blush on her cheeks.

Carmen started to whistle and scurried off to the kitchen to dish up the breakfast. The children sat in silence when they witnessed Seth planting a nice lingering kiss on Lily's lips before he sat down at his place at the table. Anne giggled in the background, and Lily turned red at Seth's behavior.

Carmen set a plate down in front of Seth and then one in front of Lily before she bent down and whispered in her ear, "It's about time you two figured things out."

Her thoughts returned to the night before and how her husband had taught her things about her own body she'd never been aware of. She had no idea her breasts were so sensitive to the pressure of his mouth, and when the rough pad of his tongue had run over the spot between her thighs...

Seth leaned over to murmur, "You need to stop thinking those things, otherwise, we won't be getting anything done today—concerning work that is."

Her cheeks flamed when his words rushed to her head, and when he settled back in his chair with a silly smirk on his lips, she wanted to smack him. After breakfast was over, he stood and headed for the kitchen with his plate while she followed. She approached the sink behind him, and he turned around, took her in his arms and planted a very passionate kiss on her mouth before letting her go.

"I need to get some things done, my lovely wife. I'll see you later." He stepped back, walked around her, and grabbed his hat before he went outside whistling a saucy tune.

Lily placed the dishes in the sink, and almost in a daze she walked back into the dining room while she tried to hurry the children in order for them not to be late for school. It was Friday, and she was looking forward to spending the weekend with her new family.

When the foursome reached the school, Lily realized it was going to be very difficult to keep her mind on the lessons for the children if she didn't quit thinking about what Seth had done to her body.

Early afternoon approached, and she was in a hurry to return home to her husband when Daniel stopped by. She really didn't want to see him. His

presence made her more uncomfortable with each passing day since he'd tried to take liberties.

"What do you want?" Irritation was clear in her voice and contempt now evident with each movement she made. He needed to know she didn't like what happened the other day and she wasn't about to let it continue.

"I'm sure you know." He raked her body with his gaze, and the heat in his eyes sent shivers of revulsion up her spine. She really hadn't noticed before that he wasn't a very nice man, but she did now. Today he had been bold enough to walk right in the front door, daring anyone to deny him entrance.

"Daniel, please. I'm really not in the mood for your innuendos. What is it you want?"

"You, but that will have to come later, I'm afraid. You'll get tired of Seth, just like Victoria did."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing," he said with a smirk. He headed back to the front door but stopped beside Johnny and Jarod for a moment to look back at her. When he did, the resemblance between the three shocked her. The boys had the same dark hair, the same dark eyes and olive complexion Daniel carried, and the same hawk-like nose that was completely unlike Seth's. She'd never seen Victoria, of course, but she was under the impression Victoria had a fair complexion too.

Daniel tipped his hat to her and walked out the door as she sank into the chair near her.

It couldn't possibly be. Surely she saw something not really there when she studied their features. *Daniel couldn't possibly be Johnny and Jarod's father, could he?*

Seth said he and Victoria had been married before their births, but something Daniel said the other day when he'd attacked her registered in her mind.

Aren't you the least bit interested in comparing Seth and me? Victoria was.

"Are you all right, Miss Lily? Shall I go get Pop?"

"No, sweetheart. I'm fine," she said, trying to bring her thoughts back to the children. "Let's go home."

She grabbed her things and ushered the children out the door, locking it behind her, while her thoughts went back to Seth. She couldn't wait to get home and see him again.

* * * *

The wagon rolled into the yard while Seth stood on the porch waiting for his family to come home. *His family*. Now that was a different thought.

When Lily stopped the wagon, he helped her down, and the children scrambled from the back before they ran for the house.

"Everything all right?" The look on her face told him she was clearly upset.

"Yes. I just had another run in with Daniel this afternoon, that's all."

He swept over her, checking for himself to make sure she wasn't hurt. "What did he say? What did he do? Did he hurt you?"

"No, he didn't hurt me or anything. It was fine, Seth, really."

"I think I need to go into town and have a nice little talk with him myself." He grabbed the seat to hoist himself aboard the wagon, but Lily's hand on his arm stopped him.

"Let it go, Seth. It was nothing."

He turned to look at his wife, and the look in her eyes made him reconsider killing Daniel for her—for now.

"All right. I'll let it go, but if he doesn't stop this, I will." He took her in his arms and held her tight against his chest. He couldn't lose her, not now, not ever.

When he finally let her go, he told her he'd put the horses away and be in the house in a few minutes for supper. When he led the horses into the barn, the urge to kill Daniel almost overcame his reasoning. *If he does anything to hurt Lily or the children, I will have to kill him.*

Later that night when all the children were in bed and Seth held Lily in his arms, he pulled her tight against him, and she rested her head on his chest. How she had taken complete control of his heart in such a short time, he'd never know, but he refused to fight it anymore. He loved her. If he ever lost her, he would lose his mind. He thought he would go crazy when Victoria died, but it was nothing compared to the terrifying thought of losing

Lily. She had quickly become everything to him, and he would do whatever he had to do to protect her.

The thoughts fluttering across his mind scared the hell out of him, and he had the insane urge to feel her warmth wrapped around him once again.

“Again?” she teased as his mouth moved a trail down her neck to her naked breast, and she moaned softly.

“Are you complaining, wife?” His own smile rippled across his mouth when he raised his head to look into her eyes.

“Not on your life, my husband. I love what you do to me.”

His mouth settled back on her breast, and he teased the nipple with his tongue until it stood at attention. She moaned softly in her throat and arched her back to press his mouth harder against her.

He loved to make her body want his. His tongue moved down her belly while he traced circles on her skin.

“Seth, please,” she begged.

His mouth wandered further down until his tongue rasped across her clit. He toggled the sensitive bud several times before he whispered, “Tell me what you want.” His tongue licked her stomach then went back down again.

“Oh God, Seth, please.”

“Tell me what you want,” he said again. He wanted to hear her say the words. He needed to hear her tell him she wanted him.

“Make love to me. I need you.”

He moved over her and slid into her hot core with a heavy groan. “My pleasure, sweet wife.”

They rode the wave of passion to the breaking point as he pushed into her feverishly, until the stars burst behind his eyelids and all strength left his body. When he finally had the energy to roll off, he pulled her tightly to his side and whispered in her hair, “I love you.”

He felt her sleepy smile against his skin before she whispered, “I love you.” He finally drifted off to sleep with a satisfied smile after he heard Lily’s soft snores next to him.

The next day he wanted to take Lily riding again. He lay on the bed and watched her shimmy the slim trousers she’d borrowed from Johnny over her hips. When she had pulled them over her long legs, those precious legs

she'd wrapped so shamelessly around him last night, he growled from the bed.

She smiled brazenly, knowing she was driving him crazy.

"You are a witch."

He rolled from the bed and began to stalk her across the room. She giggled as he slowly advanced on her and put her hands up to stave him off. He groaned low in his throat, grabbed her by the waist and pushed her down across the bed.

"Now, shall we see if you look as good taking them off as putting them on?" He pulled the pants down over her hips and off her legs.

"We'll never get out of here today to go riding if you start this again, you know," she said with a smile, but it faded into a moan when he started kissing her thighs and nipping at the soft flesh.

It was another couple of hours before they finally managed to leave their room to go for their ride in the country.

They carried a picnic lunch with them so they could stay out for a while. He wanted her all to himself today, and he wouldn't mind if they found a nice grassy knoll to make love on. She had made him almost insatiable in his desire for her over the last few days. He couldn't seem to get enough of her, and he absolutely loved it.

They chatted about the children, the ranch and several other topics, but completely avoided the subject of Victoria. Several moments later, they crested a small hill before he realized where they were headed. Victoria's headstone cast a shadow over the green grass beneath the tree.

He pulled his horse to a stop and shifted his gaze to Lily before he started to pull the animal in the other direction. He didn't want to go there with her. Victoria was his past, and Lily was his future, but seeing Victoria's grave brought back way too many memories, memories he wasn't quite ready to face yet. He could tell by the look in Lily's eyes she knew exactly who the grave belonged to, but all he could hope for was that someday Victoria wouldn't stand between them anymore.

As they skirted the grave, Seth could see storms building in the distance, and the look of the clouds bothered him while they rode. He knew a thunderstorm could build from nothing and pour down enough rain to cause a flash flood.

“I think we should find shelter for a while.” He eyed the coming rain. “Otherwise, we will get caught in the storm building over there. There is a line shack not far from here. Let’s head there.”

“All right.”

* * * *

Seth kicked his horse, and they sprinted across the grass at a fast clip, attempting to beat the rain. When it started coming down, they had just made it to the shack and were able to get inside, before getting soaked to the skin.

“We’ll just have to find something to keep us busy for a while.” He flashed a sexy grin and wiggled his eyebrows, and she laughed while he followed her around the table, almost stalking her.

“Um... I’m sure we could think of something. Let’s see, checkers?”

He shook his head, and she giggled and threw out another suggestion: “Cards?”

Again, he shook his head while the smile on his face grew bigger. He slowly continued to follow her around the table.

“I’m sorry, Seth, but I’ve run out of ideas,” she said while he closed in.

“I have a suggestion.” He scooped her up and laid her back on the table and began to kiss her neck while he slowly unbuttoned her shirt.

“You may have to explain this idea you have to me a little better. I don’t think I understand,” she whispered. He reached the bottom button and pulled it from the waistband of her trousers.

“Let me see if I can give you some idea,” he murmured against her skin before his mouth closed over her nipple and his teeth grazed it. She moaned and arched her back. The rain continued to patter on the tin roof while they slowly made love on the table in the small cabin.

A little later they moved to the bed to snuggle together while they listened to the rain, and she could hear the beating of his heart beneath her cheek. “How long do you think the rain will last?” She traced little circles on his skin.

“Mmm... not long enough, I’m afraid.” He nuzzled her hair and kissed the top of her head.

"It sounds like it's slowing down a bit. Shall we get up and see if the horses are still nearby?"

She started to move away, but he pulled her back to his side. "No, I think we should just stay here and make love again."

"You are terrible, Seth Sanford. Have you always been this way?" She giggled and pushed against him.

"Nope. Only since you came along." He gave her a devilish smile while he tried to pull her back next to him, but she managed to wiggle free and rise from the bed.

"We really need to get moving, Seth," Lily insisted. "We can't spend all afternoon in this cabin making love, you know."

"Why the hell not?" He rolled over and propped himself up on his elbow while he watched her dress.

"The children will be expecting us back for supper." She inhaled sharply when he rose from the bed, completely comfortable in his male glory.

"That they will, sweetheart, so I'll give in to you and get dressed, but only after..."

He lunged for her, and she laughed as she dove under the table. He grabbed her ankle and started to pull her toward him, causing the table to bang against the wall. Lily saw a loose brick fall to the floor near her hand.

"Wait!" She could see papers stuffed in the hole where the brick had fallen. "What's this?" She pulled them from the opening and handing them to Seth.

He took the letters in his hand and turned them over. After a moment he set them down and moved to pull his pants on while she climbed out from under the table.

"I don't know. They look like letters."

He returned to the table and picked up the letters again before he untied the faded yellow ribbon holding them together. Lily looked over his shoulder, shocked when he dropped the letters as if they burned his fingers. His face turned ashen.

"Seth? What is it?" The look on his face frightened her. "Do you know who wrote them? Lily turned them over in her hand. "Look. There is a name on them... it says... Daniel?"

"Yeah, I know who wrote them. That's Victoria's handwriting."

Chapter Seventeen

Lily's voice reached him as if he were in a fog. "But why would there be letters in here, of all places, with her handwriting? That doesn't make sense." She moved next to him and took his hand in hers. "Do you want to open them?"

"I don't know what this means, or why they are here, and no, I don't want to open them," he whispered, obviously terrified of what this meant.

I can't do this. I don't want to know why my wife was leaving letters in this shack. He wanted to go home now and leave the mocking letters on the table. *I can't look. I won't look.* He methodically buttoned up the front of his shirt.

"Let's go home, Lily." He sat down on the bed and pulled on his boots.

Lily rose from the chair where she sat and silently pulled on her boots. She picked up the pile of letters on the table, neatly stack them back together and retied the ribbon around them.

"What are you doing?"

"We need to take these with us, Seth." She tucked them into her shirt pocket.

"No, we don't. I don't want to know what's in them," he snapped.

"Someday you might."

He walked over to her, pulled the letters from her pocket and laid them back on the table. "No, I won't." He searched her face for a moment before he turned on his heel and walked out to find the horses.

* * * *

Lily stood for a moment looking at the letters, wondering if she should go ahead and bring them anyway. She suspected she knew what was contained there as she started to piece the puzzle together. She also was

quite sure Seth wouldn't want to know. He wasn't ready to hear his precious Victoria had been having a relationship with Daniel, obviously for many years, if she had interpreted the two boys' parentage correctly. The day Daniel had stood near the boys flashed through her mind, and she knew he had to be their father. She wasn't certain how Seth would feel about the boys if he knew. She really didn't think it would make much difference in his love for them even if they weren't his by blood. He loved them.

For now she would leave the letters in the cabin. Her relationship with Seth was still very new, and she didn't want to do anything to harm that.

She followed her husband outside, closing the door softly behind her.

They rode home in silence, lost in their own thoughts. The revelation of the letters in the shack caused an uncomfortable silence between them.

"Seth," Lily said, breaking the silence while they continued to ride side-by-side.

"Yeah," he replied, not turning to look at her, but instead keeping his eyes fixed on the scenery in front of him.

"I love you." She wanted to assure him she would always be there, no matter what they found in those letters.

Stopping his horse for a moment, he turned to look at her as she stopped beside him. He reached over with one arm, pulled her into the saddle with him and kissed her. She melted against his chest while his lips played on hers. When he lifted his head, he looked deeply into her eyes. "I love you, too. Please don't ever think I don't, all right?"

"I won't. I know you are upset about what we found in the cabin, but it will be all right. Please don't let it ruin what we have." Terror gripped her insides.

"Not on your life, woman. I just found you, and I'm not letting you go that easily." His lips settled on hers again, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, hanging on for dear life.

After their long, passionate kiss, he finally lifted his head, and he gave her that sexy smile he saved just for her. When he settled her back onto her own horse, they headed for home.

They rode into the yard, and Anne came bounding out of the house to greet them. Now that the child was comfortable with the fact that Lily wouldn't be going anywhere, she was a chatterbox again. In rapid succession she fired questions off at the adults before they could even

dismount their horses. She wanted to know where they went, what they did, if they saw any animals, did they get caught in the rainstorm, what was for supper, and what games they would play tonight. Lily smiled at the little girl while she tried to answer each question. She finally laughed and gave up. "Sweetheart, I can't answer your questions as fast as you're asking them. Let's go inside while your father puts the horses away."

* * * *

Seth took the horses to the barn, smiling when he watched his wife with their little girl. He just couldn't believe he was so fortunate to have found two loves in his life, and he marveled at how easily Lily had filled the void Victoria's death had caused.

Victoria. The smile slid from his face, and fear of the unknown clouded his mind. He knew sooner or later he would retrieve the letters from the line shack. He didn't have a choice now that he knew they were there. He didn't want Lily to know what was in them until he'd been able to read them himself. His mind whirled at the possible contents, and he knew this was something he couldn't share with Lily, not yet.

That night while he lay in the silent room, his mind drifted back to those mocking pieces of paper. He had just made passionate love to Lily, and she now lay sleeping soundly on his chest as he traced little circles on her arm. He loved her, God how he loved her. She was everything to him, but terror filled his heart at the betrayal he feared those letters held. The information could create a void between him and the love he held for his precious new wife. It might be something they wouldn't be able to broach.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would retrieve the letters, and he would visit Victoria's grave. He had to find out what secrets those sheets of paper held that could possibly change his life forever.

The sky turned purple, then pink as the morning sun rose in the sky, and Seth slipped silently from the bed without waking Lily. He quickly dressed, picking up his boots and treading quietly from the room before he pulled the door closed behind him.

He stopped in the dining room to slip on his boots, but was startled when a voice behind him asked, "Where are you off to so early this morning?"

"Carmen, you scared the devil out of me," he whispered. "What are you doing up so early?"

He didn't want to have to explain himself to his housekeeper, but he could tell she had more insight into his movements than was good for him.

"I'm always up this early, Mr. Seth, but you ain't. And someone needs to scare the devil out of you if you are leaving that pretty wife of yours in your bed while you sneak off." She tapped her foot and reprimanded him with her hands on her hips.

"I'm not sneaking anywhere, Carmen." He gave her an innocent smile, but he didn't think she bought it. "I have a couple of errands to run in town, and I wanted to be up and gone early to get them done before church."

"Is that right? You sure become a God-fearing man lately." Her gaze raked him from head to toe.

"I suppose so," he replied when he finished putting on his boots. He grabbed his hat and headed out to the barn to saddle his horse.

Seth rode up to the front of the line shack and sat for a long time on his horse, scared to go inside. The letters were there, mocking him from the interior of the cabin. He finally swung his leg over the saddle and settled on the ground. He tied his horse to the porch, and terror gripped his heart while his hand froze on the doorknob. *I have to know.* He finally turned the knob and walked inside.

In the dim light of the morning, he could see the bundle of letters still sitting where they had left them. How many times had she come here to put a letter in the hole? How long had this been going on under his nose? How could she betray him like this? Thoughts scattered across his mind as he slowly made his way to the table, picked up the bundle and sank into the chair. He was scared to open them. He pulled out some matches he'd brought and lit the small candle sitting there. Finally, he untied the bundle and took the one on the bottom, pulling the sheet from the envelope. He read:

"July, 1871

Dear Daniel,

I needed to write this. I don't even know if you'll ever see it, but I had to. You see, I just found out I'm going to have a baby. A baby, Daniel, can you believe me with a baby? I told Seth last night, and he's so happy. He wants a child, but I fear one thing: are you the father, or is he? The days

we've spent in this cabin fill my mind each time I'm with him, and I can't avoid it. I love him, Daniel, I really do, but the magic you and I create when our bodies come together—I just don't know how to explain it. I know you and Seth have been at odds for years. You hate him, I know, because I can see it whenever I mention his name to you. I fear this is all a game to you to see who is better, you or him. I can't get you out of my mind, so for now, we just have to leave things as they are. God help me, but I don't know if I want you to be the father of this baby or him. I must go now, because he'll wonder where I am. He never stops me from my daily rides, so until tomorrow...

Love,
Victoria."

God! How could I have been so stupid! I trusted her.

He loved her so much for so long and to know now she had betrayed him, betrayed his love with that bastard, was just too much.

He dropped the letter and closed his eyes when the birth of Johnny came rushing into his mind, his sweet son, his first-born. He knew it wasn't normal for the husband to be present at the birth of a child, but he'd insisted. He wanted to be there no matter what, and he had been. He'd held her hand when the pain ripped across her body with each contraction, and when the little baby had slipped from her body into Carmen's waiting hands, he wept like a child.

He'd never questioned the fact that Johnny had been born with a full head of dark hair. He'd never asked over the years when his boy had retained that dark complexion, dark hair and dark eyes because he loved her.

Tears sparkled on his lashes as he picked up the next envelope and opened it with shaking hands. He unfolded the next sheet of paper.

"April, 1872

Dear Daniel,

The baby is here. He was born several days ago, and I had to come here. We haven't seen each other for a while since it has been difficult for me to ride while I carried our child. Yes, our child, Daniel. When he was born it was obvious to me that you are his father. There was no denying his parentage as I held him to my breast for the first time. He's beautiful, Daniel. You would be so proud to call him your son, but that cannot be.

There is no way I can tell Seth he's not the baby's father. He would kill me if he knew; of this, I'm sure. I will raise him knowing you are his father, but I can never tell Seth what has happened between us. For now, I will be the only one who knows, and I'll cherish the thought until we can be together again.

Until then...

All my love,

Victoria."

Seth dropped the letter next to the first one and then picked up the third and a fourth, continuing to read each and every letter until all of them lay open on the table, mocking him.

Daniel was the father of both Johnny and Jarod. It was so obvious to him now. He wanted to kick himself for not seeing it sooner. His sweet little Anne, she was his. His precious little girl, he knew in his heart, was his daughter. Victoria mentioned her birth in the letters, too, and she had said she was certain Seth was the child's father, much to her disappointment. Victoria's words told him she and Daniel hadn't been together at the time of Anne's conception.

He sat in stunned silence. *Will the fact that Daniel is the boys' father change how I feel about them in my heart?*

"No! I love them," he shouted. "No matter what, I *am* their father!"

After several minutes he picked up the pile of papers, stood and walked to the fireplace against the wall. He laid them on the grate, struck a match and held it to the paper until the flames licked at the corners. He stared while the flames grew higher and higher, continuing to watch until they were nothing but ashes.

After the flames had gone out completely, and there were not even embers left in the grate, Seth pulled himself up and walked out of the cabin, not looking back.

He mounted his horse and kicked the animal into a hard gallop. He needed to erase the betrayal of Victoria from his heart. The wind whipped through his hair, drying the tears on his face.

When his horse was winded and foam had gathered on his hide, Seth finally slowed him to a walk. Seth realized where he was. Victoria's grave stood haunting him from the hillside, and he slowly walked the horse toward

it. Reaching her resting place, he dismounted and dropped the reins in the grass. He walked to her headstone and crouched down, running his fingers over the letters he had engraved there.

“Victoria Marie Sanford. Beloved wife and mother. Born 1851. Died 1883. Aged 32 years.”

“How could you, Victoria? I loved you, and I thought you loved me too. You were my life, and you betrayed my love with that bastard! All because he couldn’t give you what I could? I gave you everything,” he yelled wildly, pounding his fist on the headstone in anger. The rage, the betrayal, the hurt all welled up inside him like a dam ready to burst.

“Were you headed to meet him the day you were killed? Each and every day you went riding, was it to meet him? I held you while you lay dying in my arms, and all the while you were headed over to betray me again. You faithless bitch!” He stood up and kicked her headstone, breaking it in half. It toppled over and lay silently on the ground beneath the tree. He spun around, grabbed the reins of his horse and mounted swiftly, kicking him in the sides as they tore off, headed for home.

* * * *

Time came for the family to leave for church, but Seth still hadn’t returned. Luckily, Johnny knew how to hitch the team to the wagon, which he did with quiet efficiency.

Lily looked over her shoulder in the direction she knew Seth had taken that morning before she snapped the reins and the wagon lurched forward. The thoughts running through her head while they bumped along bothered her. What would happen between them when he read those letters? How would he feel knowing his precious Victoria had possibly betrayed him? She so wished he had come home before they left. She knew in her heart he needed her, but she also knew he would have to deal with this in his own way.

The church services stretched on for what seemed like hours. Lily couldn’t concentrate on anything the preacher said as his voice droned on in her head. When he was finally finished, she almost ran from the church, unable to wait any longer. She needed to see her husband. She needed to

know everything would be all right, now that she was sure he'd found out the truth.

"Where is Seth today?" She knew instantly to whom the mocking tone belonged when she turned to see Daniel leaning up against the side of the church.

"That's none of your business." She gathered the children and headed for the wagon.

"He really shouldn't leave his pretty wife unattended. She might be tempted to stray." His mocking tone irritated her past the point of politeness.

"You really are a bastard, Daniel, you know that?" She walked around the side of the wagon to pull herself up in the driver's seat, but before she could, she felt strong hands grasp her waist and lift her into the seat. She shuddered with revulsion.

With a tip of his hat in her direction, Daniel sauntered off toward the boarding house.

Lily sat for a moment trying to calm her anger at his audacity. He obviously thought he could steal her affection from Seth, like he probably had Victoria's. What he was completely unaware of was that Lily loved her husband with all her heart, and, without a doubt, would never do anything to hurt him.

When the wagon rolled into the yard, Lily could see Seth's gelding in the paddock, so she knew he was home from his morning errand.

The children raced in the front door, eager to shed their Sunday clothes and be off on their discoveries of the day. Lily followed close behind, shutting the front door behind her. She was curious where her husband had gone off to when she realized the house sat in silence.

"Seth?"

Not seeing him in their bedroom, she continued down the hall, thinking he might be in the office. When she reached the door, it stood open, and there was no one inside the room.

"Seth?" She was afraid to go to the guest bedroom where Victoria's things were kept for fear of what she would find. She walked into the room and was brought to tears when she saw her husband standing silently by the window, looking out into the yard.

"The boys aren't mine," he said in a whisper. He wouldn't turn around to look at her as he watched them out the window.

"I know," she said quietly when she walked up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head on his shoulder.

"How did you know?" He laced his fingers through hers where they rested on his belly.

"I suspected, the other day when Daniel came by the schoolhouse. Before he left, he stood near the boys, and their coloring and features resembled his so closely, it would have been impossible not to notice. I'm sorry," she finished in a whisper.

He turned around at her last few words and looked directly into her eyes. "There is nothing you need to be sorry for. Victoria was the unfaithful one, not you, never you."

"I know, but you loved her so much. I know this must be tearing you apart."

"My love for her died in that line shack today when I read those letters. She had been unfaithful to me for years, but I was too stupid to see it." He buried his face in her hair and drew her to his chest.

Lily pulled back so she could see his face. She needed to reassure him in any way possible. "You were not stupid, Seth. You had no reason to think she wasn't being faithful to you. You had no reason to believe those children weren't yours, but they are yours, Seth, they are. You've raised them to be strong, caring, decent boys, and you will always be their father."

"How did I get so lucky to find you?"

"I guess God had plans for us we weren't aware of. We'll get through this, Seth, and we'll raise those children as our own no matter who their parents are."

"I love you," he murmured before his mouth settled on hers.

* * * *

Summer ended, and the leaves began to turn bright orange, red, and yellow while the air got cooler in the evenings. Lily realized she was with child. She was never so happy in her entire life. She loved her husband with all her heart, and now she was to bear him a child. A secretive smile spread across her mouth, and her hand settled on her still flat belly.

Will it be a handsome little boy or a pretty little girl? Will it have Seth's blond hair and blue eyes or my darker hair and green eyes? Edward and

Kathleen would be happy to hear they are going to be grandparents, well, sort of. Last month, she'd received a letter from them telling her again how sorry they were they had kept her parentage a secret and how they wanted to see her.

"After I tell Seth he is to be a father again, I will have to sit down and write them a letter. Maybe they could come for the baby's birth and stay for a while."

That evening while she helped Carmen prepare supper, she noticed the little smile the housekeeper sent in her direction.

"Carmen, what are you in such a good mood for tonight? You look like a cat that swallowed a canary."

"Nothing, Miss Lily. You just have a glow about you lately, I noticed."

"A glow? I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well, some women get this glow about them during a certain time in their lives, I'm told, and it just makes me curious."

"Curious? Carmen, whatever you are thinking, just tell me," Lily said, putting down the knife she held and turning to the housekeeper.

With a secretive whisper, she bent to Lily's ear and asked, "Are you gonna give Mr. Seth another child?"

Lily's cheeks flushed when Carmen moved back, and she nodded.

"Oh! That's wonderful news!" Carmen giggled and hugged Lily. "I'm so happy for you."

Lily hushed her by saying, "Quiet. He doesn't know yet, and I don't want to give it away."

"He doesn't know what?" Seth leaned against the doorframe.

"Um... nothing." She avoided his eyes, knowing he'd see in her face she was keeping something from him.

"Lillian?" He slowly walked toward her. As her given name rolled off his tongue, she raised her head and caught his gaze with hers.

"It's nothing Seth, really. I'm just going to write to Edward and Kathleen and ask them to come for a visit. I haven't had a chance to ask you yet if it would be all right, that's all."

"Are you sure there isn't something else you would like to tell me?"

"N-no."

"All right. I've got work to do in the office." He walked out of the kitchen after he placed a quick kiss on her lips, and she sighed thinking about telling him her good news later.

That night while they lay sated in the big bed, she rested her head on his chest and traced little circles across the hard muscles beneath her cheek.

"Are you going to tell me what's really going on, or do I have to torture you with kisses until you do?" He kissed the top of her head before his hand began to wander down her chest.

"I don't know what you mean, Seth. I told you what we were talking about earlier," she said but couldn't help but smile against his skin, knowing she carried his child beneath her heart.

"Going to be that way, are you?" He flipped her on her back and held her hands above her head. He looked deep into her eyes and told her, "I love you."

"I love you, too," she whispered.

His mouth settled on her breast, bringing a moan deep within her to the surface of her lips. He continued to rain kisses on both breasts and nipped at her skin until she wiggled beneath him. He let go of her hands and moved farther down, nibbling and licking each inch he reached.

Lord, he knows how to drive me crazy. He moved down her body until he reached the tender spot between her legs. As his tongue played on her secret center, her blood boiled until she almost couldn't stand it anymore. When he raised his head, her body screamed for release, but he moved back up her belly to her breasts and up to her mouth. He stopped inches above her and waited.

Her eyes opened slowly, and she saw his questioning gaze. He looked down, and that oh so torturous smile graced his lips.

"Are you going to tell me?"

His hand skimmed down her belly, and his fingers slid inside her, bringing another moan from deep within her.

"You don't play fair, husband of mine," she moaned.

"No, I don't."

"All right, all right, you're driving me crazy," she whimpered, shutting her eyes when he brought her body closer to release but still too far away.

"I know," he whispered then waited for her to spill her secret.

"We're having a baby."

In the darkness his hand stopped its torture of her sensitive core, pulling a desperate moan from within her. She opened her eyes to see him above her with the most amazing look of love in his gaze.

“We’re having a baby?”

When she nodded, his mouth came down on hers, and his tongue swept into her mouth.

“Seth, please. I need you.”

He moved back down her body to bring her release from his torture with his mouth.

One, two, three flicks of his tongue, and the stars burst behind her eyelids, and she arched her body as sweet release finally came. He hovered above her and slid into her warmth with his entire length and a deep groan of satisfaction left his lips.

Riding their passion, she felt her body spring to life again beneath him while he stroked inside her. She wrapped her legs around his hips, and he pushed inside deeper and deeper, faster and faster, until she could no longer breathe or think, and release found them both.

“What are you thinking?”

“How much I love you.”

“You are impossible to keep a secret from, you know,” she said with a giggle. “I just might have to think up some more secrets, if that’s how you’ll get them out of me each time.

“You’ll be the death of me, woman,” he answered with a laugh, but after a few minutes, his mood sobered.

She propped herself on her elbow so she could look in his eyes. “What’s wrong, Seth? Aren’t you happy about the baby?”

“Absolutely ecstatic, sweetheart, but please don’t keep any more secrets from me. Even though I love torturing them out of you...” His voice trailed off, and he ran his hand up her side with that sexy look he loved to give her before he said, “I don’t want any secrets between us.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you by keeping it a secret. I just hadn’t found the right time to tell you.” A tear formed at the corner of her eye.

“It’s all right, sweetheart,” he murmured, pulling her even closer. “I’m not upset. I just don’t want you to feel you need to keep anything from me.”

Chapter Eighteen

The months flew by, and the weather turned colder. The train robberies continued, much to the dismay of the town of Parkville. The sheriff couldn't stop them and had grown frustrated to the point where he quit his job and moved out of town. With the exit of the law, the robbers grew bolder with each passing hold up. They attacked every train passing through, taking money, jewelry and anything of value from the passengers. And they seemed to know which trains had shipments of gold and money headed for the bank in town and hit those the hardest.

The government began to search in earnest on its own, sending federal marshals to the area to hunt for clues, but they'd come up empty-handed. It was almost as if the robbers knew each and every move the marshals planned to make.

December blew in with a fierce, bitter cold. Christmas loomed around the corner, and Lily began to show. The baby would be due in late spring to early summer, and she couldn't wait to hold him or her in her arms.

The children were so excited when they heard they would be getting a little baby brother or sister, especially Anne. She would lay her head on Lily's stomach after supper and talk to the baby while Lily stroked her hair.

Lily wrote to Edward and Kathleen about the coming birth of their grandchild, asking if they would like to come for a visit. The response she had received in return brought news they would be visiting come spring to await the baby's arrival, and she couldn't wait. It had been a very long time since she'd seen them, and she missed them terribly. After she and Seth talked about secrets and how they had destroyed his memory and his love for Victoria, Lily realized the Backmans loved her like their own child, and she didn't want to be mad at them anymore. Several months back she had forgiven them for keeping the secret of her birth parents from her.

When Madge heard about the coming birth, she chattered with excitement, and Lily laughed. *Madge will be the perfect extra grandparent or aunt to this child.*

Lily couldn't hold the behavior of Daniel against her friend. Madge had been her first acquaintance and best friend since she'd arrived in Parkville.

Daniel was an adult, and Lily firmly believed he should be held responsible for his own actions no matter what they were. Although Seth had warned him, he continued to taunt the couple when they were in town. He continued to be bold and daring, occasionally attempting to talk to Lily, but she ignored him as best she could. Lily wasn't sure if Daniel knew Seth was aware of his involvement with Victoria. She didn't want any confrontations with Daniel anyway.

Christmas came and went. Seth bought Lily a beautiful necklace of pearls that he'd sent away for shortly after he found out she was carrying his child. When he gave it to her late that night in their bedroom, she was brought to tears.

"I love it, Seth. They're beautiful. Each pearl is so perfect. How did you ever manage this?" She ran her fingers over each one, caressing them, marveling at how smooth they were.

"I sent away for it some time ago. Luckily, it got here in time for Christmas. When I saw it, I knew I had to get it for you. I could just imagine running this necklace over your naked skin," he said with a devilish grin. He took it from her fingers and slid the cool pearls over her breasts.

"Mmm... that's nice," she moaned, slowly closing her eyes to the sensation.

* * * *

Soon it was spring again. The trees began to blossom, the weather got slightly warmer, and the days grew longer. Lily also bloomed with the coming birth of their baby, and Seth spent more time at the house rather than out riding the fence line. Lily tsked at her ever expanding waistline while she grew bigger with each passing day. When she looked down now, she couldn't see her feet any longer.

Seth was the ever-attentive husband. He would help her out of a chair when it became impossible for her to get up on her own. He would even

help her put on her shoes and stockings because she couldn't reach her feet. He loved helping her bathe. He'd wash her hair, scrub her back and even sometimes get in the tub with her. They would laugh and splash to the point that Carmen would cringe every time she heard them because she knew there would be water all over the floor. Each and every night he would hold her close to his side while their baby kicked against him.

The day came when Edward and Kathleen were to arrive by train. Excitement hung thick in the air. Lily rose early that morning even though she and Carmen had been cleaning and preparing the house for days. The train was due to arrive around eleven, but she wanted to make sure everything was perfect.

When the time finally came to leave the house to pick them up, they all scrambled to the wagon with the children piling in the back and Seth and Lily in the front.

She stood for a moment and gripped her stomach with her hands.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine, Seth. Just a few pains here and there. Nothing to worry about."

"Are you sure?" His concerned gaze raked her from head to toe before he helped her into the wagon seat. "This isn't going to be too much for you, is it?"

"I wouldn't miss this for anything," she said, settling in the seat.

"I'll take it slow then. We don't want that baby coming before it is time."

"Oh, stop worrying. It will be fine. This baby will come when he or she is good and ready and not before." She rested her hand on his arm to reassure him, but she had begun to worry a bit herself. The pains had started earlier in the morning and hadn't really let up as the day wore on. She wasn't sure if it was time, so she bore the pain without saying anything to her husband to keep him from worrying.

When they reached town and pulled into the station, the children jumped from the back of the wagon, excited to see the train.

Seth checked his watch and said, "They must be running late. It should have been here by now."

"Could be. I don't think they hardly ever run on time with the robberies happening so frequently," she replied, resting her hand on her stomach while another pain moved across her belly.

When the train finally rolled into the station, the anxious passengers almost jumped from it while it was still moving.

"Something's wrong, Lily. Let me see what I can find out. Stay here, all right?"

* * * *

Dread gripped his belly and clenched it tight. Seth walked near the engine while the people disembarked hurriedly.

The pale face of the engineer peered around the edge of the cab when Seth approached the train. "What happened, Sam?" Then Seth saw it. Blood. Bright red blood splattered the walls and dripped from the metal floor. The body of the conductor lay sprawled across the metal grate.

"They attacked, Seth. They are blood-thirsty killers now. They've never killed before, but when Matt here tried to stop them, they shot him, shot him dead, they did." Sam almost slipped down the steps while he struggled to get off the train.

"Damn it! This has to stop! Someone has got to find a way to stop this craziness. It's not safe to travel at all these days." Seth took Sam's arm and helped him up onto the platform as the man wobbled against him.

"There was a passenger hurt in the back. Some man from back East. You better check it out. I'll be fine. Just let me rest here a minute." Sam wearily sat down on a bench.

Seth hurried to the train in search of the wounded passenger. *God, please don't let it be Lily's father.*

"Seth!" Lily yelled, obviously frightened. "Come here. What's happening? What's going on?"

"It will be all right, sweetheart. The robbers got the train again and killed the conductor. Sam said there is a passenger hurt, too. I'm going to go aboard to see what I can find out. You wait here. I'll be right back." He tried to reassure her as he protectively touched her thigh in a caress.

"Be careful, please. I'm scared, Seth. I don't see my parents."

"Just stay here. If they do come out, have them stay here with you. I'll be right back."

He walked back toward the train to search for the hurt passenger and to search for Lily's parents. Once he approached the train, he swung himself aboard and started walking between cars. When he reached the second-to-the-last passenger car, he saw a man and a woman sitting in the last row. The woman stood over the man, crying hysterically. A streak of dirt lay smeared across her cheek, and her hat sat tilted on her head, barely covering the blonde hair beneath. Both of the passengers wore formal traveling attire that spoke of probably being from back East.

"Ma'am," Seth said as he approached. The woman moved aside, and Seth could see the man propped against the wall with blood streaming down his face.

"Oh my! Can you help me, please? My husband, he's dying!" The woman almost dissolved in a puddle on the floor as tears streamed down her face.

"Kathleen, please," the injured gentleman pleaded. "I'm not dying." The man held an embroidered handkerchief to the wound on his head.

"Are you Edward and Kathleen Backman?"

"Why yes, how did you know?"

"I'm Seth Sanford, Lily's husband."

"Pop?"

"Johnny. Run for the doctor, please," Seth said once Johnny had reached them. "This man needs to be looked at."

"Sure, Pop, I'll be right back." Johnny said before he ran back up the aisle.

"Seth? Lily's husband?" Kathleen questioned.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Where's Lily?"

"She's in the wagon, ma'am. She's been having pains all day, and I didn't want her to get down." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Hell, I didn't want her to even come to town with us, but she insisted she wouldn't miss your arrival for anything, not even for the birth of our child."

Lily had been trying to hide the pains from him, but he'd seen her wince and shift with each pain. He had been present for all three of his other

children's births, and he knew what to expect. He feared the baby would be coming any time.

Edward chuckled. "That's my Lily, all right." The older man tried to stand. "Help me up, son, and we'll get off this blasted train."

He helped Edward to his feet. "Would you care to tell me what happened?"

"Damn train robbers stopped the train and stripped everyone of their valuables. They didn't like it when I wouldn't turn over my wallet to them, so they pistol whipped me."

* * * *

Lily sat stiffly in the wagon seat while she tried to look over the crowd gathering nearby. There was a lot of concern over the news of the death of the conductor and the passenger injured. She still couldn't see her parents over the passengers' heads, and she began to panic.

Her face contorted with the pain ripping across her belly, and she panted, trying to relieve it. She closed her eyes and tried to relax until Seth returned.

The next sound she heard was her husband's voice. "Lily, sweetheart?"

Her eyes popped open with a start. "Seth. Edward! Kathleen! My goodness. What happened?"

"He was pistol whipped by the train robbers," Seth quickly answered. "Are you all right?"

Seth took his father-in-law under the arm and moved toward the back of the wagon so he could sit until the doctor arrived.

"I'll be fine, Seth. I just think we need to get home. I don't think our son or daughter is going to wait much longer." She grimaced when another pain rippled across her stomach and her knuckles turned white while she gripped the side of the wagon.

"Johnny, Jarod, Anne! Come now!" Seth yelled. "We need to go home immediately." Lily heard the panic in his voice and so did the entire crowd as they turned to see what was going on. The doctor arrived, and Seth informed him of the probable impending birth.

"What's wrong?" Kathleen asked, standing beside the wagon.

“Lily is having birthing pains, and the baby will probably be here soon. We need to go now.” The boys jumped into the back of the wagon, and he lifted Anne over the side. “We’ll have to come back for your trunks or have someone bring them out.”

“Of course, son, of course.” Edward scooted into the back of the wagon like he was born there, and the doctor helped Kathleen aboard.

“Doc, can you come out behind us and have someone at the livery deliver their trunks?” Seth asked, jumping into the driver’s seat. Without waiting for an answer, he flicked the reins, and the wagon lurched forward. “Damn it, woman, stop trying to be so strong. I know you are in a lot of pain.”

“It’s not like there is anything you can do about it, Seth. It’s natural for women to have pain with birthing babies,” she whispered beside him, but she was getting worried too. The pains seemed to be coming very close together now.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you come.” He flicked the reins over the horses’ backs, urging them faster. “This has been going on all day, hasn’t it?” Her eyes widened when she glanced at him. “Don’t look at me like that, Lily. I know everything there is to know about that beautiful body of yours so when something is not right, I’d know it.” Her face heated as a blush splashed across her cheeks.

“I’m sorry. I just didn’t want you to worry, and I didn’t want to miss Edward and Kathleen’s train.”

“I’m sorry too, sweetheart. I just didn’t think you really wanted to have our baby in the back of the wagon. I thought you’d much prefer our bed.” Seth put his arm around her to pull her close, and she snuggled up next to him

“I do, but you’d better hurry.” She groaned and almost doubled over with the pain.

* * * *

I knew I shouldn’t have let her come. The panic in her eyes struck a chord, and he yelled to the back of the wagon, “Hang on, everyone. We need to move faster.”

The wagon rolled into the front yard of the ranch. Seth pulled the team to a halt, yelling for Carmen. She quickly came rushing from the house, sporting a worried look.

"What's wrong, Mr. Seth?"

"It's Lily." Fear gripped his chest like a belt, getting tighter and tighter. "I think the baby is coming. We need to get her in the house quickly. The doctor is coming, but I don't know if we have time."

He jumped down, ran around the wagon, and swept his wife into his arms and carried her into the house.

Once he reached the bedroom, he laid her softly on the bed. "Sweetheart, we need to get you changed into your nightgown. Can you stand for a minute while I help you?"

"Seth, I'm having a baby, I'm not sick," she grumbled and struggled to get off the bed. He held out his hand so she could pull herself into a sitting position. When she stood, a gush of liquid spilled from between her legs onto the floor, and Lily looked at it for a moment, completely in a daze.

"Well, I guess we'll be having a baby, Miss Lily." Carmen grabbed some linen to soak up the puddle on the floor. "You should wait out in the front, Mr. Seth."

He finally managed to get Lily into her nightgown even though she protested with every breath. He picked her back up and laid her on the bed, trying to help her to settle in a comfortable position when the pain came again. "I'm not going anywhere, Carmen. I was present for the others, and I'll be here with Lily through this one."

"But Mr. Seth..."

"I'm not leaving, and that's final."

"All right, but don't say I didn't tell you to."

"Carmen, are you sure this is it?" Seth pulled up a chair and sat next to the bed. He took Lily's hand in his, stroking it with his thumb. "Isn't it too early?" His shifted his gaze to Carmen's across the room while she readied things for the coming birth.

"This baby is going to be born soon, Mr. Seth. Ain't no stopping it now."

He'd never been this frightened when Victoria had given birth, but with Lily, he was terrified he'd lose her.

"Where the hell is that doctor?"

Carmen pulled the sheet up around Lily's waist, and when she looked, she said, "No time for him. This baby is coming now."

"Now?" Seth asked, and Lily gripped his hand so tight, he thought she'd broken his fingers.

"Yes. Move now. I've got work to do," Carmen said as she got between Lily's legs to help her birth their child.

Seth moved to make room for Carmen, shifting closer to Lily's head, and he whispered to her when her face contorted again, "It will be all right, sweetheart. I love you."

He wanted to take her mind off the pain, but it didn't appear to be working very well when he heard her moan again.

"All right, Miss Lily. You must push now."

She moaned and surged against the pain as he whispered softly in her ear. He couldn't imagine the pain she bore, but it was tearing him up inside to watch her wiggle and squirm on the bed with each pain gripping her in its vice.

A desperate scream ripped from her throat just as the baby, wailing in a high-pitched cry, slid from her body. A tear slid down Seth's cheek when Carmen announced, "You have a little boy."

Carmen wrapped the little one before she handed the baby to Seth. Just then, the doctor rushed inside the room.

"Carmen? Something's wrong. It hurts again."

She sounded frightened, and that terrified Seth. *Victoria never had pain like this after the other children.*

"What's wrong?" Seth asked when the doctor moved to Lily's side to examine her. "Doc, what's wrong?"

"Well, son, I believe your wife is having more than one."

Lily moaned again, and Seth's heart dropped to his toes. "What? What do you mean more than one?"

"I mean, more than one baby, Seth. Now, you need to move aside, so I can help her deliver the second one."

Carmen moved in to help as Seth moved away from his wife's side to make room. He continued to cradle his newborn son in his arms while the baby drifted off to sleep.

A few moments later, Lily screamed again, and the second baby slid from her body into the waiting arms of the doctor.

"It's a girl. It seems you have one of each, Poppa."

Seth stood in stunned silence. Not only did he and Lily now have one child together, they had two, a beautiful little boy, and a gorgeous little girl. He moved to Lily's side with their little boy in his arms as she sleepily opened her eyes and smiled. "Thank you for such beautiful children. I love you."

"I love you, too," she whispered, closing her eyes again.

"Why don't you take them out to see their grandparents while I finish up with your wife?"

Seth made his way into the living room with his new little boy in his arms to greet the rest of the family. With tears in his eyes, he said, "We have a boy."

Edward and Kathleen rushed over to see the new baby as Carmen came out behind Seth. "And we have a new little girl, too."

"Twins?"

"Yes, twins," Seth whispered, and he peeked at his son, who lay quietly in his arms. After a moment he moved into the living room, with Carmen right behind him, while his other children stood silently waiting.

"Two babies, Poppa?" Anne asked once he had settled himself comfortably on the couch.

"Yes, sweetie, two babies. You'll be a big sister to a little brother and a little sister." Anne pulled the blanket back so she could see and gently kissed the baby on the head.

Johnny walked over to see his new siblings too, but Jarod held back and Seth saw him sulk in the corner.

"Jarod, don't you want to see your new brother and sister?"

"No," he said as Seth watched him fold his arms over his chest and walk out.

Seth's gaze followed his second child when he left the room, and he wondered why Jarod acted so strangely. He had never been an overly loving child, but he'd never been outright rude. *I'm going have to set him straight before too long.* The baby began to fuss, so Seth had to give him his full attention.

The doctor came into the room a few moments later and said, "She's resting now. Everything looks good, Seth—nice healthy babies. You should be very proud."

"I am." Seth smiled at the baby in his arms and then at the little girl Carmen held. "But now, I think they are about ready to eat."

"I think so too, Mr. Seth." Carmen stood and headed back down the hall.

"Can we visit our daughter for a few minutes?" The Backmans asked.

"Yes, of course. You didn't even get to say hello when you arrived, and I'm glad to see your head is all right."

* * * *

A soft knock sounded on the door, and Lily called out an invitation to enter. Seth pushed the door open slowly and she gave him the most radiant smile, her daughter at her breast.

"I'm going to start supper," Carmen said, quietly leaving the room.

"I'm so glad you made it for the birth," she said to her parents when they came into the room behind her husband. "Not by much though."

Kathleen looked at her with a worried expression wrinkling her brow. "Very true, sweetheart. How are you feeling?"

"A little uncomfortable, but the doctor said that is to be expected. I am told to stay in bed for a couple of days. We didn't even get to say hello at the train station." She let her gaze sweep over her father before she asked, "How is your head?"

"It's fine. Just a bit of a knot, that's all," he replied, touching the tender spot on his scalp.

"I'm glad it's nothing bad. I was scared to death something terrible had happened when I didn't see you two come off the train." She removed her sleeping daughter from her breast and pulled her nightgown together before she held out her arms for her son. "I think it's my son's turn now."

"Well, I think I'll go back out into the front room, dear. I'll see you later."

"I will too, sweetheart," Kathleen said, moving toward the door. "Maybe I can help your housekeeper with supper."

"All right. I'll see you two after a while then."

Seth placed the little boy in her arms and moved to put their little girl in her cradle nearby.

Placing the baby at her other breast, she looked up to see her husband staring at her with a hungry look in his eye and a devilish smile on his lips.

"Stop looking at me like that, Seth. Doctor said no, um... 'activity' for a while, and if you don't stop, you will drive me crazy before then."

"I can't help it. There is something erotic about you feeding our children," he said from the foot of the bed.

"We need to think of names for these two, you know. I don't think we had even really agreed on any names since they weren't supposed to be here for a bit yet, and I certainly didn't expect twins." She changed the subject, attempting to ignore her husband's hungry eyes.

"Yes, I guess we do."

"How about Elizabeth Marie for our little girl? It was my real mother's name."

"I think it's perfect. Can we call the boy Jack?"

"Jack is a good, strong name. How about his middle name being Robert, or Edward? What was your real father's name?" Her son fell asleep against her, and she took him from her breast and pulled her nightgown back over her chest.

* * * *

Seth burned from the inside out while he watched Lily feed his children. He loved her breasts anyway, and to watch the children suckle drove him crazy.

When Lily started talking about names, he could hardly keep his mind on her words as desire rippled along his skin, sending shock waves straight to his groin.

"Carl Allen."

Damn! It is going to be a long while before I can to make love to her again, and it is already driving me crazy.

"All right, how about Jack Allen? That way, he has both your adopted father's name and your real father's name." She grimaced then wiggled in the bed, trying to get comfortable.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine, Seth, just sore and trying to find a comfortable position. So, what do you think about Jack Allen for this little man?" She pulled the

blanket around the baby as he slept in her arms. "You will have to make another cradle, and quickly. One won't be enough now, but they can sleep together for a little while."

"Jack Allen is perfect. Thank you." He bent over her and kissed her hair.

"For what?" She tipped her head back and looked into his face.

"For these beautiful babies. They are perfect and I couldn't have asked for anything more than two healthy children and that you are all right. You scared the hell out of me for a while. I don't ever want to lose you."

"I'm not going anywhere, Seth Sanford. You will just have to put up with me for the rest of your life."

"A challenge I'm definitely looking forward to, Lily Sanford," he said, before he gently took her lips with his.

Lily moaned under his mouth. He slipped his tongue between her lips and wrapped his hand in her hair before he tipped her head back so he could deepen the kiss. He continued his assault on her mouth until they were both breathless before he finally pulled away. "I think I'd better sleep on the sofa, otherwise, I might be tempted to the brink of insanity."

"Maybe you should, at least for tonight. I'll probably be up several times feeding the babies during the night anyway." Hungry passion reflected bright in her eyes, and pride swelled in his chest knowing this beautiful woman belonged only to him.

"Would you like something to eat?" He stepped back, picked up the baby and placed him next to his sister in the cradle.

"That would be nice. I am rather hungry."

He dropped his gaze to his feet and shuffled them for a moment, wanting to stay with her but knowing she needed to rest. "Let me see what Carmen has ready. You rest for a while."

"Seth?"

"Yes, sweetheart," he answered, turning back in her direction.

"I love you."

"I love you too. Now rest. I'll be back in a minute."

He gave her one last lingering look before he slipped out into the hall and softly closed the door behind him.

Chapter Nineteen

The days were spent visiting with Edward and Kathleen, watching the babies grow and observing the other children come to love their siblings, except Jarod. He kept to himself much of the time these days, completely avoiding any contact with the babies, and Lily was worried.

When the babies were several weeks old, Lily approached Seth about her concern for Jarod.

"Seth, Jarod seems so distant these days. He doesn't want anything to do with the babies, and he's become very quiet."

"I know, sweetheart, I'm worried too. He's even lost interest in playing with Johnny. The schoolteacher who is working with them since you've been out, said he's very quiet at school too. He's never been a really talkative boy, but he was never this quiet and withdrawn. I've tried talking with him, and he just says there isn't anything wrong."

She rested her cheek on the enticing muscles of his chest while she traced little circles through the springy curls and listened to his heartbeat. "I just wish I knew what was bothering him."

"Me too."

Her warm breath skipped across the skin of his belly, and she saw his manhood fill and harden.

"Seth," she whispered before she kissed his chest.

"Yes?" he said, groaning softly, attempting to beat down the desire raging through him.

She smiled against his skin and asked, "Do you think it's too soon?"

"I sure as hell hope not, because I can't take it anymore." He flipped her on her back and locked his lips over hers. His tongue slipped inside her mouth as a groan rumbled in her chest.

His lips blazed a trail across her cheek then down her neck. He sucked her straining, puckered nipple into his mouth as her back arched toward him and she whispered, "I can't take it anymore either."

* * * *

Early summer came, and the townspeople decided to have a meeting. The train robberies had continued unabated, and something needed to be done. The meeting was set for right after church on Sunday.

The church filled to capacity. Everyone wanted to know what would be done about the robberies and how they were going to go about stopping them.

The mayor called out to the waiting crowd over the rumble of voices. "Ladies and gentlemen, please. Quiet down now, so we can discuss this growing problem and try to find a solution."

"What can we do?" the owner of the livery spoke up. "They are doing this at will now, Harland. Even the federal marshals haven't been able to stop them."

Seth and Lily sat in the back of the church with the children, listening to the talk around them.

"Yeah, what can we do?" Seth heard another say.

"I'm not sure, folks. We need to think of something though. Maybe we can put someone on the trains, from here to Houston, so we can keep the folks safe, at least that far," the mayor said.

"Who is going to do that? We don't have a sheriff anymore," replied the owner of the grocery store.

"Wait! Seth saw them before. He saw them the day he came back in town on the same train his wife took," said another, and all eyes turned to Seth.

"Folks, listen." Seth stood. "I really didn't see much. There were a couple of them killed that day, but the leader got away even though I believe he was wounded."

"Why don't you ride the train for a while, Seth? You're good with that pistol of yours. Maybe just having a presence on the train will scare them off when they hear. Perhaps they will move onto somewhere else," someone suggested.

Lily swung her terrified eyes to him and put a hand on his arm. He shook his head when he looked at her, attempting to reassure her he wasn't considering riding the train.

"Folks, that's impossible. I can't leave Lily alone here to handle the new babies and our other three, too."

"We'll be there to help her, won't we folks," one woman suggested, standing up to try to convince Seth to help. Several of the other women in town chimed in their agreement.

"It wouldn't be for very long, I'm sure," Harland said.

"I have to discuss this with Lily before any decisions are made." He began to mull over the proposition as he sat back down next to his wife.

"You can't possibly be considering this, Seth?" Lily whispered in his ear.

"We have to do something, sweetheart. Remember, Edward was pistol-whipped, and Kathleen could have been killed. The conductor was killed, and we knew him," he whispered back to her. "We can discuss this more when we get home."

When they returned home and lay side-by-side in their bed, he told her of his decision.

"What happens to us if you are killed or hurt?"

"Nothing is going to happen to me, sweetheart. I know how these men work. I've seen them in action, remember? I won't underestimate them in the least, and I really think I can stop this whole thing. Besides, I'll have help. I'm not doing this alone. There will be a couple of us on those trains with each trip. I'll just be in charge, so to speak." He stroked her arm while she snuggled closer to his side.

"I'm scared, Seth. I just have a really bad feeling about this."

"It will be all right, Lily, just wait and see."

The next day Seth rode into town with Lily to tell the mayor he would ride the train for several weeks. He dropped her off at the school and headed to the mayor's office.

"Thanks, Seth. I knew you'd come through for us," the mayor replied, shaking his hand.

"Just know one thing, Harland. I'm doing this to help protect my family, too. It's not safe for anyone on those trains right now. We all know this. I

just hope we can convince these men to move onto somewhere else before someone else is hurt or killed.”

“I know, Seth, I know,” the mayor replied with a shake of his head. “Are you going to start this afternoon?”

“No, tomorrow. I just wanted you to know, so plans can be made to make sure someone is there to help Lily.” They stepped out of the mayor’s office into the morning sun. Seth looked around the town he had been born and raised in, wondering if anyone they knew might be involved. He dreaded the thought, but he couldn’t be too careful.

“I’ll take care of it, don’t you worry.”

“Thanks, Harland.”

“You are welcome, Seth. Thank you for helping us with this problem. I’ll make sure everything is in place.”

* * * *

For several days afterwards, Seth rode the train, disguised as one of the passengers, along with another man. Obviously the robbers knew they were there, because all was quiet. No robberies were even attempted, and Seth became frustrated and angry.

“Damn it,” he exclaimed one night while he paced the living room of their home, running his hands through his hair.

Lily stopped in front of him, placed her hands on his chest and then wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’ve been neglecting you lately, I know,” he whispered in her hair when she rested her head on his shoulder.

“No, it’s not that, Seth. I just wish I could help. I know this is driving you crazy. I don’t understand how these men know you’re on the train. They avoid doing anything while you’re there.”

“It’s something I’ve thought about quite a bit over the last few days. It’s obvious to me, they are aware of everything we do. I wish I knew how they were getting the information.”

“It’s almost as if they have a hideout close by and can hear the plans while they are being discussed.”

"That's got to be it! Maybe someone here in Parkville is leaking information to them so they know when and where we'll be. That way they avoid us, but who? Who could be involved?"

"I don't know. I wish I did, so this would all be over. I'm scared." She sank down on the sofa.

He walked over and sat beside her. He slipped his arms around her and pulled her close. "I know, sweetheart, I'm afraid for all of you. I don't want anything to happen to any of my family."

"Well, nothing should happen as long as we avoid the trains."

"True, very true."

"Are you going out again tomorrow?"

"Yes. I will be on the eleven o'clock train."

"Well, at least we have tonight, then, before you must leave." She turned her head so she could look into his eyes to give him her most seductive smile.

He took her lips with his, kissing her until she was breathless. He stood and pulled her up with him before he bent down and swept her up in his arms, carrying her toward their bedroom.

* * * *

Seth made an unscheduled trip on one of the trains the next afternoon. No one knew of his trip, except Lily. He'd boarded the train as the final passenger, settling himself in the last passenger car in the last row of seats. He felt the robbers would possibly attempt a heist that afternoon, since there wasn't any talk of him being a passenger. He was right.

He sat bolt upright in his seat, where he'd been pretending to rest, when he heard female screams coming from the front of the train. Pulling his pistol, he slowly made his way toward the front, keeping a keen eye on the doorway between the cars. It didn't take long for the robbers to make their way toward the back of the train while they looted each passenger for any money and jewelry.

Seth now sat in the front of the train car, with his pistol in his hand, listening to them shouting and moving toward the car where he was positioned.

The first man slipped the car door open, and Seth grabbed his arm, pulling him into the car while the door slid shut behind him. He wrapped an arm around the man's neck and put his pistol to his head as the bag of loot scattered across the floor.

"Don't move, or I'll blow your brains all over the wall," he hissed in the man's ear.

"I won't," whispered the man in return, his hands gripping Seth's arm where it lay tight against his throat.

"Where's your boss?"

"In front," the man replied as he struggled to breathe.

"Shall we go say hello?"

"He'll kill you," the man growled in return when Seth pushed him toward the front of the train. When they met one of his accomplices in the next car, that man took a shot at Seth. The bullet hit the first man Seth had captured, and Seth was able to return fire.

People screamed and ducked behind seats as bullets began to fly in all directions, hitting windows and walls within the train. Seth pushed the man he'd held in front of him to the ground and dove behind a row of seats when a bullet whizzed by his head.

The masked bandit, who had fired at Seth, retreated to the car behind him and slammed the door between cars.

The next thing Seth heard was a man shouting orders, and then the robbers jumped from the train, rolled in the grasses growing along the tracks and disappeared into the brush.

He jumped up and contemplated going after the men, when suddenly spots began to form in front of his eyes, and his head began to spin. He raised his hand to the left side of his head and faintly heard a voice beside him say, "Mister, you best sit down. You've been shot."

Seth looked at the man standing next to him with a blank look before he moved his hand and saw blood. The room went dark as he slowly sank to the floor.

* * * *

A rider galloped into the yard, sliding to a stop mere inches from the front porch. He scrambled off his horse yelling for Lily or Carmen before he'd even dismounted.

"My goodness! What's wrong?" Carmen asked.

"It's Seth. Where's Lily?"

"What about Seth? Oh God! Don't tell me." Lily felt the blood drain from her face.

"He's been shot," the man replied, and Lily leaned heavily against the doorframe.

"Where is he?"

"He's at the doc's place."

"Is he...?"

"He is alive, Lily, but he's hurt pretty bad. You need to come now," he said, taking her hand in his.

"I'll have Johnny hitch the wagon. He'll be fine, missus, don't you worry," Carmen reassured Lily before she went to find the boy and tend to the twins.

"I..." Lily started to say, she but couldn't finish. Thoughts of losing her husband swam in her brain and she almost fainted.

Johnny came running from the house a few minutes after Carmen summoned him. Lily watched him scramble to the barn for the horses and wagon. After he had hitched the team, Lily walked over like she was prepared to drive.

"No, Mother. I'll drive." He directed her to the passenger side of the wagon and helped her up.

Tears welled up in Lily's eyes when she heard him call her mother. He had never done that before, and it touched her heart.

He had hitched the team in record time, and, before another minute went by, they were on their way to town.

The wagon rolled up to the doctor's place a short while later, and when they approached, he stepped out of the door with blood on his hands. He wiped it off on an apron he wore, and her heart sank.

God, please don't let him be dead. He has to be all right. I can't live without him.

"Lily," the doc said.

"Seth?" she whispered as Johnny helped her down.

“He’ll be all right, Lily. He needs to rest though. The bullet grazed his temple, and he lost a lot of blood,” the doctor said, trying to reassure her when she stepped onto the porch.

“Can I see him?”

“Of course, come with me. He’s resting in one of the empty bedrooms upstairs. I’ve given him something to help him rest, and I’d rather he stayed here tonight so I can watch him.”

She and the doctor walked up the stairs to the bedroom where Seth rested, with Johnny close behind. The doctor opened the door and Lily nearly fainted, when she saw her husband lying in the bed with a bandage around his head. His eyes were closed, and he looked very pale. The even rise and fall of his chest with each breath reassured her he was alive.

Stepping to the side of the bed, she took his hand in hers while she sank in the chair the doctor had placed there.

“Seth?” Her tearful whisper slipped from between her lips while she watched his face, waiting for him to open his eyes and to smile at her like he always did.

“Lily,” he whispered, opening his eyes to her voice. “Where am I? What happened?”

“You are at the doctor’s place. You were shot on the train, and the bullet grazed your head. You’ve lost a lot of blood, so you’ll have to rest for a while. No more chasing after bad guys for now.” She held his hand to her face, and hot tears rolled down her cheeks. His free hand moved toward the bandage on his head, and he winced as his fingers probed where the bullet had cut a path.

“Aw, sweetheart, don’t cry. I hate it when you cry.”

“Sorry,” she said, wiping the tears on her cheeks. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I have a hell of a lot more years to love you ahead of me,” he said with that sexy smile but grimaced when pain shot through his head.

“Will you stop trying to be such a man?”

“Why do I feel like I’m drunk? Not that it would be a bad thing, mind you, with this pain in my head, but it means I can’t take you in my arms and make love to you like I want to.”

The doctor cleared his throat. "There will be none of that for a while, Seth. You're feeling drunk because I gave you something to help you rest."

"Pop, are you all right?"

"I'll be fine, son. You'll just have to take care of things for a bit while I recover, that's all."

"No problem, Pop. I've got it." Lily watched him square his shoulders and he seemed to grow a few years older right before her eyes.

"I'm going to have to sleep for a while now. I don't know what you gave me, doc, but it's making me really tired. I love you, sweetheart," Seth said in a sleepy voice. "Don't worry. I'll be fine." His eyes drifted shut when the medication took hold again. The trio left the room as the soft snores reached their ears, and they knew he was asleep.

"Is there anything I can do?" Lily asked as they walked back down the stairs to the parlor.

"No, he just needs to rest. You can take him home tomorrow, I think, but he'll still have to rest there. No gallivanting around after train robbers for a few weeks anyway." She saw the doctor give her a conspiratorial wink when he faced her.

"I understand, doctor. I'll make sure he doesn't run off, trust me." They made their way back out the front door to the wagon so they could head for home. "Take care of him tonight for me, will you? I can't imagine my life without that stubborn man."

"I've got his best interest at heart, Lily, don't you worry." He helped her board the wagon, and Johnny turned it toward home.

The sun had begun to set in the afternoon sky when Lily and Johnny made their way back to the ranch house.

Johnny kept a keen eye on the road ahead while they traveled, but he wasn't prepared when several men wearing masks over their noses and mouths moved out of the woods. They stopped in front of the wagon, making it impossible for them to pass.

"What's the meaning of this?" Lily demanded, shaking when the men snickered behind their masks.

The group of men separated as a lone rider made his way to the front. Lily's skin crawled when she met the eyes of the stranger in front of her. He tipped his hat to her, and even though his face was covered, she could tell he was laughing behind his mask when the corners of his eyes crinkled.

"We meet again, pretty lady," he said in his gravelly voice. She immediately recognized him from her train trip, and she felt the color drain from her face.

Her gaze locked with his. "What do you want?"

He didn't respond immediately. He just sat there and stared at her, raking her body with his eyes, making her feel like she was completely naked to his gaze. "Not much," he answered, and the men around him chortled in response.

Her heart beat wildly in her chest when he gently kicked his horse and moved closer.

"Grab the boy."

"No! Leave him alone," she demanded when one of the men grabbed him. Johnny struggled against the strong arm holding him.

"Mother!" Johnny yelled, trying to reach her.

"What do you want? He's just a boy. He'll do you no harm," she said when the man kept coming closer.

"Tie him to the tree and gag him." The leader moved closer still. "Unhitch the horses and scatter them. That way if he does get free, he'll have to walk back to town."

When his horse reached the wagon, and her eyes locked with his again, terror gripped her insides. *What does he want? Why is he doing this? It's not like I can identify him from the train. I didn't even see his face..*

As quick as lightning, the man's arm grabbed her around the waist and hauled her into the saddle with him. He held on tight when the horse side-stepped under them and she struggled with everything she had. She swung her arms, biting, scratching and kicking, until she heard him grunt.

"If you don't hold still, I'll knock you out," he hissed in her ear, and she stopped long enough for him to kick the horse.

When they began to move, she struggled again and managed to work herself free. After she fell into the dirt beside the horse, she jumped to her feet and tried to run. Her long hair streamed behind her since it had come out of its pins during the struggle. She didn't get far when she felt her feet lift off the ground as her hair was grabbed from behind. The air left her lungs when she hit the ground. Stunned, she lay there for a second, unable to catch her breath, and the man stood over her. When her eyes met his again,

the anger that flared there terrified her. Then next thing she knew, she felt his fist come down hard across her cheek, and then there was nothing.

Chapter Twenty

His informant hadn't told them about Seth being on the train, but from what he'd heard; his enemy had taken a bullet and was now lying dead at the doc's house. He'd waited for Lily to come around the bend in the road so he could make the rest of his plans come to life, and now that he had her, everything was in motion.

The man released her hair and bent down to pick her up. He slung her over his shoulder before he strode back to his horse. Throwing Lily over the saddle, he mumbled under his breath, "Damn woman."

The men rode for a short time when they finally stopped at a cabin, which was set back into a canyon that wasn't visible unless you knew it was there. The stranger stopped his horse and dismounted, pulling Lily's still limp body off with him. He carried her into the cabin and dumped her on the bed before he pulled the mask from his face.

He grabbed a whiskey bottle sitting on the table, sat down in one of the chairs and rocked it back on two legs. He studied the woman on the bed as he tipped the bottle to his lips. The rest of the men walked in the cabin and the chatter stopped when they saw their leader sitting at the table.

"What the hell are we going to do with her?" one of them asked.

"That's none of your business. She's mine," the leader responded, fixing his gaze on the man long enough to make him squirm under the cold stare.

"I just want my cut, and I'm out of here. Kidnapping wasn't what I had in mind when I signed on for this."

The leader pulled out a bag from his pocket and flung it at the man who wanted to leave. When he caught it in his hands, he said, "This isn't a full cut."

"That's all you'll get since you want out early. Now get the hell out of here before I kill you and keep your share," the leader growled.

The other man took the bag, grabbed his gear and with a parting glance at the woman lying on the bed, left the cabin.

"Anyone else want out? Say so now," the leader demanded as he pinned each and every man in the room with his eyes.

A whimper could be heard from the corner of the room, near the bed, and all eyes turned to a boy, who stood there with his eyes trained on the woman.

"You said you wouldn't hurt her," the boy said to the leader when he came out of the corner. "You swore you wouldn't hurt her."

"She's fine, son. She was fighting me, so I had to knock her out."

The boy advanced on him with his fists clenched. He jumped on him and pounded on his chest, knocking him backward in the chair. The other men laughed as the boy continued to pound on him until he grabbed the small hands and pushed the child to the ground beside him. He turned to the other men in the room, silencing them with a cold stare.

He heard a whimper from the bed, and all eyes turned in that direction as the boy rose and walked over to Lily.

* * * *

Lily moaned, trying to regain consciousness. When she finally became aware of her surroundings, she turned onto her back, and her head swam from the blow she'd taken. She closed her eyes for a moment against the pain shooting through her skull.

Opening her eyes again, she whispered, "Where am I?"

Tears rolled down his cheeks when Jarod approached the bed. "I'm sorry."

"Jarod?" Lily turned startled eyes on her son, not sure what to make of the situation. *Why is Jarod here? Where am I? What was going on?* The questions ricocheted around in her mind.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," Jarod whispered. Lily watched emotions flitter across his face. "He was supposed to just take you away so it could be like it was before."

"I don't understand, Jarod. What's going on?" Tears continued down his cheeks. She turned her head when she heard sounds from the table nearby only to meet the smirk of the leader, sitting there.

“Hello, Lily.” Her eyes widened, and she gasped. She recognized him immediately now that there was no mask to hide his sneer. Her head began to swim again while her mind tried to grasp who had taken her prisoner and why.

“Daniel?” She sat up on the bed and put her hand to her face where he'd struck her.

“Yes, sweetheart, it's me, but then again, I'm sure you suspected all along, didn't you?” He placed the bottle on the table and signaled to the others to leave. Lily heard their laughter reverberate through the cabin before they left and closed the door behind them.

“I don't know what you are talking about, Daniel. Suspected what?”

“That I've been the mastermind behind the train robberies. It has been rather convenient to know every time your husband and his cohorts were to be on a train so we could avoid each one. Your son has been very informative with that bit of news.”

“Jarod's been telling you when Seth would be on the train?”

“Oh yes, he has been quite helpful. Of course today we weren't aware Seth would be there, and unfortunately for him, he was alone.”

Daniel studied her from across the room as she whispered, “No one knew he was to be on the train except for him and me.”

“Unfortunately for him, he paid the price with his life.”

Lily wasn't going to tell him any different. She needed him to think Seth was dead in order for him to be able to find her and rescue her. If Daniel thought her husband was gone and no threat, he would let his guard down.

“You killed my pop?” The anguished scream came from Jarod when he looked at Daniel.

“I'm sorry, son. It appears he was shot in the head during the robbery today. Isn't that right, Lily?” Daniel appeared to wait for confirmation from her.

“Yes,” she whispered before she whimpered and bowed her head, not wanting Daniel to see the truth in her eyes.

Lily put her hand on the little boy's head when he cried. She wanted so badly to tell him his father wasn't dead, but she couldn't, not yet. She needed for Daniel to think he was gone right now, hopefully long enough for Johnny to get free, or for someone to find him so he could get help.

"What happens now, Daniel? You can't keep me here forever," she said, her eyes meeting his again.

"I'm taking you with me, Lily. You see, I've grown rather fond of you and that body of yours. You seemed to prefer Seth to me, up to this point, but I'll change that, just like I changed Victoria's feelings." He raked her body with his eyes, making her shiver with revulsion.

"I can't leave my children, Daniel. The babies, they need me, especially since Seth is gone."

"I could care less about Seth's brats, Lily. You are mine, and from now on, you'll do as I say. Be ready to leave at first light." He got up and stomped out of the cabin, leaving her with Jarod.

Lily sat stunned when the cabin door slammed shut behind him. She stayed where she was for a moment, stroking Jarod's hair as she tried to think. She needed to get away from Daniel but wasn't sure how she could do that.

"Lily?" Jarod asked, wiping the tears from his cheeks with his shirt.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

She knew he hadn't meant any harm in what he'd done, he just didn't know how else to fix the situation he'd found himself in.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered before he curled up next to her. "I never meant for you to be hurt or for Pop to be killed."

"I know, sweetheart, I know," Lily answered, hugging him. "We just need to figure out how we can get out of here."

"I know!" Jarod exclaimed while his face brightened. "They won't miss me if I leave. I was coming and going before, anyway. I'll walk into town and get help."

"That would be too dangerous for you." She admired him for the courage he displayed, but she feared he would be caught and punished. "What if they found out you were going for help? They would probably kill you just as soon as let you go free."

"I have to. I have to help you. It's my fault you are here because I believed him when he said he wouldn't hurt you, but he has. He hurt you and killed my father, so now I have to make sure he gets caught." Jarod pulled away from Lily and started toward the door.

"Be careful, Jarod. Don't let them see you if you can," she whispered, and he smiled at her, slipping quietly out the door.

Lily rubbed her arms as a menacing chill settled around her. Her thoughts drifted to the man who held her prisoner, the man she had tried to teach to read better, the man Madge thought was a good person. *Daniel. How could he? He was behind the robberies. He shot and almost killed Seth.*

“I knew Daniel didn’t care for Seth at all, that was obvious, but kill him? Did he really want Seth out of the way so badly? What will I say to Madge the next time I see her, provided I ever see anyone I love again?”

After a while she moved toward the door, only to find a guard posted on the outside to make sure she didn’t go anywhere. The man gave her a toothless grin, and she quickly shut the door before she moved back toward the bed.

When Daniel didn’t return for a long time, Lily settled down on the bed to try to sleep. She needed to rest if she was to be able to get away given the chance.

Her heart sank when she thought about her husband. *If Jarod doesn’t get to him in time, will he search for me? When he finds out it was Daniel, will he think I ran away with him, the way Victoria might have, given the chance? Will I ever see him again? Will I ever see my babies? What of Johnny, Jarod and Anne?* The questions ricocheted through her mind while she lay silently on the bed.

When sleep finally claimed her, Seth calling out for her haunted her dreams. She dreamt she kept trying to reach him as Daniel laughed behind her, pulling her farther and farther away. When she awoke, the pillow beneath her cheek was wet from tears, and the early morning sun crept through the paneless window.

* * * *

Jarod ran. He ran with everything he had toward home. He needed to find Johnny. Johnny would know what to do. He cut through a grove of trees that wasn’t far from his home and heard rustling up ahead. He slowed his pace, so he wouldn’t startle any animals or people that might give away his presence. He didn’t want anyone to know he was there. He stopped behind a bush and pushed aside the branches so he could see what made the noise. When he did, his eyes widened when he saw his brother tied to a tree.

Coming out from behind the bush where he crouched, he stormed up to his brother yelling, "Johnny? What are you doing here tied to the tree?"

"Mmm... prffsss..." Johnny murmured, behind the gag in his mouth.

"Oh, sorry," Jarod said, pulling the gag away from his brother's mouth as he started working on the ropes.

"Mother and I were coming back from town when these men jumped us. They tied me to the tree and gagged me. One of them hit her and threw her over his saddle, and then they rode out." Johnny feverishly worked on the ropes at his feet now that his hands were free.

"Mother?" Jarod asked, looking at his brother.

"Yeah, you know, Lily. We were riding back from seeing Pop, when we were ambushed."

"You saw Pop?" The color drained from his face.

"Yeah, we saw him at the doctor's place. Why?"

"I just didn't think you would want to see him like that." His knees gave way, and he sank to the ground.

"Like what? He looked fine to me. He was kind of tired and pale, but he talked to me."

"He talked to you?"

"Yeah, Jarod, what's going on? What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere? Why aren't you at home with Carmen?" Johnny asked rapidly, crouching next to his brother and looking him in the eye.

"I... uh... I have to help Lily. We have to help Lily."

"I know, Jarod. We have to find her, but I'm not sure where they took her." The boys headed toward town on foot. They needed to get help, and town was the first place they needed to look.

"I know."

"You know? What do you mean you know?"

"I'm sorry, Johnny. I helped those men kidnap her," Jarod cried, looking into his brother's eyes, which now raged in anger.

"You did what? You helped them? How could you help them after everything Lily has done for us? Look how happy she has made Pop," Johnny yelled at his brother. "He loves her, you know."

"I know that now, Johnny, and I'm sorry. I didn't want her taking Momma's place. I told Lily I was sorry before I left to find help," Jarod whimpered in the face of his brother's wrath.

Anger was so bright in Johnny's eyes that Jarod took a step back, afraid his brother would knock him to the ground.

"We need to get help right now. Come on," Johnny said, grabbing his brother's arm in a rough grasp and pulling him along.

They approached the doctor's house, and Jarod pulled back before he asked, "Where are we going?"

"To see Pop, so we can tell him what's going on." He knocked loudly since it was still very early.

The sleepy doctor opened the door a crack, but when he saw the boys, he opened the door wide. "Boys, what can I do for you so early this morning?"

"We need to see Pop. We have to tell him something that's happened," Johnny said, walking inside with Jarod following reluctantly behind him.

Jarod wasn't quite sure how they were going to tell their father that Lily had been kidnapped and what exactly he would be able to do about it. Jarod followed his brother up the stairs to a door at the end of the hall. When Johnny slowly opened the door, Jarod stood back, shaking, when he saw his father for the first time.

Johnny approached the bed quietly and whispered, "Pop?"

* * * *

Seth groaned as he tried to awaken from the drug-induced sleep.

"Poppa?" He heard Jarod say a little above a whisper. Seth slowly opened his eyes to find his two sons standing next to his bed.

"Johnny? Jarod? What are you two doing here? Where am I? What happened?"

The doctor approached the bed, gently reminding him of what had happened the day before. He reminded him that Lily had been there with him but had to leave for Seth to recuperate.

"Where is she now? Johnny, what's going on?" Seth asked, struggling to sit up on the side of the bed. He listened closely when Johnny recounted the events of the ambush on the road.

"I'm sorry, Pop. I tried to stop them, but one of them grabbed her. She struggled and almost got away, but the leader caught her and hit her. She

must have been out, because he threw her over his saddle and rode away. They tied me up, so I couldn't go for help."

Seth could tell his son must have been hurt because he didn't help Lily, but he also knew it wasn't his fault. "Johnny, it's not your fault, son. There were probably several men there, I imagine. You couldn't have done anything. I'm proud of you." Seth reassuringly put his hand on his son's shoulder.

"Poppa?"

"Jarod, what are you doing in town? You should be at the house," he said to his younger son, trying to put the pieces together, but his head was still pounding.

"Poppa, it's all my fault. I helped them. The men who took Lily, I helped them."

"Jarod, what do you mean you helped them?"

"I saw Johnny and Lily leave for town yesterday. He told me to tell him if I ever saw her alone. When I saw them leave, I rode over and told him. He swore he wouldn't hurt her, but then he did." Seth heard Jarod's words as they rambled on, and tears streamed down the little boy's cheeks.

Struggling to understand what his son was telling him, Seth said, "Who did you tell that Lily was going to town?"

"Mr. Roberts," Jarod whispered, wincing when he saw the rage flare in his father's eyes.

"Daniel," Seth growled as his fists clenched at his sides. "I'll kill him."

"I'll take you to him, Poppa. I have to help save her. It's my fault she's there." Jarod squared his shoulders, fully prepared to take the consequences of his actions.

"Do you know the way?" Seth tried to control the rage he felt.

"Yes. I can show you."

Seth stood up but had to grip the side of the bed while his head swam.

The doctor interrupted, "You can't go anywhere, Seth. You've been badly wounded."

"I have to get my wife. I'll not let him hurt her, and he's not taking her from me, like he did Victoria." Seth opened his eyes again, now that his head had righted itself, and then he walked a little unsteadily toward the door.

Chapter Twenty-One

Not quite sure what he meant by that, the two boys and the doctor stood silently by while Seth made his way out the door of the bedroom and down the stairs. The trio followed close behind, and when Seth reached the front door, he murmured, "I need a horse."

"I'll go to the livery, Pop, and get three. I'm going with you. I know how to shoot, so I can help."

"You can't do this alone, Seth."

"What do you propose I do, doc? We don't have a sheriff anymore," Seth said while he waited for his son to return.

"I realize that, but if we tell some of the others in town what's going on, we can get a posse together and go after them."

"We don't have time. He could kill her before we get there if we wait."

"I know Seth. God I know, but we have to be practical about this. Let me go see the mayor. Wait here until I get back." The doctor strode off down the boardwalk to the mayor's office.

After a few minutes Johnny returned with three horses, fully saddled and ready to ride. Seth knew they couldn't wait for the mayor and doctor to help. When Johnny returned with the horses, he was ready to ride.

"Should we wait?"

"No, we can't wait. We don't have time." Seth struggled to mount, his head throbbing in his ears.

The boys mounted their horses, and they all rode out in the direction Jarod pointed.

They continued in that direction while Jarod told his father about the hideout, where it was, and how many men Daniel had with him. He also reluctantly told him about how he had been warning Daniel concerning Seth's movements on the trains.

"We'll talk about this after we get Lily," he told Jarod while he struggled to focus. With his head so terribly foggy from the drugs the doctor had given him and from the pounding headache, concentration proved a difficult task.

A short while later, just as the sun climbed high in the sky, they reached the mouth of the canyon where the cabin lay hidden.

Seth groaned when he climbed down from the horse, and the boys followed closely behind. They found a spot where they could tie the horses without them being seen and then crept around boulders and brush, trying to get close to the hideout. He didn't see much activity around the cabin while he surveyed the layout. He only saw two men, one posted at the cabin door, and Daniel. He had to rein in his feelings as the rage threatened to consume him.

Seth saw Daniel laugh with the man at the door, then walk inside and shut it behind him. He would have to take out the man at the door without making any noise if he was to succeed in getting to Daniel and Lily. He continued to watch the surrounding area, waiting to see if there were more men nearby. Jarod had said there were several men who rode with the gang, and Seth wanted to know where they were, should he be caught trying to rescue Lily.

After a while, he didn't see any movement from anyone. Even the man at the door had taken a seat and now leaned, apparently sleeping, against the cabin. Seth was concerned about how much time had gone by since Daniel had gone into the cabin, and he sent up a silent prayer that his wife was all right.

"We'll have to be very quiet, boys. We can't alert anyone to our presence before we can get to the cabin. You should stay here."

"No, Poppa. I'm coming with you. I can help. I took a gun from the livery when I was there, see," Johnny said, holding up a pistol that Seth didn't recognize.

"You shouldn't have done that, Johnny."

"I know, Pop, but we needed the extra gun. Yours was the only one we had against how many?"

"All right, son. You come with me, but Jarod, you stay here, out of sight. All right?" Seth told his youngest boy, and he watched him nod his head in agreement.

Seth and Johnny slowly approached from the side of the cabin. They needed to reach the man leaning against the wall before he awoke and alerted the others. Seth got within a couple of feet of the man before he stirred, snorted, and then settled back against the wall again. Father and son took a big sigh of relief.

There was a large rock near his feet, so Seth picked it up and slid a little closer to the man. When he was close enough, Seth crashed the rock down heavily on top of the man's and knocked him completely unconscious. The man slumped in the chair but stayed upright. Seth and Johnny silently crept onto the porch of the cabin and stopped, listening at the door for any noise.

* * * *

Lily sat up in the bed trying to get her bearings. She knew there was no one in the cabin with her right now, but Daniel would return. Of that, she had no doubt.

As the sun rose in the sky, telling her it was getting close to noon, she heard boots on the porch and male laughter, and then the door swung open to reveal Daniel.

"Ah, I see you're awake. Good, I could use some entertainment," he said with a malicious smile as he started in her direction.

"What is it you want from me?"

"I just want you. You see, Seth has always taken everything away from me: Victoria, you and my sons," he said, slowly advancing on her. Her eyes widened when she realized what he had said.

"Your sons?" She continued to back away, not wanting him to know she was aware of the boys' parentage.

"Don't tell me you didn't know, Lily. It's very clear that his two boys are mine. Victoria told me herself." He continued to stalk her around the room.

"I... uh..." she stammered. "I don't know what to say."

"There isn't anything you need to say. Just know that you'll be mine, one way or the other." He reached her, grabbed the hands that she'd put up to keep him away and pulled her to him.

He held onto her while she struggled against him. He wrapped his other hand in her hair to hold her head still as his lips came down on hers, brutally, cutting her lips with his teeth.

* * * *

The door burst open and Seth launched himself at Daniel, knocking all of them to the floor. The two men rolled away from Lily as she struggled to rise. Johnny rushed in to help her. Seth had pulled his pistol, but it lay trapped between the two men as they continued to roll on the floor, each attempting to get the upper hand.

Lily had never been so glad to see Seth before in her life. When the horrifying sound had ripped from his throat and he had lunged at the crazy man holding her captive, she was terrified he would be hurt.

Lily and Johnny moved toward the door, in the event things went terribly wrong. The two men broke apart a moment later, and the gun went flying, wedging itself against the wall. Fists began to fly while each took out his hatred of the other with well-planted fists. Lily knew the wound on Seth's head had finally gotten the better of him when he landed on the floor, unable to rise. She choked back a strangled cry as she watched Daniel slowly walk to where the gun was and pick it up. He panted with exertion and wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand before he grinned at Seth.

"Now, my friend, I'll have what you've taken from me for years. I'm going to enjoy your pretty new wife just like I enjoyed your last one. I enjoyed her so much, I fathered your two sons. Yes, I know they are mine, the two boys you have thought all this time were yours." Daniel taunted. Lily saw the color drain from Johnny's face when he heard the words.

"You are a bastard, Daniel. I've never hated you like I hate you now. Those boys are mine, no matter whether you fathered them or not," Seth growled, struggling from the floor.

Shrugging, Daniel leveled the gun at Seth's chest, prepared to kill him in cold blood. With the sound of gunfire exploding in the room, Lily screamed as she waited to see the blood spread across the chest of her husband, but it never came. Instead, a bright pool of blood quickly spread across the back of Daniel's shirt. Smoke curled from the pistol held tightly

in Jarod's fist as he stood near the door. Daniel turned around with a surprised look in his eyes before he fell to the floor in silence, still holding the gun.

Lily ran to her husband as he made his way to his feet and wrapped her arms around him. "I was so scared." She buried her head against his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight.

"I know, sweetheart. It's over now," Seth whispered, kissing her hair.

Lily heard the boys drop their guns before they ran to their parents' side and wrapped their little arms around them. A few moments later Lily heard the thunder of horse hooves in the distance. Afraid it was the rest of the gang of robbers returning, Seth pulled himself from the grip of his family and quickly closed the door to the cabin.

They heard the horses stop in front of the cabin, and several pairs of boots stepped onto the porch.

"Seth? Lily?"

Seth opened the door to the grim faces of several of the men from town, including the mayor and the doctor. They had obviously come to help, even if it was a little late.

The doctor moved into the room, and, seeing the body lying in a pool of blood, he bent to examine him. "He's dead," the doctor said, rising to his feet and turning the man over.

"Daniel Roberts? Want to tell me what happened here, Seth?" the mayor asked, stunned when he saw who now lay dead on the floor.

Lily moved Seth to a chair nearby, to sit for a few minutes, when she noticed the paleness of his face and the fresh blood that stained the bandage on his head.

Seth explained how he had learned Daniel was behind the robberies. He told the mayor how Jarod had been giving the criminals information about posting the guards on the train, and he added that Jarod had been involved in Lily's kidnapping.

"This is serious, Seth. That boy was helping them break the law."

"Harland, I think I should handle the situation with Jarod at home. I realize he was helping them, but he was also the one who saved all of us by shooting Daniel before he could kill me." Seth pulled his son to his side.

"He shot Daniel?" the doctor and the mayor said together.

"Yes, he did, and I couldn't be more proud of him."

"Well, seeing how he saved all of your lives and also helped rid the town of the train robbers or of their leader, anyway, I guess we can overlook this."

"Thanks, Harland. I'm sure we can handle this at home." Seth tried to stand again so they could leave the dreadful place, and Lily braced him with her own body until they walked out the door. When they reached the porch, they were completely surprised at the number of people who had come from town to help. There must have been twenty men sitting on their horses or meandering around the yard.

"Thanks, gentlemen, for coming to our aid. It's nice to know you have friends," Seth said, addressing the group.

"I wish you would have waited, Seth. We would have been here to help," one man said as the horse shifted under him.

"You know me, Zeke, I'm not very patient, especially when it comes to my wife," Seth said, pulling Lily even closer.

"Yeah, we know," another said, and the men laughed under their breath.

Seth shot the snickering men a furious look and then his face relaxed. "The horses are over there by those rocks. Maybe one of you men could retrieve them for us."

"Sure, Seth," Zeke said, before he headed toward where the horses were tied.

"What are we going to tell Madge?" Lily asked as they waited for the man to bring the horses down.

"The truth. Daniel was her pride and joy, but she needs to know the truth."

"I suppose you're right, but she's not going to like it." Lily pulled her dress up between her legs and tucked it in her waistband, enabling her to ride astride the horse. Wolf whistles from the men around them echoed through the clearing.

"Look all you want, gentlemen, but just remember, she's mine," Seth said, with a mocking, furious look in their direction before turning the horses in the direction of the ranch. "Let's go home."

Later that afternoon they headed into town to talk to Madge. When they rode up in front of her place, she came out the front door, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Well hello, you two. I'm surprised to see you."

“We need to tell you something, Madge. Can we go inside?” Seth asked, attempting to take her elbow and guide her into the house.

“Of course, Seth.” They went in and sat down in the front parlor. “Now what’s going on? I don’t like the look on your faces.”

“Madge,” Lily said softly, taking her hands in her own, “Daniel is dead.”

“No! That can’t be! I just saw him this morning before he rode out. He said he was going to be gone a few days. That’s all,” Madge pulled her hands from Lily’s grasp and began to pace the room.

“It’s true, Madge,” Seth began. “There are some things we need to tell you that you aren’t going to like, I’m sure, but you need to know. You see, Daniel has been the one behind the robberies, and he kidnapped Lily yesterday. He and the others were holding her in a cabin in the canyon beyond town, I guess until he could move her without anyone seeing them. He was responsible for me being shot yesterday, too.” Seth recounted the events leading to Daniel’s death.

“It’s just not possible,” Madge whispered, sinking back onto the sofa next to Lily.

“I know you loved him like he was your own son, Madge, but he was keeping all this from you. I wouldn’t have thought him capable of this either, had I not seen it with my own eyes,” Lily said, trying to comfort the woman.

“Who shot him? Did you, Seth?”

“No, he was going to kill me after we had gotten into a fist fight in the cabin, but Jarod shot him from behind.”

“Jarod? How did he get involved?”

“Johnny was with Lily yesterday when they kidnapped her, but we found out later Jarod had been helping Daniel by giving him information on my movements. Unfortunately, or fortunately, whichever way you want to look at it, Daniel didn’t know I was on the train yesterday, so they attempted to rob it.”

Madge shook her head and stared at the floor for a moment before she said, “Wait, I have something I need to show you.” She left the room and came back a few minutes later. “I don’t know if this has anything to do with anything, but I found this on your floor, Lily, at the house here in town, after

those men attacked you. It looks like a map, but I didn't know of what." She handed the map to Seth. "What do you think it means?"

Seth opened the paper and showed it to Lily and was surprised to see that the map indicated the cabin where they had found Lily. It was a pretty detailed map of the surrounding area, with obvious escape routes, should the need arise for them to leave quickly. "I wish you'd shown this to me earlier, Madge. We might have been able to prevent this whole thing," Seth whispered, and Lily felt him shiver.

"I'm sorry, Seth. I didn't think it was that important, until now. I'm just glad everyone is safe," Madge said, and a tear slipped down her cheek.

"It's over, and thankfully, no one else was hurt or killed. We just have to move on and try to forget the terror of the last couple of days," Lily said.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. It's just going to be very quiet around here, now that Daniel is gone," Madge said sadly. "He was the only family I had."

"You have us, Madge. Isn't that right, Seth?" Lily said, and their eyes met over Madge's head.

"Of course. You had nothing to do with what Daniel was up to. We won't hold his behavior against you."

"I think we should be going, Seth. We still need to address Jarod's involvement with him," Lily said.

"Yes, we do," Seth said, rising from his place. They walked arm and arm to the front door, with Madge close behind.

"Will you come out for supper on Sunday?" they asked.

"That would be nice," Madge said.

"You can ride back with us when we come in for church, all right?"

Seth helped Lily into the wagon seat before he went around and jumped into the driver's seat.

"That's perfect," Madge replied and waved.

When Seth and Lily reached the house, he helped her down and began to unhitch the team so they could be stabled for the night. Lily walked inside to find all of the children sitting quietly in the front room with Carmen, waiting for their return.

She turned to the children she had grown to love with all of her heart over the year that she and Seth had been together, and she said, "Johnny, Anne, can you leave us for a while? Your poppa and I need to talk to Jarod alone."

“Sure, come on, Anne. You can show me those new kittens in the barn,” Johnny said, taking his sister’s hand as they headed for the barn.

Lily saw Seth come in a few minutes later as she and Jarod sat in the living room, and she waved for him to join them. He entered the room and sat down next to his wife, and together they faced their son.

“You’ve told me what you did to help Daniel, but what I want to know, son, is why?”

When Jarod lifted his head, the sadness Lily saw there was so similar to what she remembered in Seth’s eyes, the first time they had met on the train, it hurt her heart. The boy hurt, deep in his heart, for the love of his mother. Victoria was taken from him before he was ready. Lily knew the only way for this little boy to get past this was for Seth to tell him the truth of how she was killed.

Jarod told them how he didn’t want Lily to take Victoria’s place, and when she had given birth to the babies, he was afraid Seth loved them more than he loved Johnny, Anne, and himself.

“Sweetie, I don’t want to take your mother’s place in your heart. I love your poppa, and he loves me. We just want to be happy and raise all of you together until you are grown enough to have a family of your own. Your love for your mother will always be in your heart, and no one can take that away from you.”

“That’s right, son. I love Lily, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t love your mother.”

“Seth, I know you are against telling the children the truth of Victoria’s death, but I think, in this case, he needs to know,” Lily said as she braced for his fury.

“You’re right, sweetheart. He needs to know. There have already been way too many secrets.”

The words flowed from Seth’s mouth. The whole story was laid out to his son, about how Victoria had been riding that day to meet Daniel. She’d come upon the squatters, who, in turn, shot her because she had questioned their presence.

“What did Mr. Roberts mean when he said Johnny and me were his sons? That you had taken everything from him, including us?”

"You see, son, it appears that you and Johnny were fathered by him. I mean that he is your real father, not me." Seth tried to explain to an eight year-old boy the way things were between a man and a woman.

"Does that mean you are sending us away?"

"No, son. I would never send you away. I will always be your pop, no matter what." Lily saw Seth move to his son's side and pull him to his chest. She sat in the chair, watching the exchange between father and son, knowing that her family was now complete. No matter who had fathered the boys, they were their children.

That night when they lay next to each other, fully sated from their lovemaking, Lily snuggled next to her husband and stroked his chest as he pulled her close.

"I wish I had been able to stop Daniel before this got so out of control," Seth whispered as she kissed his chest. "If I had been able to keep him from robbing the trains all those times, maybe no one would have been killed in the process."

"True, but then again, we might not have met if he hadn't robbed it the first time. What were you doing on the train that day, anyway?"

"I had just made a trip into Houston to sell some cattle, so I was on my way back home. I knew the new schoolteacher was due any day, but I never pictured you as her when I saw you on the train. I thought you might be visiting family or something, but I was definitely curious when you kept peeking at me." He continued lazily to stroke her arm with his fingers, sending goose bumps across the surface.

"Peeking? I wasn't peeking at you," she said, surprised he had noticed her looking at him.

"Yes, you were," he said, with a sexy smile. "I could see you."

"How could you see me? You were sleeping."

"No, I wasn't! You just thought I was," he said before he laughed at her expression of shock.

"You are rotten, Seth Sanford, do you know that?"

"No, I'm not. I'm as sweet as a sugar cookie on your tongue," he whispered before he rolled her over and started trailing kisses down her chest. She moaned beneath him.

Lifting his head, he said, "You've shown me love can conquer all fears, revenge and anger, and I've finally surrendered to love."

Epilogue

“What’s the surprise, Seth?” Lily asked as they tumbled on the bed and she tickled him, trying to get him to tell her.

“I’m not telling you, sweet wife of mine. You’ll just have to wait and see,” he said, flipping her over, pinning her hands above her head and kissing her soundly on the mouth.

“You just don’t play fair, Seth. Why won’t you tell me?” She stuck her lip out in a pout, and he fought the laughter rumbling in his chest.

“Because then it wouldn’t be a surprise,” he said, stepping back, afraid he would be tempted by her charms to give in. “Now get dressed. We need to go to town.”

Lily sprung out of the bed and pulled on her clothing quickly while he laughed behind her.

She is so predictable, this wife of mine. God, I love her. She had been his savior and his love for almost two years now, and their love had grown stronger each day. He no longer harbored the need to find Victoria’s killers as he gave into his love for Lily. She made him whole, and that was all he needed now.

The twins were beginning to pull themselves up on the furniture and walk around, and Anne became their substitute mother. She loved to help Lily with the twins, feeding them, changing them, and playing with them all the time.

Johnny had matured so much over the last few years, it was kind of sad to see. Their boy was growing up, and it was clear lately he had a terrible crush on one of the girls in his class. He helped tutor the girl after school, and he blushed each time someone mentioned her name.

Jarod had gotten over his disappointment at Lily taking their mother’s place and had even come to call her Momma over the last several months.

"Can we go now?" She pulled the brush quickly through her hair and tied it back with a ribbon.

"Yes, sweetheart, we can go now," he said, laughing again. They walked out of their room and headed for the wagon he had already hitched to the team.

"What do we have to go to town for?"

"I'm not telling you, Lily. You'll just have to be patient until we get there," he said, walking around to the other side.

During the entire trip, she tried to get him to tell her, but he was adamant that this was to remain a surprise.

They pulled up to the train station, and she gave him a questioning look before she turned to peer at the train as it pulled in, blowing steam when it shuddered to a stop.

"I'll be right back," he said, jumping down and heading toward the train.

* * * *

She almost stood up in the wagon seat so she could see where he had gone, but he was swallowed up in the crowd, and she could no longer see him.

After several minutes, she spotted him walking back toward the wagon, and she cocked her head. A beautiful redhead walked beside him and questions began to ripple through Lily's her mind. Curiosity got the better of her when her husband stopped near the wagon and lifted his arms so she could get down. Her puzzled look swept back and forth between the two people. "Seth?"

"Sweetheart, I want you to meet someone. This is Elizabeth Flannery, your mother." Seth wrapped his arm around her and tugged her closer.

"My moth..." Lily started, but couldn't finish when her eyes fixed on the woman in front of her. She was in her late forties, with beautiful red hair and big green eyes, just like her own.

"Yes, sweetheart. She's your mother."

"But how?" she asked as her eyes fixed on her husband. "When? Where?"

“Shall we go to the restaurant so we can talk?” Seth said, steering her toward the center of town while the older woman followed.

Once they were seated at a table in a private area of the restaurant, Seth began to explain how he had hired a private investigator to track down Lily’s mother. He had found her in San Francisco. Hoping to start a new life, she had moved there after she had asked Edward and Kathleen to raise Lily.

* * * *

Elizabeth sat quietly, studying the beautiful girl before her as she listened to the man tell how he’d found her. She couldn’t believe the woman across from her was her daughter, her precious Lillian she’d been forced to give up so many years before.

“You are Elizabeth Flannery?” Lily asked in a whisper after Seth had finished his story.

“Yes,” she said with a slight Irish brogue. “You are Lillian?”

“Lily, yes,” Lily replied then asked, “Where have you been? Why did you leave me with Edward and Kathleen?”

“I had no choice. A widow with a young babe would not have done well in Boston. Edward and Kathleen promised me they would take good care of you,” Elizabeth said, studying the couple in front of her. “I traveled to California to make a new life for myself. I have been there ever since. I was very surprised when your husband contacted me and wanted to know if I would like to come and visit you.”

“Why didn’t you try to contact me all these years?”

“I thought it better not to. I didn’t know whether you would hate me for leaving you.” She bowed her head as tears threatened to spill from her eyes.

“I didn’t even know you existed until about two years ago. Edward and Kathleen never told me about you and my father until I found my birth record by accident.”

“I am sorry then that I did not contact you sooner. If you do not want me to be a part of your life, I’ll understand. I needed to see you, though, and know that you were safe and happy. I see that you are with your wonderful husband, so I will go.” She began to rise until Lily stopped her.

“No, I don’t want you to leave. I want to get to know you. You are my mother. You have grandchildren who need to know their grandmother,” Lily said vehemently.

“Grandchildren?” She was sure the surprise on her face lit up the room.

“Yes, grandchildren. Seth and I have a boy and a girl, and Seth has three children from his previous marriage. Our youngest daughter is named after you,” Lily said, touching her arm. “Please say you’ll stay?”

After a moment Elizabeth relented and agreed to stay. She had no ties in California, and her wonderful daughter wanted her to stay. *Yes. I will stay and get to know my daughter and my grandchildren.*

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Sullivan is a romance author, who, when not writing, spends her time with her husband, Shaun, on their farm in middle Tennessee. She loves to ride her horses, play with her dogs and relax on the porch, enjoying the rolling hills of her home south of Nashville. Country music is a passion of hers, and she loves to listen to it while she writes.

She is an avid reader of romance novels and enjoys reading Nora Roberts, Jude Deveraux and Susan Wiggs. Finding new authors and delving into something different helps feed the need for literature. A registered nurse by education, she loves to help people and spread the enjoyment of romance to those around her with her novels. She loves cowboys, so you'll find many of her novels have sexy men in tight jeans and cowboy boots.

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