



MARRYING *Mattie*

*Victoria
Dark*

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AN [*e-reads*]BOOK

New York, NY

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First e-reads publication 2003
www.e-reads.com
ISBN 0-7592-5437-0

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One

"Go away!"

Mattie Idyll shook her closed parasol threateningly at the large yellow dog blocking the boardwalk. Wet tongue lolling, the animal looked at her as if it wanted to play, or to have her for breakfast. "I said, 'Go away!'" "

Taking this as an invitation, the dog bounded forward and leapt up, putting its paws on Mattie's shoulders and knocking her off-balance. She dropped her parasol and the basket she carried as she tried frantically to push the dog away and regain her balance. She ended up on her bustle in the middle of the boardwalk.

The dog made a swipe at her face with its tongue, then dodged a slap and bounded out of reach. Mattie glared at the animal as she wiped her wet cheek. The yellow dog stood just out of harm's way, looking at her as if aggrieved and puzzled by her lack of enthusiasm.

Expelling an exasperated breath, Mattie picked up her closed parasol and swung at the dog when the animal ventured close again. She wasn't trying to hit it so much as to just convince the monster to go away.

"Nathan!" Mattie called out to her son. But a glance over her shoulder showed Nathan already halfway to Alma's Boarding House, racing up Main Street as fast as his short legs could carry him. His attention was focused on the long curling rooster feather he held aloft as he ran, the end twirling in the wind.

Other than her fast-disappearing son, the town of Medicine Springs was wrapped in the stillness of early morning. Pale light painted hitching rails and facaded store fronts in fuzzy, soft colors. Shadows of live oaks shaded houses built back from the road. Light from coal oil

lamps spilling through kitchen windows showed people beginning to stir to meet the day.

The livery stable doors were open. In front of the wooden structure, flames danced on the blacksmith's forge as old Joe worked the bellows and readied his fire. It would do no good to call to the huge ex-slave. He was as kind as the day was long, but Mattie knew he was also as deaf as a post.

Well, it looked like, as usual, she was going to have to help herself. She'd long ago learned that there were no knights in shining armor who rescued ladies in distress.

Getting to her knees, she firmly grasped the nearest post then pulled herself upright. And felt her foot sink when a rotted board where the gutter dripped gave way.

Still grasping the post, Mattie pulled. The boot remained stuck as though it had been made into the sidewalk.

The beginnings of tears prickled her eyes. "Damn!"

Normally she didn't use vulgar language. Normally she had no desire to. A lady did not stoop to base commonness, after all. But nothing was normal. No, nothing, she thought bitterly. First, yesterday, they'd run out of firewood and the axe handle broke when she tried to chop down a tree. Not that she was making much headway, anyhow. Usually she paid someone to cut her wood, but there was no money for that now. Then she'd come home from church and found coyotes had been at her hens. She'd wanted to sit down and bawl like a baby.

She hadn't, of course. That would have scared Nathan half to death. He'd never seen her cry. With no father, the boy depended on her to be strong.

But this was just the last straw.

The big dog turned its attention to something behind her and bounded off. Well, that was one problem out of the way, at least. Now for the next, Mattie thought, looking down.

She gave her booted foot an angry yank. To her surprise, the boot came free. To her dismay, the heel felt wobbly when she took a step.

"Damn it all to hell and damnation!"

"Mornin' to you, too, Miz Mattie," drawled a deep voice behind her.

Flushing guiltily, Mattie looked around to find Ty Warburton grinning at her, a cynical light in his ice-blue eyes. Her cheeks burned. Of

all the people to overhear her bad language! Ty Warburton was insufferably rude and arrogant and never failed to set her teeth on edge when she saw him strutting about town.

Tall, above six foot, he wore a long canvas duster, denim pants, and spurs on his well-worn boots. Beneath his hat, the wide brim of which had obviously kept much rain from his face, judging by its weathered state, his sandy-blond hair was a little too long, falling below his collar. His face would have been handsome, except there was a hard look about it. A hard look that was somehow accentuated by his smile.

Something in his eyes said he didn't quite trust her. Well, she didn't trust him, either. Because he'd earned his money to buy his spread with a gun, she considered Ty Warburton a common ruffian. In the years since he'd owned the Rocking J Bar Ranch, she'd always gone out of her way to avoid the man. And he'd always gone out of his way to rile her — showing he'd no breeding at all!

With his thumbs hooked in the belt loops of his denim pants as he lounged against the post, and that insufferable grin on his face, Ty Warburton still looked as dangerous as the first time she'd seen him riding into town with that big Colt Peacemaker strapped to his hip. The gun was gone now, but to Mattie, Medicine Springs's leading citizen still looked more like a bank robber than an upstanding member of the community.

The yellow dog sat on its haunches at his side, the picture of dogly decorum. She might have known it was his.

Ty straightened and moved nearer, the wicked glint in his eyes deepening. "I'm sure I couldn't have heard a'right. Preachers' wives don't swear, or so I've been told."

Mattie stood ramrod-straight and glared up at him past the brim of her black straw bonnet. "Widow. I am a widow, sir. And a gentleman doesn't stand by and laugh while a lady struggles in distress."

"I never claimed to be a gentleman." He grinned infuriatingly.

"Good. At least you aren't a liar, as well as insufferably ill-mannered."

Instead of being abashed by her remark, as she'd intended, Ty's grin widened, showing straight white teeth the likes of which she'd not often seen in a man's mouth since leaving Baltimore. Given the prevalence of tobacco chewing and fist fights among these western men, it was a wonder they had any teeth at all.

He picked up her basket and parasol and held them out to her. "Well, Widow Idyll, I guess that puts me one up on you, as no lady would use vulgar speech like that."

Mattie felt her face flame to the roots of her hair. Grinding her teeth in silent rage, she snatched her things away from him and turned on her heel.

Or tried to. Her boot heel broke completely off and the basket and parasol went flying once again as Mattie fell headlong. Strong hands caught her around her rib cage and saved her.

Ty lifted her and set her back on her feet as easily as if she were a child. But he didn't remove his hands. She was too stunned to speak as they seemed to burn her skin through the layers of black bombazine, her whalebone corset, and cotton camisole. She was fairly certain the ruffian's finger marks were imprinted on her soul.

"Thank you." Mattie bit out the words between clenched teeth. "I can manage now!" she added, as his big hands continued to clasp her body in that most upsetting way.

"I doubt it." One sandy brow rose mockingly. He picked her up again, so that her feet dangled.

"What are you . . . put me down!" Mattie kicked, to no avail.

Paying her vigorous protests no attention, Ty turned her around until she was facing the same post she'd used to haul herself upright. "Hold on to it," he commanded, then bent and caught her foot and the broken shoe heel.

"A gentleman does not touch a lady's limbs!" Mattie drew in a shocked breath as he pulled her foot up behind her. She tried to kick in protest, but he held her foot firmly. "Did you hear me!"

"Be still."

She caught the post. She had no choice — it was catch it or be over-set as he lifted her foot impossibly high.

"Good thing we already established I'm not a gentleman." He stepped over her leg, straddling it with his back to hers, and held her booted foot pinioned between his knees, just as though he was shoeing a mare.

Another blaze of heat suffused her face as she realized the intimacy of having her leg between his. Imagining how much of her mended stocking was showing to anyone who happened to see, she clutched the post tighter, suddenly unable to catch her breath.

"Don't faint," Ty said as though reading her mind. "I left my ammunia crystals in my other vest." Using the ebony handle of her parasol, Ty tapped the heel back onto her boot. "There. Stomp it a few times, then it should do." He released her foot as suddenly as he'd lifted it.

Clenching her fists, Mattie whirled around. Glaring at him, she stood rigid. Beyond moving. Beyond speech. Never had she been so mortified! Finally, her muscles cooperated and she lifted her shawl higher across her shoulders, pulling it tightly over her breasts.

Ty Warburton made a show of returning her parasol and basket once more. Holding her shawl with one hand, Mattie snatched them from his grasp with the other. She opened her mouth, but only an angry croak issued from her throat.

"You're welcome." Ty chuckled.

Still feeling the imprint of his fingers on her leg, and a little of the strange tingling his touch had sent running up it, Mattie felt heat flood her cheeks again. "*Mr. Warburton!*"

"Yes?"

"I . . . I . . ." Mattie began, but faltered as she stared up at him. The mocking glint in his eyes changed to something darker. And much more frightening. He was handsome, the type of man who'd never given her a second look back in Baltimore. But this man was looking at her now, and she took a step back.

"Mama, Mama, Mama!" Nathan skidded to a stop between them and looked from his mother's face to the rancher's, all the while tugging on Mattie's skirt. "Mama, ain't you comin'? Miz Alma's old red sow has a new litter of pigs, and I wanna see 'em — that sure is a nice dog, mister!"

"*Aren't you coming,*" Mattie corrected her son automatically and caught his collar when he would have gone to the big yellow dog. "Run on to Alma's and I'll catch up."

Giving the dog a wistful look, Nathan hesitated, then ran a few steps down the plank sidewalk and paused, waiting for his mother.

"You are an insufferably rude devil!" Mattie hissed.

"And you are just like the other 'ladies' I've known." The hard glaze returned to Ty Warburton's gaze.

Realizing there was nothing to be gained by dressing the man down, that he would only enjoy it if she lost her temper, she turned and stalked away.

Ty watched her go, the bustle on her black dress jerking from side to side with her quick, angry steps. Rubbing the back of his neck, he shook his head, wondering at his own behavior. He wasn't in the habit of being rude to females. Truth be told, he wasn't in the habit of having much to do with Mattie Idyll's kind at all. There were visits to the girls above the saloon in Red Creek, but he didn't do much talking then. And he was never rude.

There was just something about Mattie Idyll that goaded him. Short and thin, she was no beauty. But he'd never held that against a female. Maybe it was the way she was always so proper, so perfectly mannered. A genuine lady, for what that was worth.

Lyla Beaumont had been a proper southern lady by day and writhed in his bed by night. His jaw clamped. Young fool that he'd been, he'd believed the southern belle truly cared for him. He'd even gone through that sham of a marriage.

Yes, Mattie Idyll reminded him of Lyla. And from the expletives he'd overheard Mattie spewing, like Lyla, her propriety was tossed aside when it was inconvenient.

As Ty watched Mattie's progress, she called to her son as he darted into the square after a gray squirrel. A blue jay must have been making its nest in the big oak there because it took exception to the child and dived at him, squawking raucously and almost striking the small blond head. With a frightened shriek, the boy reversed direction and dashed back to his mother, a blur of flailing arms and pumping legs.

The lad hit her black skirts and burrowed into the folds, and a change came over the stiffly proper Mattie Idyll. As she spoke to the boy and gently stroked his hair from his face, there was a mother's love in her whole demeanor. Ty was too far away to hear her words, but they were obviously the right ones, for the child looked up, then dashed away again, this time running on ahead of her.

Did he dare to hope Lyla Beaumont had been as good a mother to his child?

His child.

Lifting his hat and stabbing his fingers through his hair, Ty silently damned the Georgia beauty. She could have told him. Not only had she not told him about the baby, but she'd been responsible for his and his brother's capture and their stay in Andersonville Prison, where his brother died.

Vague scenes from the Confederate hellhole tried to push their way to the surface, like the harsh light of the sun trying to force its way through the foliage of old live oak in the square.

Resettling his hat on his head, he pushed the memories away. It did no good to dredge up the past. It was better left buried.

Ty touched his breast pocket and felt the crumpled letter that had turned his life upside down. How the hell had it found him, anyway? It was addressed to "Major Tyrone Warburton, Sixth Illinois Regulars, U.S. Army" and had somehow made it into his parents' hands. They had forwarded it on.

He wished fervently that they hadn't.

The Beaumonts' lawyer had written for him to come take responsibility for his daughter, now that Lyla was dead.

Lyla dead. He'd once lived and breathed for the woman, but now he felt nothing at the news of her death. Not even relief.

The truth was, it wasn't Lyla he blamed for what happened to him and his brother. He alone was responsible.

More disconcerting was the thought of his daughter. A half-grown child he'd never known existed. A sick feeling roiled his stomach. He didn't want the responsibility, not for another human soul. Not ever again. He'd promised his parents he'd watch out for John, for all the good that had done his brother. Instead, Ty's selfish infatuation with Lyla had led to his brother's death.

He thought about ignoring the letter. Surely the Beaumonts would continue to see to the child's welfare. The girl had to be better off where she was at.

He sighed. He couldn't just pretend he didn't know about her. She was his responsibility. But he couldn't bring her here. He was unqualified to raise a child, and working the ranch often kept him on the range for days at a time. Besides, it would be for the best if she stayed in the surroundings she was used to, where she felt loved and cared for, he told himself.

He'd just send a telegraph and explain. The Beaumonts would see the wisdom of leaving the child where she was and not uprooting her. Satisfied with his solution, he started up the street to the restaurant. He'd have breakfast while he waited for the telegraph office to open.

* * *

"Nathan, come on." Mattie sighed as she waited by Alma's picket gate. On hands and knees, Nathan prodded a slug he'd found under a stone. She shook her head in exasperation. The boy was as curious as a puppy and just as filled with energy.

He looked up at her, frowning. "Mama, is he really?"

"Is who really? What are you talking about?"

"You know, Mr. Warbucket."

"Warburton," Mattie corrected. "Yes, it was really him." At his most annoying, Mattie added to herself. She pulled open the gate. "Don't dawdle, sweet."

As if the words lit a fire under him, Nathan rushed past her, disappearing around the corner of Alma's Boarding House. Mattie let go of the gate and it snapped closed behind them, pulled by a weight suspended on a rope between the gate and the gatepost.

She'd always thought the simple device was ingenious. Still furious at Ty Warburton's high-handed treatment, she pleasantly imagined holding his head in the gate and letting it swing closed.

Alma's kitchen was a separate structure connected to the main house by a covered "dog walk," a practical design, considering how often kitchens burned down. Also, having the cooking area separate helped in the sweltering heat of summer.

The sun was just halfway above the horizon and everything was still touched in shades of gray. Golden lantern light shone through the window and smoke curled invitingly from the stovepipe, promising warmth and maybe a hot cup of Alma's coffee. Mattie had come to borrow the eggs she needed to bake the custard pies she'd promised to the Coffeepot Restaurant, so she could have them ready and cooled by lunch. Thanks to the coyotes, she'd have no more eggs of her own for a while.

Nathan ran past the kitchen to the fence by the barn in back of the house. Stretching on his tiptoes, he scratched a Jersey calf behind the ears.

The kitchen door suddenly opened and water flung from a dishpan spread out over the yard. Mattie squeaked and jumped back, narrowly saving her skirt. A dozen or so chickens weren't so quick and took exception to the deluge. Squawking in alarm, they scattered in all directions. One fat red hen on which most of the water landed squawked loudest of all as she flew off into the corner of the picket fence.

The water had scarcely settled over the dirt before the hens were running back to scratch at the puddles for crumbs.

"Sorry, Mattie! I wasn't expectin' company to be outside the door." A grin split Alma's moon-round face as she stood on the top step. "Come on in. You're just in time. Fresh coffee's almost brewed."

"Thank you." Mattie sighed, feeling some of the anger that had sustained her drain out. "A cup sounds like just what I need." Coffee, as much as Mattie loved it, was a luxury. And she hadn't indulged her love of it for quite some time.

As the older woman held the kitchen door wide, she eyed Mattie shrewdly. "Mercy, what's ruffled your feathers? You look more put out than those hens I flung the water on."

Realizing her face had given away how upset she was, Mattie quickly schooled her features into a smile. She was not in the habit of sharing her feelings. There had been too many years when she'd been married to Jonas Idyll when she'd had to hide what she truly felt. Besides, everyone had their own problems. She'd not burden them with hers.

"Wrong? Nothing."

"Come on in. I was just about to start a pan of biscuits."

Mattie put a gloved hand on the handrail and stepped carefully onto the bottom step, in case Ty Warburton's shoeing job didn't hold. The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee found her nostrils, along with fried bacon and other warm scents, and her stomach growled enthusiastically. Oh, Lord, she should have eaten something before she came, but she had stopped eating breakfast a while back.

As it growled again, louder this time, Nathan blew by like a whirlwind, covering the noise with his clattering up the steps. "Don't run!" she scolded, but for once Mattie was grateful for his lack of restraint.

"Hi, Miz Alma!" Eyes aglow, he skidded to a stop on Alma's scrubbed wood floor. "There ain't no school today because the teacher had to go get the school boarded."

Alma chuckled. "The teacher had to *attend a school board meeting*, but you're right. The important thing for a young'un is that there's this great big Monday with no school to interrupt the important things."

"Where's Tassie?" Nathan asked excitedly. "We just saw the *devil*, and I want to tell her!"

"Nathan Robert Idyll!" Mattie looked aghast at her son. "We did not see the devil. What put such a thing into your head?"

"But you said he was!"

"I said what? Who are you talking about?"

"That old Mr. Wartburden. He caught your leg between his knees, and you called him a *rude devil*. I guess other devils is more polite."

"Are more polite," Mattie corrected faintly, eying her son with a mixture of horror and amusement.

"He had your ma's leg between his knees?" Alma's eyes were alight as they settled on Mattie. "Ack! Then he is a rude devil, and they're the worse kind, doncha know."

"Are they *really*?" Nathan's expression was hopeful.

"No, not really." Alma's laughter filled the kitchen, a rich warm sound. "I 'spect your mother was referring to his *devilish* behavior, tucking her leg between his knees, an' all. Is that it, Mattie?"

Mattie was certain her face was beet-red. "I, I — "

"Ma, when I asked you by the gate, you said he was! You *said*!" Nathan looked accusingly at his mother for having supplied the wrong information.

"Oh, honey!" Understanding bloomed. Squatting down to Nathan's level, Mattie looked her son in the eyes, thankfully hiding her embarrassment from Alma as she did so. "I misunderstood you. I'm sorry. I thought you were asking Mr. Warburton's name."

The boy's lip thrust out, and he dragged an aggrieved shoe across the scrubbed plank floor as he considered this. "Buffalo chips! I knew it was too good to be true"

Mattie cringed as she saw how scuffed the shoe was. His toes crowded the end, the little humps etched in white relief against the brown leather. Looking at it, she didn't have the heart to reprimand him for his rude language.

Maybe some lamp blacking would make the shoes look more presentable until new ones could be bought.

And when would that be? her practical side wondered.

Wiping the mirth from her eyes with the tail of her apron, Alma told Nathan, "Tassie should be about through with the milkin'. Why don't you go help her carry in the milk? That new litter of pigs is in the farrowing pen, if you want to take a look while you're in the barn."

"Yes, ma'am." Nathan flew back down the steps at the same headlong pace he'd raced up them.

Alma chuckled as she closed the door. "Ty Warburton, was it? Sit. This might be worth a slice of sweet potato pie to go with your coffee."

So Alma had heard her noisy stomach, Mattie guessed. "No pie, thank you. But coffee would be welcome."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." Raising her chin, Mattie pulled out a ladder-back chair and sat down at the kitchen worktable, placing her basket and parasol beside her. "Yes. I'm certain." She hesitated. "About Mr. Warburton . . ."

She broke off, at a loss. There had to be some way to explain what had happened where it wouldn't seem so . . . improper. But how did she make it sound less improper, when improper was exactly what it was! The nerve of that man, to place her in this predicament!

Remembering his touch on her leg, she felt fresh heat stain her cheeks. She busied herself, taking off her bonnet to hide her discomfort. "The whole thing with Mr. Warburton was . . . was nothing." Mattie studied the big Home Comfort wood stove as though it fascinated her, just as if she didn't cook on one like it every day. She hoped fervently Alma would let the subject of Ty Warburton drop.

That hope seemed to be answered when one of Alma's light-colored brows rode high, but she didn't remark. She poured coffee into a porcelain cup and set it in a saucer before Mattie. Then she opened a door on the pie safe, a handsome piece built like a display hutch, but more practical. The pie safe had punch-work tin panels depicting pineapples on the top doors, to let air in where pies or cakes were stored, while keeping pests out. A wide work space topped the lower cabinets.

Alma cocked her head back and stood on tiptoes as she peered inside for what she wanted. She took out a china creamer and a small jar of honey and placed them on the table. "I hope it's a good year for blackberries and wild plums. All that honey we robbed last fall is going to sugar. Nothin' makes better jelly than honey-sugar."

Mattie added cream to the steaming cup. "Yes, honey-sugar does make fine jelly. Go ahead with what you were doing. Please. You've probably guessed, I came a'borrowing. I wouldn't want to take you from your work. Your boarders will want their breakfast."

"I wondered what had you out at this hour. Not that I don't like the company." Alma smiled. "Now what be you needin' to borrow?"

Mattie counted herself lucky to have Alma as a friend. Pushing all thought of the irritating Mr. Warburton aside, Mattie took another sip of her coffee and gathered her resolve. Friend or no, she still hated to ask for anything. Most people had just enough to get by, and that through their own hard work. But she needed eggs. "I guess you heard about the coyotes getting my hens."

"A shame, that." Nodding in sympathy, Alma lifted the lid from the flour barrel in the corner. Using a tin cup, she filled a blue granite pan with flour, then expertly formed a little well in the white peak and added lard and milk without measuring either.

Mattie watched the process closely, trying to find where her own biscuits fell short. They never tasted or looked like Alma's.

"I promised George at the restaurant four custard pies a week, and he's expecting two today. I... Well, the money isn't a lot but it helps..." She trailed off as Alma finished kneading the dough and began "choking" biscuit-sized balls off the main roll. She gave them each a little roll in her floury hands and popped them into the waiting biscuit pan.

Try as she might, Mattie could never get the hang of the technique and had to drop her biscuits into the pan with a spoon. When baked, Nathan said they looked like turtles.

"I have an extra dozen eggs in the cupboard. You're welcome to them." Alma dipped a spoon into bacon grease and touched the top of each biscuit before sliding the pan into the oven, which took up one side of the big iron stove. "That will fix you up for today, so you can make your pies for George. But what about later?"

"The old dominecker hen is still there — you know, the one that's always flying out of the chicken yard. And I have another hen setting on a big clutch of eggs in the henhouse. I guess the coyotes couldn't get through the opening to get at her. With luck, we'll have biddies next week."

"Come back with Nathan at dark, when the chickens go to roost, and he and Tassie can catch you a few grown hens to help out. You'll need chickens for laying, until those biddies grow," Alma said decisively. "I have too many. There have been precious few boarders this winter. Only have two right now. So I've not fried near as much chicken as I expected. You'll be helping me out, taking them off my hands before they get too old and tough to cook. And it'll cut down the number I

have to feed." Alma held her white-caked hands over the slop bucket in the corner and rubbed them together, removing the excess dough.

"I . . . " Mattie wanted to refuse. She swallowed back her pride. She and Nathan needed the steady supply of eggs to help out their table, and she could continue to bake the custard pies for the restaurant. "Thank you. How can I ever repay such a generous gift?" Unable to say more, Mattie raised her coffee cup and took a sip.

"Easy enough to repay. Just tell me how the handsomest man in Medicine Springs came to have your leg between his," Alma declared with a twinkle.

Mattie choked on her coffee.

Two

Later, as Mattie approached Nevell's Mercantile, she saw Ty Warburton ahead of her on the street, his stride long and purposeful. That yellow buffalo he called a dog trotted along beside him. Though there was no one to see, she felt her face flame as she remembered how he'd handled her person — these western men were just plain uncouth!

When he jumped onto the porch in front of the store, the dog following, she frowned and slowed her steps. Surely she wouldn't have to face him again today.

When he proceeded on around the corner, she was relieved. Never had she met a man so audacious. She would be just as happy if she never had to see him again.

Unfortunately, in a town the size of Medicine Springs, that was unlikely. Although the town was growing because of the railroad spur that had been put in last year, everyone in town still knew everyone else. And everyone else's business.

A sparrow fluttered down from the big oak in the square and hopped across the porch, then flew up to where a post held the awning over the door. It searched the crannies, pecking at spiders hiding there. As Mattie approached, it flew away.

The day was growing warmer as the sun rose, though the breeze still had a little bite. The sky was clear. Twirling her parasol on her shoulder, she drew in a deep breath of the sweet spring air, scented faintly with wild honeysuckle. She took a moment to appreciate just being alive. And free. Whatever hardships she had, she was free! There was no frowning man holding her accountable, controlling her every move with fear.

Like a cloud passing over the sun, her good mood was shadowed briefly by the past, but she shrugged it away. She couldn't regret her marriage. It had given her Nathan. But she'd vowed never again to be subjugated by a man, and it was a vow she intended to keep.

Thanks to Alma, the eggs she needed were in the basket on her arm, and she had the promise of enough chickens to keep her supplied with more. In spite of the bad start earlier that morning, things were looking up. All would be right. She just knew it. With a little faith and a lot of hard work, and friends like Alma, she'd get by.

She mounted the steps to the porch, closed her parasol, and looked behind her for her son. After leaving Alma's, Mattie had stopped and given him a serious talking to about what he should say and shouldn't say regarding Ty Warburton. Nathan had listened with a frown of concentration etched between his blond brows, trying to understand the concept of "discretion."

Mattie hoped it had done some good. She could hardly have him telling everyone in town how Ty Warburton had shod her like a horse.

She spotted Nathan talking to the old veterans sitting on a bench in the sun in front of the blacksmith's shop. They congregated there when the weather was nice to refight each battle of the war. When the weather was inclement, Joe fired his other forge, inside, and they moved the battles indoors.

The bell over the mercantile door tinkled as she entered. The inside of the store was dim after the bright day outside. Only two long windows in the front of the store and two more on the double doors provided light. The local joke was that Tom Nevell liked his store dim, so his customers would think they were getting better quality goods.

Mattie placed her parasol in the battered umbrella stand beside the door, then set her basket of eggs on the floor beside it. Interesting scents teased her nose — a strange blending of roasted coffee, vinegar pickles, and coal oil. A box stove in the center of the floor radiated warmth.

"Mornin', Miz Mattie." Coming out from behind the counter, Beth greeted her. "My, you're out and about early this mornin'."

There was a hinted question in the comment. Knowing the woman's busybody tendencies, Mattie guessed Beth had spotted her leaving Alma's and wondered why she had been there so early. Thank goodness the unpleasantness with Ty Warburton on the street had

taken place before the Nevells opened the store, or it would have been all over town by now.

"Good morning. I just need a tin of soda, please. Oh, and some thread for tatting. White will do fine." Her gaze strayed to the dry goods counter, pleased when she didn't see the cards of tatting or decorated baby bonnets she'd left there on consignment. It must have all sold. Feeling better about life, she considered getting a little bacon, too.

"I can't thank you enough for taking time to show me how to do tatting and crochet," Beth declared as she took a can of soda from the shelf behind the counter. "I can't wait to show you!" After setting the soda on the scarred counter, she ducked down behind it and came up with a work basket overflowing with the tiny lace. "I have so much time in the store, just waiting for a customer, I've gotten quite good at it. I daresay, my crocheted lace has improved, too."

"This is nice." As Mattie inspected the work, she wondered if Beth had forgotten to mention the money due her for her own handiwork. Putting it back in the basket, she asked, "Have you sold any of the goods I left?"

"Well, no, as a matter of fact, I haven't." Beth went to the dry goods counter, came back with a spool of thread, and bent to add up the total.

So it hadn't sold. Mattie frowned, disappointed. She looked at the thread she was buying and wondered if she should bother making more lace before the old lace sold.

The bell above the door jingled madly. Nathan skidded to a stop midway across the floor. Mattie frowned her disapproval.

As the boy looked up at his mother, a repentant lip was thrust out. "Sorry, Ma." Like metal to lodestone, his gaze was drawn to the licorice whips and rock candy and peppermint sticks displayed in shiny glass jars along the counter. "What are you buying?"

The hopeful note in his voice wasn't lost on her. The last time he'd asked for candy, Mattie had explained that they didn't have money for extras. As much as she appreciated his self-restraint in not asking outright in front of Beth Nevell, it broke her heart to disappoint him again. "Thread and baking soda."

With a wistful sigh, he wandered over to the pickle barrel and lifted the lid, standing on tiptoe to look inside. "Do frogs ever get in here?"

"Nathan!"

Beth laughed. "No. We keep the lid tight." She looked at Mattie. "Just twelve cents."

Having calculated the total long before ever coming in the store, Mattie had the money already in hand. After paying, she picked up the soda and thread.

"This is yours, too." Beth took a small paper and string wrapped parcel from under the counter and slid it toward her.

"What is this?" Mattie squeezed it. It felt soft. A sick feeling rose in her throat. "Is this the work I left with you?"

"I hope you'll understand. Since I'm making my own fancywork to sell, now, I won't be needing yours anymore."

"*Won't be . . .*" Mattie drew herself up stiffly. "It was certainly good of you to tell me before I bought the thread to do more tatting!"

"Oh, well, I didn't think —" Beth had the grace to blush.

"Please return my money for this." Mattie put the card of thread back on the counter.

"Certainly."

The woman's discomfort didn't make Mattie feel better. She swallowed past a fist-sized knot. The crochet and tatting and other things hadn't brought in much money, but, Lord, it had helped out. Now what would she do?

It seemed no matter how fast she ran, she was always sliding downhill.

Without looking at Beth or the coins she placed in her hand, Mattie picked up her basket and parasol. "Come, Nathan."

"Yes, ma'am."

Pulling open the door, Mattie turned. The boy was dawdling as he passed by those tempting jars.

Poor child, he didn't understand why he couldn't have sugar candy anymore, or why other people could have meat and bread almost any time they wanted it, and not just dried peas and things from the garden.

Mattie realized the terrible truth — no matter how she economized, they'd be flat broke in another month or two. No matter what she tried and how many pennies she pinched, it just didn't matter.

"Nathan." She stopped him at the door and gave him three pennies. Bending near his ear, she whispered, "Buy some candy, and I'd like a licorice whip."

He looked down at the money, eyes rounding. "Oh, boy!"

Mattie waited for him in the street. She found the same bright sun that had shone before, but it didn't fill her with optimism the way it had earlier.

Nathan's face was exuberant as he came out, a peppermint stick in his mouth and clutching a paper wrapped loosely around more candy. "Thank you, Ma!" he said around the candy stick.

"Come here."

He took the candy out of his mouth and suffered her kiss on his cheek, then wiped the spot with his sleeve.

Mattie smiled. "You deserve it. You've been so much help to me. Lately you haven't even complained about your chores. Why, you seldom have to be scolded at all. I just wish I could buy you candy every time you want it, but of course — "

"We have to 'make the pennies stretch' before we can," he finished wisely, quoting one of her oft-used phrases. As if unable to be still a second longer, or afraid of another kiss, Nathan took off at a run.

As he disappeared around the corner, he cried out.

Alarmed, Mattie hurried after him. She found him sitting flat on his bottom on the hard-packed street, trying to grab the candy scattered around him, while Ty Warburton's big yellow dog happily licked his face.

"Big . . . dumb . . . Go, dog! Stop it!" Nathan turned his face this way and that as he struggled to avoid the wet tongue, all the while trying to snatch the candy from under the large paws. "Go!" He pushed the animal away. The dog surged forward again, aiming another wet assault at Nathan's face and causing the boy to drop even the peppermint stick he'd been holding in his mouth.

"Go away!" Mattie tried to insinuate herself between the animal and the boy.

"Spot!"

The word cracked like a Winchester shot. Recognizing the tone of authority in its master's voice, the animal backed away and hung its head.

Kneeling by Nathan, Mattie glanced up the street to see Ty Warburton hurrying toward them from the telegraph office, his long strides eating up the distance. He looked coldly angry. She felt a tremor go through her, and the echo of an old fear that leapt unexpectedly into her chest.

Angry with herself for her reaction, she pushed the feeling aside and turned back to her son. "Are you all right?"

Nathan nodded uncertainly. Getting to his knees, he looked about him at his lost treasure and his lower lip edged forward, pink from the melted candy still clinging to it.

Stuffing a copy of the telegraph he'd just sent to Georgia into an inside pocket of his duster, Ty knelt by the boy. "Where are you hurt, son?"

"In the candy," came the quavering reply.

"I see." Ty sat back on his heels. Repressed laughter showed in his eyes, glinting off the blue ice. His face, a second before as hard and foreboding as granite, was transformed, made human.

It wasn't funny, Mattie wanted to shout. Feeling tears pool in her eyes, she ducked her head so that her bonnet shielded her face, and she picked up a piece of licorice from the dirt.

Ty helped the boy to his feet, making certain there was no damage other than to the candy. After looking him over, he said, "I think you'll be okay."

The dog took a tentative step forward.

"You, go home and wait for me." Looking sternly at the animal, Ty pointed down the street. Hanging its head, the dog obeyed with slow, plodding steps.

Ty held his hand out to Mattie. "Let me help you, ma'am."

She said nothing, just stared at the ruined candy in her hand.

"Miz Mattie?" A note of consternation edged his voice.

"I guess Ma was really hungry for that licorice whip." Nathan sighed.

Finally accepting his help, Mattie got slowly to her feet and dusted off her skirt.

"Mrs. Idyll — " Ty grasped her elbow.

Staring daggers at him, she pulled free. "Twice in one day, Mr. Warburton? That beast should be kept on a leash!"

"Yes, ma'am," he said meekly. She picked up her basket, the package, and her parasol. Her expression was so brittle, Ty thought her face might break.

"Come, Nathan." She adjusted her reticule strings on her arm and positioned her basket in the crook.

"But, Ma . . . "

"There's nothing to be done about your candy."

"Come into the store and I'll buy you more," Ty offered the youngster.

The boy's smile was like the sun appearing from behind rain clouds. "You will?"

"No. He will not." It hurt to watch Nathan's smile die, but Mattie drew herself up, lifting her chin.

"It was my dog that caused it. Let me make it up to the boy." Ty wanted to cuss in exasperation as the offer earned him another glare. What was she being so stiff-necked about?

"Spilling your candy was an accident, Nathan. And we've already talked about how accidents happen more often when you're running, haven't we? And so it wouldn't be right to accept Mr. Warburton's charity, now would it?"

"No, ma'am." Nathan scuffed the toe of his shoe in the dirt, rubbing around the deep imprint of a horse's hoof.

As angry as she was with Ty Warburton, her son's disappointment still tugged mightily at her heart. "We'll get more candy. Later," she told him.

Nathan looked up. "When we stretch pennies again?"

Mattie closed her eyes and gave a resigned nod of her head. It wasn't only Ty Warburton who heard, but two women rounding the corner of the store and a man driving a farm wagon along the street.

"Come on, now. We have to get home."

As Ty watched the exchange, he felt an unexpected empathy for Mattie Idyll. Her stiffly proper ways still set his back up, but he'd not have exposed her to that if he'd known it was coming. He knew what it was to have one's pride stripped away and vulnerability exposed.

She suddenly looked young, standing there. Frowning, he realized she was a lot younger than he'd thought. There were no fine wrinkles framing her mouth or eyes.

It was that sour face she made whenever she looked at him — her mouth puckered like she'd bitten into a lemon soaked in vinegar — that added years that weren't hers, he decided. That, and her stick-thin figure and black-crow clothes.

Adding up Mattie's appearance and the boy's words, Ty looked more closely at the Widow Idyll as a revelation put a hollow feeling in his stomach. Her face was thin, her cheekbones prominent. Above the faded black lace of her glove, the bones on her wrist stood out in a way that was all too familiar. He'd seen his own wristbones when he'd

gone for weeks without enough to eat. He'd seen it on many emaciated men in Andersonville.

He never thought to see such things in Medicine Springs. Looking back at the boy, healthy and rosycheeked, Ty felt a new respect for Mattie. He suspected she was going without to make certain her son had enough.

And right now, he sensed, she was getting by on pride.

Well, he could understand that, too. Sometimes pride was all that kept a person putting one foot ahead of the other.

Ty squatted by the boy. "If your ma says later, then we better listen to her. Mothers always seem to know best about these things."

"I 'spose." Nathan hitched up his pants and started resolutely toward his mother.

"Hold on. Did you drop this?" Ty reached into the loose dust in the hoof print the lad had been excavating. A two-bit piece appeared in the palm of his hand when he held it up.

"Gosh! No, I sure didn't."

"Did you?" Ty looked at Mattie.

"I . . . no."

"Here." He handed the coin to Nathan and rose. "There's no way to tell who it really belongs to." Ty met Mattie's suspicious gaze innocently. "You may as well have it."

He tousled the boy's blond hair and strode away, ignoring Mattie's protests.

Three

Mattie got on her knees in the wagon bed and tied the plow line to the bar jutting from the plow point. The other end was tied to the collar of a big mule named Jack, which she'd borrowed, along with the farm implements, from the blacksmith, who'd brought them out early this morning.

Standing beneath the old hickory at the corner of the porch, Jack dosed, head drooping, quite unconcerned with what was going on.

"Okay, let's try it now," she told Nathan, scooting to the edge and hopping down from the wagon. "When I tell you, you take the rope and lead him forward."

Nathan unwrapped the rope from the porch rail. Mattie wiped her hands on her worn skirt, then grasped the plow handles and nodded. "Okay."

Giving the rope a little flip, Nathan got the mule's attention. "Now, Jack, you're a lot bigger than me, but I got the rope, see?" he said seriously. "You just have to do what I say. Now, c'mon."

The boy led the animal forward, urging him to continue when the weight of the plow made Jack hesitate. "C'mon, now. You can do it. Old Joe says you're the biggest danged mule in three counties."

Mattie's heart swelled a little as she watched her son's efforts. He was growing up so fast. Jack turned one of his long ears back, listening. Then, as if spurred by the boy's words, started forward. The plow slid out of the wagon bed, and she managed to guide it so that it landed upright.

"That's good," she called.

"Whoa!" Nathan pulled back on the lead rope.

The mule picked up speed.

"Whoa, Jack! You stupid mule!" Nathan set his heels, but Jack merely dragged him, along with the plow. "Ma!" Nathan looked back at her for help.

"Whoa, Jack!" Mattie ran to keep up, trying to hold the plow on its side so the point wouldn't dig in and plow up her yard. "Whoa!"

Jack kept going until he reached a patch of green spring clover, then lowered his head and grazed.

"Dumb mule." Hands on his hips, Nathan glared at the animal.

"He's not so dumb," she gasped as she tried to catch her breath.

"He's figured out that he's bigger than you and me."

"Yes, he has," came a voice from behind her.

"Oh!" Mattie whirled around, her heart fluttering.

Ty Warburton slid down from his tall paint and tied his reins to the weathered porch rail. "Afternoon, Miz Mattie." He tipped his well-worn hat. "Sorry to startle you. You two were so busy with the mule, you didn't see me coming down the lane."

Frowning, she put her hand to her heart, willing it to settle down from the fright he'd given her. "What are you doing here?"

"Did you bring Spot?" Nathan asked.

"Afraid not," Ty told the boy, ignoring Mattie's question. "I was just out for a ride." Pushing his hat back on his head, he looked at Mattie and smiled.

And just that slight quirk of his chiseled mouth sent all kinds of disturbing feelings swirling through her. It was one thing to see the devil — lean and hard looking in his black trousers, black leather vest, and red shirt, looking every inch Lucifer incarnate — but it was quite something else to have the devil smile at you.

As if he had plans.

She had an insane urge to pat the wisps of hair she felt dancing around her face into place. Why, Lord, should she want to do that? Surely this man's attention, or any man's for that matter, was the last thing she wanted. She could care less if he found her attractive.

Angry with herself for her reaction, Mattie drew herself up to her full five feet and glowered up at the interloper. "Mr. Warburton, you are welcome to water your horse before you go." There. She couldn't get any plainer than that without getting downright rude.

"Thank you. I shall take advantage of your kind offer . . . before I leave." Ty smiled again as Mattie's eyes flashed. Damn, but the little

wren had surprising spunk, he thought, pleased. She looked different, too, dressed in a worn calico skirt and white shirtwaist. Yes, without the widow's garb, there was a definite improvement. She didn't look quite so much like a dose of castor oil.

But it wasn't just her clothes. Instead of wearing her hair looped by her cheeks in those hideous wings, it was braided into a coil at the back of her head. Curling tendrils of dark brown framed her cheeks, softening her face into classical lines. Maybe, Ty thought, if he did carry through with the crazy plan that had brought him out here, his life wouldn't be quite so bad after all.

And maybe his life would be hell on earth, he thought, remembering Lyla's treachery.

"What are you doing?" He motioned to the tangle of plow and plow line.

"Obviously we were unloading farm equipment." Her tone was clipped.

"Me and Ma's gonna plow the garden," Nathan added.

"Mother and I," Mattie corrected. To Ty, she said, "We are quite busy, so if you'll excuse us?"

The look she gave him said she wondered what he was doing here. Well, he was wondering a little himself.

He looked over the garden. The gray stalks of last year's plants thrust up through winter grass and weeds choking the rows. Beside the garden spot was an acre of corn stubble. "Who put this in for you last year?"

"What makes you think we needed any help?" Mattie challenged. She'd had just about enough of Mr. Ty Warburton's prying. Why didn't he just get on his horse and ride away? Why was he here? After his handling of her person on the street, he must know he wasn't welcome here.

Ty cocked a skeptical brow. While he was riding up the lane, he'd seen Mattie trying to wrestle with the plow. There was no way she had done all this.

"Bobby Matthews came and helped," Nathan supplied, ignoring the sour look his mother shot at him.

"Yes, the Matthews boy helped," Mattie allowed. When Joe had brought out the mule, she'd let him think Bobby would help her again. However, there was no money to pay him this year. "But we shall

manage just fine on our own. Now, if you'll excuse me, we are wasting daylight." Mattie took one of the traces from the wagon bed and bolted the chain on the end to the plow beam. She was determined to ignore Ty Warburton until he left.

"I'm sure you will manage." Ty went to the front of the wagon and unbolted the whiffletree, then carried it to the plow. He unfastened the trace and refastened it to the whiffletree. "A lot of folks prefer to do it this way."

"I suppose," she allowed, watching carefully. In truth, she'd never before rigged a plow. But it couldn't be that hard to figure out, she reasoned. So she had gotten that little thing wrong. She would have discovered her mistake.

"To turn over that corn stubble, I guess you'll want to dig pretty deep."

"Yes. Pretty deep." She took her cloth bonnet and wiped perspiration from her forehead. The sun found its way between the still bare hickory branches overhead. The early spring day seemed unseasonably warm. Where Ty's shirt was stretched across his axe-handle-wide shoulders, there were spots of dampness from perspiration.

Ty fastened the whiffletree to the bottom hole in the plow beam. "If you'll fasten the plow ropes to the bridle and run them over the collar, I'll finish here," he said.

Mattie started to argue, then thought better of it. Ty Warburton seemed to enjoy it when she argued. She was still darned suspicious of his motives, but she decided to let it go for now. It wouldn't be polite to refuse his help, she reasoned, as he turned to get the other trace out of the wagon.

After he had finished rigging the plow, Ty took the lines and guided Jack to the first row of the dormant garden. "I'll just see how well everything is working," he said. Giving the lines a pop, he whistled and Jack started forward. The plow point dug in and the rich earth was rolled back as dead plants and winter grass were plowed under. Nathan trotted along behind Ty.

At a loss, Mattie watched as Ty plowed the row to the end, then swung the plow around and plowed up the next. He didn't stop when he reached that end, either, but guided Jack around again and started down the next row.

A farm wagon rumbled up the road. Will Bartles, his wife, and their half-dozen children all waved and called out greetings to her, then stared

curiously at Ty. She waved back, feeling decidedly uncomfortable. Of course, they would know who it was. Ty's paint horse was the only one like it in Medicine Springs. No doubt the fact that Ty Warburton was plowing her garden would be all over town by the end of the day.

The wagon passed out of sight behind a screen of white blooming dogwoods edging the road. Medicine Springs was just two miles away. It was Saturday, and more people would be passing on their way into town. Mattie clenched her fists and glowered at Ty's broad back. This plowing had to stop! What would everyone think?

She met him at the end of the next row and handed him a dipper of water. Nathan ran after a horsefly, throwing dirt clods at it.

"Thank you." Ty drank from the chipped porcelain dipper, then flung what was left in it aside before handing it back.

"There's no need to continue," Mattie said. "I shall manage fine from here."

"It's no trouble." Ty took up the plow lines once more.

Mattie stomped her foot. It sank up to the ankle of her old boot in the newly turned dirt. "Mr. Warburton, I have to ask you not to plow my field!"

His wicked blue eyes glinted. "Are you so certain you don't want your field plowed?" His voice pitched low and suggestive. It tickled over her in the strangest way.

Mattie frowned, feeling like she was missing something in his words, then shrugged it aside. There were more important matters to confront. "I can't afford to pay you, and I'll not have you work for nothing."

"I don't need your money."

"That doesn't matter at all. I can't pay you, so I don't want you to do this."

"You have a lot of pride, Mattie Idyll."

"I do."

"And *pride goeth before a fall*," Ty quoted. "Can't you look on my help as an act of Christian charity?"

"I . . ."

"Can't believe I'm Christian?"

"I wouldn't presume to judge!" Mattie spluttered.

"You wouldn't?" There was a challenge in those light blue eyes that belied his smile.

Of course, she had judged him and found him wanting. Mattie felt herself blush. "Mr. Warburton, you are putting me in a very awkward position."

"You can repay me with an invitation to supper. Nothing special — just whatever you were planning to have. Cookie Jergens, the cook on the ranch, does a good job of filling the empty spots, but I do get hungry for a meal with a woman's touch."

"Mr. Warburton, I — "

Not waiting for a response, Ty slapped Jack with the plow lines and the mule started down the next row.

Mattie watched Ty in exasperation. Yes, too much pride was wrong. She'd long known it was her major flaw.

And Ty Warburton had to be her punishment.

A buggy came around the bend in the road. Not waiting to see who might be in it, Mattie untied Ty's horse, led it to the trough by the barnyard, and let it drink. She then staked the reins where the horse could graze, screened from view by the dilapidated barn and chicken yard, where the hens she'd gotten from Alma scratched for food. The old dominecker that had survived the coyotes slipped through the open barn doors, no doubt going to hide her nest away. Mattie made a mental note to look for the eggs later.

She patted the horse's shoulder. "There, fella. Of course, I'm not hiding you because there's anything wrong in your master being here. But people love to talk, don't they?"

"Look what I got, Mamma," Nathan cried breathlessly, skidding to a stop. He held his hand up, his fingers curled loosely around a trapped horsefly.

Recoiling inwardly, Mattie mustered a smile. "That's nice, dear."

"Listen!"

Dutifully Mattie lowered her head, and Nathan held his trapped prize up by her ear. She jumped when it buzzed.

"Mr. Ty says it's already been sucking blood from Jack, see?" Nathan held the creature between two fingers and pointed out the discolored abdomen.

Mattie felt her stomach crawl. "I'm sure Mr. Warburton would know."

"I told him we're having dried field peas for supper."

"Told who?"

"Mr. Ty, of course. He said he was having supper with us. I like talking to him. He knows lots a things." So saying, Nathan released the horsefly and took off chasing after the creature.

There was nothing for it. Mattie mumbled to herself all the way to the house and up the kitchen steps. She would be cooking supper for Ty Warburton, though Lord only knew just how she'd gotten herself into this!

* * *

"Go around to the porch on the other side of the house. There's a washstand and a towel out there," Mattie said, standing in the kitchen door as Ty approached, Nathan at his heels.

"I'll show you." Nathan took off at a run. Ty followed more slowly.

Mattie wiped her hands on the dish towel tucked into the band of her apron. 'A home-cooked meal, he says,'" she muttered. What was behind his craving for a home-cooked meal? What was he up to? she wondered again.

Shaking her head, Mattie set the table, spreading out the cutwork tablecloth her older sister had given her as a wedding present. On it, she placed the three surviving plates that had come with her grandmother from Austria. When she was a little girl, her grandmother had told her the flowers painted around the edging were Swiss edelweiss. The blue granite cups she and Nathan normally used would have to suffice for drinking. Nathan was a bit hard on glassware, and there were none left.

"It smells good." Ty had left his hat somewhere outside and his too-long blond hair was pushed back in streaks, as though it had been finger-combed with a damp hand.

With his hair pushed back in much the same fashion, Nathan trailed in behind Ty and crawled up on a chair at the side of the table. Smiling, Mattie noticed that Nathan's hands were clean, as were his cheeks, but a dusty ring framed his face.

"It's only simple fare. You said you'd be happy with what we were having," Mattie reminded Ty.

"My stomach's already happy with what my nose is telling it. Here, let me." Ty took the dish towels from her and lifted the big soup tureen filled with field peas from the stove. A bit of parsley and a shaving of salt pork floated on the top. He placed the tureen at the center of the

table. There was a freshly cut pone of yellow corn bread that reminded him of his mother's, and a bowl of shredded cabbage, dressed with vinegar and black pepper.

If for some reason his plan didn't work, he'd bring her some supplies to make up for the food. No doubt, she'd dug deep in her meager larder to prepare the meal.

But there was no reason his plan wouldn't work. She needed him much more than he needed her, he reminded himself. And if everything tasted as good as it smelled, Ty thought this whole thing might not turn out so badly after all. A woman who could cook could be forgiven many flaws.

When Mattie added a platter of fried sweet potatoes to the table and a pitcher of buttermilk, he was almost certain it was a good idea. He told himself it was.

Then why did his stomach feel like he'd swallowed a horseshoe, points down?

Because he knew firsthand what misery a woman could deal out. That was why this, if the widow agreed, had to stay a business deal. Nothing more, he reminded himself.

Almost immediately he was captured and drawn in by a pair of serious gray eyes.

Mattie looked away first. She brought a taper from the stove, raised the globe of the lamp hanging above the table, and touched the flame to the wick.

She looked surprised as Ty seated her, before taking his own seat at the end of the table. "My mother did teach me some manners," he said.

"I am pleasantly surprised."

He's just so blasted big, Mattie thought, irritated at the man's size. He made her kitchen seem cramped, and he made her nervous.

That nervousness was apparent during the course of the meal, when she tilted the corn bread plate and several pieces slid off, then spilled pea liquor down the side of the tureen. Dabbing at the stain on the cutwork cloth, she decided she didn't like the effect the man had on her. She didn't like it one bit.

After having a husband who found fault with virtually everything she did, it had taken her a long time to relax and feel in control again. She resented mightily Ty's taking that feeling of control away from her, and in her own house, to boot!

Throughout the meal, Ty said little beyond complimenting the food, though his gaze rested on her in a way that made her uncomfortable. As though he was sizing her up in some way. It made Mattie wonder all the more what had really brought him here.

Nathan provided a diversion by chattering to her about the grub worms, fire beetles, and mole crickets the plow had churned up, and he had subsequently caught and inspected. But he gradually wound down and the narrative became punctuated by yawns. When he grew completely silent, Mattie looked up. The seven-year-old's eyes were closed, his head resting on the back of the chair, his fork still in his hand.

Making a sign to Ty to be quiet, Mattie rose and went around the table.

"Let me," Ty whispered. Before she could lift her son, Ty slid his arms beneath the boy and picked him up. "Which way to his bed?"

"This way." Nathan was really too dirty for bed, but too tired to wake up to bathe. Mattie led the way to a tiny bedroom off the kitchen and turned back the covers on the narrow bed. "He'll have to come out of those dirty clothes."

To her amazement, Ty sat down with the boy on his knee, his head cradled on Ty's shoulder, and wiggled Nathan out of shoes and socks, then breeches and shirt. Leaving the boy in undershirt and underclothes, Ty placed him on the bed.

Mattie drew the covers up and placed a kiss on her son's forehead. Smiling, she found he still smelled of freshly turned earth, sunshine, and unnamed adventures.

Straightening, Mattie turned and gasped when she found she was far closer to Ty Warburton than she had thought. For a moment, she stared into his ice-blue eyes, strangely alight in the darkened room. He didn't touch her, but an awareness of him passed through her as surely as if he had run his hands up her arms and down her back.

His gaze moved to her mouth and her breath caught in the back of her throat. It refused to release until he stepped back.

When he did, she hurried out past him, at a loss as to why the man affected her so.

"You should wear something besides black more often. Maybe stop wearing it altogether. It's been several years since your husband's death."

"You should go."

So she refused to be drawn into more personal conversation, or to comment on her husband. She must have loved the man very much to still mourn him. That was all right, he told himself. He didn't want her love, just her help and her motherly instincts. No matter how much she rubbed him the wrong way, from what he'd seen, she was a wonderful mother to her son, and in the past he'd seen her use the same gentleness when talking to Alma's girl and other children.

"Yes, I should go." But he hadn't gotten around to talking about what brought him here. He found he was reluctant to do that. "I could help with the dishes."

"No. It isn't proper for us to be here alone." Mattie's gaze flew to his face as she realized what she'd said might suggest improper behavior to him. If he hadn't already thought of it for himself.

Ty smiled, the cynical twist of his lips she was coming to recognize. "Do you always do what's proper?"

"I try to."

"Why?"

Mattie wet her lips, not liking where this conversation was leading. "We must have standards of behavior, Mr. Warburton. Otherwise where would we be?"

"In my experience, some think a great many things are moral and right, so long as one doesn't get caught."

She drew herself up stiffly. "You may go, Mr. Warburton. Those standards may be all right for you, but I am no hypocrite."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't implying you should be a hypocrite. My mind . . . was ten years away." He sighed and clasped the posts on a kitchen chair, studying his hands as though he'd never seen them before. "I didn't just happen by. I had a reason for coming."

"Yes?" Mattie faced him.

The lamplight spilled over her, softening her features and lighting her gray eyes. Ty had an urge to touch one of the curls by her cheek, stretch it out and see if it sprang back.

"Yes." He didn't know any way to go on with this but straight to the point. "Yes. I have a daughter. A nine-year-old daughter." Somehow saying it aloud made the fact seem even more unreal. "I didn't know of her existence until a week ago. Her mother — once my wife, but she managed to have our marriage annulled — never thought to tell me."

"Oh, my." Mattie put her hand to her throat and looked at him in wonder. In a small town where everyone knew practically everything about everyone, Ty Warburton had long been the town's biggest mystery. To discover that he had been married and even had a child was like discovering Main Street was a frozen river. Unexpectedly Mattie felt her heart soften a little toward Ty. She imagined the hurt he must feel, to find he had a child and had been denied knowledge of her for so long.

But what could have caused his wife to treat him so?

And why was he telling her?

"I'm hardly qualified to take charge of a young girl," he went on, "but her mother died recently and I've sent for the child." He'd had little choice. The Beaumonts' lawyer had sent a telegram in answer to his, informing Ty the girl had never lived with the family but had been fostered out at birth.

Ty again felt rage grip him. Lyla let everyone think her baby died at birth. She had gone on to have her and Ty's marriage annulled, so she was free to marry the owner of a neighboring plantation. And now that she was dead, her husband had placed the girl in an orphanage, rather than continue paying for her foster care.

Mattie nodded, conscious of Ty's changing emotions swirling just beneath the surface, knowing instinctively that he was in pain. "So you want me to take care of the girl," she guessed.

This could be the answer to her prayers, she realized. Surely Ty would give her money to provide for the girl's care, and having another child staying with them would be good for Nathan, who was too often alone. She'd often regretted not having a daughter, a little girl she could sew for and whose hair she could put ribbons into.

"Yes. In a way."

Mattie was thinking of the young girl who'd never known her father when what he'd said registered. "I don't understand. What do you mean 'In a way?'"

"I want you to be my wife."

Four

"You can't be serious!" Mattie put her hand to her throat.

"I wish I wasn't," Ty said grimly. He very much wished he wasn't seriously asking this sour-faced widow woman to marry him.

Well, that wasn't quite the truth. He still regretted that he needed a wife, but Mattie really didn't look bad tonight. Her lips, usually puckered into a disapproving frown, were slightly parted and moist looking, her thick-lashed gray eyes wide and questioning. Her white shirtwaist showed her bosom to be nicely rounded and her waist small, and didn't drain all the color out of her face like the black widow's weeds she usually wore.

No, she didn't look bad at all.

He took a step nearer.

She took a step back, clutching her hands in her skirt.

Frowning, he wondered why she seemed so skittish, like she was afraid to be in the same room as a man. Hell, she'd been married before. She wasn't an inexperienced girl.

On the other hand, Jonas Idyll hadn't been much of a man, in Ty's opinion. He'd had little use for the sanctimonious preacher.

"You hardly know me, other than to . . . to nod in the street!" And to shoe her like a mare, she fumed silently. Now he was asking her to *marry* him?

But as much as she wanted to fling his proposal back in his arrogant face, Mattie caught back the words. It had become more and more apparent to her over the last few days that she and Nathan existed from one small disaster to the next, never having the money to weather the storms completely, their fortunes sinking a little lower each time.

First they'd lost the chickens, which Alma replaced, then the mercantile wouldn't take her tatting and crochet, and yesterday the restaurant owner told her business had been slow, so they didn't need any pies at the present. She would at least hear what Ty Warburton had to say, no matter how repugnant the man was.

She didn't like the way his ice-blue gaze seemed to look too deeply inside her, as if trying to ferret out her secrets. But he did meet her gaze steadily. A good sign, she had to admit. Either he was accustomed to telling the truth, or he was an accomplished liar.

"I know you are proper and upstanding, a woman respected in the community, and a good mother to your son. I know a nine-year-old girl needs mothering, a woman to teach her girl-things."

The truth was, the prospect of being responsible for his daughter's care left him feeling overwhelmed. The last time he'd been responsible for another soul's well-being, it had been his younger brother. Now John was buried in one of the countless unmarked graves at Andersonville.

But the past couldn't be changed. The future needed his attention. Pushing away the feelings of failure and guilt, Ty went on. "I'll provide a home for you and Nathan. I don't know a lot about being a parent, but I'd try to teach your son about man-things. He's a fine boy."

He thought it was a fair speech. Standing in Mattie's kitchen with its handmade table and chairs, the few black iron pots hanging on the wall behind the woodstove, the crisp, red gingham curtains at the single window pointing up the bleakness of the unpainted room, it seemed to Ty that Mattie should be asking him how soon he wanted to wed.

However, Mattie was studying him like she was eyeing a three-day-dead fish — one brow slightly lifted and her mouth in a tight, unyielding line. Not a good sign, he decided.

"Sir, other than today, when you've been suspiciously agreeable, I had the impression that you didn't even like me!" Mattie clenched her hands. *That* was an understatement. Ty Warburton had seemed to take the greatest pleasure in riling her, like the other morning when that yellow buffalo had knocked her down, and Ty had held her leg between his. Just thinking about it provoked embarrassment.

He had the grace to look sheepish, but Ty hooked his thumbs in his trouser pockets and made his stand. "I, uh — " He cleared his throat.

"It's come to my notice that I, uh, may have misjudged you in the past. I apologize."

"You need help with your daughter and so have decided you *may* have misjudged me. Thank you. That's *very* kind."

"Be that as it may, Mattie, it's not necessary for two people to like each other to get married," Ty reasoned. "Going in, each of us would know exactly where we stand, wouldn't we? No false expectations. No declarations of undying *love* that really don't mean anything." A hard edge to his voice revealed just what he thought of the emotion and anyone fool enough to be swayed by it. "Just a straightforward business arrangement, Mattie."

"A business arrangement?" She blinked up at him, her gray eyes widening. For the first time he noticed the golden flecks hiding in them, seeming to light them from within. The overhead lantern cast golden highlights over her coronet of brown braids. As the habitual worry lines eased and excitement animated her face, she suddenly looked young. And unexpectedly pretty.

"You mean you want a civil contract. A marriage of convenience."

"I guess you could put it like that." Frowning, he tried to see where she was going with this. But what claimed his attention was how her bottom lip, wet and pink, was caught between small white teeth as she was deep in thought.

"You wouldn't expect . . ." She swallowed hard and caught her hands together. Blushing like fury, she drew in a deep breath and steeled herself to push on — she had to get it out in the open, to be sure what this devil's bargain he was tempting her with entailed. "I mean, it would be a marriage *in name only*, for your daughter's benefit?"

Oh, wouldn't a marriage in name only be wonderful! Just like being his housekeeper, she supposed, but with a wedding band to add propriety as she lived in his house. And a nine-year-old girl did need mothering. It would be like having a daughter, Mattie thought, her heart warming. She'd teach the girl to sew and cook, make her dresses and put ribbons in her hair. And there would be enough firewood and food in the pantry and new shoes for Nathan — surely, Ty would give her money to spend for the boy's needs.

Well, no matter. If not, she could always continue with her baking and mending. The money would go a long way if she could just use it for Nathan's needs and didn't have to depend on it for everything.

She wouldn't have to worry.

The darkening look in Ty Warburton's blue eyes as his gaze moved over her face, then her breasts, let her know just how wrong that conclusion was. Caught off-guard, wondrous feelings tingled through her. Her insides felt like a bottle of ginger beer that had been shaken up.

Until she realized where such looks led and her breath locked in her throat.

"I'm a man, Mattie. I couldn't promise you that." His smile turned wicked, his voice a low rasp. "Would you really want me to?"

Ty knew at once he'd said the wrong thing. She crossed her arms over her bosom, and her mouth, so soft and kissable looking just moments ago, drew up like a prune as she frowned. Whirling away, she began pacing between the large wood-burning stove and the kitchen work-table, her movements stiff. Evidently she found the idea of marital congress between them rather over-setting.

"Mattie, you aren't a green girl. I won't apologize for speaking plainly. If we get married, it's better we each know what's expected of us and where we stand. I'm offering you marriage, not love. I'd expect you to act as my wife in every way. I can promise not to make unreasonable demands on you. But I can't promise to make no demands.

"In return for your hand, I believe I'll be able to provide you and Nathan with a good home."

Ty wanted to tell her if she turned all prune-faced and tight-lipped like that every time he wanted to take her to bed, she'd be perfectly safe.

He rubbed the back of his neck, wondering if he was doing the right thing. Lord, he felt like he was facing a hanging, and he was arguing with the executioner to let him swing! Foremost on his mind was getting his hat and getting the hell out of the Widow Idyll's small kitchen.

Mattie stopped pacing and turned to face her tempter. The Good Book said that the love of money was the root of all evil. Trouble was, she was finding being without it was pretty wicked, too.

His offer *was* tempting. But she knew from hard-won experience nothing but grief could come of it if she gave in and agreed to be his wife. Or any man's wife.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Warburton. I'm certainly aware of the honor you do me, but I must decline your offer." Mattie was proud of herself for managing a civil tone. She and Nathan would get by, somehow, she

told herself. With the garden plowed now, they had only to dig it into rows and plant. There'd be plenty of fresh vegetables in a couple of months, and if she could find some turnip seed, they'd have greens even sooner.

Liar. Ty saw it in her eyes, the fear, the uncertainty. Though she tried to meet his gaze levelly, she looked away, knotting her hands in her skirt.

When he made no move to leave, just looked at her, she moved to the door and held it wide. "If that's all, Mr. Warburton?"

"No. That's not all." Taking the knob from her grasp, he closed the door. "What is the reason you won't marry me?"

Stepping back, she put distance between them. "I promised myself at my husband's grave side that I'd never be another man's wife — and it's a vow I intend to keep!"

"I see." The Reverend Idyll had been a lucky man, to have had so loyal a wife, Ty thought. She must still love him.

"Having nothing further to say on the matter, I insist that you leave, now," Mattie declared, crossing her arms over her chest.

He didn't leave. Moving instead to the window, he looked out at the bright stars in the moonless Texas sky, the view barely dimmed by the weak light from the lantern behind him. She didn't want him. He should leave her alone. But his brother's shade reached out to him over the years and he couldn't.

Looking back at Mattie, he said, "No. Not until I tell you what a damn fool you are if you let the memory of a dead man keep you from seeing that this would be best for you and your son."

Angry, Mattie snapped, "Mr. Warburton, you're overstepping your bounds."

"Ty. Having discussed whether or not I would want to take you to bed, I think you should use my first name." He turned fully around.

Mattie squared her narrow shoulders and drew herself up indignantly, reminding Ty once again of a bantam hen, feathers ruffled and ready to fly in his face.

"You are offensive!" Her chin lifted.

He shrugged, undisturbed. "What made me think of marrying you over any other woman in town is the way you mother your own child. You're doing without to see that your son has enough. While Lyla," his tone turned bitter, "my *wife*, had every comfort, but she

never cared about our child. The girl was sent to live with a poor family, who were paid for her keep. After Lyla died, her husband didn't want to pay for Angeline's fostering anymore, and she was packed off to an orphanage."

Mattie caught her hands together, her heart going out to the child, who must feel keenly unwanted. Still, now that the girl would be living with her father, he would care for her and love her. "I still fail to see — *Oh! How dare you! Let go of me!*"

Having snagged her wrist, he held it up between them, ignoring her struggles to free it. The cuff of her shirtwaist was worn until the edge of the material was fuzzy. Her hand was rough and work-worn, the bones standing out on the back, and her wristbones looked delicate enough to snap if he gripped them too hard. "How long can you keep it up, Mattie?"

"Let me go!" she said through clenched teeth.

"You didn't eat much tonight. You're in the habit of not eating much, aren't you, to make sure there's enough for Nathan. I've seen hunger before. In the war."

The stench of Andersonville Prison came back to him, and the way John had grown thinner each day. Then the cough had started.

Resolutely Ty pushed the memories away. "It's usually something else that kills. Pneumonia or measles or influenza. A weak body can't fight off disease. What will become of Nathan then?"

Mattie wanted to put her hands over her ears and beg him to just go away. But with his icy-blue eyes boring into hers, he made her face the possibilities. The all too real possibilities. Things that had been hovering at the corners of her mind, things she had been able to deny until now, took ominous shapes.

What if something did happen to her?

Then Alma or someone would do their Christian duty and take Nathan in.

And he would grow up an orphan.

"Think about it, Mattie. If you still feel the same tomorrow, I won't bother you anymore." Ty took his hat from the hook by the door. "I'm going back into town. I'll take Joe's mule and buckboard back."

And after delivering the mule to the smithy, Ty planned to go to the saloon. Proposing to Mattie Idyll had left him feeling in need of whiskey.

After the door closed, Mattie hugged herself. The man was too infuriating, too abrasive! He possessed not one ounce of sensitivity! How could she bear to wed such a man?

The Reverend Idyll had been dynamic, and he'd courted her with pretty speeches, swearing his devotion and love.

Pretty, empty words.

She'd thought herself in love when she'd married, but found herself wed to a fiend who tried to crush all the happiness out of her.

Ty Warburton made no declarations. No promises. He didn't even pretend to like her, just said he *may* have misjudged her. How much greater a hell would life with him be than it had been with the man who swore time and again he loved her?

Trembling, Mattie covered her mouth with her hand as remembered feelings of helplessness and hopelessness tried to engulf her. She never wanted to go back to that again.

Never.

But if it came down to making certain Nathan would always have a home and be cared for, did she have a choice?

Five

"Mornin' to you, Mattie. And you, too, young'un." Peggy Sanderlin pulled back on the reins as her mare took a restless step, trying to reach one of Mattie's rosebushes for a nibble, causing the surrey to rock.

"Good morning! I'm sorry I wasn't ready when you arrived." Mattie caught her black bonnet as she put a foot onto the hub and climbed into the vehicle. "I tossed and turned last night, then simply didn't wake up as early as I'm accustomed."

The wonder was that she had slept at all, with Ty Warburton on her mind. She doubted she could ever go into her kitchen again without thinking of the man, long and lean and with that certain dangerous quality about him. The way he'd looked at her had done strange things to her insides. But it was his proposal and the truths he'd made her face that had kept her staring up at the ceiling for hours.

His proposal, and the pain which had shadowed his eyes. The man might be as strong as a mountain, but something was eating away at his insides.

And that realization had been the most disturbing one. Mattie could have hated his strength, his self-assurance. But his pain reached out to her in a way she was unprepared for.

Settling onto the narrow seat beside Peggy's granddaughter, Ann, a shy girl of about fifteen, Mattie lifted Nathan onto her knees, where he immediately began to squirm.

"It was very kind of you to wait on us."

"Waiting was no problem." Peggy beamed a gold-toothed smile, then she clicked her tongue and slapped the reins. The mare started forward at a sedate pace. "My, don't you look nice this mornin', young man," she said to Nathan.

"Thank you, Miz Peggy. It don't feel nice." An aggrieved lower lip thrusting out, he ran a finger under the starched half-collar of his white shirt.

Mattie smiled fondly. He did look nice. She had wet his hair and slicked it down, before he'd crammed his wool cap on his head, then put some lamp blacking on his shoes to cover the scuffs. But Sundays were hard for him to bear, having to be all dressed up *and* having to hold reasonably still during services.

"I see you got your garden and your corn patch plowed," Peggy commented, nodding toward the tilled ground as the surrey rolled down Mattie's lane. The elaborate feathers on her Sunday hat nodded in the breeze. "Aches from hard work can make a body real restless at night."

Peggy's comment caught her off-guard. She hadn't expected anyone to mention her garden being plowed. And just how it had *gotten* plowed, Mattie decided, was a subject best avoided. Though others, like Will Bartles and his family, had surely seen Ty working yesterday, maybe they wouldn't think anything of it. Maybe they hadn't recognized him and would just think it was someone she had hired. She hoped.

"And how have you been keeping?" Mattie asked a little breathlessly.

"My joints are all aching," Peggy said. "There was a south wind yesterday, and a red sky this mornin'. It's certain we'll be getting rain by afternoon."

Nathan leaned back on his mother's shoulder. "Mr. Ty said he hoped it would hold off rainin' until we could get the garden planted."

The child's innocent comment washed over Mattie like a dunk into cold water. Because she didn't want to teach him to be secretive or to think there was anything wrong with the man's being there, she hadn't told Nathan not to talk about Ty's visit. She'd rather hoped the boy would just forget about it with the same speed he forgot so many things, like scraping the dirt from his shoes before coming inside, or washing his hands.

Mattie realized her mistake as she felt the weight of both Peggy's and Ann's gazes on her. Silence stretched out, broken only by the squeak of the old surrey springs, the wheels crunching the gravel, and the clop of the mare's hoofs as the animal turned onto the hard-packed main road. A mockingbird sang, perched somewhere in the white wall of dogwoods.

She fought hard to keep a blush from staining her cheeks. There was nothing wrong with Ty plowing her garden, she reminded herself.

So why did she feel so guilty?

"You don't mean Mr. Ty Warburton?" Ann asked. Nathan nodded, and the girl sighed, her face lighting up in the shadow of her gray bonnet.

"I had no notion you were keepin' company with *him*." One of Peggy's thick brows rode upward and her chins jiggled as she looked at Mattie questioningly.

"I haven't been keeping company with him, Peggy!" Losing the battle to control her emotions, Mattie felt her cheeks flame.

"Oh, Miz Mattie, Mr. Ty is about the handsomest man who ever lived!" Ann tangled her white gloved fingers in her reticule strings as she eyed Mattie enviously.

"That's enough of that, Missy." Peggy gave her granddaughter a quelling look, then her gaze moved onto Mattie and both brows lifted. "If you aren't keeping company with him, what was he doing plowing your field?" She gave the reins a shake, urging the mare to greater speed. The horse took three fast steps, then settled back into its comfortable plodding.

"I never asked him to!" Gathering her composure, Mattie straightened her back and made a show of shifting Nathan on her black bombazine lap. Would she ever get used to the straightforward way these western women had of asking questions? Back home in Baltimore, a lady would never pry! Gossip, yes, but pry, never. "Ty Warburton came up the lane as I was trying to rig the plow, and he just took over! I told him it was most improper, but he paid no heed. How was I to stop him?"

Peggy nodded understandingly. "I don't guess there was much you could do. I have to say that was right decent of him. And it's not the first time that gunman has surprised me. The first was when he bought the old McAllister place and stayed on doing honest work. He's built that spread up into something he can be proud of."

Nathan swiveled his head around and stared wide-eyed at his mother, reminding Mattie of an excited owl. "Ma, Mr. Ty's a *gunman*? Where's his gun? I didn't see no gun."

"Didn't see *any* gun," Mattie corrected, wishing heartily she'd told Peggy to go on without her this morning, before all of this came out.

But she realized that she would have had to face it sooner or later. Why had the man put her in this predicament?

"Any gun," Nathan conceded. "Where was it? Did he shoot lots of men?"

"You'll have to ask him," Mattie said faintly, staring ahead.

Later, as Alma pumped the foot peddles and played the last hymn, Mattie wrapped her shawl more tightly about her shoulders, her back ramrod straight, waiting for the instant she could escape.

As everyone bowed their heads and the minister said a closing prayer, she fought hard not to think angry thoughts about Ty Warburton. Usually she enjoyed church services. It was a time of peace and focusing on better things. But this morning, even before she had settled into a pew, the church had been abuzz and speculative looks had been cast her way. The Bartles clan was there, and the family had no doubt been spreading tales.

And Ty was to thank for all of it.

She was grateful to Peggy and Ann, who sat on the back pew beside her, as if to lend support. No doubt Alma would have been there, too, but she was needed to play the organ.

After services, Mattie usually paused to visit with one or more of the little groups that lingered in the churchyard. Today she looked neither right nor left as she made her way down the brick steps and started for Peggy's surrey, a firm grip on Nathan's hand. Several older boys were starting up a game of marbles on the hard-packed dirt and Nathan tried to pull free of her grasp, but she held him firmly.

"Not today, dear. Mrs. Sanderlin will be waiting," she said to his look of appeal. Being the object of speculation chafed sorely. She wanted only to escape, a hot cup of tea from the tiny supply that was left from better times, and quiet to come to grips with the answer she was going to give Ty Warburton.

"Why the hurry?" Catching up with her, Alma linked her arm through Mattie's.

"Mornin', Miz Mattie," said Tassie, walking on Alma's other side.

"Good morning." Mattie found a smile for the twelve-year-old.

"Morning, Alma. That is a lovely hat."

"Thank you. It's the same one I been wearin' for ten years, just with a different bow. Now don't be tryin' to cozen me by turnin' the conversation to my hat!"

As they reached the edge of the shade of the giant live oak tree in the square, Mattie turned to face her friend and shook her head. "You want to know why Ty Warburton was at my house."

"Of course I do!" Alma grinned at her. Leaning close to her ear, she whispered, "if he was at my house, now, I know why he'd be there." She winked

Mattie frowned. "Why would he be?"

"Ack!" Alma shook her head. "Sometimes I think you're a total innocent, Mattie Idyll, and Nathan here was found under a cabbage leaf!"

She was still trying to understand Alma's jibe when Peggy paused beside them and squeezed Mattie's arm. "We'll wait in the surrey, dear."

"Thank you." Mattie nodded her gratitude. It was good to have friends. Even if they couldn't deliver her from this predicament.

Despite her earnest efforts to subdue her frustration, she was angry all over again at Ty Warburton. In the space of twenty-four hours, he'd turned her world upside down, made her face truths she hadn't wanted to face. Taken away her choices. And made her feel sorry for him — as if he weren't the richest man in town, and *she* the one living from hand to mouth!

Alma nodded to Ann, then gave Mattie a wide-eyed look and said, her voice pitched to carry, "Now, pay no attention to what any busybodies have to say. It were right decent of the man to help a poor widder woman get her garden plowed."

Mattie looked at her questioningly as Alma guided them around a horse patty.

Alma went on. "I bet there's a lot o' these good *Christian* folk just a wishin' that they'd realized you were in need o' help, dear! I know I do. Though she's small, my Tassie is as good behind a plow as any man. She just can't last as long."

As they continued toward the surrey, tied under the oak with the other horses and buggies, dead silence followed them, except for the birdsongs filling the spring air and the honeysuckle scented breeze. The patches of sky visible through the dense canopy of leaves showed heavy-bottomed clouds spaced out in the sky like an armada of warships.

Ebenezer Dunnam cleared his throat. "Aye, Miz Mattie." The furrows deepening on his weathered brow, Eb nodded. Taking his hat off, he turned it in his hands, his thinning red hair sticking up at odd

angles. "I'm embarrassed to say I just didn't think of you needin' — well, me or one of my boys should have seen you needed help." He looked contrite. "It does a body precious little good to come to church on Sunday if'n he don't do his Christian duty."

"That's all right, Eb," Mattie said, wanting to ease the man's conscience. He nodded again and climbed into his buckboard, already filled near to overflowing with his large brood.

Slim Wilkerson stepped nearer. "I have to beg your pardon, too, Mattie. Last week, I took my mule out to my ma's place at Crabapple Hill and turned over her garden spot, passing right by your place. On the way back to town, I surely could have plowed yours. I'm sorry I never gave it a thought."

"Please don't think anything of it. How could you know my garden needed plowing? I didn't ask." Mattie smiled at him, warmed by his sincerity.

With a "you-behave" glare at her twin boys, Rosalee Wilkerson took Slim's arm. A confection of pink ribbons and lace, she twirled a matching parasol on her shoulder. "Does that mean you *asked* Ty Warburton, Mattie?"

"Yes, it does sound that way," Beth Nevell agreed.

"Certainly not!" Mattie looked the half-circle of people over. "He just started to plow and wouldn't stop."

"Rosalee, isn't our dinner waiting?" Her husband, who owned the bank, frowned down at her. "Boys, go on home."

"Yes, sir!" They took off at a run.

Rosalee gave her husband an exasperated look and turned her attention back to Mattie. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by that. But I just wondered why he'd be at your house. You do live a little ways outside town, and his ranch is in the other direction, so it's not likely he just passed by."

"What *are* you saying, Rosalee?" Alma put her hands on her plump hips and looked the woman over, fire in her eye.

As Rosalee shrugged, Mattie squared her shoulders. "He came to ask me something. Now if you'll excuse me." She guided Nathan to the surrey and climbed inside.

"But what did he ask you, Mattie?" Rosalee moved beside the vehicle. Turning its head and looking over the woman, Peggy's mare snorted.

"I think some people have a great deal of nerve!" Alma declared. As if in agreement, a blue jay high in the gnarled limbs of the old oak began a raucous scold.

"I didn't mean anything, Alma. Just curious." Rosalee had the grace to blush under the older woman's censorious gaze.

After Nathan scrambled up the side of the surrey, Mattie lifted him onto her lap. She had no intention of answering that question.

She was still wrestling with a bigger question of her own — how could she bear being married to Ty Warburton? And looking at the people gathered around her, Mattie didn't know which she was angrier about — that he'd made her the object of speculation and gossip, or that he'd ruthlessly made her face the truth about Nathan's and her future.

She put her hand to her throat as a trapped, panicked feeling skittered through her chest. It felt as though an invisible hand was squeezing her throat, keeping her from drawing enough air into her lungs. It was a feeling that was all too familiar, though she'd not been overly troubled by it since her husband's death.

"If you're ready, Mattie," Peggy said, "I think we should get on home a'fore the rain."

"I think so, too." Mattie caught Alma's hand and squeezed. "I —"

The words stuck in her throat as the circle of people parted like the Red Sea before Moses, and she found herself staring into eyes as blue as winter ice.

Ty Warburton tipped a black hat — which looked as new as the rest of his clothes. Why was he so dressed up?

"Morning, Mattie."

Feeling as though the last bit of breath was being squeezed out of her, Mattie nodded vaguely. "Hello . . . Mr. Warburton."

"I told you. 'Ty.'"

Mattie nodded, all too aware of how familiar that would sound to the people curiously listening.

"Where's your gun?" Nathan pulled against Mattie's restraining arms as he peered at the ex-gunman's hip.

"At home." A smile twitched Ty's lips. "I don't wear it all the time."

"Oh." Obviously disappointed, Nathan kicked his foot against Mattie's skirts.

Ty took off his hat and stabbed his fingers through his straight, sandy-blond hair, pushing it back as he looked over the small knot of people. Many began easing back, giving him space.

There was a dangerous quality about him, Mattie realized. She suddenly understood why people continued to think of him as a gunman, though she'd not seen him wearing his gun for a very long time.

Ty turned back to her, his gaze steady. "To ease everyone's curiosity, I think it best if we tell them what I asked you, Mattie."

"Tell us!" Rosalee demanded.

"Just like a duck after a June bug, aren't you? Can't let it go." Alma shook her head and snapped her ruffled parasol open.

"Yes, tell them." Mattie sighed. Get it over with. Otherwise, they'd only draw their own conclusions, which no doubt would be far worse than the truth.

Turning back to the people standing about, he said, "I've asked Mattie to do me the honor of being my wife. I came here today hoping to have an answer."

Silence held everyone for the space of a heartbeat.

Then Nathan began to wriggle furiously. "Mama, you're hurting me!"

Realizing how tightly she held him, Mattie loosened her grip on her son.

Ann sighed and clasped her hands together, a dreamy expression lighting her eyes. "Miz Mattie, this is too thrilling!"

Nathan looked first at Ty and then her, then back at Ty. "You're goin' to be my new pa?"

"If your ma will have me." Ty held his hands out and the boy went into them readily. He lifted him down.

"Wait till I tell Jake and Brad!" The lad took off at full speed for the marble game his ma had dragged him by earlier.

"Mattie?" With a questioning lift to his brow, Ty held out his hand.

Fresh doubt stabbed through her as she laid her hand in his. His palm was so big and work-roughed, her fingers in her mended black lace gloves looked like a child's in comparison. As his fingers closed around hers, the feeling of unease swelled in her chest. She stood, and he caught her waist and lifted her down as easily as he'd lifted Nathan.

Clutching his wide shoulders to steady herself as he set her on her feet, she felt the rock-hard muscles beneath her hands and her doubt

turned to full-blown fear. How could she bind herself in marriage to this man? His sheer size left her feeling overwhelmed!

And how could she not, if it meant Nathan's well-being?

Ty wondered at the look of fear that skittered across Mattie's face. But then she raised her chin as she turned and thanked Peggy Sanderlin for the ride to church. If not for the way she clutched her reticule, like it was a lifeline in a stormy sea, he might have believed he'd been mistaken about her discomfort.

When he'd pulled up across the street and saw the people gathered around Mattie like vultures gathering on a kill, he'd figured his visit yesterday had had just the effect she had thought it would, and he had known he had to rescue her.

Ignoring the irony, Mattie nodded to several people in response to their good wishes as she let Ty guide her to one of the wooden benches under the shade of the massive limbs. "They act as if we're already at the altar, and I haven't said I'd marry you, yet."

"You were right about how people would react to seeing me at your place. I apologize, Mattie."

Mattie stared at him past the brim of her bonnet, unable to grasp what he said for a moment. Had he really apologized? It was a new experience in her world. Her father hadn't shown any concern for anyone but himself. Her husband had, of course, never been wrong.

She looked up at Ty, trying to decide how she should react to this novel experience, and as he met her gaze, something warm sparked inside of her, tingling beneath her diaphragm. She had the most insane urge to touch his clean-shaven jaw. How would they feel to her fingers? Her gaze moved to his lips, and the heat in her increased.

"May I take the fact that you didn't hit me with your reticule as a good sign?"

"An oversight on my part, I assure you." Confused by her feelings, she hit him on his arm with the little black purse. It had no effect, except for creating an infuriating smile that tugged at his lips.

"I wish it was filled with silver dollars!"

"Testy, aren't you?" He sighed gustily as he wiped the dusty bench with a bandanna handkerchief. "Why did you let me help you down from the sully, then?"

"Do you *think* I had a choice? After you told everyone you had proposed, even if I hadn't wanted to get out, I was obliged to for

appearance's sake!" Fuming anew, Mattie sat on the spot he'd cleaned for her and crossed her arms over her chest. "Women don't have the options men do."

"Sorry, Mattie. It's been a long time since I lived in a world where appearances mattered." Her words took him to his mother's parlor, with its heavy, dark furniture that smelled of beeswax and lemon. It had been a lifetime ago since he'd been back to Illinois.

"Things are easier for a man. Society doesn't judge, it winks." Mattie raised her chin another notch. There had been a murmuring in their wake, and as they'd walked away the knot of people had drawn tighter, talking excitedly. Discussing the upcoming wedding, she had no doubt.

As if reading her thoughts, Ty said, "I didn't come here by accident, Mattie."

"I heard."

"Well, have you made up your mind?" Propping one boot on the bench, he leaned on his knee and looked out over town as he waited for her answer, wondering why her answer should matter so much.

"There has never been any doubt about my answer, has there? I never had a choice. It just took me a little time to realize it." Sighing, she studied her folded hands. Lord, how had she gotten herself into this?

"Your answer is no, then?" Straightening, Ty hooked his thumbs in his pockets, looking strangely defeated. "No. The answer is *yes*. I assure you I would not be nearly so upset if I could refuse your offer!"

She means, if she could throw it back in my face. Feeling a reluctant smile tug at the corners of his mouth, Ty studied the small woman glaring up at him. The black bonnet she wore was hideous, and the way her hair was drawn into loops at the side of her face made it look narrow and plain. In her high-necked black dress and dark gray shawl, she looked like an unhappy crow.

She'd looked like a different person yesterday in the plain shirt-waist. Younger and prettier.

"Have you another dress? Something with color in it?" He could take her home and let her change.

Glancing at her black bombazine, then at his face, Mattie shook her head. "Why?"

"My daughter is coming on next Monday's train, so I'm anxious to get this over with. I've lived mainly in the kitchen and parlor of the ranch house, leaving the rest closed off. It needs cleaning, furniture,

curtains — I've a couple of the ranch hands' wives cleaning, but it still needs a lot of work. Since you've decided to have me, I'd like to go ahead and tie the knot, then we could get started on making it a decent place for both our children to live."

"When?" Mattie wet dry lips, and his gaze went to her mouth and darkened in the most disturbing way.

"I'm not handling this very well. But I thought we could have the preacher marry us this afternoon and get it out of the way."

"This afternoon?" Mattie's wide gray eyes held a hint of terror. Standing abruptly, she moved behind the bench.

Watching her, Ty wondered if she had consciously put the bench between them. What was she so afraid of?

Very deliberately, he walked around the bench and stood very close to her. She wanted to move away again. He saw it in the way she looked away, as if afraid to meet his gaze.

"Yes, this afternoon. I have a lot to do before my daughter comes. You could help."

"I could help you anyway. There's no need to rush our wedding just because a little scrubbing and the like needs to be done."

"What are you afraid of?" Ty asked gently, sliding his hand across her shoulders. "Tell me, Mattie!" Her name was like a caress on his lips.

"Nothing." Meeting his gaze, Mattie was amazed it was true. When he'd said he wanted to get it over with this afternoon, familiar feelings of dread and panic had roiled inside her at the thought of being again under a man's domination. But at his touch, gentle and soft, and the reassurance she saw in his eyes, the feelings left her. Now warmth was spreading through her from the place where his hand caressed her back. Wondrous warmth. What were these feelings he stirred inside her so easily?

She drew in a deep breath and decided on honesty. "All right, the prospect of getting married so soon did give me a turn. I'd just resigned myself to the need to get married at all."

"Chilling prospect, isn't it?" One corner of Ty's mouth curled into a smile, but there were shadows in his eyes. Shadows that made her wonder again how he had ended up separated from his wife. An annulment, he'd said.

Realizing his hand was still on her back, Mattie stepped away.

The little knot of people was breaking up. Parasol held at a jaunty angle, Alma approached, her plain face wreathed in smiles, Nathan and Tassie in her wake. Glancing at the children, she said, "I thought these young'uns could do with some chicken and dumplings. You two come join us for dinner, when you're through talking."

"Thank you, Alma, but I don't know if we'll have time. I've accepted Mr. Warburton's . . . Ty's proposal." Trying to keep the desperation out of her voice, and failing, Mattie added, "He wants to be married today."

Six

"This afternoon?" Alma looked from Mattie to Ty and placed one white-gloved hand on her hip. "Well, now, that's the oddest thing I ever heard! You ain't even been keepin' company, and now you want to race down the aisle." She shook her head.

Mattie tried to keep a reassuring smile on her face — but, Lord, she was anything but sure herself. "Ty's daughter is coming here to live, and he's concerned with making a proper home for her. That's why he's asked me to be his wife. Since this is a practical arrangement, I understand his haste."

"His daughter?" Alma gave Ty a wondering look, filled with unanswered questions. Then, her mouth drawing down into a straight line, she snapped her parasol closed. "This afternoon, is it? Well, ain't that just like a man." She studied him as though assessing just how flawed the male of the species was. "And pray tell, now, what have you in mind for her to be married in, her widow's weeds? A fine start to a marriage that would be, with the bride dressed in black. And she has friends who'd like to be present to wish her well, doncha know!"

Frowning, Ty looked at Mattie's black skirts. "That's why I asked you earlier if you have a dress with color in it — something more suitable."

"I suppose I could alter my dark blue traveling dress. But I haven't worn it in years and it had a few moth holes last time I put it out to air." It was certain to be too big now, and it was horribly out of fashion, but Mattie didn't think that mattered.

"You'll not get the alterations done by this afternoon," Alma said practically. "Not by yourself. Let's have Sunday dinner and talk about it." Hooking an arm through Mattie's and, obviously expecting Ty to

follow, Alma started down the hard-packed street toward the boardinghouse. "I may have something more suitable."

Not for the first time that day, Mattie felt carried along by events moving far too fast. Truth be told, she liked none of it. This was not a solution to her problems she ever would have chosen. But she was committed now. There was nothing for it but to put on a brave face.

A glance to the rear showed Tassie and Nathan following along in the grown-ups' wake. Looking downcast, Nathan put one plodding foot in front of the other. Normally he would be running as she admonished him to slow down. Mattie frowned. Changes were coming fast in his life, too. And he must feel even less in control than she did, poor heart!

After they had finished dinner and the dishes, Tassie and Nathan had been dispatched to round up the members of Medicine Springs's sewing circle. Beth Nevell was the first to arrive, brimming with curiosity and congratulations. Others, including Rosalee Wilkerson, soon followed, sewing baskets in hand.

Alma dusted the lid of a tin trunk she'd had Ty bring down from her attic, before shooing him out of the room with the warning not to expect his wedding that afternoon and a glare for him having dared to suggest such a thing in the first place.

The parlor with its stiff horsehair furniture and many crochet doilies was alive with feminine laughter and the tinkle of teacups as everyone waited for what she would reveal.

Parting Alma's chintz curtains, Mattie gazed through the window. The street looked much as it always did on a Sunday, empty hitching rails and boardwalks along the hard-packed dirt track. Except nothing was the same. She was about to be married again, give control of her life over to a man. Again. And though she told herself it was the best thing, the knot in her stomach said it was anything but.

A stray dog ambled along, stopping to drink at a wooden tub set under a drain spout, then looked behind it. The Miller boys appeared, barefoot with trousers turned up to their knees, running along, rolling a metal hoop with a stick. The carefree laughter echoed up the empty street. The stray followed them, barking enthusiastically.

Mattie started to turn away, but something caught her eye. Ty Warburton strode across Alma's yard and out of the gate. As she watched, he paused and stabbed his fingers through his hair and resettled his hat as he looked at the gathering clouds. Tall and wide shouldered,

he looked as solid and independent as the massive live oak in the square, but last night she had looked into his eyes and glimpsed his pain and uncertainty.

She dropped the curtain and turned away. She'd always thought life easier for a man, but this was as hard for him as it was for her. Only wanting to provide the best for his child drove him to it. Though the thought was hardly flattering, she could understand the motivation and empathize. Wasn't that exactly what drove her?

As the trunk was opened, everyone grew quiet and drew near. After lifting out a muslin-wrapped parcel, Alma untied the string. "This is the dress my Jean was married in, four years past," she said, speaking of her older daughter, who lived now in Dallas. Unfolding the old sheet it was wrapped in, she revealed lush folds of rose silk. "I was savin' it for Tassie, but it's bound to be a few years a'fore she has need of it."

"The way the Matthews's boy was making moon-eyes at her in church, I dunno about that." Ida Webster chuckled.

"I suspect a good shotgun and a bad dog will cure him," Alma retorted.

As the laughter erupted, Beth touched Mattie's shoulder. "With your coloring, you'll be lovely in that shade."

"Thank you, I . . . Thank you." Mattie covered Beth's hand and squeezed.

Giving her a warm smile, the younger woman moved to the tea service on Alma's marble-topped sideboard and took a gingerbread from the cloisonne tray.

As the women gathered around, including her in the laughter and conversation, Mattie realized, humbled, how precious the gift of friendship was. She'd always felt on the fringe, never a part. She realized now that had been her choice. When her husband was alive, she'd kept to herself to avoid curious questions. But even after his death, she'd held herself apart, embarrassed by her penury.

"Clara, take these." Alma set aside chunks of pure white beeswax in cheesecloth that had been nestled in the folds of the dress to prevent yellowing. "Oh, but I'll be needin' a piece or two to face the iron."

As Clara Thornhill, the sheriff's wife, gathered the chunks, Alma lifted the treasure and shook out the silken folds, eliciting more "ahs" from the women. As she held the dress up against Mattie, there was a smattering of applause.

Mattie smoothed her hand over the material and felt the sting of tears threatening. "I've never had anything so fine." She had had finer things in Baltimore, but she was really speaking of the overwhelming warmth and friendship she was being given. She let the women think she meant the dress.

Beaming with pleasure, they set to work. Before she had time to turn around, the door was locked and she was stripped down to her corset and petticoat and measurements were taken. Then strategies for bringing the garment in line with current fashions were discussed. The main flaw bemoaned was the lack of a bustle. Rosalee declared that she had an idea of how to solve the problem and hurried out of the parlor.

After standing about for an hour, Mattie escaped the parlor, vainly trying to smooth her hair back into some semblance of order as she went. Against her protests, the pins had been snatched out and the thick brown mass twisted this way and that, as styles and possible hats she could borrow were argued about. She might have been a dress dummy for all the credence that was paid to her objections when she'd tried to tell everyone they were taking too much trouble. After her measurements were taken the third time, her presence had obviously not been required.

Ty rose as Mattie entered the dining room. Looking startled to see him, she stopped short. "I didn't know you were here."

"I was waiting for you." As this bright-eyed creature had floated into the room, he was glad he had. The black crow clothes were the same when he studied her — however, her cheeks were flushed with color. She looked young and vivacious. It was the first time he'd noticed that her face was heart-shaped, dominated by those wide gray eyes, which were sparkling now like they'd been lighted from within. And she had a stubborn little point of a chin. He smiled, remembering the way it could jut up into the air when she got her back up.

But it was her hair that fascinated him. Thick waves of dark chocolate curling free about her shoulders, shiny as silk. With it loose on her shoulders, her whole appearance was changed. Ty thought the milliner who'd created that mourning bonnet she was so fond of wearing should be horse-whipped.

Her hand went to her throat. "I thought you'd gone." She took another step into the room, though it looked as if she really wanted to turn around and go back into the parlor.

"I guessed as much from the shock on your face." Ty didn't realize that he'd moved nearer until he was close enough to reach out and capture a curl. He didn't, sensing she might bolt if she felt threatened. "Mattie, you're beautiful."

Her gray eyes widened, then her gaze dropped, her thick lashes forming crescents against her cheeks, where faint roses bloomed. "Thank you. But you don't have to say things like that to me. I know I'm plain."

"Plain? What put that notion in your head?"

But hadn't he thought it himself? Ty realized. Well, he had, but he excused himself. He knew now she'd worked real hard at being plain.

"My father told me." Mattie's smile was bittersweet. "He meant it kindly, I'm sure, so I wouldn't have false expectations."

"I don't understand." Sensing her pain, Ty wanted to put his arm around her and draw her to him. Realizing this was the first time Mattie had spoken about anything about her past, except for her love for her husband, Ty waited, wanting to know more.

"I have two sisters, one older, one younger. My father said Ellen was beautiful, and she was. After she got old enough to go to socials, our house was always filled with flowers from her beaux. He told Anna, the youngest, she had the voice of an angel. And the way she played the pianoforte — Chopin, Liszt!" Mattie clasped her hands, her eyes glowing with memory. "If she had been a man, her future would have been assured as a concertist. Because she was a female, my father wouldn't hear of her going onstage — I always thought that grossly unfair."

"Anyway, he very kindly told me since I lacked both beauty and talent, I should not expect any respectable prospects to come courting. And to beware if anyone told me I was pretty, for they were merely trying to deceive me."

"He was wrong." Glimpsing the pain in her eyes, he recognized the wound on a small corner of her soul. Hadn't he enough scars on his own?

And he realized he'd been wrong again. He'd thought Mattie the perfect bride because she wouldn't want or need anything from him. He wouldn't have to spend time trying to understand her, or getting to know her. Now he found he very much wanted to know her better.

"No." Mattie shook her head, sending silken curls dancing. "He was right. Long after Ellen and Anna were married, I continued to live at home, taking care of his household. There were no suitable prospects."

Ty wondered if he'd imagined the slight emphasis on the word "suitable." Thinking about it, his gaze was drawn to her rose-pink lips. The fuller bottom one pouted out. Her mouth was made to be kissed, he thought, wanting to do just that.

He shifted uneasily. "But you were married."

Her mouth twisted in a parody of a smile. "So I was."

"So your father was wrong."

Her lips parted, but she didn't speak. Her eyes filled with unspoken emotions.

Looking up, Mattie caught her reflection in the mirror over the sideboard and gasped, her hands going to her unbound hair. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"I like it. Leave it down."

"Are you daft?" Her eyes widened. "I didn't mean — a lady doesn't . . . Oh!" Cheeks flaming, she quickly gathered it up and twisted it into a knot, securing it at the nape of her neck with the pins from her pocket.

"There you are!" Clara appeared, a piece of rose silk draped over one shoulder, tape measure in hand. "I need to measure your inside sleeve again."

Mattie held out her arm and Clara applied the tape. Folding it at the right number, she cocked a brow at Ty. "The ladies in the sewing circle have determined that you can't marry Mattie before next Saturday," she said in a voice that brooked no argument.

"Is the piece from the dress?" At her nod, Ty slipped the silk off Clara's shoulder and held it up beside Mattie's face. It added a glow to her creamy complexion. "I think it'll be worth the wait, then."

Looking pleased, Clara took it from him and disappeared into the parlor.

Ty hooked his thumbs in his pockets. He had to, or he'd be tempted pull the pins back out of Mattie's hair. "Even though there's no wedding this afternoon, I thought you might like to ride out to the ranch with me, see what you're letting yourself in for."

"I'd like to."

Her lips again snagged his gaze, and Ty had a vision of cuddling in the buggy with Mattie as the rain poured down, taking the pins from her hair and crushing it in his hands. And heat flooded his groin. The more he thought about it, the more driving out to the ranch seemed like an excellent idea.

Mattie nodded, that hunted look he'd come to recognize darkening her eyes. Then she brightened. "I'll find Nathan and tell him we're going to see our new home, and I'll ask Tassie if she'd like to go along."

Watching her go, Ty thrust his hands in his pockets. Tassie and Nathan. Well, it was still a good idea. Just not as good as he'd thought.

What the hell made Mattie so afraid of being alone with him? He had to admit it was a facet of Mattie Idyll that had taken him by surprise. Stiffly proper, snippy, capable — he'd been drawn to the fact that he didn't like her much and the feeling was mutual, and thought they could rub along together well enough to make a home, but never have to pay each other much attention. And he'd known she needed someone to take care of her.

Who would have thought she was hiding so much under those stiff black clothes and stiffer attitude?

And who would have thought he'd find himself intrigued and wanting to know more?

* * *

On the ride out to the Rocking J Bar, the landscape changed. Hickory and oak forest gave way to open hills and rolling grassland, dotted by an occasional black oak, and a few pockets of trees growing beside small streams. Mattie had never been so far away from Medicine Springs before, and the difference amazed her. Even with the thickening clouds, the sky seemed to open up, becoming impossibly wide, stretching on forever.

"This is it," Ty said, as they rounded a curve atop a sharp hill. One booted foot propped on the dashboard of the buggy, he tugged on the reins, halting the big bay gelding. In the forefront, a two-story brick house with square white columns dominated the scene. Bunkhouse, barn, and other buildings were spread out behind it, scattered across the green grassland like a child's toy blocks.

"I wanna see!" Nathan called from the tailboard behind them.

"Me, too!" Tassie seconded. The carriage shook as the pair scooted off.

"What do you think?" Ty asked.

Hearing the pride in his voice, Mattie decided it was forgivable. "It's beautiful."

"That's what I thought the first time I rode over this hill and saw it."

It was grand, far grander than she had imagined. Last winter, she had gathered dead limbs in the woods and brought them home, making her precious supply of bought firewood last through the days that were too terrible to go outside and scout for more deadfall. On those cold days, she had tatted lace until there were calluses on the sides of her fingers, anticipating the sugar and flour the pennies earned would buy.

Now she was going to be mistress of all this.

Looking back at Ty Warburton, his profile angles and strong lines under the shadow of his hat, she wondered what would be the cost?

Seven

"What do you think?" Ty asked, a hint of pride in his voice.

"It's so big," she breathed as a break in the trees offered a vista of the ranch. She'd heard people say that Ty had the prettiest spread in the Medicine Springs area, but she'd been unprepared for this. The land seemed to stretch out forever. Cattle dotted the far hills.

"Only ten thousand acres — small by Texas standards."

"Only?" Mattie looked at him questioningly. Ty turned to her at the same time and his gaze snagged hers. Awareness of the man skittered through her. His breath was sweet and warm and smelled faintly of tobacco. She thought his cheeks were like lean tanned plains, originating at the promontory of his high cheekbones. There was a small nick on his chin where he'd cut himself shaving that morning. Had he been nervous?

It was a strong chin. In contrast, his nose was almost too finely sculpted. His mouth was lush, expressive, the full bottom lip slightly squared at the outer corners. Mattie wondered how it would feel to kiss him.

Thoroughly shocked at herself, she snapped her attention forward and studied the horse's rear. Lord, what was she thinking? Barely a week past, she'd been mortified as he'd handled her person, shoeing her like a horse. Today she wondered how it would feel to kiss him. Shameless, wanton thoughts!

It must be the bad company she'd been forced to keep!

Feeling the hint of rain in the wind, Ty looked at the line of heavy clouds thickening on the western horizon. "You kids climb up here where the top will keep you dry if the rain starts."

"Yep, looks like we're in for a frog-strangler." Tassie caught the foot-board and hauled herself up.

To make room for the twelve-year-old tomboy, Mattie was obliged to scoot over until her hip was in danger of touching Ty's. Just the thought making her face warm, she cast a wary glance between them.

Ty grinned. "I don't bite."

The look sparking in his ice-blue eyes seemed to belie that.

Under that look, a shiver raced over her, prickling her skin. She decided the effect was from the cool breeze, ignoring the fact that she felt strangely warm.

As Nathan climbed aboard, she held out her hands. "Come, sit on my knees."

Lower lip thrust out, he shot a belligerent glance at Ty, then shook his head. "I don't wanna."

"Nathan?"

He didn't answer, just wriggled in between her and Tassie.

This time as Mattie made room, her hip pressed against Ty's. Barely had she taken this in before he shifted his leg and his hard thigh pressed along the length of hers. As he snapped the reins, his shoulder brushed hers. She opened her mouth to protest, but the buggy started forward with a jerk. She snapped it shut and held on.

As Ty guided the horse and buggy down the hill, it waddled and dipped, seeming in danger of being tipped over by deep ruts cut into the hard clay wagon track. Metal and wood shrieked and groaned.

"This is fun!" Tassie giggled as the springs were tested.

Her teeth clamped together, Mattie caught at the back of the seat behind Tassie, trying her best not to fall against Ty. But time and again, she was dashed against his solid strength.

Giving up, she clung to his arm. And found heat and banded steel. Both her hands barely circled his biceps, her thumbs scarcely meeting. She looked at them in amazement. As he worked the reins, muscles bunched and knotted beneath her fingers. Feeling his strength, a tingling warmth started deep in her chest, wondrous and unexplainable. Nothing had ever felt quite like it before. And Mattie was almost certain it couldn't be proper.

"Gee, fella! Gee!" Guiding the horse around a tree that had fallen across the roadway, Ty pulled hard on the right rein, and the back of

his arm brushed her nipple. Even through the barrier of her clothes, the effect arced through her, as powerful a feeling as the jagged bolt that split the sky on the horizon. A strange feeling sizzled through her center, like a meteor's brief track through the night sky.

When the road became smoother, Ty relaxed and let the horse set its own pace. Though the breeze had turned damp and cool, Mattie eased her shawl off her shoulders and turned her face into the cool wind. Drawing a deep breath, she tried to understand the strange feelings he engendered inside her. When no explanation offered itself, she decided the best course was simply to ignore them.

If she could.

Looking down at Nathan, she straightened his wool cap and turned his collar up, wishing she had made him wear his heavier coat. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

He gave an infinitesimal shake of his head. Sitting with arms crossed and lower lip thrust out, he stared straight ahead. Mattie met Tassie's gaze over his head, the girl shrugged.

"Nathan, are you feeling well?"

His sighed gustily, his lower lip seemed to tremble ever so slightly. "I'm okay."

He suffered her to lift his cap and put her hand on his forehead. There was no fever.

As he pushed back his hat, Ty's brows lifted questioningly. She shrugged.

As Ty halted the buggy on the carriage sweep, Nathan was climbing down. "Nathan, wait — " he began, but when the child's shoes touched the ground, he was off like a shot.

"Nathan, come back here! It's about to rain!" Mattie cried. As if echoing her warning, thunder boomed, distant but still ominous as it vibrated the earth and the buggy beneath her. The boy stopped in his tracks at the corner of the house, shoulders slumped.

"I'll see about him." Tassie leapt out of the buggy and ran, her sun-bonnet flapping by its strings. "Hey, wait up!"

After wrapping the reins loosely around the brake handle, Ty hopped down and reached out to help Mattie. "What have you told him?" he asked, concern edging his tone as he lifted her easily. Again she felt the muscles bunch under her fingers, and felt something like disappointment when he set her on her feet and stepped away.

"Nothing." Mattie's gaze focused on her child. Her heart constricting, she realized events were happening faster than he could cope with the changes. She pulled her shawl tighter about her shoulders. "I didn't know you would want your answer today. Everything started happening and picked up momentum, like a snowball rolling downhill. I haven't had a chance to talk to him."

"I'm sorry." Ty stepped back. "In thinking about my child, I didn't consider yours. I'm going to take care of the horse and put the buggy up while you talk to him." He took the gelding's bridle and led the animal toward the barn. "The doors to the house are unlocked," he tossed over his shoulder.

Mattie found Tassie and Nathan around the corner, talking as they pulled off wild morning glory and honeysuckle vines growing up through the latticework skirting under the porch. Squatting down, she touched her son's cheek, tracing a tear track. "I guess you're mad at me, huh?"

He kicked his toe against a clump of spring grass. "I don't want you to marry Mr. Ty."

That makes two of us, Mattie thought. When she married again, she'd become Ty's possession, little different from a horse or a carriage.

But for her son's future, she could endure it.

Buttoning Nathan's coat, she frowned. "Well, I can understand that! He bites the heads off chickens, and he has bad breath, he has worms for hair, and he spits when he talks — "

"He *doesn't!*" Nathan seemed to be having trouble keeping his frown in place.

Tassie giggled.

"Stop it, Tass!" He shot her an irritated glance and tears welled in his brown eyes.

"Hey." Mattie reclaimed his attention. "Why don't you want me to marry him, then?"

"Billy said when you do, I'll be a 'stepson' and Mr. Ty won't want me around. Billy's stepfather doesn't want him around!" Nathan tackled her in a hug, winding his arms around her neck and almost knocking her over.

"Oh, Nathan!" To keep from falling, Mattie was obliged to catch the latticework at her back. Recovering her balance, she hugged him fiercely, aching as she understood his uncertainty. The way Sara's second

husband had treated Billy was a scandal in town. The lad had gotten a job unloading freight and moved into a spare room in back of the depot.

"That Billy Collins!" Tassie clenched her fists. "Putting ideas in Nathan's head — the next time I see him, he'll get what-for!" She tromped away and took out her anger on a clump of wild crocus, roughly plucking a handful of the blue star-shaped flowers.

Hugging him, Mattie stroked her son's narrow back. "I'm sorry Billy's stepfather is mean to him! That's not fair, is it?"

His face buried in her shoulder, Nathan wobbled his head from side to side.

"But *Ty isn't* Billy's stepfather, is he?" she asked soothingly. She felt him still, the sobs stopping as that got his attention. "I've seen Billy's stepfather be mean to his horse and to his dog. I haven't seen Ty treat any animals cruelly."

Sniffing, her son pulled back and looked at her, uncertainty still clear in his eyes. But he obviously wanted to believe.

Mattie brushed the blond bangs off his forehead and resettled his cap. "I think Billy's stepfather was mean before he married Billy's mother."

He considered this. "Then why did Miz Sara marry him?"

"That's a good question. I don't know," she said honestly. What if, like Sara, she was making a terrible mistake?

She remembered how Ty's face had softened the night before, when he'd gently wriggled Nathan out of his dirty clothes and put him to bed. She felt a warm certainty Ty would be good to her child. "I believe Ty will be a good stepfather to you."

Now if only she could convince herself that he'd be as good a husband!

"He has a nice dog," Nathan said consideringly.

As if summoned, the big yellow mongrel bounded around the corner. Seeing Mattie and Nathan, the animal doubled its speed, heading straight for them, a joyous look on its face, its tongue lolling.

Gasping, Mattie stood, pushing Nathan behind her. What had Ty called the beast? "*Spot, no! No!*"

Its front paws skidding on the new spring grass, the animal stopped, sat on its haunches, and looked askance at her. He then turned back to Nathan, longing in its whole demeanor.

"Well, what do you know? He knows his name," she said, amazed that she'd managed to avoid being knocked down and licked.

Thunder rumbled again, and the dog whimpered, crouching.

"Don't be afraid, fella." Leaving the safety of Mattie's skirts, Nathan went to the dog and petted him. "That's okay. I don't like thunder too much, either."

"Why don't you take him up on the porch? He might not be as frightened under a roof," Mattie said, as another round rumbled, still distant but building. Looking at the dark sky, she wrapped her shawl more tightly about her.

Nathan caught the string collar and pulled the dog in the direction of the steps, then held on as he got the idea and bounded up, practically dragging Nathan behind.

"That's a good Spot!" He giggled as the dog swiped his cheek.

"Tassie! We'd better go inside!" Mattie called, the wind damp and cold against her cheeks. The girl, who'd run across the yard chasing a cabbage butterfly, waved to show she'd heard.

A fat raindrop plopped on Mattie's hand. Another spattered her chin as she hurried up the brick steps. "Nathan, you come in, too, if the lightning gets closer."

"What about Spot?"

"All right, he can come. But try to make him behave."

On the porch were signs of neglect that hadn't been apparent from a distance. Last fall's leaves and small limbs were banked around the pillars. Over the doors, mud-dauber wasps had filled the curve of the fanlight with mud nests, as they had every other shadowed nook on the ceiling and tall windows that went all the way down to the floor.

Taking mental notes of what was needed, she opened one of the tall doors and went inside the house. The musty smell of disuse greeted her, and her footsteps rang hollowly on the heart-of-pine floor as she pushed open dusty drapes, then started to explore.

The house wasn't overlarge. It was about the same size as her father's house in Baltimore. But it was classically southern in design: a large central hall, high ceilings, walk-through windows, and thick walls. In the hall, wide, gently ascending stairs with elegant spindles and railing curved around two of the walls. The walls were covered in flocked paper and rose to a ceiling adorned with plaster angels and formal designs. The chandelier was shrouded in a dust cover at the center.

Bending, she touched one of the beaded moldings on the generous baseboard. Dust came away on her fingers. Everything was thick with dust. As she went from room to room, her woman's sensibilities were thoroughly offended.

But when Mattie looked around, she hugged herself, envisioning the house clean and furnished and filled with children's laughter and love. *No*, she chided herself. Children's laughter would ring in the hall, and she hoped Ty's daughter would love her and Nathan, as well as her father. But Mattie knew Ty would never grow to love a plain-faced woman like herself. He wasn't looking for love. That wasn't why he was marrying her. That wasn't part of their bargain.

Finding the man who could love her in spite of her plain looks was a foolish fantasy — she'd indulged in it when she was younger. And Nathan had been the only good thing to come of it.

The sky outside the windows darkened ominously, and lightning grew sharper, the thunder more shattering. The front door burst open and the yellow dog dashed inside and up the stairs. Calling vainly for the animal to stop, Nathan and Tassie were right behind.

"You children stay inside, now." Mattie wondered how long they would be obliged to wait out the storm here.

Continuing her exploration, she discovered the kitchen and small adjoining room were neat and clean, and obviously lived in. However, they were bare of anything more than the essentials — a small table and two chairs, a stove and a coffeepot, and a few tins on shelves on the wall, and a lantern hanging over the table. In the small adjoining room, obviously intended as a storeroom, a small cot sat against the wall, a striped wool blanket neatly stretched over it.

The ceilings were lower in these two rooms, and there were different-style windows. She guessed they had been added on after the main house was complete.

Hugging her shawl tight against the chill, Mattie wandered back into the kitchen and eyed the coffeepot longingly.

Rain sluicing off the brim of his hat, Ty jerked the back door open, then fought the wind to close it behind him. After shaking off his hat, he hung it on a peg by the door. His dripping oilskin followed. Luckily he'd kept spare rain gear in the barn.

To let Mattie have time to look around at the house, he'd taken his time, giving the bay gelding a rubdown and water, and giving the

other horses in the barn feed and water, too. And not knowing how long the rain would last, he'd passed by the bunkhouse and told Cook there might be extra bodies for supper that evening.

When he'd paused in the door of the bunkhouse before braving the storm, he'd seen the golden light spilling from the kitchen window. And Mattie's shadow as she'd moved about. Something warmed inside him at the sight.

"Coffee's hot." Standing beside the stove, Mattie looked uncertain. "I hope you don't mind that I made myself at home." She cradled a blue enamelware cup in her small hands. Her gray eyes seemed to glimmer in the lantern light, which cast a soft halo around her head. As her hair slipped free of the hurried knot she had pinned it into at Alma's, soft curls caressed her cheeks.

Soft and warm and woman.

"It soon will be your home." Funny, he'd never thought of this house that way.

His gaze shifted to the coffeepot on the black iron stove. "It smells good," he said, wrestling his thoughts back in a safer direction. Moving to the stove and spreading his hands out to the warmth, he watched as Mattie took a cup from the hooks under the open shelves and poured steaming coffee into it.

"Sugar? There doesn't seem to be any cream." She glanced at him, then looked away.

"Black's fine." He took it from her. As he sipped the rich brew, Mattie moved around restlessly, finally settling on one of the two ladder-back chairs he'd made with a draw knife. He'd have to get proper furniture. It had never seemed important before.

Mattie fussed with a loose thread on her sleeve. Watching her, Ty wondered why being alone with him still made her so nervous.

Rolling his shoulders, he realized he, too, was tense. Well, it had been that kind of day. Binding up his heart that morning, he'd ridden out with the intention of getting married. Finding he was obliged to wait a week was like having his execution postponed.

No. That was the way he'd felt this morning, but it wasn't the truth anymore, Ty reflected. Watching the graceful movements of her hands as she sipped her coffee, he was coming to think the idea wasn't too bad.

He propped his foot on the stove lip and steam rose from his wet boot, along with the smell of wet leather. "Did you talk to Nathan?"

"Yes." Her wide gray gaze met his, then flitted away and focused on her cup, a slight frown between her winged brows. "Seems the Collins's boy told him you'll be his stepfather, then told him how his own stepfather didn't want him around."

"It can't be easy for Nathan. Where are he and Tassie now?" He propped his other boot on the stove lip.

As if in answer to his question, a squeal of childish laughter and an excited bark sounded from somewhere upstairs. Ty smiled. It sounded good to hear laughter in this house. Made it seem less hollow.

"Spot is afraid of storms," Mattie said, one corner of her lush mouth lifting.

"I wondered why he wasn't cowering under the hay rack in the barn." After pouring more coffee, he sat in the other chair, bumping her knee with his as he pulled it up to the table.

Mattie jumped at the contact, spilling her coffee. "Damn!"

"Why, Mattie Idyll!" Devilish lights glinted in his light blue eyes.

At the teasing tone, she clamped her teeth shut on the other words she wanted to say. Using the freshly folded towel, she wiped up the spill with far more vigor than was needed.

"I've had a look around." Mattie folded the cloth and wiped again, needing to keep her hands busy. What was wrong with her? Since Ty had come in the back door, she'd been struck with the sheer size of the man, the way he moved, the way he filled the small kitchen. Awareness of him seemed to seep into her every pore and made it hard to keep her mind focused.

Dragging her gaze away from his mouth, and the way his lips touched the rim of his cup, she forced her thoughts back to the house. "This is a beautiful home, but there's a great deal to do if your daughter is arriving next week."

"I know." Funny, he'd never thought of it as a home. It had been a place to sleep when he'd come in exhausted from the range. It would be a home, now. Mattie watched, fascinated, as he raked his hair back with his fingers, as if deep in thought — then caught her breath at the dark intensity in his eyes as he snagged her gaze. Dragging her gaze away, Mattie cleared her throat. "I, uh, found a pencil and scrap of paper, and made a list of some things I'll need to get started." She pushed the paper toward him.

He glanced at it. "When would you start?"

There it was again, that intensity. It made her feel she had to look away, before he saw too deeply, saw what she wanted to hide, even from herself. "Tomorrow. I could come back tomorrow, after I put my wash out on the line."

"I'll arrange for you to have help."

"That's not necessary. I — "

"Mattie, I didn't ask you to marry me because I wanted a work-horse." His quiet words rang in the small room.

"Why did you ask me?"

The question was out before she thought about it. She wanted very much to snatch it back. When he looked at her like he was doing now, she wasn't certain she wanted to know.

Reaching out, Ty touched a curl by her temple, then stroked her satin cheek. His fingers rough and brown against her creamy skin, he felt he touched something fragile and precious, like a porcelain doll. But Mattie was more, she was flesh and blood and heat.

He cupped her cheek, smoothing his thumb across her bottom lip. Heat surged in his groin as she gasped, her eyes darkening beneath her shadowing lashes.

Why had he asked her to marry him?

Because he hadn't imagined being this curious about her or interested in her. The truth was, he had asked her because he'd imagined he wouldn't have to think much about her at all — that she'd keep his house and be a mother to his daughter, freeing him to lose himself again in work on the ranch, as he'd been doing for the last five years. To spend long days in the saddle and roll up at night in a blanket, so tired he could sleep without dreaming.

But he'd found shadows in her eyes, mysteries of her own that roused his curiosity. There was a woman's body hidden under that black crow dress. And there was heat in Mattie Idyll, heat she tried damned hard to keep hidden.

What the hell had ever made him think she was plain and uninteresting?

Mattie felt a warm quiver of anticipation as his hard gaze focused on her mouth.

"It must have been that teasing way of crossing to the other side of the street whenever you saw me coming. I knew you wanted me." His grin was pure evil as he lowered his head.

Then he closed the small distance between them and his mouth settled over hers, tender and taunting, tasting of tobacco and heat and man.

The room whirled about, but his hands cupping her face anchored her. He stole her breath, then gave it back. Made fire arc through her and delicious sensations swirl madly around in her stomach.

Mattie trembled as he broke the kiss, but his hands still held her. She swallowed the urge to beg him not to stop.

Ty stood, drawing her to her feet, also. "You can't kiss properly across a table."

"That kiss definitely wasn't proper." Low and husky, she hardly recognized her own voice.

"Mattie Idyll, you have no idea how improper I plan to be!"

Trembling, Mattie closed her eyes. She didn't want proper.

"Look at me."

Obedient, she saw the desire darkening his eyes. Remembered echoes of sensation danced through her, mingling with new desires.

A lock of his sandy-blond hair had fallen onto his forehead. She longed for the temerity to reach up and push it back, then comb her fingers through his hair. She longed to touch his face, his lips. Explore his chest, shoulders, arms. She wanted to be closer to him. So close, she could feel his heartbeat through her own flesh.

But all her life the rigid standards that defined a lady had been drilled into her. But for one lapse. One terrible, much regretted lapse when her true nature had surfaced. The lessons of which were too well learned.

At war with herself, Mattie stood mindlessly wanting, not daring to reveal the depths of her wantonness. Her hands fisted at her sides.

Ty pulled her tightly against the length of him. Sighing, she pressed her cheek to his hard-muscled chest. The width of his shoulders made her feel sheltered, and she'd felt the strength in those arms. She felt his heart beneath her cheek, felt the long, hard length of him. And the rigid bar of his erection pressed intimately against her abdomen.

Lord help her, she was no lady. Ladies didn't feel these desires. She knew she must hide her feelings, or he'd lose respect for her. As Jonas had.

"Mattie, look at me." His voice was dark silk, wrapping around her. Compelling her.

Raising her face, she gave herself once again to his kiss. She had no will to resist. Rain beating against the windows, the smell of hot coffee, the muffled sounds of the children playing upstairs, all whirled away. His mouth on hers, his body against hers, was her only reality.

Eight

Ty cupped her head, angling her mouth to suit him, tasting the sweetened coffee on her lips. When she kept her mouth closed, he sucked her lips gently and felt her tremble, her breathing becoming shallow and light.

What was it about this slip of a woman that made him want her? Want *her*, not just a woman? He certainly hadn't suspected it would be like this between them when he'd convinced her to marry him.

If he'd known, he might never have asked.

Continuing his assault, he pressed kisses at the corner of her mouth, her cheek, the sensitive skin below her ear. As he stroked her slender shoulders and her back, damning her stiff whalebone stays that separated him from her softness, Mattie shivered and pressed more tightly against him.

But he was aware she was holding back. Her hands were fisted at her sides as if she fought herself, repressing her response.

Why?

"Mattie," he began, but her delectable lower lip had to be kissed again before he went on. "Relax, sweet. Open your mouth."

His mouth came down, hot and hard, his tongue demanding entrance. Her will was too frail to withstand such temptation. Wind-ing her arms about his waist, pressing even closer to his hard length, she welcomed his invading tongue.

No one had ever kissed her like this before, his tongue stroking her mouth carnally. When his hand left her hair and skimmed down her throat, she tensed under the pleasure rippling through her. Giving in to her weakness, she closed her eyes and savored the intense waves, certain nothing would ever again feel as good.

Then he caught her breast and squeezed softly, and she realized she'd been wrong.

A pleasure so intense it was painful arced through her, liquid heat throbbed in her center.

Ty broke his kiss. "What do you want, Mattie?"

The gray eyes she lifted were dark and drugged with passion. But there was something more in them, shadows and pain.

Mattie wet her lips. She wanted not to want his touches and kisses so badly she ached. She didn't want to feel these terrible, shameful yearnings to touch him. Hold him. To have him touch her in the most intimate way possible.

He was temptation incarnate!

Her fingers trembling, Mattie touched his lean cheek, savoring the rough texture of his shadowed beard. This was wrong. A lady didn't act like a whore!

Summoning what remained of her will, she caught his hand, wanting to pull it away from her sensitive breasts. But she moaned helplessly as he caught her nipple again through the thick material, squeezing it and rolling it between his fingers.

"Ah, Mattie. This is what you want, isn't it?"

God help her. It was. Tears burned her eyes.

Her husband had been right. She was no better than a strumpet.

Tearing away from Ty, Mattie ducked her head. Feeling hot blood suffuse her face, she was mortified at herself, at the way she'd let her own base desires have control.

Again.

"Mattie?" His voice questioning, Ty touched her shoulder.

Her back rigid, she moved away from his touch. Hating him for making her feel these things, for breaking through her control and revealing her wantonness. Hating her own weakness more.

Her back was eloquently rigid. Ty reached out again, but dropped his hand to his side as he saw Mattie viciously scrub the back of her hand across her mouth, as though trying to rid herself of contamination from the touch of his mouth.

Just like Lyla. Using him, but secretly loathing his touch.

No. Mattie wasn't like Lyla. The Georgia beauty had seduced him into giving her food and money. She'd never known that he would have tried to help her anyway. She hadn't needed to play games with his heart.

Mattie tried to hide the passion and fire inside her. If she was lying to someone, it was herself. And he wasn't going to let her continue.

But now wasn't the time.

Needing to be anywhere but the kitchen, Ty stalked into the wide hall. Through the open drapes, he saw the spring shower had spent itself. Golden fingers of sun were prying between the clouds.

"Nathan, Tassie! Come down. If Mattie's ready, we're going back now."

A happy bark drew his attention up the stairs. Spot stood on the top landing wearing an admiral's hat made of newspaper. The children appeared behind Spot, wearing more paper headgear.

Despite the frustration that still thrummed through him, Ty was drawn to smile. Children. That's what this house had needed for a long time. Their laughter dispelled the shadows and filled the empty corners.

Maybe children's laughter could even dispel the shadows in his soul.

* * *

This couldn't be her.

Mattie stared into Alma's cheval glass mirror, trying to accept what she saw. A warm spring breeze played with the chintz curtains at the parlor window, sunlight spilled around and over her and splashed gold on the red Turkish carpet. Alma and the rest of the Medicine Springs Sewing Circle stood silently intent as Mattie turned this way and that, awaiting her reaction.

Her reaction was disbelief. No matter what angle she looked at herself from, a beautiful woman stared back.

"How do you like it?" Alma asked.

"That can't be me," Mattie breathed, feeling a tightening in her chest. She was completely nonplussed. All her life, she'd been plain, practical Mattie. But in this dress, that wasn't the case.

The sewing circle ladies had completely remade the rose silk, adding touches that brought it into current fashion. "I'm . . . the dress is beautiful." Mattie fought the urge to say it didn't suit her at all and refuse to wear it. She couldn't lie. It suited her perfectly, far better than anything she'd ever worn.

And these women had put a great deal of work into making her a proper wedding dress. She couldn't throw it back in their faces.

"You're beautiful in it." Beth Nevell beamed. "I told you this color would look wonderful with your complexion."

Mattie touched her cheek. "It is so . . . fashionable. Like it came straight from New York." Pasting a smile on her face, she tried to like it. A lace inset, dipping low on her bosom, had been added in the silk bodice, and a short standing collar of rose velvet in a slightly deeper shade circled her neck. The effect seemed at once demure and provocative. The same color velvet formed a short overskirt that fell in rippled folds, stopping at her knees. The full sleeves had been recut. Now saucy puffs stood at her shoulders, while the rest narrowed to fit her arms.

"The sleeves and lace were Clara's ideas," Alma said.

"You're such a little slip of a thing, we wanted to give you a little, ah, *breadth* up top." Nodding as if pleased with the effect, Clara folded her hands on her ample middle.

Looking at the stylish bustle, Mattie took a few trial steps. The swags of rose velvet swayed with the movement of her hips. "Oh, this is so . . ."

"Provocative?" Rosalee supplied.

Mattie blushed red. Ty Warburton hardly needed any provocation! He'd wanted to bed her when she was swathed in stiff black widow's weeds. Thinking of the effect this would have on him, Mattie ran her finger under the velvet collar, wishing it was just a little looser.

"Rosalee contributed the velvet and the design for the bustle and overskirt." Alma smiled at the banker's wife. "She did good, didn't she?"

Blushing, Rosalee shrugged. "I had a terrible mustard stain on the bodice of my velvet dress and couldn't wear it anymore. The style it's draped in is copied from a picture in *Godey's*."

Mattie touched the lace at her bosom, where the cleft between her breasts could be seen. "But isn't this too daring?" she was drawn to protest. She'd never shown so much cleavage in her life!

Rosalee winked. "You'll want Ty to notice that, dear. It'll keep his mind off the fact that he's getting married, and keep him focused on the honeymoon."

Knowing laughter erupted in appreciation of Rosalee's wit.

"Aye." Alma winked. "She'll have the man eatin' out of her hand."

"Ty asked me to marry him, so I could help him make a proper home for his daughter. He's not interested in the way I look!" Mattie protested.

She felt at a loss when there were murmurs of sympathy and Beth gave her shoulders a squeeze.

"That's as may be, but things have a way of changin' just when you think you've got them all figured out, doncha know," Alma said with a wink. "And this dress is a good bet to start things a'changin'."

But she didn't want them to change! Clasping her cold hands together, Mattie felt it impossible to draw in a deep breath. She willed the nervous butterflies rioting in her stomach to go away.

It was all very well for Rosalee, Alma, and the others to talk about how this dress would get Ty's notice. Mattie had listened as her older sister, Ellen, educated Anna and herself about how women had to use their feminine assets to ensnare husbands, or to make an existing husband easier to live with. That was perfectly acceptable. Ellen had told them blithely that the way to any man's heart was through his desire. But while a lady wanted a man to desire her, she certainly didn't reciprocate it.

But Mattie was certain neither Ellen nor anyone in this room had ever shamefully lost control, like she had with Ty. Like a wanton. Because love was never a part of their agreement, Mattie wanted desperately to keep respect as the cornerstone of their relationship.

And his respect for her would surely vanish if she gave in to her wanton nature. Her self-respect was already a casualty of it.

Still the gift of this beautiful dress and their time touched her deeply. Reverently she brushed the soft velvet overskirt. "It's the finest thing I've ever worn. It's so lovely, it makes me feel pretty." She was just certain, if Ty found it half as provocative as she thought he would, it would lead straight to her disgrace. Feeling her eyes mist, Mattie hurried on. "Thank you all for the care and effort that has gone into it! I feel fortunate and grateful to have such friends."

The women beamed their pleasure.

Then she looked down at her old shoes, peeping out from under the pinned hem, firmly reminding herself of who she really was. Plain Mattie in a fancy package.

"I have shoes you can use," Beth said. "I think we wear the same size."

"And what about her hair? Did anyone decide how we shall dress it?" Clara asked the room at large.

"I could part it in the middle and pull loops up on the sides, as I usually wear it." Mattie touched the bun at the back of her head. She'd worn it simply today, in case this fitting was finished in time for her to go on out to the ranch and clean. The women Ty had hired,

wives of some of his men, were a great help. They'd soon have the house spotless.

The room grew quiet. Alma cleared her throat. "Mattie, dear, I think some other style might suit you better."

"I don't understand." She looked around the room.

"It makes you look like Harriet Beecher Stowe, doncha know," Alma clarified. "No disrespect intended to Mrs. Stowe, but the style doesn't do your pretty young face justice."

Yes, she had known the style was unbecoming, Mattie admitted to herself. Just as the ugly black dresses were — not that she could have afforded pretty clothes. She had never been beautiful, like Ellen, but she had been hiding what few feminine charms she had. She hadn't wanted male attention.

Now there was no need. There would be a husband in her bed. She remembered the feel of his heart beating under her cheek, the pressure of his mouth moving over hers. Lord, help her not to disgrace herself, to show what a wanton she was.

Thankfully she hadn't been faced with temptation since the visit to the ranch. Ty had taken two wagons to Austin to get furniture, a start to making the house a home. If all went well, he was to be back before Saturday — in time for the wedding.

She had rejoiced in her freedom after Jonas died. Maybe that had been a sin and having to marry Ty was how she was being punished. Humbled. But if not for providing a good home for her son, she'd *not* be married again. Mr. Lincoln had not abolished slavery and human abuse so long as there were wives.

While she'd been caught up in her own thoughts, a hairstyle was decided on, a way to refurbish a hat donated by Clara, using some scraps of leftover lace and velvet, and gloves decided on. There again was nothing for Mattie to do but go behind the screen and remove the dress and horsehair petticoat beneath. The only things left to do on the dress were for the ladies to take up the waist a bit more and sew the hem.

Deciding it was too late to make the near hour drive out to the ranch, Mattie decided to send Juan back with the buggy and go on to her house.

As she passed through the front hall in search of Juan, Ty's foreman's son, she heard a shriek behind her.

"Watch out, Miz Mattie!"

Looking up, she jumped out of the way, just in time.

Spot, who'd adopted Nathan and followed them home every night, bounded down the stairs like a runaway freight wagon, Nathan and Tassie pounding after him.

"I'll cut him off!" The tomboyish twelve-year-old hiked up her skirt, showing a pair of boy's trousers beneath, then climbed over the railing and dropped down in front of Spot, catching his string collar.

"Tamara Alicia!" Mattie gasped. "A young lady does not wear . . ." Shaking her head, at a loss, Mattie finished weakly, "It's just not done!"

Her eyes glimmering, freckled cheeks bunched up into a grin, Tassie said, "Why not, Miz Mattie? I like wearing breeches."

Mattie cast about for a reason. And came up with no viable ones. What was she to say? A young lady who flouts convention might end up without prospects? Why should she encourage the child to adhere to the same conventions that had made it impossible for her to provide for her son?

If she had flouted convention, gone onstage perhaps, or gone into medicine like her father, she would have been able to hold on to her sweet independence. She wouldn't be forced into this marriage!

"Nothing is wrong with it," Mattie said, revising her long-held beliefs, "as long as your mother says it's all right."

"Oh, she does, Miz Mattie, as long as I wear a skirt over them. It's ever so much bother when I climb into the hay loft to throw down hay, but I'm just glad I have my breeches and don't have to climb up without them."

Walking down Main Street a short time later, Mattie shifted her parasol on her shoulder and tried to find pleasure in the fine afternoon. It was bright and clear, and the sweet smell of spring flowers was in the air. There was little breeze and the day was almost unseasonably warm.

Watching Nathan and the yellow buffalo loping on ahead, she wished that she could feel as carefree.

The wedding was in two days.

Something catching his attention, Nathan stopped, stone still. An unusual occurrence in itself, Mattie thought with a smile. He put a hand on Spot's collar, compelling the dog to be still. Then Mattie heard what had attracted his attention — a train whistle. Nathan was wild about trains.

"Ma!" His eyes were huge. "Train's comin'!"

"You may run on to the station, but stay back and don't get in the way. Spot might get hurt," she added, before he could protest. He had often argued lately that he wasn't a baby.

Nathan looked down at the dog. "Come on, Spot! But don't run! You have to be careful not to get in front of the train!" He led the animal away.

A few blocks past the square, Mattie caught up to the pair. Nathan stood with a look of awe lighting his face as the train approached, the heavy chugging of the engine slowing, steam boiling out of the escape vents.

"Boy, it sure is a long one!" Nathan said. Like a giant panting beast, it crawled to a stop at the open platform, the iron wheels shrieking on the track as the engineer braked.

Nathan waved to Billy Collins as the older boy rushed to the water tower to pull the arm down and refill the tank on the steam engine.

The conductor put down the steps and a half-dozen tired-looking passengers got down. Most, no doubt, just stretching their legs, Mattie thought. There was little in Medicine Springs to compel people to move there. Most looking for new starts or opportunity kept going northwest. Two drummers in plaid suits hefted sample cases and carpetbags and started up the street, to Alma's Boarding House, no doubt.

A woman with a wealth of fiery hair alighted behind them, her blue traveling dress cut to flatter her trim figure and a jaunty blue hat topping her lustrous curls. Once she'd set her dainty foot on the platform, she turned and lifted a young girl down.

Unlike the woman, the child was dressed in a rough gray dress and dingy pinafore, both covered by a short coat with too-short sleeves. Some type of paper was pinned to the child's coat, but Mattie was too far away to distinguish what it might be.

It was the way the child eagerly looked about her as though searching for someone or something that struck Mattie most. The lady talked with the conductor, and he pointed out Matt Simmons, the station manager. The woman and child went over and talked with him.

Growing restless, Mattie touched Nathan's shoulder. "Since the engineer hasn't shut down the boiler, I guess the train will pull out again, soon. You may stay if you like. But don't dawdle too long. Spot will get bored."

Hearing his name, the yellow dog went to Mattie for a scratch, pulling Nathan along with him as he went. He had no doubt who was in charge, Mattie thought as she rubbed the dog behind its ears.

"Ma, he's pointin' at you." Nathan looked from his mother to Mr. Simmons and back.

To Mattie's surprise, the station manager raised his hand and waved to her, then said something to the lady, who waved, too. After nodding to Mr. Simmons and tipping the conductor, the woman caught the little girl's hand and started for the steps.

"Mama, who's that?"

"I feel like we'll soon find out," Mattie said thoughtfully, moving to meet her.

"Pardon me, ma'am. Mrs. Idyll, is it? My name is Shirley Aimes." The woman held out her hand and Mattie took it. "I hesitate to intrude, but Mr. Simmons thought you could help us."

"If I can help, I'm sure I'd be happy to do so." Mattie waited, wondering what this was all about.

The blonde girl moved closer to Nathan. "That sure is a nice dog you have there." She petted Spot. "I always wanted a dog."

Shirley adjusted her hat, then brushed a spot of ash from her coat. "You'll have to pardon my disarray. I've been on the train since Montgomery. Angeline has been riding on the thing since Athens, Georgia. All alone, mind you, with no one to make certain she got to her pa okay. I just couldn't bear the thought! That's why I took it on myself — well, I'm beating the devil around the bush, ain't — *aren't* I." She smiled again. "Mr. Simmons said you'd be able to help us find her pa. Ty Warburton is his name."

Ty's daughter. Mattie had a thousand questions she had wanted to ask Ty about his daughter. And the child's mother. As Angeline looked up at her with wide, uncertain eyes, they all seemed unimportant.

Mattie smiled. "Welcome home! Your father was expecting you next week, but I'm certain he'll be delighted that you've made it!"

"Do you think so, ma'am?" Angeline sighed happily. "I sure hope so."

* * *

"Whoa!" As the wagon came alongside the porch, Ty stopped the tired horses and looped the reins around the brake handle. The second wagon pulled up behind his, dust floating out behind them.

"Good job, Manuel!" Ty raised a gloved hand to the other driver. "Go see Consuela and tell her you're back, then round up some bodies to help with this."

"Sure thing, *Senor Ty*." The man hopped down and headed for the cabin, about a quarter of a mile away, where his family lived.

Ty hopped down from the high seat and stood and stretched his tired back. There'd been changes worked while he was away, he noticed. The grass around the house had been scythed. The porch had been scrubbed within an inch of its life. No mildew or spiderwebs or mud-dauber nests remained. Flakes of paint had come away, too, pointing up the need for a new coat. But that could be addressed later.

Mattie and the women had been hard at work. Though he'd told Mattie he didn't expect her to take on the task, it showed her character when she'd insisted. She had principles. And a streak of fire in her, even if she didn't know quite what to do with it.

This marriage might not be hell on earth after all.

He should have seen to fixing the place up long ago, Ty thought. But he'd never thought of it as a home. He'd been content to work himself to exhaustion, then fall into bed and hope for sleep without dreams.

A flash of blond hair at the corner, a childish giggle, then Spot's bark gave away the fact that he was being watched by Nathan.

He pulled off his thick driving gloves, then beat his hat on his thigh, cleaning off the dust. Ty pretended not to notice Nathan. He loosened the half-hitch knot on the rope binding down the tarpaulin. "I wonder who this brand-new bed is for? And this wardrobe?"

More childish giggles erupted.

Two children? Leaving the rope half-undone, Ty went around the corner. Parting wild honeysuckle and morning glory vines, he found a large hole in the latticework skirting under the porch and squatted down, peering underneath.

"Okay, who's in there?" Ty frowned with mock severity.

Hearing his master's voice, Spot barked and came out of the hole like a shot for a rub behind the ears and a pat. "Hi, fella. Glad to see me, are you? How about the boys you're playing with? Why aren't they in school?"

"Mama said I didn't have to go today, Mr. Ty, so I could play with Angeline." Nathan crawled out of the hole, a cobweb and dust in his blond hair.

“Hold it, Nathan.” Ty brushed the sticky web and dust off.

A pretty girl with long wheat-blond braids followed the boy through. “And I’m not a boy and not going to school yet. Miz Mattie said we’d wait till my papa got back.” She studied him with wide, solemn eyes, blue-gray and thick-lashed. Her childish brows were already dramatic wings.

Ty’s sin raised its head and smiled at him as he stared into his dead brother’s eyes.

Nine

Staring at his child, he wanted to hug her. And he wanted to turn and run like the worst coward possible. To get on a horse and ride wherever the wind blew him, as he'd done after the war. Ride until he couldn't see John's face. Couldn't hear his brother telling him it wasn't his fault.

It damn well was.

All of it was his fault.

But no matter how far he'd gone, it had never been far enough. He never found that place where he was at peace.

Lately he'd started thinking of Mattie, her way of looking into him and easing the hurt had made him think they might build a real home, for his daughter and Nathan.

But he'd been a fool to think it. In his daughter's innocent face, he'd see his guilt every day.

It was no more than he deserved.

"I knew you'd come today." Angeline smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck, hugging him as if he was her every hope.

Ty was still for a moment, not knowing quite what to do. Then, stabbed by guilt, he unwrapped her arms and stood. Stung by the confusion written on her face, he asked, "How did you know I'd be here today?"

Lyla's selfishness had shaped both their lives. This child didn't deserve to continue to suffer for it. But as she stared up at him expectantly, her eyes so like John's, it took almost more courage than he had to look into them.

It was like looking into his past.

"She wished on the long end of the wishbone at dinner," Nathan confided, clearly in awe of such power.

Ty ruffled the boy's hair, then turned back to the little girl. His daughter. The hope shining in her blue-gray eyes was unmistakable. Ty swallowed against the knot in his throat. "I didn't expect you until Monday."

"Mr. Rogers said they needed space at the orphanage, so Mr. Grice said I was coming here earlier than planned. That was okay with me." A dimple appeared in her cheek. "I didn't know how I'd find you, but Miss Shirley said she would help and then we found Miz Mattie."

That explained how she came to be there. "Your name is Angeline."

"Yes. I never knew what my last name was, so I called myself 'Smith,' like the family I used to live with." A shadow crossed her face. "Though Missy said I was just borrowing their name because I was a bastard and didn't have a name of my own."

"Warburton." He rammed his hands into his pockets and looked at the crystalline sky, then gazed at the road snaking up the hillside. "Missy Smith was wrong. Your mother and I were married. Your name is Angeline Warburton. And this is your home, now."

He dragged his gaze back to his child. How much had she suffered because of his selfishness? How often had other children teased her and called her names?

She turned to look at the house consideringly, then back at him, hope lighting her face. "This is really my home? Miz Mattie said it would be, but I didn't think it really could. I mean, it's really such a fine house."

"I told you Mama was right." Nathan looked smug.

"Is this Nathan's home, too?" she asked.

"Yes, this will be Nathan's home, after his mother and I are married tomorrow."

"Mama told me you'll be my sister," Nathan said to Angeline. To Ty, he added, "Angeline's been teaching me to play 'castle.' Spot's the dragon."

"I knew I'd have a brother." Angeline sighed happily, twisting the skirt of her pinafore. "I wished on a falling star on my birthday — I wished for a real family and a brother — those wishes always come true," she confided, her eyes sparkling with wonder.

Spot barked sharply, as if to say he wasn't happy at being left out of the conversation.

"Oh, Spot!" Angeline hugged the dog. "And I wanted a big yellow dog, too, just like you!"

"I think we'd better find your mother, Nathan. I think I smell something interesting coming from the kitchen." Swallowing hard, Ty willed himself to unclench his hands.

He waited as the children rushed on before him, Angeline's wheat-blond braids dancing down her back.

"Is that *all* furniture?" Nathan pointed at the tarpaulin covered stacks.

"Yes," Ty said. "We can't have a home without furniture, can we?"

As Angeline ran up the steps, she kept turning back to look at him, as if afraid he'd disappear. Knowing she needed reassurance, Ty managed a smile, though his gut twisted. "Everything will be all right now," he told her, trying to believe it.

As Nathan ran on into the house, she turned around again and hugged Ty around the waist. Helplessly he looked down at the small blonde head. Wishbones and falling stars — his daughter. He could barely grasp the reality of her. She was filled with faith and hope and belief in all things good. He had lost his faith and hope and belief in anything good a very long time ago. He didn't deserve this beautiful child.

And every time he looked at her, John's eyes would remind him of why he didn't.

He silently promised his daughter that she would have the home she'd wished for and never again want for any material need. She'd never again have to wish on stars. He could give her that.

And it would be enough, he hoped.

"Careful," he said, covering his gun butt with his hand. "You'll scrape yourself on the hammer."

There was a question in her eyes again as she looked up at him. He understood it, but couldn't give her the answer she wanted. Not yet.

"Come on." Ty held the tall door open. "Let's go find Mattie."

"I thought I heard someone talking." Mattie set a baking tray on the table, and smiled as the children's eyes lit up.

"Gingerbread!" Nathan looked up hopefully. "Can I have a piece?"

"Me, too?" Angeline asked uncertainly.

The child was obviously used to being excluded. Mattie's heart pinched. "*Everyone* can have a piece — after their hands are washed." The children hurried to the washstand.

"I haven't had gingerbread since I left my father's farm in Illinois." He had the strangest desire to wrap his arms around Mattie, just as

Angeline had done to him. What was it about this woman that made him think she understood?

"Illinois? Well, you may have gingerbread, too, then." Alert to the opening in the mystery that was Ty Warburton, Mattie wanted to ask him more about why he'd left Illinois. Someone had told her he'd been in the war. Looking at him, she realized now wasn't the time for questions.

There were shadows in his eyes, old ghosts she could only guess at. Looking at Angeline, she guessed the reason why. "You've met your daughter, I see?"

"Yes." Ty glanced at the girl, then looked away.

Mattie wondered at the tension lining his face. Angeline kept looking at him expectantly. Perhaps this meeting would have been better in private. There was bound to be an awkwardness for both.

After Nathan and Angeline were seated with cups of milk and cookies, Mattie held a hot piece wrapped in a napkin out to him. "Here's your gingerbread."

"Thank you, Mattie."

As he took it, their fingers touched and sparkles of pleasure danced through her middle. His gaze snagged hers, as though he'd felt it too. And the dark intensity in his eyes sent heat into her.

Mattie looked away first, telling herself she had to be more on guard. "You and Angeline need time to get to know one another. Nathan and I will go on back to town."

"No." His gaze shot to the little girl. "I mean, that isn't necessary. By the way, I wanted to tell you how nice the house looks. You've worked hard."

"Thank you, but Consuela and the other women did most of the work." Picking up on his reluctance to be alone with the child, Mattie didn't push the issue. But she hoped Angeline wouldn't be disappointed. Ever since she had arrived, she'd done little but talk about and ask questions about him. The child had built him up in her mind to be a knight in shining armor.

Mattie hoped the real man wouldn't disappoint her. She knew he'd never hurt the child on purpose.

"I'll be sure to thank them, too, then." He leaned against the worktable and crossed his boots at the ankles, making her aware of just how long his legs were. "I like your hair like that."

"Thank you." Mattie didn't put much stock in his compliment. But she was glad that she'd taken some trouble braiding her hair into a coronet. She'd also worn her best shirtwaist and a skirt that wasn't quite so old and threadbare. Not that she wanted to impress Ty, but it was nice to think he liked the way she looked.

He looked at the gingerbread, and laid it aside. "When you want something, like material and thread, don't hesitate to charge it to my account at Nevell's store."

Well, obviously she *had* impressed Ty — just not in the way she'd thought. "I have what I need," she said stiffly. Taking a dishcloth, she began wiping the stove.

"When you are my wife, I'll take care of your wants and needs." His voice was a warm purr that slid through her, making her feel far too warm. "I'm sure you'll take care of mine."

His smile was as wicked as the warm shivers he made her feel. Mattie felt her cheeks heat. Why, oh, why couldn't she control these terrible feelings, like a decent woman?

Ty glanced at the table, and she sensed the tension he felt when he looked at Angeline, who slid shy looks at him and shy smiles.

"I hope you brought back more chairs for the table." She took the water pail from beside the enamelware dishpan and turned to the stove, to refill the hot water tank on the side. She'd emptied it when she'd washed up the bowl and utensils she'd used when making the gingerbread.

He took the bucket from her and poured the tank full. "I bought a dining table and chairs that can seat twelve."

"Twelve?" Mattie was stunned.

"And sofas. And beds."

"A bed for me, too? Of my very own?" Angeline asked, popping the last bite of gingerbread into her mouth. Her eyes were aglow. "I always wanted a bed of my very own."

"How about a bed with a tall canopy, do you think that would do?" Ty asked.

"Oh, a canopy!" Angeline clasped her hands. "Just like a fairy princess!"

"Can we see the stuff on the wagons now?" Nathan asked, his eyes rounded with anticipation.

"When you're finished," Ty said.

Popping the entire last quarter of the slice into his mouth, Nathan brushed the crumbs off his fingers onto the table and scooted off the chair. "I'm finished," he mumbled around the mouthful. As he headed through the door, Angeline was right behind him.

"I see Manuel and some of the men coming to help unload," Ty said, looking out of the window. "Let's go, Mattie." He put his hand on her shoulder.

His touch brought instant heat.

"Just a moment." Why did he affect her so? she wondered vainly as she pulled away from him. She picked up her shawl from the back of a chair, where she'd hung it earlier. Draping it around her shoulders, she hurried after the children.

* * *

Three hours later, Mattie stared around her in disbelief. Rose damask sofas with ornate woodwork framing the high backs, faced each other across a low, marble-topped table. A turkey carpet padded the floor, and wing chairs and another small table had transformed the room into a parlor.

Ty had found a store that dealt in used furniture, as well as two cabinetmakers' shops. He'd bought out the entire stock of all three. There was a bed for Nathan and a chest of drawers, Angeline's canopy bed, a wardrobe, and a chest with a tapestry covered seat on the lid. Rugs for the floors.

And a huge four-poster, which Ty and the men were putting up in the next room, which he'd decided should be the master bedroom.

That piece of furniture filled her with trepidation, which was silly. She'd been married before, after all. She knew what it entailed.

But something told her being married to Ty Warburton was going to be vastly different than her marriage to Jonas. Jonas had sought to control her. Ty made her feel completely out of control.

Deciding to face her fears, she entered the bedroom and found the bed assembled, the ropes on the frame stretched taut. There was also an armoire and a highboy chest, and another huge turkey carpet covered the floor. Ty wiped the varnished mahogany with a cloth as Manuel and two other men looked on.

Mattie made mental notes about the amount of linen or cotton muslin needed for sheets and the number of blankets to be bought. Ty

had told her to charge what she needed at Nevell's store. She would just take him up on that.

"Cookie and Consuela have jugs of lemonade on the porch," Mattie told the men, smiling. "Thank you for everything. And Cookie says he has a pig roasting in a pit that will be ready to eat about dark, so he forbids you single men to wander into town just because you have the day off tomorrow."

Ty's wedding tomorrow was considered a holiday, and almost all of the hired hands had come in from the range, except those riding fence lines too far away to get word to.

"It was our pleasure." Manuel nodded. "We only hope you and *Senor* Ty will be very happy."

She smiled, all the while thinking there was little chance of that.

After the men had gone, Ty said, "You've already got that bunch eating out of your hand."

"I was just being polite." She looked at the empty rope frame — far safer than looking into his eyes. "I saw there were mattresses with the other beds. Where will you get a mattress for this one?"

A cotton mattress could be ordered from New Orleans, but it would take a while to get it here. Most people made their own, from feathers or straw. She had a small store of down and feathers washed and cured, but not nearly enough for a mattress this large.

"I thought we could use your mattress for now. Until we can get a new one."

"My mattress?" Mattie took a small step back.

"You do have a bed and mattress?" Ty looked at her curiously.

"Yes, of course. But I thought I would put my bed and other things in the extra bedroom upstairs."

"Where you would sleep all alone?" There was a mocking light in his eyes.

"Why, of course! You can't have thought we'd sleep together." Seeing one sandy-blond brow ride upward, she stammered, "Not *all* the time?" He smiled in a way she was coming to recognize all too well, in a way that sent shivers through her.

"It's not . . . *decent*!" She hissed the last word, shocked at just the thought of lying next to his long hard body night after night. Faced with such temptation, how would she ever hide her wanton nature?

"I take it, you and the Reverend Idyll didn't share the same bed for sleeping?"

"Certainly not," Mattie whispered. All the doors and walk-through windows were open, and laughter and talk from the front porch drifted back. Surely they could be overheard just as easily.

"You did share a bed conjugally. Nathan is here as testimony."

Mattie's face flamed in answer.

"But you didn't like it." It was a statement, not a question.

Mattie felt her cheeks grow hotter, and she turned her back to the infuriating man. How could she bear to be wed to him?

She had endured worse, came the realization.

Without hearing when he drew nearer, she sensed his presence at her back.

"Ah, Mattie." Ty put his hands on her shoulders and slid them down her arms, warming her flesh as he went. He pulled her back against his solid wall of chest.

At first, Mattie held herself rigid, willing herself to hate his touch. But as he continued to gently stroke her arms through the material of her blouse, her will melted. Closing her eyes, she savored the feeling.

"I'll try not to make undue demands on you." His voice, pitched low, shivered through her. "And after we get a proper mattress for this bed, you may sleep in your own, if you think it best for some reason. I suppose it would be for the best if you snore like you're sawing tin cans, or if you eat a lot of cabbage and beans and tend to break wind under the covers —"

Mattie tore out of his embrace and glared at him. "I *never*, I . . . I —"

"Never snore? Or never break —"

"A lady does not discuss bodily functions!" She whirled away.

Of all the insufferable, infuriating men — and I shall be married to that! she told herself as she went up the stairs to check on the children.

But if she was honest with herself, she would admit that she liked Ty Warburton better that way. When he made her boiling mad, it made her strong and she could easily resist him.

When she came back downstairs, she found Consuela and Manuel and a few other men and their wives seated on packing crates or on the high edge of the porch, talking while they rested from their labors. All the furniture had been unloaded and placed in the proper rooms.

Laughing and shrieking, Juan and a few older youngsters played a lively game of chase, dodging around the pink-blooming peach trees, late camellias with their saucer-sized blossoms, and pear trees edged with tiny white flowers.

A buggy Mattie recognized as belonging to the livery was pulled up beside the porch in the shade. Standing beside it, Ty was talking with Shirley Aimes. And from the discreet glances at the pair, then the sympathetic looks turned Mattie's way, it was obvious Ty's hands and their wives wondered what was going on.

Starting down the steps, Mattie decided to find out. As she approached them, Shirley Aimes turned with a bright smile, the cockade of feathers on her hat waving in the slight breeze.

"Hello, Mattie!" As though greeting an old friend, Shirley clasped Mattie's work-reddened hand between her own, gloved in delicate black kid.

"Hello." Mattie tried to sound friendly. It wasn't easy. The red-head wore a smart pepper-red driving dress, with a form-fitting coat and short cape, all trimmed with black braid work. Standing next to the woman, Mattie felt very much like a little brown wren beside a bright cardinal.

Mattie pulled her hand out of the woman's grasp and wrapped her old shawl more tightly about her shoulders. "This is a pleasant surprise. Would you like some lemonade?"

"No, thank you. I ain't — that is, *I'm not* very thirsty. I was just introducing myself to Mr. Warburton, and explaining that I thought it my duty to come out and meet him and make certain poor Angeline was united with him, as I promised her."

"Thank you for accompanying Angeline," Ty said sincerely. "Whatever Grice promised to pay you, I'll match."

"Oh, goodness." Shirley put a gloved hand to her chest, a gesture that, Mattie noticed, drew Ty's gaze to the vee of cleavage in the red-head's jacket. "I don't know anyone named Grice. I just found the poor lost dear on the train, with a letter with your name on it, Mr. Warburton, pinned to her coat. I took it as my Christian duty to see her safely here!"

"No one traveling with her?" Ty turned to Mattie, a question in his eyes. "In his telegram, the lawyer said she'd be here Monday and there'd be someone traveling with her."

As she sensed his sudden anger, Mattie clasped an arm over her middle, where remembered fear wriggled. Though she knew Ty wasn't angry with her — that Ty wasn't Jonas Idyll — old lessons were hard to forget. Jonas's temper had been flash-fire quick, and he'd been prone to taking it out on whatever, or whoever was handy.

With a glance at Shirley, Mattie said, "I know, Ty. I checked at the telegraph office. The lawyer sent a second telegram, saying Angeline would be here yesterday and that there was no one to come with her. Knowing you were out of town, Mr. Freeman simply held on to it."

"You have my gratitude, ma'am," Ty told Shirley earnestly. "What can I pay you for your trouble?"

Looking affronted, Shirley shook her head, a red ringlet bouncing saucily. "I was only glad I was there. I could not believe such callous treatment of a child! I'm certain I couldn't have lived with myself if I hadn't done nothing to help her."

"Still, I'm much obliged. If there's anything at all I can do for you, please don't hesitate."

"Why, how kind!" Shirley laid a black-gloved hand on his sleeve. "I just might need some advice, if you wouldn't be opposed."

"Anything at all." Ty smiled at the redhead.

"If you're certain you wouldn't mind helping me just a little, Mr. Warburton." Shirley opened her parasol, then drew her arm through Ty's. "May we walk?"

As Shirley smiled up at Ty, she batted her lashes so vigorously Mattie was tempted to ask the woman if she had something in her eye.

"Certainly. Mattie, will you excuse us?"

"Certainly." Mattie tried hard to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. Failing miserably, she was thankful when Ty seemed not to notice.

As she started back up the steps, Mattie wondered if some women were born knowing just how to bat their eyelashes and smile, so that a man forgot everything but them. Not that *she* wanted Ty Warburton's hateful attention, but it was sad when a man let himself be led around by the nose!

From the raised brows and the murmurs of the men and their wives, she saw others shared her opinion.

Hearing a trill of feminine laughter behind her, Mattie had a strong urge to turn around and see just how close the woman stood to Ty.

No. She would do no such thing. If he wanted to walk off with the redhead hanging on his arm, far be it from her to spy!

It's not like their impending marriage was based on anything greater than practicality. He needed a mother for his child. She needed a home for Nathan. She had hoped they might eventually develop a mutual respect for each other. Perhaps even friendship. Love was never part of their agreement.

She'd learned long ago that men didn't develop *grand passions* for little brown wrens like herself.

Mattie poured herself a dipper of lemonade out of the crockery jar that had been placed on an empty packing crate. Taking the tin cup with her, she sat down on another packing crate near the women who'd helped her clean.

"Watch out for that one," Consuela whispered to Mattie, gently patting the blanket-wrapped baby sleeping on her shoulder. "She has eyes that dart about too much, like my cousin, Maria." She raised a dark brow. "And Maria, I would not trust to be alone with my Manuel."

Aware of the sympathetic looks, Mattie decided to ignore the pair who'd strolled some distance away. She peeled back the soft blanket on Consuela's shoulder to get a peek at the tiny face underneath. Short black hair stood straight up and tiny eyes were closed tightly. "Is this your oldest daughter's new baby? He's adorable!"

Conversation settled comfortably around children and home life, while the men discussed the ranch and the upcoming spring roundup, where all the new calves were counted and branded.

When Nathan and Angeline came out on the porch a short time later, Spot faithfully tagging at their heels, Mattie rose to meet them. "Would you like some lemonade?"

"Yes, ma'am," Nathan said. Angeline nodded eagerly.

"We need some more cups. Tell you what, go get the cups you had milk in earlier and rinse them. And bring the plate of gingerbread for the other children to have some — I had forgotten all about it. But first — "

"We know," Nathan sighed. "Wash our hands."

Mattie couldn't help but smile as he dashed through the open walk-through window and Angeline sedately walked through the door.

"She is a precious child," Consuela commented. Mattie agreed.

The gingerbread was brought and eaten by the other children. Nathan and Angeline tired themselves out playing hide-and-go-seek in the yard. And Ty continued to talk with Shirley.

Once, Mattie thought he started back with her on his arm, but he stopped halfway to the house and talked another thirty minutes. Gradually everyone drifted off to the bunkhouse after Cookie clanged the triangle dinner bell. Refusing to get upset, Mattie gathered the cups and other dishes and carried them inside. Angeline and Nathan followed her in.

"I can help," Angeline offered, then hid a yawn.

Mattie smiled. "Just sit. You've had a long day."

She dipped hot water from the well on the side of the stove and filled her dishpan. She then shaved slivers of soap into it and began washing the dishes.

"What are Miss Shirley and my papa talking about for so long?"

"I don't know."

"I don't like her much, Mama." Nathan glanced up as though expecting to be reprimanded.

"Who, dear?"

"Miss Shirley." He made a face.

"I don't either," Angeline agreed, making a face to match Nathan's.

"Why ever not?" Drying a bowl, Mattie looked at the children, surprised.

"When she sat down across from me, she read the name on the letter Mr. Grice pinned to my coat, and got a real funny look on her face. After she took the letter out and read it, she asked me a lot of questions about Mr. — Papa, I mean, and got mad when I couldn't answer."

"I'm sorry she made you uncomfortable, Angeline. Some people are very curious by nature."

"*Nosey-posies*, you mean," Angeline said.

"Yes." Mattie was drawn to smile. However, now that she thought about it, once she'd escorted the woman to Alma's, Shirley had asked her a great many questions about Ty and the ranch.

For that matter, after stating her intention of staying with Angeline and seeing her delivered to her father, Shirley had been happy enough to let Mattie take charge of the child, taking the little girl home with her last night, while Shirley had stayed in Alma's best room.

"Why don't you like her, Nathan?" Mattie wiped the crumbs off the table into her hand.

"When she thinks nobody's lookin', she gets this mean look in her eyes." Nathan scrunched up his face, in an imitation that made Mattie hard pressed not to laugh. She couldn't encourage him to mimic people.

"Yes!" Angeline nodded vigorously. "Like she has all this 'mad' just bottled up inside. And she said she got on at Montgomery, but I was looking out of the window, and I saw her get on the train at a place called 'Lake Charles.' I had already been on the train all day and part of the night, 'cause we stopped a long time in New Orleans. She said she'd look after me, but I didn't really need her to." Her lower lip quivered. "Now my papa is talking to her more than he talked to me."

Mattie didn't know what to say. She had noticed a certain skittishness on Ty's part whenever he was near Angeline.

Going to the little girl, Mattie hugged her tightly. "Give him time, honey. I think he might just need time to learn how to be a father."

"Really?" Angeline looked up, the hope in her eyes painful to see.

"Really. He didn't even know about you until a couple of weeks ago. He has to learn. He already cares about you a great deal. After all, he bought all the furniture and things just so he could make a home for you." Mattie felt a bump, and saw Nathan had joined the hug.

"And he's marrying my mama just so you'll have the best mama in town — that's what he told Miz Alma," Nathan said.

Angeline sniffled once, then wiped her eyes. "He bought me that pretty bed."

"That's right, sweet, he did. Just give him time." Mattie hoped she was right. This angel child deserved his love.

Ten

"You look lovely." Alma stepped back and viewed Mattie in the rose satin dress, then made a show of coughing and discreetly wiped her eyes. "Ty Warburton is a lucky man. And you tell him so for me!"

Standing in the church foyer, not knowing quite how she came to be there, Mattie blinked at Alma. Her friend gradually came into focus. "My chickens, Alma. I completely forgot about my chickens. I have to go feed them and gather the eggs."

"Doncha worry, Mattie. I'll send Tassie and the young'uns down to your house to take care of it."

Rosalee twitched the short lace adorning Mattie's hat, adjusting the veil so it came just past her eyes. Clara fussed with the rose velvet draped over the bustle. Standing in the corner of the crowded foyer, Beth sniffed into her handkerchief. "You're so beautiful, Mattie!"

"Aye, she is that." Alma nodded.

"But the old dominecker hen gets out of the chicken yard, you see, and steals her nest away. She was laying in the barn but moved her nest. I need to look for where she's moved it before she starts setting on the eggs and spoils them."

"There, there. Now not another thought about those pesky hens, you hear," Alma said stoutly. She was dressed in her best striped calico and a stylish flat-brimmed hat with an ostrich feather set on her gray-blond curls. "This is your wedding day!"

Mattie closed her eyes as a shaft of pure fear went through her. *That* was what she was trying not to think about.

Beyond the wooden doors, a church full of people waited. Sounds of their shuffling, an occasional cough, the low murmur of voices, gave away their impatience. Nathan would be sitting on the first row

beside his new sister, Angeline. He'd be pulling at his starched collar and fidgeting.

"Nathan's never been away from me at night. He'll be frightened and confused. Angeline, too. I can't leave them in town, Alma. They should come home with me."

"Nathan and Angeline will be just fine at my house tonight. They're waiting with the rest of the town to see how pretty you look. And you do look lovely, dear," Alma assured her.

"You're ready." Clara cast a final glance at the bustle, then looked at Mattie's face. "Why, you're as pale as chalk!" She pinched Mattie's cheeks. "There, now bite your lips, dear."

To Beth, Clara said, "Better get Manuel in here. I'll get out of the way." She eased through the sanctuary doors.

"Here." Beth thrust the bouquet of white dogwood flowers and spikes of fragrant peach blooms into Mattie's hand, and went outside to fetch Manuel, who had been chosen in the absence of male relatives to give Mattie away. Mainly because he owned a proper dress suit.

"I have to go to the *necessary*," Mattie announced and turned for the door to the outside and freedom.

Alma caught her arm. "Now you're just nervous, Mattie Idyll. And why you're so tied up in knots, I'm sure I haven't a clue! Ty Warburton is as fine a figure of a man as the good Lord ever seen fit to make. And it's not like you've never been married before."

"That's *why* I'm tied up in knots." Mattie's voice cracked.

"You'll be fine." Alma kissed her cheek. "I best be getting to the organ to play the march." She eased through the inside doors.

Mattie wanted to cry out for her to come back. With Alma and everyone gone, she found it hard to breathe. It was impossibly hot in the small foyer, but her hands were icy cold. Looking at her bouquet, she wondered why petals were falling. Then realized her hands were trembling. The trembling soon spread through her whole body, especially her knees.

She *did* need to go to the necessary.

The doors behind her opened and Beth slipped in, then Manuel appeared in a short, Spanish-style coat, string tie, and dark, tight breeches. Silver conchos flashed along the outside of the legs, which were split from the knees down, to fit over his boots.

"When Alma plays through the prelude, I'll open the doors." Giving Mattie an encouraging smile, Beth eased by them and went inside.

As the music started, Mattie thought her heart stopped.

Manuel took her hand and kissed it. "*Senor Ty is a lucky man, senora.*"

Looking into Manuel's dark eyes, Mattie thought that there was a reason everyone insisted the man getting married was lucky.

It was because the poor woman was *luckless*.

The prelude played through and started again. Beth opened the doors. Reverend Michaels stood in front of the altar in his vestments, just as he did for every wedding and every funeral.

A handsome man stood a little in front of him and to the side. Oh, it was Ty. How silly of her not to recognize him.

Then Mattie noticed every pew in the small church was full, and everyone had turned to see the bride, and she thought she might never get a deep breath again.

"Shall we go in, *senora*?" Manuel wrapped her cold fingers around his forearm.

"If I faint, just drag me along," Mattie said. She drew in as deep a breath as the absence of air would allow, and they started down the aisle.

People, colors, sounds melded together in a dizzy swirl. She had one clear image of Nathan, seated on the first pew beside Angeline, kicking his foot and looking as though he would cry.

She understood just how he felt.

Angeline smiled shyly at her. Mattie tried to smile back.

As they reached the end of the aisle, Ty took her hand, though he was obliged to peel it away from Manuel's arm.

Resplendent in a long, blue coat with wide lapels, an embroidered waistcoat, and wide black cravat, she wanted to tell him he looked beautiful. She thought he might have whispered something about how nice *she* looked when he'd taken her hand, but wasn't certain. However, since she seemed to have lost the power of speech to tell him anything, she decided not to try to compliment him and focused her whole attention on his pearl stickpin.

Far safer than looking into his eyes. Piercing blue, with a desperate light in them as his gaze snagged hers. The scared look in them asked what the hell they were doing.

Mattie wondered what the devil *he* had to be worried about — *he* was a man!

Another thought took root — if Ty was afraid, she should be terrified!

“Mattie, don’t faint. Don’t you *dare* faint,” he whispered as he put a ring on her finger. Had they come to that part of it already?

Then he said more loudly, “With this ring, I thee wed.”

She was aware the minister said something, then looked at her expectantly. Oh, Lord, she was supposed to answer and she hadn’t heard the question. Mattie mumbled something, hoping it sounded close.

Evidently she mumbled well enough. The minister’s next words rang like a death knell: “I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Mattie found herself in Ty’s embrace and closed her eyes, steeling herself for the touch of his mouth. She’d been thinking about the effect he had on her quite a bit, and had decided that’s all she needed to do. Steel herself. Let no emotion wriggle through her barriers.

He touched her cheek with his lips.

Mattie gasped. “You didn’t kiss my mouth!”

His grin was a ghost of its old wicked self. “I’ll kiss you properly, later.” Then he added soberly, “Mrs. Warburton.”

Before she could retort, Alma played fanfare chords on the pump organ, and everyone cheered and clapped. Things started to whirl again. People crowded around, giving them congratulations. Faces swam as Mattie smiled and nodded until she somehow found herself outside.

He was right beside her, his arm locked through hers, guiding her toward the big oak.

In Medicine Springs, it was traditional to celebrate weddings and other events with Mexican-style outdoor fiestas. Colorful paper lanterns and other decorations had been hung in the outstretched branches of the tree, and there was a plank table with refreshments and cake set up on sawhorses near the trunk.

“*Throw the bouquet!*” someone shouted. Several voices joined in, telling Mattie to throw it. She turned her back to the crowd and flung it over her shoulder. There were gasps, then disappointed murmurs. Turning back to see who caught it, she saw it dangling from a low overhead limb.

Old Amos, the fiddler, struck the first notes of a Strauss waltz, and Ty turned Mattie to face him. Taking one of her hands in his and plac-

ing her other one on his shoulder, he said, "Everyone is waiting for us to start the dancing, Mrs. Warburton."

Mattie looked up into his eyes as he guided her, whirling with the music — too late remembering her resolution *not* to look into those blue traps. She was pulled helplessly into their depths.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"How very blue your eyes are when the whites are red."

Ty threw back his head and laughed. Mattie smiled, liking the sound, and the way his laughter vibrated through his deep chest. She realized it was the first time she'd heard it.

"They're red because I didn't sleep last night. Mattie, you aren't the only one who was nervous about getting married."

"That's encouraging," she said dryly. "It might have been better if *one* of us had been sure."

Her gaze was snagged by the clean-shaven line of his square jaw and his lean, tanned cheek. She could smell his shaving soap, and his male warmth invited her closer.

Then she realized how close she was as he whirled her to the music — her breasts flattened against his embroidered waistcoat. She missed a step.

"Are you all right?" Pulling back a little as she recovered her feet, Ty studied her, concern drawing a line between his sandy brows.

Mattie flashed him a sardonic look. "I just broke a solemn vow I made to myself to *never* marry again. Now, not only am I married, but to a man I hardly know." She looked away. "No, I'm not at my best."

Ty's face closed. "Let's get some lemonade."

Making their way through the other dancers, he led her to a quiet spot, and Mattie waited as he went for refreshments. "Thank you," she said, as he gave her a glass and took a sip of the tart liquid.

After she studied the contents of the glass for a second, she asked, "Was your first marriage so horrible, then? I mean, is that why you have such a distaste of the state?"

"So you want to know something about how I landed us both in this mess." His expression became even more reserved. "All right. Lyla married me to save her reputation. She came to me and told me our affair had become known and she was ruined." He paused. "I married her because I was in love."

"When the battalion made our headquarters and field hospital at the Beaumont Plantation, I thought Lyla was the most beautiful woman in creation. The family was in bad straits.

"She used me to get food and special treatment." His smile was grim. "At twenty-three, I was more than willing to be used.

"I know, looking back on it, from the way she acted for the time we were together just before the marriage, she was pregnant. Her father, a very honorable old gentleman, must have forced her into it — a Yankee husband was better than a bastard child."

Ty met Mattie's gaze, then looked away. But not before she saw the pain of the woman's betrayal in his eyes. And deeper shadows, she could only guess at.

"Lyla decided a dead Yankee husband would be better still."

His voice lacked emotion, somehow making the statement all the more terrible to hear, his pain more apparent than if he'd shouted.

Mattie laid her hand on his sleeve. "Oh, Ty, I don't know what to say." She'd been so focused on how unhappy her marriage was for so long, it came as a revelation that someone else might have suffered because he placed his faith in the wrong person.

He looked at her hand, and covered it with his own. "Mattie, do you realize this is the first time you've touched me voluntarily?"

"I . . ." She looked at their hands and tried to pull hers away, but he held it firm.

"No. Don't, please." He saw caring in her eyes. She was a good woman at heart. She'd hidden a lot behind those layers of brittle propriety she'd worn, and he'd never guessed the woman beneath was so intriguing.

And so desirable.

His gaze traveled up her rose silk sleeve and moved to her lace-covered breasts, not large but nicely rounded, and with an interesting cleft between. The lacy inset showed him just enough to make him wonder about her nipples. Were they light or dark, large or small? His groin kicked, and he found himself thinking of how much he would enjoy finding out.

"You think Lyla tried to have you killed?" she guessed. That would account for his bitterness.

He didn't want to talk about Lyla. But it was better to get this out in the open, so she'd understand. And it would help him remember why it was wiser not to need anyone too much.

"I know she did. She disappeared for two days, and I was worried sick. Then I received a note from her, telling me to meet her at an old gristmill a few miles away — she had something she *had* to show me in private. John, my brother, rode with me. He was concerned I might happen on some Confederates on the way.

"What she had to show me was the Rebs waiting in the mill with her. John and I were taken to Andersonville Prison."

"Oh, Ty!" Mattie's heart went out to him. After the war, she'd seen pictures of pitiful wretches freed from that hellhole. Skeletally thin. No wonder he'd told her he'd seen hunger in the war. He'd been intimately acquainted with it. "Thank God, you survived."

Had he? He wondered.

Amos started the lively strains of an Irish folk tune, and the dance area cleared but for the O'Sheas and the Doyles, who demonstrated clog dancing as the crowd laughed and clapped. The children had congregated to one side and Tassie was trying to show Angeline and Ann the dance steps.

Looking at Ty, Mattie found him focused on his daughter, a longing look on his face, too.

"Does your daughter look like your wife?" Was that why he was having difficulty accepting her? It would explain much, she thought.

"Lyla was a black-haired beauty with eyes like a moonless night."

Mattie didn't know why she should find his words so distressing. But they made her feel even more like a little brown wren.

He loved the child, Ty realized. He just couldn't bear to look at her. As if feeling his gaze, Angeline turned with a shy smile. It was to his credit, Ty thought, that he managed to smile back.

"Angeline looks like John. She has the same curve to her eyebrows and the same blue-gray eyes. Every time I see her, I'm reminded that John didn't make it out of Andersonville alive."

He drained his glass. "Excuse me. I'm going to find out if any of my hands brought something stronger than lemonade."

Mattie watched him make his way through the crowd, wishing she could have thought of something to say that would have helped, would have eased his pain. She turned back to Angeline. She thought the child's eyes looked like Ty's, just a slightly different shade of blue. And Ty's brows were curved like that, too.

She was his child. He needed to accept that without his brother's ghost coming between them.

"Excuse me, Miz Mattie." David Champagne, one of Ty's hands, approached her. "May I have this dance?"

When it ended, another hand took his place. Eventually every man present danced at least part of a dance with her. Back home in Baltimore, sitting in the corner with the matrons, she'd often looked on as prettier girls were taken on the floor dance after dance and wondered how it would feel.

It felt wonderful.

"Mattie, you are a beautiful bride." As Slim Wilkerson whirled her in a waltz, there was admiration in his eyes.

Mattie was shocked. What would he find to admire about someone as plain as she? Rosalee was a beautiful woman!

After the dance finished, she thanked him and looked around. Spotting Nathan, she went and scooped him up. He giggled as she swung him high in the air.

"Young man, are you avoiding me? You haven't spoken to me since we left Alma's this morning."

"Miz Alma said me and Angeline could have peppermint sticks if we acted like proper little gentlemen and ladies, and didn't get under your feet. And we didn't, did we?"

"No, you didn't!" she said.

Angeline came running up. The child was adorable in a pink dress that Tassie had outgrown, her braids wound atop her head. "Miz Mattie, you look too beautiful for words!" Big eyes assessed her with admiration, then she looked around. "Where's my papa?"

A good question, that, she thought, looking around for him.

She spotted Ty talking to Shirley Aimes, the latter dressed as brightly as a canary in a suit of light yellow. She felt a strange stab in the region of her heart.

"Oh," Angeline said, following her gaze. "Miz Mattie, when I grow up, do you think I'll be as pretty as you?"

"I think you're already far prettier," Mattie told the child. Setting Nathan on his feet, she squatted down and put an arm around both children. "Now that I'm married to your father, I'd like it if you call me 'Mama.'" She turned to Nathan. "If that's all right with you."

Nathan nodded.

"Mama." Angeline tried the word out, then hugged Mattie. "Oh, yes! I'd like that very much. Mama."

Nathan said, "Will I call Mr. Ty 'Papa?'."

"We could go ask him." Mattie rose and looked around.

Something heavy settled in her chest when she saw Ty, half hidden by the giant bole of the oak, still deep in conversation with Shirley Aimes. It lifted a little when Mike Champagne interrupted them and led Shirley off to dance.

"That old Miz Shirley." Angeline fisted her small hands.

"Yes," Mattie agreed.

Ty looked at where she was standing with the children, then turned away.

Well, it wasn't as if this was a love match, Mattie reminded herself. Looking back at the children, she forced a bright smile. "Would you two like to dance with me?"

After instructing them to hold hands, and each to hold her hand, Mattie spun them in a modified waltz. When the music ended, she received giggling hugs from both.

This wasn't going to be so bad, she thought. Even if Ty did find more to interest him in Shirley Aimes, Mattie had the love of these two beautiful children.

Eleven

They were almost to the ranch. As the buggy wheels followed the deep ruts, Mattie crossed her arms over her breasts, chilled. The air was cooling. Beside her, Ty handled the reins in silence, the wide brim of his short crowned hat shadowing his face.

When they had left amid winks and jokes that had made Mattie's face flame bloodred, the celebration showed little sign of winding down. Ty had stopped just out of town and removed the tin cans some of the local boys had tied to the axle. Then he got silently into the buggy and drove on.

"We should have brought the children." She studied the western horizon, still glowing as though on fire, though the sun had dropped behind the hills. A line of high clouds were slate blue against an iridescent sky.

"They'll be fine at Alma's." He glanced at her and frowned, then gave her the reins.

"What are you doing?" Mattie asked as he shrugged out of his coat.

"You're cold."

He draped the coat around her shoulders. It was wonderfully warm and held Ty's unique scent. Wearing it she felt surrounded by him.

And it would be all too easy to like the feeling, she realized, scooting away from him on the buggy seat. She mustn't let herself.

"Thank you."

Holding the reins in one hand, he draped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close, sharing his body heat. Since there seemed nothing for it, she relaxed against his warmth, until she smelled the faint scent of whiskey on his breath and straightened.

"You've been drinking!"

"Indeed, I have, Mrs. Warburton."

She glared at him, and he chuckled. "I was wondering when the old stiff-drawered Mattie would show up."

Instead of snapping back at him, as he'd expected her to, her gray eyes grew moist and she turned away, looking straight at the road.

"Oh, damn, I didn't intend to hurt your feelings. In fact, I don't know who you are, but the old Mattie would have snapped my head off for a remark like that." He looked at her questioningly.

"The old Mattie wasn't married to you, Ty." She had learned the hard way to keep a cautious tongue when a man held the power of a wedding ring over her.

"You mean, you take your vows to love, honor, and obey that seriously?" He raised his brows.

She was drawn to smile. "I didn't hear that part, so they might not apply."

He threw back his head and laughed.

She thought again how she liked the sound. So easy and rich. He should laugh often, but she realized he seldom did. Another mystery about the man. Though he'd given her clues to some of them today. How he must have suffered, betrayed by the woman he loved, watching his brother die because of it. She couldn't imagine his pain.

Pulling back on the reins, he stopped the horse as they came out of the woods on the hill where they had paused the first day she came to the ranch. Again, she was awed by the beauty of the scene spread out before her. The last fingers of the sun speared the sky. The high feathery clouds had turned slate blue. A thick bank of clouds building on the western horizon were shot with gold. The ranch looked immense and wonderful.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Warburton."

Ty slapped the reins against the horse's rump, and they started the rough descent. Mattie held on to the back of the seat as the spoke wheels dipped into deep ruts and holes washed into the clay track, rocking the buggy.

An odd snap rang out, like a rifle shot echoing on the silent hillside. Just a stick breaking — some part of Ty recognized the sound. Reflexively his hand went for the gun at his thigh. But found nothing. Because it hadn't seemed proper, he'd hadn't worn the gun to his wedding.

Someone was watching them. The back of his neck prickled as instincts that had once kept him alive in war and his years drifting

took over. Scanning the still woodland, he wondered who. And why? Could be someone traveling through, who had reason to avoid being seen. An outlaw. Maybe even an honest man who was being careful of strangers he met on the trail.

The trouble was, the only place this road went was to the Rocking J Bar.

"What is it?" she asked, gripping his arm.

"What's what?" He slapped the horse's rump with the reins, speeding the animal along.

"All of the birds have stopped singing."

"You continue to surprise me, Mattie. Most women wouldn't have noticed that." He slapped the reins again and looked about, maintaining a casual air. "Just some animal in the woods, I'm guessing." He knew his voice carried on the still air. Better that whoever it was didn't see them as a threat.

"Like a bear or wildcat?" Unconsciously she moved closer, hugging his arm more tightly.

Ty's groin tightened as he felt the firm flesh of her breasts pressing against the back of his arm and side. "Maybe even a wolf or puma," he said consideringly.

She pressed closer still.

Nothing had leapt out at them, so she'd relaxed somewhat by the time they stopped in front of the house. Then she remembered why they were here.

Her wedding night.

Long before she'd had time to come to grips with that fact, he was lifting her down. Then escorting her up the steps.

"We're home, Mattie."

Ty opened both the tall doors, then swung her up into his arms with a flourish. Mattie felt the world spin as he carried her over the threshold. Setting her on her feet, he kissed her swiftly, not giving her time to stiffen up or protest.

"I'll take care of the buggy," he said. "Cookie said he'd leave us something for supper. I'm hungry." Wanting very much to kiss her again, he tried not to stare at her mouth.

He took his time tending the horse, giving the horse oats and rubbing it down. He also took time to clean the tack and put it away in the tack room.

As he gave Spot a scratch behind the ears, the thought hit him: *He was married.*

The fact kept popping into his head at the oddest times. He felt caught up in a dream, as though this couldn't be real.

Mattie waited in the house. He knew she was nervous, though he couldn't imagine why. She should be getting used to him by now, coming to grips with the fact that they'd live together and share a bed.

At the thought of sharing a bed, his hand trembled as he undid the halter buckle. It had been quite a while since he'd visited the girls in Red Creek, and he was looking forward to taking Mattie to bed tonight. But he'd give her a little time to herself right now.

Taking a soft cloth, he worked saddle soap into the leather to clean it of sweat. His thoughts were on Mattie. What was it? Why did Mattie hold herself back? When he kissed her, did she feel she was being unfaithful to Jonas Idyll? Had she loved the man so much? Briefly jealous, Ty wondered what it would feel like to have someone love him that way.

Had he been wrong to marry Mattie when her heart belonged to a dead man?

No. This marriage was the right thing for both of them. She needed the security he could provide, to see that she and her son had what they needed. And he needed her to show him how to be a good parent. Angeline deserved the best home he could give her.

And tonight he'd love Mattie so well, she'd bury Jonas Idyll's memory and start living in the present.

When Ty went back to the house, he found Mattie in the small kitchen, wariness in her large gray eyes as she looked up from setting the table for two.

"I'll have supper on in a minute. I thought since there's just us, we could eat here in the kitchen. The dining room is so big and cold."

Ty hung up his hat on the peg by the door. "That's fine, Mattie."

She was still in her wedding dress, but she'd taken off her hat and soft curls cascaded from the knot atop her head, framing her face. Ty was struck again by how well the dress suited her, emphasizing her small waist and well-rounded bosom. That lacy inset was provocative.

Looking at her cleavage beneath, his blood warmed. As if sensing his interest, she nervously moved about, putting the food on the table.

"What do we have?" he asked.

"Fried chicken. Mashed potatoes. Sweet peas and biscuits. Sweet potato pie. I made coffee to drink."

"Sounds good."

Throughout supper, he talked about the spring roundup that would start soon. He talked about his plans for the ranch. He talked about everything but what he wanted to talk about — how beautiful she was and how much he wanted time to pass so he could take her to bed.

Mattie ate little and from her distracted expression, he imagined she heard little of what he said. Blinking as though coming out of some inner musings as he finished his last bite of pie, she asked, "More coffee?"

"No." He caught her hand as she would have reached for the pot. Smoothing his thumb over the back, he studied it. "My hands are as rough as a washerwoman's," Mattie said, blushing.

"They're capable hands, Mattie." He kissed the back, but was all too aware of the panic in her wide gray eyes. He wondered again what she was afraid of. She snatched her hand away as soon as he released it.

"I need to do the dishes."

"Leave them."

"But I — "

"Leave the dishes." Ty rose and began putting the leftover food away. The biscuits he wrapped in a cloth for the next day. The leftovers that wouldn't keep without spoiling, like the mashed potatoes, went into the slop bucket for Cookie's pigs. Mattie flitted around him, careful to keep her distance, as she scraped the plates and stacked them, then wiped the crumbs off the table.

"More coffee?" she said hopefully.

"No."

Her face grew shadowed and she twisted her fingers in the apron she'd put on over her dress.

Ty moved to her and cupped her face, and then smoothed his thumb over her high cheekbone and down the line of her jaw. Her warm skin smelled faintly of lavender flowers and her lips looked soft and moist. God, he wanted her. Heat throbbed in his groin as he imagined seeing her body. Touching her. But he didn't want to rush her. Why was a woman who'd been married before acting this way?

"Don't be afraid of me, Mattie."

"I'm not," she said breathlessly.

"You're afraid of something. Do you feel that you're betraying Jonas's memory? You must have loved him very much to swear you'd never marry again."

Her eyes grew wide. "I don't feel I'm betraying Jonas's memory! And I certainly didn't love him!"

The last was said with so much vehemence, Ty was taken aback. He'd mistaken her feelings for her dead husband.

"What are you afraid of, then?" He stroked the line of her jaw and was rewarded as her eyes darkened.

"I'm not afraid." Her gaze dropped to the center of his chest. He knew she was lying.

Ty wanted to assure her he'd be gentle and considerate. But he decided the best way would be just to show her. "Go on in the bedroom."

Wide eyes flew to his face, then she hurried away.

Damn, you'd think she was going to a hanging — her own. Ignoring the urging of his body to follow her, Ty took the wash pan from the stand by the door and put warm water from the stove-well into it.

After knocking, he carried it into the bedroom. Mattie stood at the window, whirling around as he entered. She hadn't bothered with a candle. In the fading light he saw she'd taken the pins from her hair and was braiding it. He set the pan on the marble-topped dresser. "I thought you might like to freshen up."

"That was . . . considerate of you." Her gaze touched his, then went to the floor.

"Do you need any help? I mean, with the hooks on your dress?"

"No."

"I don't mind helping."

"That's all right. I shall manage."

"Mattie?" Ty paused, his hand on the doorknob.

"Yes?" she squeaked.

"Leave your hair loose." His gaze went to the voluminous cotton nightgown she'd laid out on the quilt-covered bed. He'd brought her mattress, bedding, and other things early that morning and had taken time to make up the bed before he'd gone to town for the wedding. "There's no need to bother with nightclothes," he added, grinning. "I'll try to keep you warm."

His dark silk voice wrapped around her intimately, his promises making heat tickle inside her, long after he'd closed the door. She'd

already decided he was temptation incarnate. How would she ever lie with this man without betraying her shameful, wanton nature?

She remembered Jonas's rage when he'd found out the kind of woman he was married to. She couldn't bear the shame of seeing Ty disgusted as he discovered her sinfulness.

She left her hair down, as he requested, but undressed hurriedly, then grabbed the nightgown and put it on. After buttoning the long sleeves and high collar, she slipped into bed.

When Ty returned, she waited for him with the quilt drawn up to her chin.

He divested himself of coat and vest, folding each neatly and laying it across the dresser.

The Lord is my shepherd. . . . Mattie tried hard to focus on higher, unworldly things. But there was an early moon rising, spilling light through the window. As Ty slowly removed his shirt studs and cuff links, he watched her, his eyes gleaming in the half-light, and she found it hard to stay focused on the spiritual.

Then his shirt joined the other things stacked on the chest of drawers and moonlight washed over his heavily muscled chest, delineating the ridges.

Mattie knew she should look away, but she couldn't take her eyes off his male body. It was a revelation, and she wanted to see every fascinating inch. Jonas had always come to her bed in the dark, in a night-shirt. This was the first time in her twenty-eight years, she'd seen a man without his shirt.

She didn't just want to see, she wanted to touch. As she imagined sliding her fingers over those ridges of muscle, warmth arced through her and pooled low in her belly. The weight of the quilt felt heavy on her suddenly sensitive breasts.

No! She closed her eyes.

"Relax, Mattie." Ty unbuttoned his breeches then sat on the bed to remove his boots.

When she felt his weight sink the mattress, her eyes flew open. "I don't want to relax." Mattie held the quilt firmly drawn up to her chin.

"Don't you?" Ty set his boot on the floor under the edge of the bed, then looked at her. Slowly he reached out and touched her cheek.

Mattie found herself holding her breath as his fingertip slid across her skin, leaving a wondrous tingling in its wake.

A smile curled his lips. "Maybe you're right." He stood and stripped off his breeches and underclothes in one fluid movement. "Maybe tense is better," he teased wickedly.

After stepping out of the clothes, he paused in the moonlight.

Completely, gloriously naked.

Lord, he was lean. Lean hips and lean but muscular thighs. Jutting from a dark thatch, fully erect, his male member captured her attention.

Ty wanted to give her time to look at him, to get used to the idea that he was going to join her in bed. However, she wasn't relaxing and, damn, he was ready. But he didn't want to rush her. "You're staring at me like you've never seen a man before." Her eyes snapped closed. "I'm sorry. I haven't. Jonas always came to my bed wearing a nightshirt and . . ."

"I don't give a damn what Jonas did," Ty ground out, and she flinched as though he'd frightened her.

"Mattie," he said more softly. "Mattie, I don't want any ghosts between us. Not in here."

How could there not be? she wanted to shout at him. When she was feeling so many of the same shameful sensations that had been her undoing on her first wedding night? She had fallen in love with Jonas's fire and energy and defied her father to marry the young evangelist. When he'd joined her in bed, she had tingled with anticipation. When he had touched her, spreading her thighs, she had writhed and moaned. No one had ever told her that such feelings existed.

No one had ever told her they were wrong, that only whores and Jezebels got wet in anticipation of having a man between their legs.

Jonas slapped her, then he'd taken her roughly. And he'd told her the truth about herself, that she was a whore at heart.

The remembered shame was enough to dampen the sensations she'd was feeling. She closed her eyes again, willing them to be gone forever. "Ty, just do it."

"Mattie, I don't want to rush you. I —"

"Please!"

She heard him sigh. The mattress sank again as Ty sat down on the edge of the bed. He cupped her cheek tenderly, and there was a danger of those mad tingles starting.

Keeping her eyes tightly shut, Mattie recited, "*The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. . . .*"

"What are you doing?"

"Just get it over with! *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. Yea, though —* "

She felt the mattress spring up as his weight left it and opened her eyes. "Ty?"

An unhappy look drawing his brows together, he grabbed his boots and picked up his pants. His male member, which just a short time before had jutted proudly, was lying against his thigh.

"Ty, what's wrong? I'm ready to do my duty."

"That's what's wrong."

He closed the door behind him.

Twelve

Mattie awoke with a start, alert to the strangeness surrounding her. Through the window, a pearly predawn grayness lightened in the east. Not enough to give enough light to show her where she was.

It took her a second to remember. She was in Ty's house — their house, now. In bed.

Alone.

She'd spent a great deal of time dreading and anticipating last night, but never had what she'd imagined come close to matching what had happened. Never in her wild imaginings had Ty just left her alone.

Curling her hands into the quilt, she felt an emptiness, a dissatisfaction with what had happened. Why on earth she should feel that way, she had no idea.

Because she'd wanted to get it over with, she told herself. And to prove to herself she could control her shameful sinful nature.

Now she'd have to face it all again. Remembering how his body had looked, naked in the moonlight, Mattie closed her eyes. How would she ever find the strength to resist the things he made her feel again?

She had to! Ty would be disgusted with her, like Jonas had, if she didn't. She couldn't bear to think of losing the respect he'd shown her.

Hearing a noise in the kitchen, Mattie threw the covers off and stood. Ranchers started their days early. Ty would think her a slugabed.

The chill air wrapped around her and the floor was cold beneath her bare feet. Finding the wrapper she'd hung on the bedpost the night before, she quickly shrugged into it and made her way to the kitchen. As she swung open the door, heat emanating from the woodstove greeted her.

As did the sight of Ty, naked to the waist, his back to her as he used the washstand.

Movements of the ropy muscles on his shoulders held her mesmerized as he used a cloth and soap to wash. No wonder he smelled better than most any man she'd ever known, if this was his regular morning routine.

Her gaze traveled over the width of his shoulders, watching the play of muscle and sinew beneath the skin. Then drifted lower on his back, below his shoulder blades, where long, thin stripes were ridged.

As Mattie realized what she was looking at, she couldn't look away.

Ty watched Mattie in the mirror as she came to him and touched the scars on his back, her fingers infinitely gentle.

"Who did this?"

"Just a souvenir from Confederate prison. Forget it."

Ty couldn't help imagining her fingers moving gently on other parts of his body. He shrugged the thought away. If he went on like this, he'd have a damn hard time sitting a saddle all day. He slipped his shirt over his head.

Pain and compassion filled her eyes as they met his in the mirror. "Oh, Ty, I'm so sorry."

"It was a long time ago. Forget about it. I have."

He turned, buttoning the square-bibbed front. Mattie looked warm and sleep tousled. Touchable. Below her old, faded wrapped were slender bare feet.

"The floor is cold. Where are your slippers?"

"I don't have any."

"Buy some."

"Really, Ty, it's all right. I don't want to take —"

"Mattie, I'll provide for my wife's needs." His tone brooked no argument.

Mattie bit back the words that sprang to her tongue. Turning on her bare heel, she went to the other room to see what was in the larder. Casting a glance at the neatly made cot as she entered, she decided that was where he'd slept.

And that was fine with her!

"I'll have your breakfast in a few minutes." She picked up a sack of grits and looked around for an egg basket.

"Don't bother. Cookie will have something."

With a muttered remark, Mattie set the sack down and went back into the other room. Taking a coffee cup from the open shelf, she noticed there was a used cup on the worktable. "More coffee?"

"No. I'll have some of Cookie's with breakfast." Ty nodded toward the pot. "Help yourself to what's left." He took his gun belt from one of the pegs by the door and buckled it on, then checked the cylinder of the gun and slid it into the holster. "If you want to go to church, Juan will drive you. I've hired him to make himself available whenever you need to go someplace."

"I could just learn to drive myself." She set the cup down.

Ty shrugged. "That's up to you."

Mattie realized he was pushing her away. Why? Because of last night? Had she betrayed her lustful nature? At just the thought of it, she felt humiliated. But she had to know for certain. Then she'd know where she stood.

After putting his battered hat on his head, Ty took down his lamb-skin coat and slipped it on.

"Why did you leave last night?" Mattie blushed at her boldness and pulled her wrapper more tightly about her. The cold floor felt like ice beneath her bare feet.

Looking back at her, Ty paused, the door half open.

"Never mind." Mattie's courage failed her and she looked at the stove. "I know I'm not pretty enough. But it *was* dark."

He closed the door, shutting off the cool draft that was moving through the room, and moved to where she stood. "Not pretty? Who told you that?" he asked, as a little piece of the mystery that was Mattie slipped into place.

"Every boy who didn't ask me to dance at the assemblies in Baltimore. They used to approach me to ask if I'd talk for them to my sister Ellen. My father told me I was plain, and no gentleman would ever offer me marriage, so I should apply myself to learning to be content keeping his house ordered, leaving him free to concentrate on his medical practice."

"You *were* married," Ty pointed out. "Your father was wrong." He'd seen men selfishly deny their daughters a future before.

Mattie laughed. There was no humor in the sound. "I should have said, no 'acceptable' gentleman. Father didn't approve of Jonas. When I married him, my father disowned me."

Unwilling to look into his eyes, she studied Ty's well-worn boots, still feeling the shame and hurt of her father's rejection. When Jonas had shown his true colors, erupting in anger and violence at the least provocation, she'd written her father about her plight. He'd returned her letter, unopened. She'd had nowhere to turn.

But she'd learned an indelible lesson. Life-changing decisions could never be called back, no matter big the mistake or how high the cost.

Had marrying Ty been a mistake? She thought not. Hoped not. If he took care of Nathan, she would get what she bargained for.

She was still looking at his boots when Ty slipped a finger beneath her chin and raised her face. His startling blue eyes searched hers, probing, as if trying to ferret out her secrets.

"I left because I didn't want to bed a martyr," he said grimly, and started for the door.

"But I was prepared to do my duty!"

Pausing on the steps, he said, "That's what I mean." He closed the door firmly.

Suddenly it opened again, and Ty strode back inside, a determined look on his face. "I forgot to tell you — I'm not used to having another person to consider when making plans — I'm riding out to check the summer pastures and start planning for spring roundup. I should be back for supper. If I'm not, don't worry. I'll be back when our children come home from school tomorrow. I want them to feel that they have a mother and a father when they arrive."

"I'd like that," Mattie said sincerely.

"One more thing." He stuffed his work gloves into his jacket pocket.

"What?" As she looked up, the gleam in his eyes should have warned her.

Splaying his fingers into her hair, Ty cupped her head, tilting her mouth up to meet his. He savored the softness of her lips and the small surprised gasp that stole some of his breath into her lungs. He felt exultant. She'd been too surprised to stiffen up, and she was responding. The pulse beneath her jaw, beating under his thumb, betrayed that.

Mattie opened her mouth to draw in more air, and he immediately took advantage of it, thrusting his tongue into the soft recesses of her mouth, stroking and tasting. It was quite the most glorious thing she'd ever felt. She quickly was lost in a sea of sensation and longing. From the way she reacted, hesitant, shocked, but unwillingly drawn to

excitement, Ty would have bet money no one had ever kissed her like that before. Certainly not Jonas Idyll, Ty thought with satisfaction. The sanctimonious preacher probably hadn't even kissed her when he'd taken her to bed, just told her to lie back and do her duty.

And she had loved the selfish bastard. Why? Was he more noble than Ty had observed? Someone who demanded admiration?

When he broke off his kiss, she was clinging weakly to him, as if passion had stolen her strength. Her gray eyes were heavy lidded and dark, her lips red from his kisses, like crushed strawberries.

Need, pure and powerful, slammed into his groin.

"You liked that, didn't you?" No one would think anything of it if he didn't ride out today. Quite the opposite, in fact. He could take her back to bed, now that he'd found the real Mattie.

"You caught me off guard!" Mattie drew back from him, accusation in her eyes.

He pulled off his hat and tossed it on the table. "What does that have to do with it?" He reached for her again, but she jumped back.

"You caught me off guard!" Mattie repeated. Tears welled in her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

"What the hell?" He reached for her again, but she turned and ran out of the room, her bare feet making soft patters on the wooden floor. "Mattie?"

The bedroom door slammed.

Ty jammed his hat back onto his head and headed out the back door, wondering what the hell had ever made him think marrying Mattie would be a simple solution to his problem?

* * *

What was her problem? It was as if she was afraid to show him any feelings.

Looping his reins over the saddle horn, Ty bit the middle finger of his glove and pulled it off, then took out his tobacco pouch, rolling a cigarette as his big paint horse ambled along. The animal trail he was following as he inspected the barbed-wire fence was wide and well marked.

This area was too wooded to be good grazing, but in dry weather, the creek was an added water source. He'd decided to spend the extra money to fence all the Rocking J Bar in, even sections like this he got

little use out of. Experience in a range war in Kansas had taught him that if a man wanted to keep what was his, he did well to mark it.

Ty paused his horse on a small rise and lit his cigarette, the new gold band on his left hand catching his eye. No matter that Mattie wore one like it, he didn't feel she was his.

Well, that was all right. Theirs was supposed to be a simple business deal. Just as if he'd hired her as a housekeeper.

Shaking his head, Ty remembered that was precisely what Mattie had wanted, a marriage in name only. *He* was the one who'd wanted the comfort of having her in his bed. He'd reasoned they were both young enough to need sexual release, and he hadn't wanted to make their family the object of gossip by continuing to visit the girls above the saloon in Red Creek.

Well, he'd been half right. One of them needed sexual release. So far, Mattie hadn't been in his bed.

Just remembering the sweetness of her mouth, the way she'd trembled as he'd kissed her, and how her firm breasts had pressed against his chest was enough to make him shift uncomfortably in the saddle.

But why had he insisted on marrying Mattie, instead of just hiring her as a housekeeper? For so long he'd avoided any risk of involvement. What had changed his mind?

Because, deep down, he'd been tired of living for no one, not even himself. Getting up before dawn and working the sun down, then dropping into a bedroll on the hard ground. Exhaustion had kept the ghosts at bay. But he didn't really have a life.

There'd been no one really to share anything with.

Angeline's arrival had seemed to signal the need for change. And that's what he'd wanted from Mattie. First, a mother for his little girl. Next, companionship, as they worked together to form a family. He was tired of coming home to an empty house. And in his gut he'd known a cold business relationship wasn't best for his daughter's sake, or for Mattie's son's, for that matter.

To her credit, Mattie had tried to tell him she didn't want him. Maybe it had been arrogance on his part to make him think she would change her mind.

But she hadn't. He realized now that he wouldn't insist. They could still be friends. Still respect each other. It wouldn't be the best situation, but he'd survived worse.

They would both be there for the children and she would help him learn to be a father to Angeline. To put aside this guilt he had whenever he looked at his daughter.

He didn't want the child to suffer anymore for his past. She'd done quite enough of that already.

After pinching the fire out with his gloved fingers, Ty flipped the cigarette away and picked up the reins. He turned his horse along the top of a ridge running beside the swift-running creek. Water tumbled over itself, fallen logs, and stones as it rushed along between the high banks. As Ty neared his favorite place on the ranch, the roaring of the water grew steadily until he came out of the hickory and oak woodlands into an opening overlooking a falls.

Water, brilliantly clear but for reddish leaf stains, rushed over the top, falling ten feet into a bowl-shaped pool at the base. A fine mist hung in the air, and the sunshine formed a rainbow.

Ty smiled as he remembered the conversation he'd had with his daughter the day before. She was truly a special child. Angeline set great store by rainbows. And lucky pennies and wishbones. She had wished for a real home and a family. Now he promised her silently he would make her wishes come true. No matter what demons he had to fight.

Ty rode down the steep bluff, fighting through a tangle of fragrant red honeysuckle vines that had overgrown the path, and crossed the creek at the ford below the falls. Going back to the fence line, he continued riding along it, looking for breaks.

It was sometime later one of his hands caught up to him.

"Ho, Ty!" The call came before the man appeared through the bushes.

Ty had been watching the path behind him since his horse had looked back, pricked up its ears and snorted, letting him know long before his own ears picked up any sound that they had company coming.

"We've got trouble." Tin-can Willie reined in beside him, lines deepening in his weathered face.

* * *

Every muscle tight and protesting, Ty swung off the paint's back. It was late and the ranch was quiet. Exuberant, Spot ran up to him

demanding attention, and he gave the dog a scratch behind the ears. "Miss me, did you, fella?"

Sitting, the big yellow dog put its head against Ty's thigh, whining affirmation, and Ty gave it another scratch.

Then moving stiffly, he gathered the reins. "Come on, Paint." He patted his horse's neck. "Let's get you rubbed down."

"I'll do that, Ty," Pecos Jim offered, slipping his suspenders onto his shoulders as he came out of the barn. Jim's stride was uneven as he swung a stiff leg. "I reckon that new bride o' yorn is a'waitin'." The man winked as he took Ty's reins.

Ty doubted it, but glanced at the beckoning lamplight spilling out the back windows of the house. He'd put in a lot of miles since Willie had told him about the slaughtered cattle in the north pasture. What he'd found there had made no sense. A half-dozen head of cows and calves had been shot for no reason, just left where they fell. Renegade Comanches would have eaten them. Rustlers would have driven them off and sold them.

Ty had tracked the lone rider responsible over half the county, until a spring shower washed away the tracks and he'd given up. Now, after three days in the saddle, the lamplight seemed to promise hot coffee. A hot meal. Mattie's smile.

With a nod, Ty said, "Much obliged, Jim."

After scraping the mud from his boots, Ty went through the kitchen door. Warmth rushed to greet him. After the showers, the weather had turned cool. As he hung his gun belt, coat, and hat on the pegs by the door, Mattie came into the kitchen.

"You're back!"

"I'm sorry I wasn't home when I said I'd be."

"Cookie passed your message along." She shook her head. "I can't believe someone would just shoot cattle for no reason. Who could have done such a thing?" She twisted her fingers together, clearly distressed by the thought of such cruelty. She wore a calico dress that was so old it was colorless — nevertheless, it hugged her narrow waist and showed off the swell of her breasts.

Forcing his eyes away from the sight, Ty shrugged.

"Never found him."

She met his gaze, then glanced away. "Here. Sit down. I'll get you some hot food."

Ty sat down and soon coffee, stew, and corn bread appeared before him. "I know it's late, but this is hot." He looked at her questioningly. "You were waiting for me?" It warmed him to think so.

Mattie seemed uncomfortable. "I kept it on the stove, in case you came back tonight."

"Thank you, Mattie."

There it was again, that look in his eyes she'd come to dread. The look that warmed her and sent mad butterflies frolicking in her stomach. No matter how much she told herself to control her feelings, that look went right through her defenses.

As he ate, she busied herself taking the pots off the stove. Two small blonde heads appeared at the door to the hall, the higher of them had golden braids.

"Told you it was Papa!" Angeline told Nathan triumphantly.

"I told *you* it was!" he said over his shoulder, his nightshirt flapping about his small legs as he ran to the old table. Angeline was right behind him and both crawled up onto the only vacant chair.

"Miz Mattie — I mean *Mama* — made me these bed shoes, see?" Angeline held out a small foot and pointed to the gray crocheted slipper.

"Made me some, too!" Nathan lifted his foot up on the table to show off his new bed shoes. "They keep my feet real warm."

"And she's making me a new dress and pinafore." Angeline smiled happily.

She looked at Ty with John's eyes. Suddenly the savory stew was like ashes in his mouth.

Ty found Mattie watching him curiously. "That's why I married her. She knows about making pinafores."

"And gingerbread! And giving hugs!" Angeline enthused.

Nathan yawned.

"And when it's past little people's bedtimes," Mattie said. "Now hug Ty and then off to bed."

Angeline slipped off the chair, giving Nathan an accusing look. "You *had* to yawn."

"I couldn't help it."

A child stopped on either side of Ty's chair and arms encircled his neck.

"Good night, Papa. I'm glad you're home."

"Good night, Mr. Ty."

"Off to bed with you two, now." He tousled Nathan's hair. Angeline looked at him expectantly, and he tugged a braid.

After she'd gone, he saw John in his mind's eye, begging him to end his suffering. Maybe if he'd given in to John's plea, he wouldn't carry such guilt now.

As his gut knotted, Ty pushed the rest of the stew away. "I'll take this out to Spot in the morning."

"Okay, Ty." Mattie frowned at the half-eaten serving. "Was something wrong with it?"

"No. I guess I'm just too tired to be hungry." Ty had noticed two large metal cans on the stove when he came in. Mattie touched a finger to the water in the nearest.

"This is hot, if you want a bath," she said.

"Are you trying to tell me something?" Ty managed a grin he didn't feel. He'd been in the saddle three days and smelled of horse and leather and sweat.

"Absolutely." She pushed away the new screen he'd also noticed in the corner and revealed a copper hip bath. "I brought the rest of our things from the house this morning. Juan helped. The children have already had a bath, but the water's not very dirty, if you'd like one."

"Woman, even if I hadn't had Angeline coming to live with me, I'd have married you for that bathtub!" He grinned and found a dry cloth on the worktable. Using it as a hot pad, he picked up the cans and emptied them into the high-back copper tub.

The steaming water swirled invitingly, smelling faintly of lavender. Sniffing the bar of damp soap he found on the shelf by the wall, he pinpointed the source and his brows rose in silent question.

"I boiled a lavender bag in the pot when I made soap," Mattie explained. "I have a plain bar for the dishes. I'll get you that." She turned.

"But I want this." Ty grinned at her surprised look.

"Well, if you want it." She twined her fingers and looked uneasy, like she'd just realized she was alone with him and he was going to strip off his clothes. "I'll get you a bathsheet and cloth."

"Here," she said, returning a few minutes later.

"Put the bathsheet on top of the Dutch oven, so it'll get warm." Ty sat and worked his boot off with the toe of the other.

"What a good idea." Mattie did as he asked. "Well, if you don't need anything else — "

"I do." The other boot came off. Still in his socks, Ty stood and moved closer.

She was completely aware of his size, of his sheer masculinity. "What?" said Mattie, eying him as a mouse might eye a cat.

Taking hold of her shoulders, he turned her around and began to unfasten the row of small hooks holding her dress together. The calico was old and threadbare.

"I told you that I want you to charge what you need. That includes material for your dresses. Or you can have them made. Shirley Aimes has decided to open a dress shop in Medicine Springs."

The feel of Ty's fingers on her clothes made Mattie's hands cold and her heart pound. But at the mention of the redhead, she managed to rally. "How do you know?"

Had he been out on the range chasing a cow killer the last three days? Or with Shirley Aimes?

As soon as the thought formed, she was ashamed of it. Shirley annoyed her, but she had a kind heart. Hadn't she gone out of her way to bring Angeline to them? And Mattie knew she should trust her husband.

Ty finished with the hooks, and caught the strings of her corset and began loosening the laces. "Why do you bother with this contraption around the house?"

Mattie couldn't have answered. She was all too aware of Ty Warburton's fingers brushing her naked skin as he caught the strings and worked slack into them.

"There."

Suddenly his hands were no longer touching her. The anticipation of whatever would come next made her shiver as she stood waiting, her dress falling off her shoulders, her corset sliding down. Not daring to turn and face him.

"I'll wait in here."

Mattie whirled around. Ty had moved away, and he stood in the door to the small room off the kitchen, his boots in his hand.

"I . . . I don't understand."

"You brought that water in and heated it for yourself, didn't you? Or am I to believe you put that lavender soap out for me?" He arched a sandy brow.

"Yes, I did plan to use it. But you can go ahead. I don't — "

"You have your bath, and I'll use the water afterward to wash off this trail dust. I'm so dirty, it'll be mud when I'm through." He disappeared into the room, closing the door.

Mattie stared at the door a second, then hurriedly finished taking off her clothes and slipped into the tub. Letting herself sink up to her neck, Mattie closed her eyes and enjoyed the warm water. It really was decent of Ty to insist she have first use. After a few moments of luxuriating, she took the soap and finished her bath, wanting to get out while the water was still warm. And before he got curious and returned.

As if he'd been listening for her, the instant she stood up to step out of the high tub, Ty opened the door.

She dropped back into the water with a squeak and watched him warily over the rim.

"Sorry. It occurred to me you couldn't reach the bath sheet from there," he said, casually picking it up and letting it unfold. "Stand up."

Mattie eyed the sheet in his hands. She should have known Ty Warburton wouldn't act the gentleman — the role was too far out of character!

"Just hand it to me."

Sighing gustily, Ty shook his head. "I'm not going to look." He made a show of turning his head and closing his eyes. The lantern hanging behind him seemed to put a halo around his sandy curls.

Mattie wasn't fooled by the effect. He was no angel!

Seeing no help for it, Mattie stood and stepped out. Instantly he wrapped her in the warm sheet. Clutching the edges at her throat, she stiffened, waiting for him to take liberties, all too aware she was naked beneath the material and Ty was just inches away. He could do with her what he would.

"There." He briskly rubbed her shoulders with it, then down the length of her back.

Everywhere he touched, her skin was instantly sensitized. Closing her eyes as he rubbed it over her ribs, Mattie waited for more intimate contact. Her breasts tingled in anticipation.

"There you go."

Realizing his hands had left her body, she turned and frowned at him.

Ty was unbuttoning the placket of his shirt. "Did you need something else, Mattie?"

She stood riveted as he pulled his shirt over his head, and his well-muscled chest was exposed. She noticed the light furring of blond hair and had the strangest urge to run her fingers over it.

"If not, you could fetch me a bathsheet before you go." Ty pushed his breeches and underclothes down his lean hips and stepped out of them, seemingly unconscious that he was fully, gloriously naked.

Whereas every fiber in Mattie's body was alive to the fact. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch the light furring on his chest, to slide across his flat abdomen.

"A bathsheet," Mattie squeaked, and hurried from the room. Ty smiled as he stepped into the tub.

Thirteen

Mattie plumped the corn-shuck mattress, trying to fit it better on the ropes zigzagged across the bed frame. She moved it nearer to this edge, but made a crack on the other side. Of course, it was fine for one person, but when Ty joined her . . .

A flash of warmth suffused her at the thought. Blowing out the lamp on the bedside table, she quickly crawled under the covers. The house was quiet, save for the noise Ty was making in the kitchen, subdued splashes as he bathed.

Listening to him, it was impossible not to picture what he was doing — rubbing the soap over his chest, lathering his shoulders and back. Then he would stand as he lathered those firm buttocks she'd only glimpsed. And his ridged abdomen. And on down. His thighs and, and . . .

Drawing a shaky breath, she divided the blankets and threw part aside. She had to get control of these lustful feelings. Put her mind firmly on higher things, as she'd done on their wedding night. Or Ty would discover the truth.

She was no lady.

Hearing larger splashes and then silence, she imagined Ty getting out of the hip bath, water dripping down his muscular legs as he set first one foot on the floor and then the other.

He would pick up the bathsheet she'd forced herself to bring after he'd gotten into the tub and be drying his body. His chest. His arms. His loins. Next, he'd come into the bedroom, his warm skin clean and smelling of soap. . . .

Forcing her mind to Bible verses, she listened for the door to open, trembling. Though whether it was fear or anticipation that caused it, she wasn't certain.

She was aware when the faint light under her door went out. Ty had blown out the lamp in the kitchen. Mattie clutched the covers, waiting.

After a few minutes, something like disappointment washed through her as she realized he wasn't coming to her bed.

* * *

"Lay in the supplies we'll need, Cookie. We'll be starting out the first of next week. I'm sending this wheel to the blacksmith. You and Jim can ride together."

"Good enough, boss. I better make a list."

As the old cook headed to the bunkhouse worrying a plug of tobacco in his jaw, Ty took off his hat and wiped his forehead on his sleeve. Turning his face to the cooling breeze for a moment, he noticed Mattie, up behind the house. She'd been giving her rub board hell all morning, and looked now like she was putting the sheets through a final "cooling off" rinse, after fishing them out of the boiling washpot.

Shaking off the need to watch her, Ty braced his legs wide apart and lifted up on the side of the wagon as Pecos Jim shoved wooden blocks under the axle to support it.

Releasing the wagon, Ty nodded. The wheel was held off the ground. "That's got it, Jim."

As the older man climbed out from under the wagon bed, Ty picked up a wrench and began undoing the iron nut holding the hub on the axle. Two spokes were cracked and the iron rim was pitted with rust. He wanted to make sure all the wagons and other equipment were in good shape before moving them into the south pasture for spring roundup, where new calves would be marked and branded, and steers would be made out of the bulls. Also, the cows would be counted to see what could be sold this year. Afterward the herd would be driven out to summer more distant pastures in the hills, to fatten up for the fall drive to sell.

"I'll get this 'ere wheel to the smithy, Ty. Shouldn't take 'im long." Jim rolled the wheel to the small wagon they usually used to get supplies from town, and Ty helped him lift it onto the wooden bed.

"If he can get to it right away, just wait for it."

The man nodded and went to the bunkhouse.

Ty started for the barn, but his attention was captured again by Mattie, pinning a blindingly white sheet onto the clothesline he'd strung up for her behind the house. Without thinking about it, he started toward her.

"Mornin', Mattie." He took off his hat and pushed back his hair. "Nice-lookin' sheets." In truth, the wet front of her blouse interested him more than the bed linen. As she raised her arms, the fabric was stretched taut around her rounded breasts and her pebbled nipples were visible against the wet front. He felt interest kick in his groin.

"Thank you," she said around a wooden pin in her mouth as she tried to stab another pin onto the line, to secure a flapping sheet.

"Here." Biting the finger of his glove, he pulled it off, then he caught the sheet and held it as she secured the pins. Taking the basket of wet sheets from her, he helped her hang all of the clothes, holding each piece while she pinned it firmly.

"Thank you, again. You made it a great deal easier."

He'd been spending a great deal of time away from the house over the last several days, coming in late and bypassing her bed to sleep on the cot in the storeroom. He'd sensed she had needed him to keep his distance as she settled in and got used to the idea of being married again.

And to be truthful with himself, Ty admitted he'd been avoiding the house for other reasons. Whenever Angeline looked at him, her eyes so like John's, it was so painful for him he had to fight the urge to turn away. He certainly didn't want the child to think he was rejecting her, so he'd decided spending just a little time with her every day was the wisest course.

The torture of being near Mattie and not being able to take her to bed was something that kept him out of the house, too. Not knowing exactly what the problem was, he was trying to give her time to sort through it.

Someone who thought sex was so horrible she had to recite Bible verses during the job needed to do a lot of sorting.

Even now, she was still skittish as a new foal around him. Not quite meeting his eyes, she tugged a stray curl off her forehead and moved to the tub of rinse water. As she grasped the rope handles and tried to move it, Ty shook his head.

Straining, she lifted it slightly. Then the handles slipped out of her hands and the tub dropped back to the bench, splashing her face and chest.

Mattie gasped, looking down at her wet blouse. "Damnation!"

Seeing Ty smile, she clamped her lips together.

"You know, Mattie, you just have to ask and I'll help." He lifted the tub easily. "Where did you want it? On the garden?"

"Yes, please." Her tone clipped, she dried her face with her apron, and dabbed at her blouse.

Ty carried the tub to the vegetable garden Mattie and Cookie had put in, and poured the water in the shallow furrow cut at the end of the rows. It ran between the rows of tiny plants just poking out of the ground.

"How about the wash water?" he asked, carrying the tub back to the wash area and leaning it against the back wall of the house.

"No. The lye soap might kill the young plants. I'll dip some of it out and use it for mopping later. And the water where I boiled the clothes is still too hot to handle," she said, nodding at the black washtub.

Looking back at him, she said, "May I ask you something?" Mattie eyed him uncertainly. The gleam in his eyes was wicked. His gaze dipped to her wet blouse then went back to her face.

"Anything you want, darlin'." Ty smiled.

Stiffening her back, she refused to let him fluster her. "I just wondered why you spent that afternoon plowing my garden at the old place. You knew quite well, with what you'd come to ask me, that I'd never get to plant it."

Grinning wryly, he tipped his hat back with a finger. "You needed a husband. But I wanted to plow the garden for you, in case you weren't wise enough to realize it and turned down my proposal."

"That was nice of you." Bending, she picked a sticky plant off her skirt.

"Is there anything else you need?" he asked.

Ignoring Ty's suggestive tone, Mattie held up the little plant. "This is a bedstraw, isn't it? If I could find a big patch of this, I could dry and use it to stuff a new mattress."

Ty took the square-stemmed plant between his fingers, his gaze going beyond it to the neckline of Mattie's blouse. His eyes had that look in them again, the one that made Mattie feel hot and tingly all over.

Deciding it was best to go about her chores, she picked up her laundry basket. As she headed toward the back door, her gaze was caught by a movement high up on the hill, where the road overlooked the ranch.

"Mattie?"

She turned and found Ty had followed her. "Yes?"

"If you pack a picnic lunch, I'll take you and show you where we can get that bedstraw."

The movement on the hill was forgotten. "I can be ready in a half hour!"

His mouth curled up into a half-smile and there was a warm glint in his light blue eyes. "See you in a half hour."

* * *

"This is so wooded, I don't see how bedstraw could flourish," Mattie commented, holding on to the saddle horn as if it were the difference between life and death.

When Ty had led two horses up to the door, she'd told him flatly that she didn't know how to ride. Undaunted, he'd told her she simply had to hold on and he'd lead the animal. Nothing could happen.

Well, so far nothing bad had happened, although riding astride was a new experience. Having her thighs wrapped around a moving horse and the saddle flush beneath her filled her with odd sensations.

"I wanted to show you a special place," he said, glancing back. Ty sat his mount effortlessly, looking as if he was a part of the horse. "For the picnic."

A special place, Mattie mused as a roaring caught her attention. It grew steadily louder until they came out into a clearing overlooking a tumbling waterfall.

"What do you think?" Ty tugged on her horse's reins and her mount came abreast of his.

"This is the most beautiful spot I've ever seen," she breathed, trying to take it all in: the falling water tumbling over the edge of the falls, the roar, the clean, damp smell tinged with honeysuckle.

Ty dismounted and helped her down, then lifted down the picnic basket and a blanket. "If you'd like to start spreading this out, I'll lead the horses down the hill and stake them out to graze."

Tingles shot up her arm as their fingers touched. Well, tingles were okay, today. They weren't in the privacy of the house. Surely she was safe from his advances here in the open.

Mattie spread out the blanket and put the basket on the corner. When he joined her again, she was sitting on the blanket, staring at the water.

Turning to him with a smile, she said, "Thank you for bringing me here. It's so peaceful."

He smiled and hung his gun belt and hat on a nearby tree before easing down beside her.

"See the rainbow?" she said, pointing at the mist against a patch of blue sky visible through the trees.

Leaning over, very near Mattie, Ty looked up to see. "Very beautiful," he murmured.

Her breath caught in her throat as he turned and his lips were suddenly inches from her own. Before she could think or react, he gave her a swift kiss.

"What did you bring?"

She blinked uncomprehendingly.

"To eat." He grinned.

"Oh!" Jumping to grab the basket, Mattie pulled napkin-wrapped parcels out. "Fried chicken. Rolls. Sweet potatoes. Tea."

They ate in companionable silence. Afterward Mattie put the leftovers away in the basket and carried it to a shady spot under a tree.

"Mattie, look at this."

Ty lay on his back on the blanket, staring raptly at the sky.

"What?" she asked, kneeling on the blanket and looking upward where he pointed.

"This."

As he caught her beneath her breasts, Mattie gasped in surprise. As Ty lifted her over him, her surprise turned to wonder. He was so strong, but held her so gently. There was longing in his eyes as he gazed at her face, her lips, then the vee where her breasts were spilled against her blouse.

Heat followed and she struggled to pull away. "Let me go."

"No."

"Ty!"

"Shh. Be still."

Gazing at him with uncertain gray eyes, Mattie obeyed.

"That's better. See, I'm just holding you. I'm not hurting you."

"I never thought you would hurt me." Her thick lashes dropped, shielding the expression in her eyes.

"No. I don't believe you are afraid of me. I've been thinking about it a lot, trying to understand what you *are* afraid of."

"Nothing!"

"That's good." Letting his hands slide upward until they were touching her breasts, he then lowered her to his chest. "It feels nice, having you atop me like this. Do you like it?"

Frowning, she wet her lips. "What do you want from me?"

"Honesty." Cupping her breast, Ty squeezed gently and watched her eyes grow dark. Her fingers, splayed on his chest, curled into his shirt.

Encouraged, his thumb found her nipple, already drawn up into a tight bud. As he toyed with it, a little gasp of pleasure was drawn from her lips. Hot blood surged in his groin in response, and he tweaked the tight bud again. She closed her eyes, a look of sheer pleasure crossing her features.

Then her eyes flew open, fear clearly written in them. Stiffening her arms, she pushed at his chest, but he held her, refusing to let her scramble away.

"Don't you dare start reciting Bible verses."

Mattie gave him an incredulous look, as if that had been exactly what was in her mind.

"Relax, Mattie." When she continued to hold herself stiff, he demanded, "*Relax!*"

Mattie stopped fighting. Once again, they were chest to chest.

"Now talk to me," Ty coaxed. "We both agree you're not afraid of me. But you're sure as hell afraid of something. What in hell is wrong?"

Miserable, Mattie shook her head. If only he'd get on with it, she could bear it. But she didn't want this, didn't want Ty to find out her shame, as Jonas had.

"Mattie, look at me." He raised her chin with his fingers, then coaxed her nearer and placed a butterfly kiss on her lips. "Every time I touch you and you look like you're starting to feel the same need that is burning me, you get that scared look in your eyes." He placed another butterfly kiss on her lips. "Now we've decided that you aren't afraid of me. It seems like you're afraid of what you feel."

Trembling, she closed her eyes tightly. "I'm sorry! I know I shouldn't . . . A lady never does — It's wrong!"

"Son of a bitch."

Feeling tears spill onto her cheeks, Mattie hid her face against Ty's hard chest. "I know I shouldn't feel these shameful things! But when you touch — "

"Who told you that?" Ty interrupted. "Never mind." He could imagine. Holding her, Ty stroked her back as she told him her terrible secret — that when he kissed her, she desired him.

When the storm of self-recrimination had passed, he asked casually, "Mattie, who invented sex?"

Blinking, she looked up at him, her thick lashes wet and spiked. It took a great deal of restraint on his part not to pull her to him and kiss her.

He answered his own question. "If God made everything, He must have designed the way you feel when I touch you. Why would He give you those feelings if He didn't want you to enjoy them?"

"Because — " She blinked. "You don't think I'm wicked?"

Ty grinned. "I guess wicked was too much to hope for." He grew serious, his blue eyes glinting like warm ice. "But when I make love to you, Mattie, I damn sure hope that you enjoy it. And the more you enjoy it, the more I do."

"Really?" This was a totally new concept to her. "Even if I get wet and — "

He turned over suddenly and Mattie found herself beneath him. "Oh, yes! Especially if you get wet," he murmured, and kissed her so deeply, she felt he touched her soul.

Fourteen

The mockingbird singing in the buckeye tree, the rainbow of mist, the pounding waterfall, the faint scent of wild honeysuckle — Mattie was acutely aware of everything around her. And it all faded as Ty continued to look down at her, his need darkening his blue eyes.

His gaze moved to her mouth and she braced herself.

“Relax,” he whispered, his words caressing her lips with puffs of air. “I don’t want you to shut out anything. I want you to experience everything.”

He brushed her lips with his thumb and Mattie arched as sensation sizzled through her.

Ty smiled. “Yes, like that.”

Then he bent his head and claimed her mouth, his hand finding her breast. Mattie arched again, pressing closer, and put her hand over his hand. Feeling his hand caressing her breast was the most dynamic thing she’d ever experienced.

But he was content to caress her through the fabric for only a few moments. Ty pulled her blouse out of her skirt band and unbuttoned it, then loosened the string on her camisole, exposing her breasts to the sun and his gaze.

“Ah, Mattie. You’re beautiful.”

She wanted to deny it, but calloused fingers caressed her skin, and she lost the ability to object to anything. It was the most wondrous thing she’d ever felt. Mattie decided nothing could surpass it. How could she bear the pleasure of anything more?

Ty took her breast into his hot mouth, and she realized she’d been wrong. Kneading one breast, he suckled on the other, and Mattie helplessly arched and shuddered as sensation after sensation ripped

through her, vibrant and shining, while a heavy heat began to fill her innermost parts.

Ty gave her nipple a final flick of his tongue and lifted his head. "You like that?"

"Yes!"

"It's the way it's meant to be between a man and a woman. Why would it be wrong to experience it?" he whispered seductively.

Mattie shook her head, helpless to answer. She wet her lips, waiting. Was there more? Surely there was more! She closed her eyes.

Catching her hand, Ty sat back on his heels and urged her into a sitting position. He kissed her fingers, then pressed her hand to his chest.

She stared at it, fascinated by the hard thump of his heart beneath it.

"Touch me, Mattie."

Her fingers trembling, her gaze flew to his face. The desire in his eyes warmed her and urged her to do as he asked. Still she hesitated, uncertain. She'd never dared to imagine touching a man in the way a man touched a woman.

"Ah, Mattie." Ty pulled her close, and the tips of her nipples touched his leather vest. She slid against him, and the sensations were exquisite. He feathered soft kisses along her cheek. "You like it when I touch you, Mattie. Give me the same pleasure."

Hesitantly, still not quite believing it was all right to behave this way, she slid her fingers over his hard muscled chest, so different than her own, feeling the ridges and contours beneath his shirt. She found his male nipple and grasped it between her thumb and forefinger, as he'd done to hers.

Ty's face became rigid, his eyes blue coals. "Yes! Yes, like that!"

Mattie felt empowered. Still on her knees before him, a surge of heat pierced her at the strength of his reaction. Mattie attacked the buttons on his shirt. "I want to see you."

Grinning, he slipped off his vest and helped her undo the square placket of his shirtfront, then slipped it over his head.

Sitting on her heels, Mattie satisfied her need to look. Burnished by the sun, his skin gleamed over the hard ridges of muscle.

"You are beautiful, too." She reached for him, but instead of allowing her to feel his skin beneath her fingers again, he caught her hands and stood, urging her to her feet, also.

"Now I want to see you, too. All of you."

"Ty!" The idea was shocking. She already felt supremely wicked with her breasts exposed to the sky and all of nature. And Ty's hungry eyes. To be all-over, naked here in broad daylight had to be plain decadent!

But the idea was exciting, too.

Planting swift kisses along her jawline, Ty placed both her hands on his chest and reached for the pins in her hair.

"You'll lose them!"

"I'll buy you more." But he put them in his breeches pocket. Once her hair was tumbling in a dark chocolate cloud around her shoulders, he started loosening the strings of her corset. "Help me get this contraption off you, Mattie."

"Let me," she breathed, reaching behind her.

"The skirt, too," Ty commanded, grasping the waist of his pants and starting to undo the buttons. "And what's underneath."

A few moments later, with the sweet breeze caressing her skin, Mattie stepped out of her drawers, dropping them on the untidy pile of her clothing. She'd never felt so wanton. Or excited. Or alive.

The breeze shifted, blowing the mist from the waterfall over them and prickling goose bumps along her skin. Her heart beat in her ears like the roar of the tumbling water as Ty finished stripping off his clothes.

"I want to feel you against me." Ty pulled her along his length, aware of her little gasp as his hard arousal came into contact with her soft stomach. He trembled, needing her so much it hurt.

Mattie was lost in wonder. She'd never been completely naked with a man before. Her skin was sensitized, tingling everywhere her body touched his. Her nipples pebbled against him. The sight of her white breasts against his tan chest was wildly exciting.

When he cupped her breast in his sun-browned hand, molten fire shot through her. Moaning, she arched into his touch.

"Touch me, Mattie. Give me the pleasure I'm giving you," Ty urged, stroking her breast.

Emboldened by his demand, she let her fingers play over his chest. His hardness fascinated her. She slid her hands between them, exploring his ridged abdomen.

"Ah, Mattie. I like it when you touch me."

She found the thatch of light brown hair at the apex of his thighs and combed her fingers through it, fascinated by the difference in texture to her own silky pubic strands.

Ty stilled as she came close to his erection. "Touch me anywhere you like," he gasped.

She wrapped her fingers around his hot, hard shaft and Ty groaned. He cupped his fingers around hers, showing her how to stroke him. As Mattie watched in fascination, he closed his eyes, in the throes of exquisite sensation.

She had never felt so empowered. So much a woman. Was this why Jonas had slapped her and told her a decent woman lay still while a man pleased himself — because he'd needed to dominate her in every way? Oh, how could she have believed that lie! It hadn't been her feelings that were unnatural, but his!

His face tense, Ty stilled her hand. "Now, you." He slid his hand between her legs, unerringly finding her hot wet center, stroking it.

Mattie clung to his wide shoulders and whimpered. Her legs seemed to spread apart of their own volition.

"Do you want more?" he whispered.

Helpless, Mattie nodded. Ty slipped a finger inside her and thrust as he kissed her, thrusting his tongue into the inside of her mouth in the same rhythm.

Mindless, Mattie groaned, writhing against him, needing something more — but helpless to gain it, not knowing what it could be.

Ty laid her down on the blanket, then came down over her, nudging her thighs apart with his knee. He nipped her breasts, sucked her nipples, then kissed her deeply.

Feeling his hard shaft touching her wet center, Mattie whimpered, "Please, Ty." She wasn't sure what more there was, but whatever it was, he could give it to her.

"Ah, Mattie," Ty breathed into her mouth. "I love your fire. I need it." He entered her in one swift stroke, filling her completely.

He started to move. Slowly, drawing almost all the way out. Then surging into her, filling her soul deep.

"Yes! Oh, yes!" Mattie caught at his shoulders, trying to hold him within her when he drew back, then lifting her hips to meet his thrust. He became her only reality. Murmuring encouragement, she stroked his back, frowning as her fingers came into contact with the ridged scars. Then she moved on, to his tight hard buttocks, pulling him into her again and again.

A coil of heat began to tighten inside her, shimmering through her, building. She didn't know what was happening, but was helplessly carried along. The sparkling possessed her, filled her, erupting, and she was carried outside herself, into the stars.

When she started to spiral down to earth, Ty found his release, spilling his hot seed into her, and she was carried back skyward again.

Later Mattie awoke. Disoriented by the roar of the falls and the leafy woods, it took a moment to remember where she was. And with whom. She'd been sleeping, her head cradled on Ty's shoulder. He'd pulled her voluminous skirt over them both to keep them warm.

Ty was still asleep, a lock of blond hair falling across his face. He looked boyish. Mattie felt a warm surge deep inside as she remembered his naked body, and she smiled. There was nothing boyish about the rest of him. He was gloriously male. Warm echoes of sensation moved through her as she remembered their lovemaking.

She had never known, never imagined what being with a man could be like. Now she understood what her sister, Ellen, had meant once when she'd said the best part of marriage was sleeping with her husband. Mattie had naively thought Ellen meant being close to Dan, who loved and adored his wife.

Now she felt silly not to have known, not to have realized what was possible. She felt angry and cheated over all the years she'd spent not knowing.

Ty had shown her the truth. He was a good man, and honest. How could she ever have thought him wicked?

Snuggling closer, Mattie traced her fingers over Ty's chest. Ty caught her hand and she suddenly found herself on her back, Ty grinning down at her.

"Ready for more, are you?"

Mattie felt herself blush, but his words awakened a new need deep within her. Resisting the urge to wrap her legs around him, Mattie said, "We haven't gathered one sack of bedstraw so far."

"Hmmm." He nuzzled the tender skin under her jaw. "So we haven't. We might have to come looking for it again and again."

"I'll pack the picnics." Mattie grinned, then sighed with pleasure as he moved to her breast, nibbling the incredibly sensitive peak. "Oh! I have to get back and cook supper!"

"Cookie always prepares extra. He'll have enough beans to feed us." Ty moved to the other breast, and Mattie caught his head, winding her fingers into his hair.

"The children will be coming home from school, and will wonder where we are!" Mattie gasped before all reason left her.

When Ty stopped the delicious torture and looked at her askance, she knew she'd won. He couldn't ignore the children. "Spoilsport. Let's get dressed, then." Ty reached for his breeches.

As he finished with his clothes, Mattie had barely struggled into her camisole and petticoat and was trying to tie her corset.

"Let me." In a few minutes, she was again clothed in her blouse and skirt. Kneeling before her, Ty rolled one stocking smoothly up her leg and tied the garter, then he did the other one. "Now if you'll just turn around and hold onto that tree, I think I can handle these boots." He grinned.

"I was so angry with you that day — shoeing me like a horse!"

Ty shrugged. "It worked. And it will again. Turn around."

After Ty worked her high-button shoes onto her feet, he attacked the small buttons — not an easy task without a button hook. "There." He rose. "I think I have enough done that you can walk."

After she took an experimental step, she smiled. "This is fine. Thank you." She added shyly, "And thank you for teaching me about love."

A hooded expression came into his eyes. "Sex has little to do with love, Mattie."

Embarrassed for no reason she could name, Mattie stammered, "You know what I mean." But the closeness she'd felt to him suddenly vanished. It was as though the sun had gone behind a cloud.

Of course, he was right. What they had shared hadn't been love. It had been sex. Glorious, unbridled sex. Love had never been a part of their agreement, after all.

She knew how Ty felt about love, and she'd been the victim of falling in love, too. It had lured her into a hellish marriage that produced only one good thing — Nathan. Why had she even used the word when true love was something so rare, very few found it?

Ty put his hat on his head. "Are you ready to go?"

Mattie nodded and began folding the blanket.

Just as Ty bent to grab the wicker handles, a shot rang out. His hat flew off, sailing over the edge of the high bluff and into the froth beneath the falls.

Mattie stared at it, churning in the current. If Ty hadn't moved suddenly, the bullet would have hit him.

"Get down!"

Fifteen

Ty dove, grabbing Mattie around the waist and carrying her to the leaf-littered ground. The sound of an angry “bee” zipped somewhere above their heads as a gun barked.

“The shots are coming from there.” He gestured toward the path they’d ridden in. “Stay low. Get behind that buckeye tree.”

Her heart thrumming in her ears, Mattie started to rise to do as Ty commanded.

He pulled her back down. “Crawl, Mattie!”

She made it to safety behind the wide trunk and sat with her back against it. He crawled to where he’d hung his gun belt and got into a crouch, then lunged upward for it. Another shot rang out and bark flew from the tree, just above Ty’s head.

“*Son-of-a — !*” He rolled to where she was. “Someone seems to be upset with me,” he commented, snuggling up to the tree beside her. “I can’t imagine why.”

“I can,” Mattie retorted. Someone was shooting at them. How dare he not treat it seriously!

“Now, Mattie, I do have my good points.” His gaze trailed to the vee of her blouse, reminding her of all they’d just shared.

Shaking her head, Mattie couldn’t believe he was sitting there, joking, as someone shot at them.

Another shot rang out, and a bullet dug into the other side of the tree trunk. “What are we going to do?”

“I’ll let you know when I know.” He picked up a stick and tested its weight, then threw it at the gun belt. It hit solidly and the belt almost came off the broken limb where he’d hung it. “Damn.”

"Don't curse! It can't help matters!" Mattie snapped. Another shot rang out, and she squeaked and put her hands over her ears.

"Sorry." Keeping his back to the trunk, Ty stretched his arm as far out as he could and barely snagged another stick with the tips of his fingers. This one had to do the trick. He didn't see any other sticks.

He threw, hitting it solidly, and the gun belt fell. Crawling on his belly again, he retrieved it, then came back to the security of their tree.

Mattie stared in fascination as he spun the cylinder, making certain all chambers were filled, then snapped it back into place.

"You're going to shoot him?"

"No." He thrust the pistol into her hands. "You are. If he gets close enough."

The gun was big and heavy. "I don't want this!" Mattie tried to give it back to Ty. Another shot peeled bark on the side of the tree, and she jerked the gun back. Maybe she did want it. She turned the evil-looking weapon over in her hands. "How do I use this?"

"Cock." He reached over and thumbed the cock back. "Then point and shoot. It has a kick, so hold your arms straight and stiffen your wrists. If you run out of bullets, put in more from the belt." He showed her how to open the cylinder.

"What will you do?" Mattie asked.

The shots had stopped. Peering around the bole, Ty signaled her to be quiet as he listened for movement. He could see nothing through a thicket of box elders and briars, and he could hear nothing above the roar of the falls. Ty sensed their assailant was moving, maybe looking for a better angle to fire from.

"Listen. He has a rifle. From the sound of the shots, he's out of range for a handgun to be effective. But it might divert his attention. That's why I gave it to you. I want you to fire in the direction the shots came from — only in that direction, understand? I'll be moving around but you won't shoot me if you don't fire anywhere else.

"And, Mattie, *stay* behind the tree! If something happens to me, save your bullets and stay hidden. Someone at the ranch will hear the shooting and ride out to see what's wrong. But if the bastard gets close before that happens, shoot him."

He gave her a hard, assessing look. Mattie nodded, trying to stay calm.

"Ready?" He stretched out on the ground on his elbows. "Shoot!"

Mattie leaned around the tree and pulled the trigger. The kick smashed the back of her hand against the trunk, and the sound left her ears ringing. "Ouch!"

Shaking her smarting hand, she glanced behind her and saw Ty crawling quickly away, down the sloping bluff, toward where they'd left the horses tethered. Her heart lurched. Even though he was staying low, his red shirt made him an easy target. Too damned easy, she thought in despair. She cocked the weapon and fired again and again, as fast as she could, praying that one of her wild, too far away shots would find its mark.

When the gun clicked on an empty cylinder, Mattie sat back against the tree and fumbled more cartridges into it with cold shaking fingers. Just as she was putting the last bullet in, a horse whinnied down below the bluff and she jumped at the sound, dropping the gun. Catching a glimpse of red down there, she knew Ty had made it to the horses and his rifle.

Picking up her weapon, she brushed dirt off the cock and started firing again. The explosions from the six-shooter were joined by three louder blasts from near the horses, then she was firing alone again. After she exhausted the second load of ammunition, Mattie sat back to reload again, taking cartridges out of Ty's belt.

She still caught glimpses of red beneath the bluff. What was Ty going to do? The bushwhacker fired repeatedly. Bullets no longer thumped into the wide buckeye tree, or cut leaves overhead. Mattie's heart sank — he had to be firing at Ty.

No! Not the only man who'd really been completely honest with her! And kind! Underneath his tough exterior, Ty was kind. He'd recognized the straits she was in and insisted on marrying her.

Hot tears spilled onto her cheeks. *No!* The bastard wouldn't shoot Ty if she could help it! She angrily swiped at her wet face and thrust the gun around the trunk, firing repeatedly.

* * *

As he crawled away from the horses, Ty looked back. Having tied his red shirt to the bay's saddle horn, he'd untied both animals' reins and looped them over their necks, so the horses could move about. Nervous, the horses fidgeted just enough, the bay staying close to his paint.

By making a target out of the mare, he hoped to keep the gunman aiming at the wrong target, away from Mattie. Ty didn't like it, but he knew he'd sacrifice a dozen horses if it would get Mattie safely out of this.

Before crawling away, he'd fired a couple of shots over the animal's saddle. More shots answered, and the whirring of bullets still flying overhead told him he had the gunman's attention focused in the direction he wanted.

Mattie's shots answered and he grinned. *That's a girl!* He'd been afraid she'd have been reduced to a sobbing, clinging heap, but he should have known better. She had courage.

Crawling quickly, he covered as much ground as possible while she fired, knowing the sound covered the noise of his approach. He was almost within sight when a shot spattered dirt in his face. Cursing, he rolled behind a tree.

"Only a yellow coward hides and snipers at someone!" Ty yelled.

"A man doesn't give a snake an even chance," a voice he didn't recognize returned. "You sound rattled, Warburton. How does it feel to know you're gonna die?"

Before the man finished talking, Ty was cutting the bushes down with bullets around where he thought the gunman was. Answering shots came from a different angle than he expected, and Ty was obliged to dive and roll. Bullets peppered the area where he'd been.

The man was good.

Safe behind the trunk of a hickory, Ty fitted cartridges into the rifle from the box he'd taken out of his saddlebag. Mattie's handgun had fallen silent. Mentally counting the rounds she'd fired, he knew she was nearly out, but holding a couple in reserve. *Good girl, Mattie.*

He listened, trying to tell if the gunman was moving. Hearing nothing above the roar of the waterfall, Ty yelled, "I don't know how it feels to know you're going to die. You tell me."

"I ain't worried!"

Ty sighted around the trunk toward where the voice had come from. Before he could fire, a bullet slammed into the tree and bark flew into his eye. Cursing under his breath, he hid behind the tree and used the pad of his thumb to get bark out, then blinked until his eye felt better.

The gunman taunted, "Yore the one gonna die, all right. But first, yore gonna lose this fine ranch you bought with blood money. Then I'll take pleasure in gut shootin' ya, so it'll take weeks fer ya to die, Warburton!"

So that's what this was about. The Cratchet brothers. Another one of the family had crawled to the surface and was daring to threaten him and his.

Rage filling him, Ty charged toward the bushes where the man's voice had come from, firing as he ran.

There were no answering shots. He jumped across a clearing, then dove behind a fallen log, crawling the length of it, giving himself adequate cover. Then rolling behind the cover of a tree, he crouched, listening.

Nothing.

Where had the bastard gone? Sensing the gunman had left, Ty cursed under his breath.

Why now? Now that he felt he might join the living again? Two months ago, it wouldn't have mattered. Now he had others to think about, a family depending on him.

Ty wanted to rush to Mattie, to make certain she was all right. He forced himself to sit where he was, listening, for several minutes, then he made his way cautiously to where the gunman had last fired from. Spent cartridges and tobacco spit on the dead leaves marked the spot.

The man had picked his vantage points well, Ty thought, squatting where the gunman must have knelt last. He'd hidden in deep shadow, while they had been easy targets on the sunlit bluff of the creek. Through a thick stand of box elders, snatches of his red shirt could be seen every now and then, showing the mare was still alive.

Back-trailing the gunman, Ty found where he'd tied his horse, and his trail where he'd ridden in and then out. The bastard was gone, all right.

For now.

A slow burn started in Ty's gut and he wasted no time in getting back to Mattie.

On the trail back to the ranch, the new hand he'd hired the week before stepped out from behind a tree, uncocking his pistol as he did. In far less than a heartbeat, Ty's pistol had been drawn and pointed squarely between Luke Rivers's eyes.

"Whoa, there, Warburton. No need for that iron. I heard the shots and was coming to see who was having the turkey shoot." Luke let his pistol swing by the trigger guard around his thumb as he took aim and let go a stream of tobacco spit.

Ty uncocked his gun. "Is anyone else coming from the ranch?"

"I was about all that was there to hear, other than Cookie. He said he'd send out help as soon as any showed up."

Nodding, Ty holstered his gun. "I see you have a Winchester in your saddle boot. If you've got spare cartridges, I'd be much obliged if you'd see your way clear to giving them to me. Same for my pistol, too."

"Sure thing." The man searched out the ammunition from his saddlebag. "What are you going to do?"

"I came across a rabid skunk. I need to trail it up and take care of it." Ty gave him the reins of Mattie's mare. "Then see Mattie back to the ranch."

Luke nodded. "Mark the trail. After I see Miz Mattie home, I'll catch up with you."

"No." It was the first time Mattie had spoken since Ty had helped her onto the back of the horse. She'd been too emotionally spent to form words. But at this new threat to her peace, she came to life. "No, you'll not go, Ty Warburton! There's a county sheriff to take care of criminals and bushwhackers!"

Looking from one hard face to the other, Mattie knew her words had fallen on deaf ears. Nonetheless, she tried to reason with her husband. "Your family needs you, Ty! Out on the trail, you'll be easy to kill. Not that *I* care, mind you, if you're going to be this stubborn! But there's your daughter to think about. And Nathan."

She angrily wiped at her eyes. How dare he show her the glory that could happen between a man and a woman, then put himself in danger!

"Excuse us." Nodding at Luke, Ty led her horse a little way farther up the trail. Urging her mount up beside him, he said, "It's the children and you I'm thinking of, Mattie. You'll not be safe so long as this gunman is prowling around. What if he's aiming at me and hits you or one of the children?"

Mattie placed her fingers over her mouth, shaking as the cold reality of what he had said slipped into her brain. After she'd heard the man taunt Ty and understood he was out for revenge, she'd thought only of the threat to her husband. But the threat might well spill over to their children.

No, God, it was too terrible to even think!

"I'm sorry, Mattie. I know you were looking forward to seeing if loving in a real bed is more fun than on a creek bank, but you're just going to have to wait."

Mattie glared at him, which seemed to please him no end. He grinned. "Give me my reins, Ty Warburton. I'll ride back to the ranch myself."

* * *

Mattie wielded the broom briskly, ridding the front porch of the last speck of dirt and dust. Lying in the yard, Spot lifted his head in mild interest, then returned it to his front paws, dozing in the sun.

"Okay, fetch the pillows and let's put them out to sun, now. And don't run!" she called after them as the children streaked away to do as she said.

"I thought you were going to sweep the paint right off the boards, Miz Mattie," Luke Rivers drawled, leaning a wide shoulder on one of the columns. "Something biting at your bonnet?"

"Just restless, Luke."

Luke and another hand had been watching over Mattie and the children since the incident at the creek, rifles always close at hand. Even as Luke spoke, his dark gaze went to the hills around the house, watching, waiting.

His presence did give her added peace of mind, not that Mattie really thought she or the children were in danger. Though she'd been shaken by the ordeal by the falls, she'd put it behind her.

It was Ty the gunman had promised to kill. And it was Ty she was worried about.

Since the gunman fired on them, Ty had kept his distance, telling her he wouldn't want them caught in a crossfire if the man came back.

His reasoning was logical. But after the closeness they'd shared that afternoon, having him avoid being near her was hard to accept. Damned hard. Made harder by the niggling suspicion that being apart from her and the children wasn't so much a trial for Ty as it was a relief.

On the other hand, Mattie didn't ever want to go through that again. The sheer terror had haunted her for days afterward, and she'd jumped at every loud noise. She'd wanted nothing so much as to wrap her arms around Ty and bawl like a baby.

But Ty had been nowhere around.

Mattie sighed. Luke was right. She'd been trying to work off her worry. She wanted to feel secure again, to have things back to normal. Well, more than that — she wanted Ty to start spending time with them, getting used to his role as husband and father.

The things he'd taught her down by the creek made her feel she'd been let out of prison. Just remembering the beauty of what they'd shared put a flutter in her stomach. It wasn't fair that he hadn't had an opportunity to teach her more. Even if it was just sex and not love.

The children returned with their bed pillows, and Spot took an interest in helping arrange them, trotting up on the porch to inspect the placement of each.

"Now, Spot, I don't want no fleas on my pillow!" Nathan said sternly. "Go back 'n lay down in the yard." He pointed off the porch.

Spot reluctantly went back down the steps.

"We'll have to watch him, Mama," Nathan told Mattie, his fair brows drawing together.

"Yes, we will. Now let's get back to work. The sun will be setting before we get these out."

After placing the pillows on the sun on the edge of the porch, Mattie sent Angeline and Nathan for her pillows and blankets and the bedding on Ty's cot.

"If you wouldn't mind, give me a hand with the mattresses," Mattie said, smiling.

With a careful look around at the hills, Luke took the cartridge out of the barrel of the rifle, so it wouldn't fire the first time someone pulled the trigger — a precaution against the children picking it up. After propping it against the column, he followed Mattie inside.

When the bedding was all arranged on the porch in the sun, Angeline tugged on Mattie's apron. "Do you think we could have chicken and dumplings tonight?" the little girl asked eagerly.

"Chicken and dumplings is Mr. Ty's favorite," Nathan added. "He might come home to supper for chicken and dumplings."

Mattie's heart twisted as she met Luke's understanding gaze over Nathan's head. The children missed Ty badly.

"All right." Mattie tousled her son's hair and hugged Angeline. "Let's go see which of those old hens we brought from the other house we need to cook."

But she doubted chicken and dumplings would get Ty to share a meal. It was as though the gunman had given him the excuse he'd been looking for to keep his distance.

Sixteen

Shirley Aimes took a multicolored bundle of scraps from her brother. "Thank you for fetchin' these for me, Trent. Now we'll have enough to finish."

Sixteen-year-old Trent, who had a slightly rustier shade of hair than Shirley's, had joined his sister last week. Mattie noticed he was the object of much giggling by twelve-year-old Tassie and fifteen-year-old Ann. Though what the girls could see in him, she hadn't a clue. His bad attitude swirled around him like a cloud, and sometimes the way he looked at her sent a funny feeling up Mattie's spine.

"I'm going to the blacksmith's now. You won't need me to help you with anything else," he told his sister, a challenging edge to his words.

Shaking her head after he'd gone, Shirley said, "I apologize for Trent. Our ma died when he was a baby, and I've done my best by him, but he seems to resent me more every day. I thought a new start would help him to grow out of it." She sighed. "I guess not."

After knotting her thread, the redhead again bent to the quilt stretched on the frame and started adding a row of neat stitches. The sewing circle was busily stitching a crazy quilt to help a family near Red Creek whose house had burned. The family had lost all their possessions.

Mattie watched through the window as Shirley's brother passed by Luke Rivers, who sat in one of Alma's porch rockers, his long legs stretched out before him, Winchester across his lap. The younger man and the older man nodded casually, then Luke tilted his hat to shade his eyes and watched Nathan, Tassie, and Angeline playing hopscotch.

Mattie had the feeling that there was more to the exchange between the two than a polite nod. Something in the overdone casualness. They were like dogs meeting in the street and sizing each other up.

She looked at the children, happily unconcerned with the currents going on around them. She was glad school was out for the summer and she could keep an eye on the pair.

"Why is Trent going to Ole Joe's?" asked Rosalee Wilkerson. Rosalee was never one to let her curiosity go unsatisfied, Mattie thought, so long as her mouth worked.

"He likes to work iron. He's hoping the smithy will take him as an apprentice. I hope so, too. Now that we've decided to settle in Medicine Springs, he needs to find work," Shirley replied.

Looking up from her stitching, she smiled at the room in general. "And I want to thank you all for being so kind. Giving me orders for dresses and such. Well, it ain't easy being a widow and getting by."

Mattie knew just what that was like. On the other hand, Shirley's dresses were mighty fine to be scraping by, and that struck Mattie as strange. But maybe it was like Alma said when Mattie had mentioned it to her friend — a seamstress has to display her wares to interest others. That made sense.

But Mattie hadn't been able to stop the uncharitable comment that her needlework wasn't the only wares Shirley Aimes was fond of displaying. All her dresses were cut to show off her full bosom and tiny waist, and her bustles were stylishly large, swaying when she walked.

Alma had laughed, and pointed out how some people might take the comments to mean Mattie was jealous.

Well, of course she was, Mattie thought, threading her needle. Ty had financed the woman's business, helping Shirley to set up shop in the old barbershop off Main Street — and without even talking to Mattie about what he planned to do.

There were raised brows and speculative looks all over town. Mattie had been forced to order a dress from Shirley, just to quell gossip.

Feeling guilty for more uncharitable thoughts toward the woman, Mattie offered, "If Trent doesn't have any luck at Ole Joe's, I'm certain Ty could use an extra hand on the ranch. Spring roundup is going on."

Looking startled, Shirley shook her head. "Ah, no, Mattie. He couldn't. I mean, Ty has been more than generous already. Helping me get started in my shop, and all that."

"What you're really thinking is it might not be safe for the boy to be near Ty, with Cratchet out for Ty's blood, isn't it?" Clara asked.

"I'm sure I didn't mean to imply that, Clara Thornhill!" Shirley said.

Alma's comfortable parlor grew quiet, except for the tiny sounds of scissors snipping thread and needles being pulled through fabric and cotton batting.

Mattie sighed inwardly and took inordinate pains in placing a scrap of pretty green and pink calico, from a new dress she'd made for Angeline, just so. There it was, at last, out in the open. What everyone had had on their minds, since she and Ty had been bushwhacked.

Not that Ty had let it get out that she was with him. Which had been fine with Mattie. She hadn't wanted to face Rosalee's curiosity about the ordeal. Or awkward questions on what Mattie and Ty had possibly been doing in the woods alone.

When she'd shown up at Alma's with Luke for an armed guard, "Just in case," she'd told the sewing circle, brows had been raised and understanding murmurs had followed.

"Well, it's a lowdown skunk who'd try to bushwhack someone like Ty Warburton, doncha know." Alma bit her thread and knotted the end before stabbing the needle into another patch, attacking it with fervor.

Shirley focused on her stitches. "I heard about what happened, Mattie. I just wonder what Ty could have done to rile up somebody so."

"I'm not certain I know the whole story," Mattie said, not wanting to be drawn into a discussion. "It's all rooted in Ty's past."

"Shirley, you weren't in the area when the Cratchet gang was ram-paging. Meanest bunch God ever gave breath to, to hear my husband tell it. He was only deputy and not sheriff at the time." Clara stopped speaking, screwed up her mouth, and squinted at the eye of a needle, poking the thread at the hole.

After the third unsuccessful try, she held needle and thread out to Beth. "Thread it, dear. My eyes aren't what they used to be."

Beth took needle and thread and complied.

"I heard the one of the Cratchets called Snake cut off a fat woman's finger with a jackknife, just to get her ruby wedding ring when the gang hit the Midland stage." Rosalee shivered, but her eyes were aglow with the excitement of relating the gruesome tale. "And he wasn't even the leader of the gang."

"That sounds like a tall tale to me!" Shirley eyed the banker's wife askance. Seeming to realize too late that she was taking the outlaws' part, she laughed self-consciously. "I mean, I know they were that mean and all from what you say, but I have trouble cutting up a

chicken, even with a sharp knife. Seems like it would have been a lot easier to bite out the ring setting and be on their way."

Murmuring reserved agreement, the sewing circle ladies allowed it would have been easier.

"Well," Beth said, "there's plenty of crimes they were responsible for." Sitting on a footstool, she plied her needle on the edging, her chin barely rising above the quilt frame.

"Yes." Rosalee nodded. "Like those banks in the panhandle the Cratchet gang robbed. People lost their life savings."

Alma added, "And the people they killed in cold blood. Like that Pinkerton agent they shot on that last train they tried to rob. The one where Ty took exception to their shenanigans."

"That was their one mistake, tangling with Ty Warburton!" Clara said, then smiled at Mattie, and Mattie blushed for no reason she could name.

It was as though the women had allotted part of Ty's glory to her by association. She certainly felt undeserving of any of it. For that matter, she thought Ty felt that way, too. She'd heard him say he wished people would just forget the incident and bury the past. Killing was nothing to praise.

"I've been wondering how on earth one man got the drop on so many gunmen," Shirley mused. "Unless, he recognized them and was able to sneak up behind them, or something."

"That's not what happened," Mattie said, firmly in Ty's defense. The very thought that he could be a back-shooter was preposterous.

Looking up, she realized everyone's attention was focused on her, sewing needles stilled. "I mean, Cookie told me the story. He got it straight from Ty — who was beyond walking straight when he told it, due to several drinks of bourbon whiskey to celebrate his birthday. Otherwise, I don't think Ty would ever have talked about it."

"Well, tell us," Alma said. "We're all a'dyin' to hear what really happened, doncha know!"

The chintz curtains blew out into the room on the warm spring breeze, reminding Mattie that there were little ears about. Glancing out the window, she saw that Tassie and the children were still hard at play. Luke had left the rocker and was standing by the front gate.

Seeing that they wouldn't overhear, Mattie drew in a deep breath. "Well, Ty doesn't think of himself as a hero. He was riding the train when the Cratchet gang stopped it — they'd blocked the tracks with

trees and crossties. There was a Pinkerton man in the seat across from Ty, and when the detective looked out the window and saw what was happening, he recognized the gang from their posters. He told the passengers around him to just stay calm and to cooperate."

As Mattie went on, she saw it all happening in her mind. "Ty was resigned to getting robbed, wanting to avoid innocent bloodshed. But the gang wasn't worried about shedding blood. An old lady was crying and begging one of the gang not to take her money, her life's savings. Her husband had died and she was on her way to live with her daughter's family. The outlaw hit her in the mouth with his gun. About the same time, the brother called Bad Bob saw the Pinkerton man's badge, put a gun to the detective's head, and pulled the trigger.

"Ty told Cookie he didn't remember shooting the man, or the one who'd struck the old lady. He suddenly had his gun in his hand and they were dead. Then the one in the front of the car leveled a rifle at Ty, and Ty does remember shooting him.

"The fourth one, Henry, was holding the engineer at gunpoint, shouting for his brothers to hurry. Ty slipped down the other side of the train and got the drop on him. Tying him up, they put him in the coal car behind the engine.

"Afterward Ty organized some of the men into a crew and put the tracks back together well enough so the train could pass. He told Cookie he had had a lot of practice fixing track in the war. The Confederate troops would sabotage the tracks every night."

The truth was, Mattie felt embarrassed to have pried into her husband's life by questioning the ranch's cook. But Ty wasn't exactly talkative and, after the attack on them by the creek, she felt like she had a right to know why this gunman was after her husband.

"Well, that's more'r'less what I heard, but better told," Alma said.

"What did they do with the last Cratchet brother?" Beth asked.

"He was convicted of train robbery and sent to prison," Clara replied.

"Then *who* is after Ty?" Beth looked at Mattie as if she had the answer.

"I don't know, Beth." Mattie picked up her needle again. "It must be some of that family."

"Well, I shouldn't tell you all this, but my Zack wired the prison to find out about the last brother. Seems he escaped a couple of months ago.

"The shame is Ty didn't just shoot the last Cratchet and be done with it!" Clara declared. "If one dog in the pack is rabid, they all are."

"Ouch!" Shirley held her finger, staring at it in consternation as a drop of crimson blood formed on the tip, looking like she might cry over the tiny wound.

* * *

Later, riding back to the ranch in the buckboard with Luke, Mattie held on to the wooden sides, Angeline leaning against her. Nathan had curled up in the wagon bed atop the supplies they were bringing back. He was asleep, despite the bumps and jarring.

There was something reassuring about Luke's quiet, watchful presence. She didn't think Cratchet would bother them — his quarrel was with her husband — but Ty had insisted that they have an armed guard.

She would rather have had Ty.

Talk at Alma's had swung to the upcoming Founder's Day picnic and dance, and Mattie remembered how it had felt to dance in Ty's arms. He'd made her feel delicate and pretty, like her sisters must have felt at socials in Baltimore, when they were sought out dance after dance.

But Ty couldn't take her to the dance if Henry Cratchet wasn't caught. Strangely it was like Ty was set free by the man's menace. Free to ignore the children, turn away from the family he'd put together. Although she knew the threat was real, Mattie couldn't help but wonder if Ty wasn't glad of the excuse.

The children's plan of luring him home with chicken and dumplings had failed, as she'd known it would. He'd sent them a message that he was busy with the spring roundup. Nathan had suggested Luke could help brand the cows, and let Ty come home.

Ty didn't seem to realize that the children needed him. Angeline, Mattie suspected, was waiting for her dream to collapse, as no doubt so many other lovely dreams had in her young life. The child sat looking out the window with sad eyes, waiting for Ty.

Nathan was listless and irritable. When Mattie thought about it, she realized Ty was the only father Nathan remembered.

Whether Ty liked it or not, he was needed and loved by those children.

Mattie vowed *she'd* never be so foolish as to love Ty Warburton — besides, after her Jonas and Ty's Lyla had gotten through with the two

of them, they had only few shreds of heart left between them. Best to give those few shreds to the children, who'd keep them safe.

She tried to ignore the ache deep within that said it might already be too late.

* * *

As she looked up from the nursery rhyme book she'd been reading, Mattie smiled. Eyes closed, Angeline was hugging the rag doll Mattie had made for her. Nathan was also fast asleep. Laying the book on the bedside table, she eased off the bed and carefully lifted her son. Trying not to wake him, she carried him into his bedroom and tucked him in, then came back and blew out the lamp.

Her slippers made little noise on the stairs. She hadn't bothered with a candle. The moonlight spilling through the tall windows into the hall offered ample light to find her way. A shadow moved by one of the windows and she caught her breath, until she recognized Manuel's cousin, who had taken over Luke's guard duty for the night.

In her bedroom, Mattie closed the door behind her and went to close the drapes. One of the windows was open. She had made certain they were closed earlier. This time, when her heart leapt into her throat, it brought the copper taste of fear with it.

"Mattie?"

Whirling around, screaming even as she recognized the voice, Mattie felt her knees buckle. As Ty caught her, she beat on his chest and he was obliged to catch her hands, too.

"Mattie, it's me!"

"*Ty Warburton!* If you *ever* do that to me again, I'll shoot you myself!" Mattie looked up at him, tears of anger and relief wetting her cheeks.

Laughter danced in his eyes. One lock of blond hair had fallen on his forehead. And the broad chest he was holding her hands against was completely bare. A quick glance showed he was wearing trousers, thank goodness.

"*Senora*, step away." A rifle barrel was thrust through the window.

"It's okay, Esteban."

"*Senor Ty!* I'm very sorry!" The rifle disappeared.

"Don't be. You were doing your job."

"*Sí, señor.* Now I will continue." The man disappeared as silently as he'd come.

"How did you get in?" Mattie asked.

Ty moved to the window and closed it. "I remembered thinking this lock needed to be repaired. It started weighing on my mind that someone could break in on you."

"So you did it yourself," she finished dryly.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" Ty took her into his arms, grinning unrepentantly.

His male heat penetrated her wrapper and nightgown, and seemed to warm her from the inside out.

"Very glad." She smiled shyly.

"That's my girl." Ty splayed his fingers in her hair, which flowed over her shoulders in rich dark waves, and angled her mouth for his kiss. Her lips parted the instant his mouth touched hers and she pressed her soft curves closer to him, twining her arms around his neck. She tasted as sweet as he remembered. Breaking off the kiss, he nuzzled her neck and she giggled.

"Ah, Mattie. I was thinking about you today and it got damned hard to ride."

"Really? Do you often think of me when you're working the cows?" She looked at him as if waiting for the secret to the universe.

Had he ever noticed before how long her lashes were? Or how her bottom lip was just a little fuller than the top one?

"Yes, I do, darlin'. I think of you every time I rope a big mean one that bellows and paws and charges my hor — *Ouch!*" He laughed as she punched his arm.

Ty wrapped her in his arms, holding her forcefully as she squirmed to get away. "You see, while I'm wrangling with that ornery cow, then darlin', I think about how much nicer it would be to be up here in this big bed with you." Shifting her in his arms, Ty slipped his thigh between her legs, so she was obliged to part them. He took her hand and placed it on his erection. "I think about that a lot," he said next to her ear, before kissing her neck.

Mattie shivered, but pulled away from him. "I haven't seen you in more than a week."

"With calving and all, springtime is a busy time on the ranch. And you know why I didn't want to get too close to you or the children. I

don't want someone gunning for me to hit you with a stray shot." He sat on the bed and took off his boots.

"Yes, I understood. You were protecting us. But you're here now. Does that mean Cratchet's been caught?" she asked hopefully.

"It means I couldn't stay away any longer"

Mattie caught his words to her heart and gave him a smile that started in her toes. *Ty couldn't stay away.* Did she mean something to him?

He shucked his trousers and tossed them aside. His male member stood out taut and proud. "I want you, Mattie." Drawing her into his embrace once more, he combed his fingers through her hair. "I love your hair. You should never pin it up and hide it."

Filled with tenderness and the feeling she'd found something she'd needed a very long time, Mattie cupped his face, enjoying the rough texture of his end-of-day beard. Closing her eyes, she absorbed the sensations of holding him naked in her arms. There was the smell of soap and the outdoors, his heat, his glorious hardness. She stroked his broad shoulders and down his back, to his taut buttocks. Emboldened, she squeezed and tested the firmness she found there, pressing him closer still.

"I even took a bath in the horse trough for you. Ah, Mattie, I can't wait to make love to you again." Ty nuzzled the side of her neck, below her ear as he untied the sash to her wrapper and parted it. "You feel so good." He pressed against her again and groaned deep in his throat.

Realizing he only meant he wanted her physically and didn't need her at all emotionally made her heart feel like a stone. Ty seemed so impatient, Mattie thought he would jerk up her gown and have her right there, standing up.

The thought further released her from the erotic spell he'd been weaving. Though his lips continued to nibble her throat and his hands slid down her back, smoothing her shoulders, the languorous heat she'd been feeling vanished.

Sensing the change in her, Ty looked into her eyes. She met his gaze briefly and looked away. Wondering what was wrong, he wanted to ask her if she was on her menstrual cycle. But after trying to form that question, he gave up, not knowing quite how to approach it.

Taking her hand, he sat on the bed and pulled her down beside him. "What's wrong?"

Mattie turned great gray eyes to him. "I feel so powerless!"

Powerless to change her husband's heart, but she couldn't tell him that. Love was never part of their agreement, she reminded herself bitterly. When had her own heart forgotten that?

She had thought she'd been so rational and practical where this marriage was concerned, bravely sacrificing her independence, striking a bargain. She hadn't even realized her feelings were changing. If someone had asked her earlier that day if she loved her husband, she would have laughed and told them that only a fool would fall in love with Ty Warburton — not knowing her own heart was already lost.

Seeing no help for it but to speak plainly, Ty asked, "Is it your time of the month?"

She shook her head, then buried her face in his shoulder. Not crying. Just plainly not happy.

It was her old fear of losing control and appearing wanton, Ty decided, stroking her wonderful hair. It crackled and curled under his hand like living silk. Well, they had dealt with that once successfully. But Mattie was still a lady, for all that she was sweetly passionate. That's what he'd told her by the creek and she had believed him at the time. Now he had to make her believe it again. Eventually she'd get over her fears.

It would just take a few more lessons.

And there was no better time to start than now.

"Mattie." Ty eased her back so he could look into her face. "You aren't powerless." Holding her hand over his heart, he kissed her. Tender little kisses that sucked on her bottom lip. She sighed, her mouth softening, slanting so his kisses would be deeper. "See what you do to me," Ty whispered, aware his heart was beating harder.

He moved her hand to his manhood, lying against his thigh, then deepened his kisses, stroking her mouth with his tongue. Mattie curled her other hand around his neck, pulling him closer as she timidly met his tongue with her own.

Beneath her hand, his male member grew and hardened, like warm steel covered in velvet.

"Go ahead. Stroke it. Touch me anyway you'd like," he said hoarsely, then arched and stiffened with pleasure as she did just that. Putting his hand over hers, he showed her how to give him more pleasure, main-

taining a rhythm. "How can you say you're powerless, when you do this to me with the touch of your hand?"

Stroking Ty, Mattie realized what he said was true. She didn't have control of his heart, but she had a woman's power over his body.

He lay back on the bed, closing his eyes, letting Mattie have full rein. Taking advantage of it, she looked at his body in the faint moonlight filtering between the edges of the drapes. She'd seen his body by the creek. But she had been too shy to stare as she'd wanted.

He was beautiful, lean and hard and male. She released him and his erection curved back, almost touching his bellybutton. Curious, Mattie explored his flat abdomen and the thatch of hair surrounding his manhood. Then she returned to that part of him that fascinated her most, and slowly stroked the length of it. Ty groaned deep in his throat.

"It's not fair of you to keep that gown on," he rasped.

Mattie quickly took care of the unfairness, tossing gown and wrapper into an untidy heap in the corner. Returning to bed, she sat on the edge.

Propping up on his elbows, Ty's eyes gleamed as he looked at her. "Mattie, you are beautiful," he said, sliding his hand under her breast, testing its weight.

"You make me feel that way," Mattie admitted. "Now what shall I do? To please you."

"Please yourself," he said hoarsely. His eyes were blue coals in the half-light.

"What do you mean?"

"Touch yourself." Ty took her hand and placed it on her breast. She sucked in her breath as he guided her fingers over her taut nipple. "Find out what pleasures you, and what doesn't."

At the sight of his darkly tanned hand and her small white one cupping her breast, pulsing heat began to build within her. Then Ty sat up straighter and guided her fingers to her own warm moist center. "Touch yourself, Mattie. Inside."

The thought was too shocking. When Mattie looked at him in surprise, he guided her fingers in with his own. A wild heat began spiraling inside her, drawing tighter.

Mattie shook her head. "I'd rather touch you."

Ty nodded and lay back. "Whatever you wish."

She touched his erection and it leapt under her fingers. "Shall I . . . would it be wrong to — "

"There's no right and wrong between husband and wife, so long as it brings them both pleasure." His voice was barely recognizable as she fell to her knees between his legs.

There was a musty male smell about it that made her want to taste. Seizing her courage in both hands, she bent her head and brushed her lips against his velvet scabbard. His erection leapt again.

Putting her hands to her cheeks, Mattie said, "I'm too bold."

"Part of me likes bold." Ty swallowed hard. "Very much."

Realizing how pleased he was made her bolder. Mattie tasted him fully, watching his reactions. She loved her power over him as she caressed him with her mouth and he writhed, almost mindless with pleasure.

Then straddling him, she guided him inside her, loving the feel of him fully sheathed. Finding the ancient rhythm of love, she brought them both to the stars.

Seventeen

Mattie awoke to a mockingbird singing enthusiastically in a peach tree by the porch, and she discovered the warmth that had been pillowing her head was her husband's bare shoulder. Her hand lay on his equally bare thigh. Meeting his gaze, she snatched the hand back to safer regions and felt her cheeks grow warm.

Ty smiled. "I love it when you do that."

"What?"

"Blush, because you're remembering what a wild woman you've been."

Her cheeks grew hotter. "I wasn't a wild woman!" Throwing the covers back, she got out of bed. Cool spring air washed around her naked skin. Well, if Ty could be casual about his nakedness, so could she . . . if she could find what she'd done with her wrapper last night and not have to stay this way too long.

Locating the garment in a heap on the floor, Mattie shrugged it on and tied the sash.

"I'd like to tell you not to bother getting dressed," Ty said with an evil smile. "But I have to go."

"Go?"

Ty threw off the covers and stood. Mattie temporarily forgot she'd asked a question.

"Yes." Picking up his drawers and denim breeches, he started to dress. "We're through with the branding and cutting on all but fifty calves, the Herefords, which are penned up with their mamas in a draw. We'll probably finish today and start out early in the morning driving the herd to summer pasture."

"But I thought you'd come home. Cratchet hasn't shown his face again. He must have given up. Maybe taunting you was enough, Ty."

Buttoning his pants, Ty shook his head. "I'd like to think so. Why he's waiting, I don't know. I think he wants to play on my nerves. When he does make his move, Mattie, I don't want you or the children to be caught in the line of fire." He slipped on his shirt.

Mattie looked at the floor. "I think he's given up, but even if he hasn't, you could keep us safe, Ty."

"Even if Cratchet has given up, I'd still have to work the roundup, Mattie." Sitting on the edge of the bed, Ty slipped his socks on. There was a hole in one of the heels, and she started to say something about it, but thought better of it. Damn and blast him if he thought she was darning it, if he couldn't stay home. She hoped he would get a blister!

"Why can't they go, and you stay here with us?" Damn, that sounded like begging. Mattie crossed her arms over her chest and moved to the window.

"No. We need every man that can sit a horse. I have to be there."

"Of course you do." She didn't turn around.

"I'm the boss," he added defensively. "Besides, we don't know Cratchet has given up on hanging my hide out to dry. If I'm still a target, Mattie, my being here puts you and the children in danger. We've talked about this before. I won't take that chance."

Tightening her sash, Mattie started for the door. "I'll make you breakfast."

"Don't bother. Cookie will have something in the bunkhouse."

Mattie stopped dead in her tracks. "Ty Warburton, you can't mean to leave without seeing Angeline and Nathan?" she asked softly.

"Well, I — " He looked away. "Damn, Mattie, I have a ranch to run."

"Angeline wants to show you the doll that I made her. It's the first doll she's ever had. Ty, I cried when she told me that, because no one ever cared enough before to take an hour or two to make one. And Nathan has something he thinks is very important to ask you. They talk about nothing else but when you'll come home."

"I guess I'd better go upstairs and see them for a little while, but the men will already be wondering where I am." His face set, he turned for the door.

She caught his arm. "Not if you're just going up to tell them you're too busy to spend any time with them! That would be worse — " She

glared at him, tears making her vision wavy, unable to say more without losing control of her temper.

Heavy footsteps in the hall preceded a brisk knock on the door. "I'm awful sorry, Ty, ta have ta bother ya'll," Pecos Jim called from the other side.

Ty swung the door open. "What is it?"

"We got big trouble." Jim nodded at Mattie then studied Ty's boots, a flush rising under his scraggly whiskers that made her all too aware that her nightgown lay on the floor in plain sight. She drew her wrapper more tightly about her.

"What is it?" Ty grabbed his gun belt off the chest of drawers.

"I think ya better come see ta the draw where we got those Her-e-fords penned up."

"Wait outside. I'll be right there."

The man left, closing the door behind him.

"We'll talk more about this later, Mattie," Ty said, buckling on his gun. He jammed his hat on his head and was gone.

She stared at the door long after he left, trying to decide if his last words were a threat or a promise. She decided it was most likely an empty promise. Ty had his demons. Lord knew, she did, too. But she wasn't about to let one put a bit in her mouth and control her life!

Thinking about it more, she had to admit she'd done just that for a time. Jonas had filled her with fear of ever letting any man too close again. But Ty had seemed to understand and released her from that shackle.

Why couldn't she help him be at ease around the children?

What was wrong? Did he feel unworthy of home and happiness because his brother had died?

Or was she reading him all wrong — was it possible he just didn't care?

Well, what couldn't be changed must needs be endured, as Alma always said.

As Mattie started for the kitchen to fix breakfast for Nathan and Angeline, she remembered she'd wanted to tell Ty about the Founder's Day picnic and dance.

Maybe she should go by herself, with the children. Angeline and Nathan would enjoy it, and Luke would keep them all safe. Shirley could make her a new dress, Mattie decided, liking the idea more and more.

She felt bad that she had harbored suspicions against Shirley when she first came to town and seemed so interested in Ty. She admitted now that she'd just been plain jealous, and for no reason. Though Ty had helped Shirley out of gratitude by backing her loan from the bank to start her dress shop, that was as far as it went.

Giving Shirley another order would be a nice gesture, Mattie decided. And she didn't have a great deal of time to sew for herself, since she was sewing clothes for Angeline, who'd had little when she came.

There was a bolt of blue calico and one of green gingham in Nevell's store, and a card of white cutwork lace that would make wonderful trim for either. Or she might find some material that suited her better at Shirley's shop. There was certainly no point in moping around the ranch, waiting for Ty to realize he was needed. And Mattie thought bitterly she couldn't even complain. She had the marriage she had bargained for.

* * *

"It's 'black leg' all right." Tin-can Willie took his battered hat off and wiped his forehead, looking over the horizon, like he was unable to look at the dead calf, bloated and covered with carbuncles.

Ty tied his bandanna around his face, covering his mouth and nose. The men around him did the same.

Pecos Jim shook his head. "After we're through, I think I'll head down to the Santa Fe. I allus did like that country. How 'bout you, Champagne? Wanna come along?"

The big Cajun kicked a small rock and watched it roll. "Not many spreads that'll accommodate a married man, Jim. It was sure nice, havin' a little cabin of our own, me and Marie and the kids." He paused, looking at the sky. "Me, I guess I'll head back to New Iberia. Maybe run some trap lines through the marsh, catch me some muskrats."

"That sounds good." Willie lifted his bandanna long enough to launch a stream of tobacco juice, knocking a red "cow-killer" ant off a stick on the ground.

Ty stared at the calf, as though willing it back to life.

"What are we to do, *Senor Ty*?" Manuel asked. Ty read the worry in his foreman's face, but there was little he could say to ease it. To a man, they all knew what black leg meant. The end of the ranch.

Reports had been filtering in from Mexico, where the outbreak had started — thousands of cows dead by disease or destroyed, ranches that had been in Mexican families for generations, lost. Ty felt like a hole had opened up inside him and was slowly sucking the rest of him in. He'd begun to make plans — to buy Nathan and Angeline ponies. Teach them how to ride. Teach Nathan about the ranch. Use some of the money he had in the bank to buy Angeline the things she deserved. And Mattie, who'd worked so hard turning that big hollow house into a home for all of them. He'd wanted Mattie to have things, too.

Now, without beef to sell, he'd have a hard time holding on to the land.

He straightened. "Burn the calf. Start shooting the Herefords. I guess I better send to town for a few cases of bullets for the rest." Killing three thousand head would take a lot of bullets.

Ty turned away, feeling the weight of all their troubles on his shoulders. And his own. The men parted to let him pass.

"Wait, Ty." Luke Rivers came up outside the pole gate. He'd been eating in the bunkhouse when Jim came in looking for Ty with the news and had ridden out with them, leaving Esteban at the ranch. "Why shoot all your herd? They're not sick."

"When you signed on, you told me you knew ranching, Rivers. If I don't do the decent thing and protect the other ranchers in the area, they'll shoot them for me."

"Look, Warburton, I'm not trying to tell you your business. But it rained yesterday. Not a lot, but enough to dull tracks. When I was looking around just a while ago, I saw fresh tracks coming in from the southeast. A horse, with a calf following. Must have been on a rope and already sick, 'cause it was dragged the last few hundred yards."

Ty met Luke's hard black gaze, and wondered, not for the first time, if there was more to the man than he was letting on. "You're saying someone put this sick calf in with the herd?"

"Now that you say it, *senor*, I was wondering how I missed seeing a black calf when I made the tally. We have only the red Hereford cows and calves in here," Manuel said.

Luke showed Ty the tracks. It was just like he said. Walking back along the trail to the pole gate, the signs were slightly obliterated by boot prints — they had all walked in this morning, leaving the horses

tied a distance away, but for Willie, who had found the dead calf. When Ty looked closely, he could see the calf had been dragged through the gate.

"It might have already been dead," he concluded.

"What does that mean?" Willie scratched his ear.

"My pa always said black leg was either spread through horse-flies or water. There's no stream in here. The cows drink at a wet-weather spring, so none of the main herd has drunk behind them. And I don't know if my pa was right, but horseflies don't bite dead cows," Luke concluded.

"By damn, that's right. Fleas jump off a dead dog. Flies don't bite a dead cow." Pecos Jim nodded his agreement.

Luke took one of the discarded pine limbs that had been stripped off the poles on the gate and used it to roll the calf over. There was a spur branded into the dark hide.

"The Silver Spur ranch is outside San Antonio." Luke looked at Ty. "Cratchet hates you bad to go that far."

"Cratchet!" Willie spat brown tobacco juice on the ground. "Now I know why that no-good polecat stopped after only shootin' a few cows. He figured out it'd take a powerful lot of bullets to do it that way. This way he got the whole herd." He chuckled, squinted eyes gleaming. "Only he ain't."

"Just the best ones," Ty concluded, jamming his hands into his pockets. "We'll take a chance on the main herd for now, just watch them close. Go ahead and do away with these. I'll replace any cartridges you use. And there'll be an extra pay in everyone's pay at the end of the month for this."

Manuel nodded to the men. "Let's get to it."

As Ty walked away, Luke went with him. "If you think it best, I'll ride out and tell the men riding the main herd not to come out here with their horses."

"That makes sense, Luke."

"Then I'll meet you back here." Luke resettled his hat on his dark head. "I reckon you're planning on hunting Cratchet down. You might want someone to watch your back."

Ty nodded. "I'd be obliged."

As Ty mounted his horse, gunshots sounded as the men started doing away with the cattle. His gut clenched. The waste made him sick.

Usually, when something was bothering him, he rode out alone for a while, putting distance between himself and everything else. But right now, all he could think about was Mattie, and he reined the paint toward the ranch. He craved Mattie's gentleness and understanding, and he wanted to smooth out the tangles between them. He wanted to feel her arms around him, for a little while at least, before he gathered supplies and rode back to pick up Cratchet's trail.

One way or another, he was going to put an end to this business with Cratchet.

When he got to the ranch, he discovered she'd gone into town. The empty feeling in his gut grew.

* * *

"Allow me, *senora*." Esteban cradled his Winchester in one arm, and gave Mattie a hand to hold on to while climbing out of the buggy.

Once on the boardwalk, Mattie adjusted her reticule strings on her wrists and straightened her old woolen shawl. The breeze had a damp coolness to it. High clouds had moved in from the northwest, making the sky overcast. The weather matched her mood completely.

Lacking anything else remotely suitable, she'd worn her black mourning bonnet to town, a white shirtwaist, and a black skirt, and she felt about as frumpy as the scarecrow Cookie had put in his vegetable patch to keep birds from eating the seeds. He'd used one of her black dresses for it, and he told her it worked better than any scarecrow he'd ever made.

Lord, new clothes were long past due — not just a dress or two, either. The wonder was that Ty looked at her at all. Or desired her. Almost blushing with the memory of their night together, Mattie thought she was lucky they at least shared that. If he'd given in to demand for a name-only wedding, she wouldn't even have known that closeness or had the memories of their lovemaking to hug close.

Thinking of Ty, an ache began in the region of her heart. How could she feel so close to him when she was in his arms making love to him, and so shut out of his life when she wasn't?

Esteban opened the door of Shirley's shop, and a little bell rang merrily over her head as Mattie went inside, Esteban following dutifully. There were a few displays of fabric and lace and a pattern book on a

table by the window, a couple of chairs, but on the whole the shop was austere. "Oh, hello!" Shirley brightly greeted them as she came through the curtain, which separated the living area in the back from the shop. Her nose and eyes were suspiciously red, as if she'd been crying. "You'll have to excuse me." She tucked a handkerchief into her sleeve. "There's a cat that's taken up residence beneath the back, and those critters have always set me to sneezin'. I'm certain I look a fright."

"I can come back another time," Mattie offered.

"No, no! I won't hear it. You traveled all the way into town for a reason, I'm sure. Besides, I got some lovely fabric in on the freight wagon this morning. I was just in the back unwrapping it. Let me bring it out."

"I could go back with you."

"No!" Shirley snapped. Then, seeming to catch herself, she softened it with a smile. "I mean, it is messy back there and I wouldn't want you to see it. Besides, I need to put the fabric out on display anyway."

Shirley slid through the heavy curtains, closing them behind her. Plainly she didn't want Mattie wandering into the private area where she and her brother stayed.

Mattie thought she caught a glimpse of Trent's rusty red hair as Shirley closed the curtains. If he was as sullen as usual, no doubt that's why Shirley didn't want her back there. His manners had to be an embarrassment to a woman trying to build a successful business.

Mattie turned to her escort and smiled. "Thank you, Esteban. I may be awhile, so if you have something to do while you're in town, please feel free to go on and take care of it," she suggested.

The young man took his job far too seriously. She hardly wanted him underfoot while she discussed bustles and bustlines, in the hope that Shirley could give her advice on dressing for the best effect.

Esteban nodded. "Then I'll wait outside, *senora*."

"Thank you."

As she waited, Mattie studied a display of ribbons and feathers to trim bonnets and hats with. She needed new hats, too.

Lifting a spool of red velvet ribbon, Mattie ran her fingers over it, remembering Ty's passion the night before. A shiver of remembered sensation shimmered through her. Ty found her very attractive wearing nothing at all, she had to admit. Would new dresses make a difference the rest of the time? If she looked prettier, would Ty want to spend more time with her?

No, her practical self warned. Why did she think she might lure him to her side with pretty clothes? Hadn't the children tried the same thing with chicken and dumplings?

As that truth sank in, she lost some of her enthusiasm for a new dress. When Shirley returned with bolts of fabric, sensible Mattie was again in full control. As Shirley spread a pretty red-striped calico on the table, Mattie shook her head. "I guess more sedate colors suit me best."

"Not at all. You were gorgeous in that rose silk for your wedding," the seamstress said.

Mattie had to concede the dress had suited her. "Well, yes. As I was walking down the aisle, I think Ty thought he had the wrong woman. Plain Mattie was hidden in a pretty package."

Shirley cast an uncertain glance at the curtain at the back of the shop, then seemed to force a smile. "I'm sure you exaggerate. Your husband must know you're a pretty woman. He asked you to marry him."

"Why, thank you, Shirley." Surprised by her sincerity, Mattie repented again of all the uncharitable things she'd thought about the redhead in the past. "But ours, as you probably heard if you've spent any time at all around Rosalee, is just a marriage of convenience. Ty needed a wife to take care of his daughter. I have no illusions. If he was besotted, he wouldn't be running off all the time, like this morning."

Mattie settled for a practical style, though Shirley did persuade her to use a bright calico and agreed that more trim and a fuller bustle was in order.

When Mattie rejoined Esteban outside, he asked, "*Senora* there was a man in the back room. Did you see him?" Esteban asked as he helped Mattie climb into the buggy.

"I only glimpsed him, but I'm certain it was Shirley's brother by the red hair. Why?" Mattie settled her skirts.

Esteban shrugged. "So I saw. I only asked because this outlaw, Henry Cratchet, he has red hair also." He slapped the horse's rump with the reins and it started forward. "Where now, *senora*?"

"To the mercantile for a few things." A bag of candy for the children — Tassie, too. "Then we'll pick up Angeline and Nathan at Alma's."

Now that she didn't have to stretch pennies, it was nice to be able to make the children happy with a treat.

But it was funny that being free from worry about where their next meal was coming from hadn't made her happier than it had.

Eighteen

"That's Warburton's wife! Why didn't ya tell me it was her in here?" Henry dropped the window curtain and glared at his sister, grits from his just-finished breakfast still sticking on the corner of his rusty mustache.

"And what would you have done? Shot her?" Shirley shook her head. "I was stupid to ever meet with you, or think you could change, Henry. And I was especially stupid to believe you really just wanted to buy a farm somewhere — get a new start."

"Ain't yer forgettin' that bastard killed yer brothers? And put me in jail to rot? I got plans for Warburton's woman, all right, and his brat. And since Warburton'll be busy killin' cows into the night, this is a good time to take care of the woman and the kid."

"What do you mean, Henry? Don't you go hurtin' Mattie and those kids!" He'd bragged about how he'd infected Ty's herd. Shirley had hoped ruining Ty financially would be enough to satisfy his hate. But at his words, she felt tears burn her eyes. "I thought you were better than Snake and Bad Bob — there was never a bunch that deserved shootin' more, and that's the God's honest truth!"

"I s'pose ya think I need shootin', too? Gonna shoot me, Shirley? Maybe even collect the blood-money on my head and feather this goddamn nest here? Looks to me like yore new friends are a sight more important to ya than yore blood kin!"

"I didn't want to stop in this one-horse town, Henry. It was all yore idea. I didn't want to buy this store and make a shop. The plan was to get Ty Warburton to co-sign the loan for it, then skip town with the money, leaving him to pay it. You're the one who decided I had to go

ahead and start the business, so you'd have a place to hide out. Five hundred dollars would have bought a new start for us all. We should have just ridden away."

"That's enough outta ya!" Henry slammed his fist down on the table, sending cards of lace and spools of ribbons flying in all directions.

Shirley knew she'd pushed him as far as she dared. There was a dangerous glare in his eyes that she recognized all too well. Though Henry had never been as mean as Bad Bob, or Snake, or even Roy Allen, all her brothers had been capable of fits of rage, striking her or anyone else that ran afoul of their temper.

Hadn't they watched their father beat their mother enough times to think that it was the way a man did things?

Why had she believed Henry when he found her in Lake Charles and told her he just wanted to lie low, maybe go to the western territories and start a farm? Coming west, with Trent following, had seemed like the right thing, and it might have been all right if they'd traveled on to New Mexico, like they'd planned. There were enough badlands there, they could have disappeared, claiming new identities.

Now this was all her fault. When she saw the little girl on the train, she never should have gone back to the car where Henry was riding and told him whose daughter she was.

But Shirley had told him and he'd made her get off the train with the child. Now Mattie and those children, and maybe Ty, too, was going to die, and she had herself to blame.

After watching the buggy until it stopped down the streets at the mercantile, Henry buckled on his gun belt.

"I mean it, Henry! Anyway, Ty don't care nothin' about Mattie so you can let her be — he just married her to have someone keep his house and his kid. Everybody in town says so, even her."

"I ain't got no notion when I'll be back."

"Henry!"

He closed the back door in her face.

Leaning against it, Shirley splayed her fingers on the rough surface. What was she to do, now? If she went for the law, Henry would kill her — or beat her so she wished she was dead.

Unless the law took him first. She had to hope they would — before he got to Mattie.

Plucking her shawl from a peg on the wall, Shirley left by the front door. Clara and Zack's house was a mile or two out of town. She set off at a brisk pace.

* * *

"Thank you, Alma." Mattie accepted a saucer with a big slice of apple pie.

"Thank you for the sunbonnet." Alma touched one of the green and pink calico strings.

"It's little enough for all you've done for me. Besides, there was a lot of material left over from Angeline's dress." Mattie smiled. It felt good to be able to hold her head up again and do something for her friends, and not always be the object of charity.

"I recognized the material from the scraps you put on the quilt. Clara and Zack were to carry it over to Red Creek this morning, by the way."

"Zack went, too?" Mattie took a bite of the sweet, cinnamon pie. Seemed like Clara's husband could find a lot of unimportant things to do, when he should be looking for Cratchet.

Alma said, an edge of sarcasm to her voice, "Zack didn't want her going off with only their boys along with Cratchet on the loose still." After glancing in a big iron pot where stew for her boarders' noon meal simmered, she stirred it briskly with a wooden spoon.

Noticing the frown drawing her friend's brows together, Mattie asked, "What's wrong?"

Alma pulled out a chair and sat, clasping her hands on the worktable. "I have a fear that the brigand will be dealin' out troubles aplenty. I haven't wanted to alarm you, now, but I've been havin' this queer feelin' about the whole nasty business."

"It's Ty he's after. But if it worries you to have me and the children here, I'll be happy to leave."

"No, I ain't worried about us!" Alma caught her hand and squeezed. "But I think you might just underestimate how low down this devil might be. To get at Ty, he might try an' burn the house down, with all of you in it, or anythin' else that comes into his head, doncha know. Be careful as you can out on that ranch, you hear? Out in nowhere-and-beyond like that, anythin' might happen!"

"I'll be careful."

"Good. I know you'll think I'm a daft old woman, but men like Cratchet, they're the worst kind of cowards. They think back-shootin' is a fair fight. And wouldn't that be a shame if somethin' happened to one of you, now that you've that fine husband to take care of and a real chance for happiness."

Mattie squeezed Alma's hand then turned her attention to her slice of pie. "I am happy now, Alma."

How could she have said she wasn't happy when she had so much?

* * *

"Looks like he circled back to Medicine Springs." Ty squatted by the trail they'd been following all day. Twilight was settling into dark, and he could barely see anything of the tracks. Otherwise he would have still been in the saddle.

A sense of urgency had been niggling at him all afternoon, a cold feeling in his gut that he needed to find Cratchet before the outlaw struck again. Next time, Ty thought, he would be after more than cows.

But he hadn't been easy to track. The trail had wandered over a large area, seeming to be headed nowhere, often changing directions in no apparent pattern. Ty figured they turned back toward town more often than any other direction. "Do you think Cratchet might have somewhere in town he's been hiding out?"

Luke shrugged. "Seems likely. There's no town law, and I don't think he's got too much to worry about with the county sheriff. Zack isn't gonna do more than put up a few wanted posters."

Ty rose, knowing Rivers was right. Zack didn't go out of' his way to find trouble. The sheriff hadn't tried to track Cratchet down after the last incident. Ty looked for no help from the man now.

"I have to hand it to you, Rivers. You're a little better at trailing than a bloodhound. I lost him last time when he crossed Devil's Hump. When he headed for it again, I thought he'd beat me again."

On Devil's Hump, a limestone promontory three acres wide, the hoofprints had virtually disappeared. Smart, Cratchet had obviously taken the time to scout the area well. But this time, it hadn't thrown them off his trail.

It had been slow going, but each time the trail had seemed to disappear, Luke had found a mark on the rock or scuff on a mossy surface.

Watching the man track, Ty had thought Luke a little too good.

"That coffee ready?"

"About." Lifting the lid, Luke splashed a little cold water from his canteen into the rapidly boiling pot to settle the grounds to the bottom. He lifted it from the fire and filled the cup Ty held out.

"Much obliged." Ty fished a piece of jerky out of his saddlebag.

Pouring a cup of his own, Luke shrugged. "It's your coffee." He leaned back against a pine. "Even though Cratchet looks like he's headed to town, he may just want to lose his trail in all the traffic along the main road. It would be easy enough to double back to the ranch again."

Mattie and the children were there. Ty stared into the black liquid as the thought put a knot in his gut like a fist. Was he really protecting them by staying away? His thought had been to protect them from getting caught in a crossfire if Cratchet tried to shoot him again, like he had down by the creek. But what if Cratchet went after them?

"Damn it. We should split up. I'll ride on to town and you go back to the ranch."

"Now that's what I was thinking. Only, you should go back." Luke sipped his coffee. "I'm the better tracker if he takes off in another direction than we think."

"Now that you mention it, Rivers, you're just a little too damn good. Are you a bounty hunter?"

Luke pushed his dark hat up, giving Ty an assessing look. "Afraid I'll beat you out of the reward?"

Why was the man trying to goad him? Ty was certain of only one thing. There was more to the younger man than met the eye.

"I'm afraid I'll kill you if you put my wife or children in the line of fire trying to collect some damned reward." Ty kept his tone conversational, but it was a promise.

"I don't think Mattie or the young'uns are in danger." Luke set his coffee aside and untied the straps of his own saddlebag, propped on the pine log he was leaning against. "Cratchet wants to destroy you and what means the most to you. And you don't seem to pay your family much heed, so it's obvious you don't care about them all that much."

Ty threw what remained of his coffee into the fire and rose. "Stand up, Rivers."

"That's what Mattie and the kids think, anyway." Ignoring Ty's order, Luke brought a bandanna out of his saddlebag and unwrapped something small and silver. He then tossed Ty a Texas Ranger's badge. "Go on back to the ranch. Esteban's a good man with a gun, but he's young. And it's not his family that might be at risk."

Ty hadn't argued further with Rivers. Going home to the ranch was exactly what his gut had been telling him to do all afternoon. Picking up his saddlebags, he'd left the camp without another word.

And just a few miles from the ranch, when he'd heard shots coming from that direction, he'd put spurs to his tired horse.

Reining to a stop as he topped the hill overlooking the ranch, Ty dismounted, not daring to charge down the hill the way his gut urged him. He had to take care and find out what was going on, or chance walking into a trap.

Looking down on the dead-quiet scene, his exhausted horse pricked up its ears and snorted, scenting the air as it blew, trying to cool off. Sensing the animal's sudden tension, Ty untied the flap over his rifle boot and flipped the leather guard off the Colt on his hip. It could be a coyote or a fox that someone here was hunting, and that the horse now smelled.

It could be. But Ty's instincts told him he wasn't that lucky. He tied his horse to a pine. After taking off his spurs to prevent their jingle from giving him away, he dropped them in his saddlebag. As he slid his rifle out of the boot, the paint raised its head and whinnied. Another horse whinnied in response, but not in the barn. From somewhere in the shadows by the house.

The last quarter of the moon was just rising over the eastern horizon. A distant whippoorwill's call broke the silence of the chill spring night, echoing through the darkness. No lanterns were visible anywhere, not the bunkhouse or the barn. Every man on the ranch would be with the herd, even Cookie. Tomorrow they should reach summer pasture and then head back to the ranch.

Tomorrow could be too late.

Something cold settled between Ty's shoulder blades as he looked over the scene, wondering if Cratchet was in the house. And where Mattie and the children were — *if the bastard had hurt them . . . !*

Forcing himself to remain calm, to think logically, he made his way down the hill as silently as he could, his boots sliding and slipping on

dead pine needles, expecting rifle fire to spit in the darkness every time a dry stick cracked underfoot.

At the bottom of the hill, still in the cover of the trees, he scanned the porch and the area around it, trying to pry into the deep shadows. Where was Esteban?

Not seeing the young man, Ty guessed he was dead. The knot of dread coiled tighter.

Damn it, this was his fault. He should have guessed Cratchet would double back and get at him through Mattie and the children.

Ty's heart clenched.

As he neared the house, he crouched and ran, intent on making it to the porch. When his foot slipped on dewslick grass, he went down with a hard thud. Rolling quickly to the latticework edging under the porch, he tried to control his breathing and listen, six-shooter raised, rifle in hand.

He heard a growl and a frightened squeak, whispers and the click of a cock being thumbed back. But not from inside the house.

The sounds were from beneath the porch.

Remembering the hole in the latticework off the side, Ty's heart slammed into his ribs in relief. "Nathan, Angeline? Are you under there?" he whispered, hardly daring to hope he'd really heard them.

"Papa?"

"Mr. Ty!"

Spot barked.

"Sssh! You must be quiet!" came an urgent whisper. "*Senor Ty?* We are under here. I am shot."

Crouching low, Ty made his way into the opening, and immediately had two pairs of arms wound around his neck. Putting the rifle aside, he hugged Nathan and Angeline to him. They were frightened and shivering.

"I knew you would come!" Angeline whispered fervently. "When the bad man shot Esteban, Nathan and I were in my bedroom looking out of the window and saw it! He kicked him and thought he was dead.

"When Mama came out and started yelling at him, he grabbed her and forced her inside. He shouted at her to get me, then she started crying. We climbed out the window and down the drainpipe, and helped Esteban hide. Then I prayed and prayed really hard, then I wished on a falling star, even though it isn't my birthday!"

"Sssh. I'm here. I'm here!" Ty searched the darkness behind them. He made out Esteban's white shirt and the big yellow dog Esteban was restraining. "Mattie is still inside?"

"*Sí, señor.*" Esteban's whispered words sounded weak.

One thing at a time, Ty reminded himself, forcing himself to ignore the surge of pure fear the young man's words sent through him. Ty hugged the children, trying to reassure them without words, and promised himself he'd kill Cratchet for putting them through this.

And he'd kill him slowly if he'd touched Mattie.

"How badly are you hurt, Esteban?"

"Shot through the leg, *Señor Ty*, and a graze on the side of my head. I was unconscious and I think he left me for dead. I have stopped the bleeding, now."

Ty said to the children, "You stay here with Esteban and help him hold Spot until I come back."

Both started to cry in protest.

"Sssh! I have to help Mattie." Ty unwound their arms, feeling wetness on his cheeks. "Stay here and don't come out for anything. If you don't hold Spot, he might get hurt."

"What if you don't come back?" Nathan asked, fear in the urgent whisper.

"I'll try my very best to come back," Ty reassured him. "But if you hear shots and I don't come back, you must take care of your sister. Take her into the woods and hide. Do you understand? Hide until you see someone you know."

Ty sensed the boy shaking his head. Angeline hugged him again. Unwinding her arms, Ty whispered, "I have to go help Mattie."

She nodded and the two moved back into the shadows, hugging Spot between them.

Ty asked, "Is Cratchet alone?"

"*Sí.*"

"Try to stay alert, Esteban. You may yet get a shot at Cratchet."

"It is my fondest hope, *señor.*"

Nineteen

Ty found Cratchet's horse tied behind the house. Untying the reins, he looped them loosely over the animal's neck and gave it a light swat. Freed, it ambled toward the water trough by the barn. He would have liked to slap its rump and send it running, but the sound would alert Cratchet that he was out here.

If Cratchet didn't already know.

Turning Mattie's washtub over, Ty stood on it and eased close to the back window. He was almost deafened by the sound of his heart beating.

A faint light issued from inside. Peeking through the pane, Ty saw a candle on the kitchen table. Mattie sat on a chair, her back to him, her shoulders slumped. Ty's heart twisted.

Half hidden behind her, Cratchet sat across the table from her, swilling coffee and smoking one of Ty's cigars. There was an empty plate on the table and a rifle propped against the wall.

Raising his rifle, Ty sighted at the half of Cratchet's head visible behind Mattie, itching to take a shot.

But he couldn't chance it. If she turned suddenly or tilted her head an inch to the side just as he pulled the trigger, he could hit her. And even if she sat still, the glass might deflect the bullet just enough to redirect it.

Damn!

Lowering the weapon, Ty watched as Mattie looked toward the door, as if waiting for him to crash through it and save her. He saw her split lip and half-unbound hair — it looked like the chocolate waves had been yanked from the knot atop her head.

He decided Cratchet needed killing.

He should have attended to it five years ago.

Watching Cratchet draw on the cigar, Ty remembered the broken latch on the bedroom window and hoped Mattie hadn't had it fixed.

* * *

As Mattie watched apprehensively, Cratchet sucked hard on the foul-smelling cigar, making the tip glow red, then looked at it, letting the smoke roll around in his mouth before inhaling. He blew it out in Mattie's face. "Where's the girl?"

"I told you, I don't — "

As he brought his fist down on the table, making coffee slosh out of the cup, Mattie jumped, her heart thudding in her ears.

"Ya sung that there song too many times. I think ya do know, and yer'll tell me, by God! Where's Warburton's brat?"

"I don't know! You were with me. We looked everywhere upstairs. I . . . I guess she ran away when you shot Esteban. She's terribly afraid of guns, that child is." Mattie had seen the open window leading onto the balcony and hoped Nathan and Angeline found a safe way down. And that they had run and kept on running. She prayed they had.

She thought of poor Esteban, lying dead in the front yard. Cratchet hadn't even had the decency to let her tend his body or cover him up.

The outlaw leaned forward on his elbows. "I *said*, where'd she go? I been real patient, now." He caught her hand in a crushing grip.

Trying not to flinch, Mattie looked up at him. "Well, that child runs away all the time! How am I to know how long she'll be gone? She'll probably come back when she gets hungry."

His gaze slid to the vee of her blouse, where a button had torn off when he'd grabbed her as they'd struggled earlier.

"No." Mattie tried to jerk her hand free.

Without a word, Cratchet stood and forced her to her feet, After slapping his empty plate off the table, he bent her backward over her cutwork tablecloth, ripping the rest of the buttons off her blouse. Feeling his hand on her flesh made Mattie want to retch.

But fighting him did no good.

"Here on the table?" Mattie tried to make her voice soft and seductive.

The outlaw pulled back slightly, eyeing her suspiciously.

"I mean, I think that's a real fine idea, but wouldn't you like it better if I pleased you in bed?" She batted her eyelashes.

Cratchet let her regain her feet, obviously liking the idea. "Get to the bed."

"This way." Smiling coyly, Mattie led the way. There was nothing in the kitchen she could use as a weapon — nothing the bastard would let her get close to, anyway.

Keeping his hand tangled in her hair, he'd watched her closely as she'd served him food, making certain she had no opportunity to grab a knife or skillet. But in the bedroom, he might let down his guard, and she could grab the scissors she'd left in there by the bed. Mattie knew she would kill him, if God only gave her the chance. She would kill him before he hurt Angeline or Nathan or Ty.

"What's this game yer playin' at?" As they entered the bedroom, he yanked her hair harder, making tears form in her eyes from the pain.

"Nothing!"

He set the candle he'd brought with them down on the bedside table, and Mattie saw the scissors. Just out of reach.

"Ya fought me before hard enough when I first caught ya, and I had to wallop ya. What's yer game now, bitch?" He yanked her hair again, making Mattie cry out in pain.

"Nothing! Nothing! I only thought you'd be a bit nicer to me, if I was nice to you." Mattie tried to stem the tears.

"I like the id-ee of havin' Warburton's woman in his own bed." He smiled, spreading the rusty red mustache above his tobacco-stained teeth. Pulling her hair, he forced her face close to his. Then putting his gun barrel to her temple, he said, "Tell yer what. If 'n yer a real good hump, I might not blow yer brains out after."

As he threw Mattie across the bed and grabbed the buttons on his breeches with his free hand, the bedroom door swung closed behind him.

"Drop the gun, Cratchet."

Stepping out of the shadows, Ty put the barrel of his Peacemaker behind the outlaw's ear. "Real easy."

Standing frozen, Cratchet opened his fingers and his pistol hit the floor. Ty kicked it under the bed.

Only then did he dare to look at Mattie. There was a purpling bruise on her cheek, in addition to her split lip. Her blouse had been ripped open.

"Mattie, are you all right?"

Sitting up on the bed, she pulled her blouse together and nodded, tears wetting her cheeks.

Ty punched the gun barrel into Cratchet's back. "Down on the floor."

Seemingly complacent, the outlaw went down on one knee, but whipped a derringer from his boot.

Mattie cried out as Cratchet turned the small but deadly gun toward Ty, and she kicked Cratchet with all her might.

Too late. The explosion rocked the room.

Blue smoke and the acrid scent of burned powder filled the air. All she could see through the haze was Ty falling backward and the gunman thumbing back the cock for the second barrel.

Holding the bedpost, Mattie kicked the kneeling outlaw again, connecting with his jaw and snapping his head back. He fell over, but caught himself with one hand, scrambling back to his knees.

"Bitch!" Cratchet pointed the little two-barrel at her.

Though Ty felt as though a mule had kicked him in the chest, like he might never draw breath again, he lifted his gun and fired at Cratchet, hitting him in the shoulder. The derringer flew from Cratchet's hand as the outlaw fell, screaming in pain.

The man scrambled for the derringer and grasped it again with his other hand. Rolling over, he pointed it at Ty.

Ty fired again, and a bullet tore into Cratchet's side. The outlaw fired at the same time, his shot going wide, thudding into the door behind Ty's head.

The derringer empty, Cratchet managed to gain his feet and staggered through the door, cradling his right arm. Ty squeezed off another shot, but saw it splinter the door frame.

The rifle was in the kitchen.

Forcing himself to his feet, Ty stumbled after Cratchet and shot again as the outlaw grabbed at the Winchester propped against the wall. Ty hit the weapon, knocking it out of Cratchet's grasp. Sinking to his knees as weakness threatened to overcome him, Ty steadied his six-shooter in both hands, trying to remember how many rounds he'd fired. It was getting hard to think.

Giving up on the rifle, Cratchet lunged through the back door and disappeared into the dark outside.

Mattie had followed, her hand over her mouth to still her cries. The outlaw's footsteps seemed inordinately loud as he staggered through

the door. When he was outside, she flew to the door and slammed it, driving home the bolt.

When Mattie turned, Ty had slid down the wall and was sitting with it at his back. Kneeling beside him, her tears flowed unchecked as she promised him he'd be all right.

Ty caught her hand as she tried to look at his wound. "Get something to stop the bleeding."

Mattie pulled a sheet off the bed and ripped it into strips. As she returned to the kitchen, she heard a horse gallop by.

"The bastard's getting away." Ty struggled to get to his feet, but ended up sitting flat on the floor again, the wall all that kept him upright. Blood covered his shirt.

She pressed the pad against the wound. "Be still!"

Tenderness and caring twisted Mattie's face. He wanted to tell her he didn't deserve it. Stupid bastard that he was, to not realize Cratchet would go after her and the children. He didn't deserve her concern at all. He'd let this happen.

Catching her hand, Ty said, "I'll hold it. Go see. The children and Esteban — under the porch."

"Nathan and Angeline are all right?" She wiped the tears from her eyes, rising.

Ty nodded. "Esteban needs quilts, covers. You can't move him."

"Esteban's alive?" Mattie wiped her eyes again and looked at him, obviously reluctant to leave him. "Press that tightly against the wound. Do you understand, Ty?"

Nodding again, Ty said, "Go!"

As her footsteps receded, Ty leaned his head back against the wall and thought of all the chest wounds he'd seen in the war. And all the scared, sick looks on the faces of the men that had them. There was usually little hope.

But he could breathe fairly well. It hurt like hell, but he could breathe. The bullet had missed his lungs, by some miracle.

That was good. He didn't have time to die. Cratchet had gotten away again, and Ty didn't think the outlaw had received a killing wound. He had to protect Mattie and the children.

This time, he wouldn't fail.

Picking up his gun, he flipped the empty shells out and reloaded it.

Mattie knelt beside the opening in the latticework, able to see little in the darkness under the porch. "*Nathan? Angeline?*" she whispered.

"*Mama, mama!*" Nathan and Angeline tumbled out of their hiding place, and Mattie caught them in a hug. Spot barked enthusiastically.

"*Sssh! Quiet, Spot!*" Nathan said.

"Oh, Mama, I was worried that the bad man hurt you!" Angeline cried.

Nathan nodded, wiping his nose on his sleeve "It was hard to stay still, but I knew Mr. Ty would make everything okay."

"I'm just fine now," she assured them. "But we have to help Esteban."

"I am all right, *senora*." His voice was far from strong.

Crawling under the porch, she caught the young man's hand, just as several shots sounded somewhere beyond the top of the hill.

"I think the b-bad m-man, he r-ran into trouble," Esteban said. There was a smile in his voice, despite his teeth chattering.

Mattie wished Cratchet dead and prayed God would forgive her for the thought. Touching Esteban's hand, she said, "How badly are you hurt?"

"Not bad. Just c-cold."

After telling Nathan and Angeline to stay with Esteban, Mattie went to get the quilts from her bed and to check on Ty. She found him sprawled facedown, and her heart rocked painfully in her chest. Turning him over, she discovered he was still breathing, but the bleeding had started again.

Pressing the pad of cloth against the wound, she held it until the flow was stemmed. Only after adding a new pad and making certain that he was no longer bleeding did she hurry back outside with quilts.

After tucking the covers around Esteban, she made Spot lie down beside him and the children hug him on either side, throwing another quilt over them.

"Where's Papa?" Angeline asked uncertainly.

It was the question she'd been dreading. Mattie smoothed the child's hair. "He's inside and he's hurt. Just a little hurt — I need to go back to him now. But he's not as cold as Esteban. Esteban needs you to stay and help keep him warm." She didn't want them to see Ty like he was.

Mattie met the young man's eyes, barely visible in the half-light. He seemed to understand her silent plea.

"S-sí. I n-need you w-with m-me," he told the children, shivering each word out.

As Mattie climbed back out into the open, she hoped she had told the truth. *Please, God, let Ty just be a little hurt! Let it not be as bad as it looked.*

Back inside she found Ty had lost consciousness. She sat on the floor beside him and placed Ty's head in her lap. Watching by the faint light of the candle she'd brought from the bedroom, she'd made certain the bleeding was stopped.

After what seemed an eternity, but could only have been a short while, hoofbeats sounded outside. Mattie's heart leapt into her throat. Then she realized it was more than one horse — Crachet *hadn't* come back. Zack and two men she didn't know strode through the door into the kitchen.

After she told them what had happened, the sheriff took charge. As they helped Mattie get Ty in bed and covered, Zack told her that they'd shot at a mounted man on the road when he'd refused to stop, but he'd gotten away in the dark. Zack stayed with Ty as the two deputies went with Mattie to get Esteban from beneath the porch.

Kneeling down, Mattie said, "You can come out now." Catching her children to her in a fierce hug as they tumbled out, she told them, "The sheriff's here. It's over now. You did just fine! But I need you to help a little longer. Can you do that?"

Each child nodded. Spot poked his nose in the circle and whined.

"Fine. Go inside. Hurry. Take Spot with you. Wash up as best you can and get ready for bed. I'll be up as soon as I get Esteban taken care of. Now go on."

"Yes ma'am." Nathan caught Spot's string collar. The dog was more than glad to go with him.

"Are you sure Papa is all right?" Angeline asked.

"He is hurt, and I need to go help him. Now go on."

As the child obeyed, the men hauled Esteban, groaning, from beneath the porch. Mattie hoped his wounds didn't open again.

"Put him in the kitchen where it's warm," Mattie ordered, and picking up her skirts, ran on ahead. She dragged the narrow mattress from Ty's back room cot out beside the stove and found fresh blankets.

Once they had him settled and the blankets tucked around him, Mattie gave Esteban water, though it seemed to intensify his chill.

"You didn't start bleeding again. Barring infection, you should mend fine." Zack washed his hands in the wash basin. "I've sent a man to fetch Doc White to get those slugs out. It's about thirty miles to Red Creek from here. He should be back with him by first light."

"Sí. How is *Senor Ty*?"

The sheriff took the globe off the kerosine lamp and lit the lamp with the candle. "That's what I plan to find out right now."

She followed as Zack carried the lamp into the bedroom, and she grew more afraid with each step. *What would she do if he wasn't?*

"I need to check and make sure he hasn't started bleeding again."

"Pepper's with him, Mattie. He'll be watching for bleeding. And I've dressed wounds before. You go take care of those young'uns. They're mighty scared." Zack patted her shoulder.

Torn between the need to take care of Ty herself and to reassure the children, Mattie hesitated. But Zack was right. Angeline and Nathan had been through so very much, she needed to go to them. And these men knew more about wounds than she did.

Fighting back tears that threatened anew, Mattie went in to Angeline's bedroom.

"Do you promise Papa's all right, Mama?" Angeline had pulled off her shoes and dirty pinafore and was struggling with the hooks at the back of her dress.

The question weighing like a cannonball on her heart, Mattie helped the girl take off her dress and underthings and slip into her nightgown. "You and Nathan stay in your bed until all the excitement's over. You don't have to go to sleep. Spot can stay where he is on the rug."

Hearing his name, the big yellow dog raised his head. He looked as worried as Mattie felt. Lowering his head to his paws, he whimpered.

Buttoning the child's nightgown, Mattie said, "I'd like to just curl up in here with you, but Ty might need me to fetch him something."

Dressed in his nightshirt, Nathan came running in, tears in his eyes, and ran to his mother. "I'm scared the bad man will come back."

"You won't be scared here with your sister, will you?" Mattie held the cover and he crawled into the bed, then gave him a hug.

"I'll try not to. She might get scared, too."

"Will not."

"Will too!"

Mattie set the candle she'd brought with them on the hearth. "I'll leave this burning here, so you'll have light."

"Do you promise, Mama?" Angeline asked again, almost desperately. "Papa's all right?"

Mattie sighed. "I can't promise, but I believe he will be. I believe he'll be just fine." She had to believe that. She needed him too much for him not to be. These children needed him, too. At the door, she paused. "I know one thing for sure — Ty is very proud of how brave the two of you are."

Twenty

After making a small incision on Ty's side, Doc White plucked the lead slug from just beneath the skin and dropped it into the washbasin, then put his forceps aside. "The Lord just didn't want you, Warburton."

"I can believe that," Ty gritted out, sitting on the bed, propped against the footboard to expose his side.

"Not many men get shot in the middle of the chest and survive," the old doctor went on conversationally as he picked up a rolled bandage and began wrapping it tightly around Ty's cracked ribs. "The slug just hit your breastbone and skidded across your ribs, winding up under your arm."

Ty felt cold sweat pop out on his forehead as the old doctor tightened down on the strip and tied it off. "Will that do it?"

"Should." The doctor gathered his instruments.

"Thanks. How's Esteban?"

"He'll be all right, with time. He'll take a mite more healing than you, and that leg will stiffen up if he lets it."

Ty nodded, his eyes closed against the pain of breathing.

Doc White gave him a glass of water. As Ty drank it, he tasted a strange bitter taste, and spit it out in the washbasin.

"It's just laudanum, to help you rest." Looking over his half-lensed glasses, Doc frowned.

"Much obliged, Doc. But I don't want to sleep too sound. All my men are out driving the herd to summer pasture. And Cratchet's still out there." Manuel and the men should get back late that afternoon. Until then, Ty wanted to stay alert.

"Well, I'll leave this here, if you change your mind." Doc picked up his case. "I want to have one more look at the other fellow."

As the doctor left, closing the door after him, Ty lay back and tried to find a way to breathe that didn't hurt. The slug had cracked his ribs as it skidded across them — but that wasn't what was keeping him down. When he sat up, the room spun. Doc had said that was just loss of blood and nature's way of telling him to stay still.

But he couldn't. Not as long as Cratchet was out there.

Ty's gut twisted with the truth. He'd failed. He'd told Mattie he'd build a safe life for her and her son, and instead, he'd put them through hell by not keeping them safe.

He'd failed Angeline, too.

Outside Ty's bedroom, Mattie leaned against the wall, tears flowing down her cheeks. Doc White paused and patted her hand. "There, there. He'll be fine."

"That's why I'm crying. I'm so relieved." Pulling a handkerchief from her sleeve, she wiped her eyes and straightened her spine. She had to be strong for the children. If they saw her crying, it would frighten them. After all they'd been through, they frightened all too easily. "Let me get you a cup of coffee, Doc."

"I shouldn't care for any, thank you. But I will have another word with my other patient."

"Of course." As she preceded him into the kitchen, Mattie tucked her handkerchief back into her sleeve and firmly told herself to stop letting her emotions rule her.

Why she wanted to cry and cry, she couldn't fathom. She hadn't shed a tear when Jonas Idyll died, struck with apoplexy during a fit of rage.

Ty wasn't Jonas. Ty was good and giving, and he'd been protecting her and their children when he'd been shot.

And he was going to be all right. She had to believe that.

Consuela and her teenaged daughter were with Esteban, who was pale, but alert on his pallet behind the stove.

As Doc went to talk with the young man, Consuela asked Mattie, "What is wrong? Is it Ty?"

Shaking her head, Mattie managed a smile. "He's going to be all right. But I still don't quite believe it. I'm still afraid. . . ." She felt the beginnings of new tears and, drawing in a deep breath, firmly forbade them to fall.

Consuela patted her hand, much as the doctor had. "It is very natural, *senora*. But you must not fret."

Mattie said, "I don't believe I shall ever relax again. I have the children playing upstairs because I can't bear the thought of them being outside."

The older woman nodded understandingly. "When this bad man is caught, you will feel right again." She shook her head. "It is hard to imagine such hate. When we heard the shots last night, we knew there was trouble. But with all the men gone on the drive, even little Juan, all we could do was wait, not knowing. And then, there were more shots and the sheriff came with news of Esteban."

"I felt so helpless when I watched Ty get shot. So frightened for him . . ."

"You love him very much." Consuela's look was sympathetic. Her daughter smiled.

Shocked, Mattie searched for the right words to deny it. That wasn't what she felt at all. She looked on Ty as a friend. A dear friend. He'd been honest about all things with her. He'd taught her to trust him in a way she'd never been able to trust anyone before. He was a dear friend, like Alma. She would have been as worried about Alma, if Alma had been shot.

Wouldn't she?

Doc straightened after examining Esteban once more. "You can move this young man to your cabin when your husband gets back, so you can tend him better. But I won't have him putting any pressure on that leg. See that he's carried on a plank, or rig some kind of stretcher."

He looked at Mattie, including her. "Feed both of them lots of broth and soup. Keep the bandages clean. I've left salve for each of you to apply to the wounds before bandaging. I'll be by to check on both patients tomorrow."

"Thank you, Doctor, for everything." Consuela smiled.

"I'll see you to your buggy," Mattie offered.

After the doctor's buggy was rolling down the drive, Mattie turned her face up to the bright sunshine, wishing it could erase the chill she felt inside.

It was over, she kept reminding herself. She'd seen Cratchet wounded. If he didn't die right out, he'd be in no shape to continue to cause them trouble. And Zack and his deputies were looking for his trail. If Cratchet did live, he'd soon be behind bars again.

Then why wouldn't this feeling of foreboding go away?

As she went back inside, she found Angeline and Nathan sitting on the stairs, subdued, Spot between them.

"Nathan wants to go see Papa, but I told him we had to ask," Angeline said.

"You want to go, too," Nathan declared.

"Well, what if I do?"

"I think I'd better see if Ty is awake first," Mattie said decisively. "Wait here."

After knocking lightly, Mattie eased Ty's door open and found him lying flat on his back, staring at the ceiling. "You're awake. Feel up to a little company?"

He turned to her, a hint of a smile stretching his chiseled mouth. "Come in. I was half expecting you to pack up and head for Baltimore."

She closed the door behind her and moved to the side of the bed. Ty caught her hand. "Your eyes are red. Have you slept at all?"

"No." She looked at his strong brown fingers twined with her pale ones. The blanket was pulled up to his waist. A white bandage bound his chest. His face was pale beneath his tan.

"I'm so sorry, Mattie." His voice was filled with self-recrimination.

"Why?"

"I should have protected you."

"You tried." She squeezed his fingers reassuringly.

"That's not good enough." His gaze met hers, then skittered away. He slipped his hand free and smoothed the edge of the blanket. "I should have sent you and the children back east. Maybe you could have visited your father and made amends."

"No. I wanted to be here." Mattie wanted to ease his guilt, but she was at a loss as to how. "We're a family. We face things together."

Most men took care of their families, kept them safe. Ty's hand curled into the blanket. "My horse, did Zack say he'd brought him to the barn? Or was I dreaming?"

"The paint is safe in the barn." Mattie was aware that he'd deliberately changed the subject. Well, she could play at that, too. "I have two little people out here who are very anxious to see you." She turned for the door.

"No."

"Ty?"

"I don't want to upset them, Mattie. They shouldn't see me like this."

"They are worried about you. All the reassurances I give them won't do a bit of good if they don't see you for themselves. They will worry more and think the worst."

She thought for a moment he'd refuse, but after a second Ty nodded and she let the children in.

"Papa!" Angeline rushed across the room, Nathan on her heels.

"Be careful," Mattie warned. "Don't hug him too hard. He has hurt ribs."

Wide-eyed, Angeline stopped by the bedside. "Will I hurt you if I give you a little hug?"

Ty touched his daughter's cheek, then closed his eyes. "Not at all, Angel-child."

Sighing, Angeline laid her cheek against his and hugged him. A look of pain crossed Ty's face, causing Mattie concern. Was she pressing his broken ribs?

"My turn!" Nathan waited impatiently until Angeline moved, then thrust out his small hand. Ty took it, and Nathan gave him a manly handshake. "I guess I'm too old to hug."

"But I'm not." He tousled Nathan's hair then wrapped an arm around the little boy and drew him down to his shoulder for a hug.

"We heard the gunshots!" Nathan pulled back and stared wide-eyed at the white bandage.

"Then we saw the bad man riding away," Angeline added. "I was scared."

"I was, too," Nathan admitted, digging his bare toe into the Turkish carpet.

"It's all right to be afraid," Ty told them. He met Mattie's gaze. "I was."

"Not you!" Nathan shook his head.

"No." Angeline looked shocked.

Before he could answer, Mattie said, "While you have company, I'm going to the barn to feed the horses."

Ty looked like he didn't like the idea of her leaving, but she slipped out of the door, closing it softly behind her.

If anything good had come out of this, Mattie thought, it was that the children finally had Ty's undivided attention. The pity was it had come at so high a price. For all of them.

If Cratchet wasn't caught, she wanted to discuss sending the children somewhere safe, until all this was over. But not today. Today, they needed to accept that their world was still intact, if shaken.

Before going out to the barn, Mattie took a ham wrapped in burlap out of the larder and carried it into the kitchen. Consuela offered to wash it for her and put it to boil, while Mattie went on and tended to the stock. After thanking Consuela, Mattie took the egg basket with her and escaped the confines of the house.

The worst was over, she assured herself. Things looked so much better than they had last night, when she'd sat by her husband's side in the dark waiting for the doctor to arrive. Now she knew he'd be all right.

It bothered her that he blamed himself, when a madman was at fault. There was no way Ty could have foreseen this coming.

Mattie kept thinking of how much he'd given her. She hadn't wanted to marry him. After having lived under the constant crushing pressure of a husband who wanted to dominate her every thought and action, she hadn't wanted to trade her independence for prison again. But Ty had never tried to make her feel small or stupid.

With patience and understanding, he'd set her free, taught her to accept herself for who she was, accept her woman's feelings as natural. She loved his gentleness, his humor. His sense of honor . . .

Mattie's steps faltered and she closed her eyes as the truth hit her like a runaway freight wagon.

She loved her husband.

Consuela was right, after all.

And love had never been a part of their agreement. Not for Ty. Angeline's mother had destroyed his belief in love.

Drawing in a deep breath of the sweet spring air, Mattie opened her eyes. A pair of red-shouldered hawks circled in an aerial ballet over a distant hill, as if celebrating being together. Mockingbirds sang and in the barnyard sparrows pecked for seeds.

The important thing was Ty was alive, and he was going to be all right. She'd do everything in her power to make certain that he got well without any setbacks.

And she had his friendship. That would have to be enough.

Opening the door, Mattie propped it back against the side of the barn with a stick to let the fresh air inside. The dark interior smelled

of hay and horse and feed. The animals inside nickered or snorted at her in greeting as Mattie went about the business of filling water buckets. As she approached the last stall with water, Ty's big paint rolled its eyes and snorted.

"What's a'matter, fella?" Mattie reached to stroke its nose. Agitated, it stomped its forefoot and shook its head.

"What has you so upset?" The horse wasn't used to being stalled, but was out every day with Ty. "You're just restive, aren't you, fella? Ty will be well soon, and have you saddled again. Probably sooner than he should, knowing him."

Standing on tiptoe, she poured fresh water into the tub in the corner, then poured a peck of cracked oats into the feed trough built into the other corner. As the paint crunched the oats, it was mollified somewhat.

After finishing with the other horses, Mattie picked up the pitchfork and headed for the hay rack in the center of the barn to toss them some hay. Loud squawks erupted and a blur of feathers streaked from beneath the rack, making her heart jump into her throat. Her hand on her chest, Mattie watched her old dominecker hen race through the door into the sunshine. The paint snorted, pawing the ground.

"It's okay, fella. If she scares me like that again, she'll end up in a pot of dumplings," Mattie promised, then bent and looked under the rack, pleased to find a nest with six eggs.

Mattie went back and got the wire egg basket from the shelf by the door, where she'd left it, and placed five of the eggs inside, careful to leave one in the nest so the hen would continue to lay there. As she straightened, a piece of hay floated down from the loft overhead.

Watching as the straw drifted down and settled on the barn floor, a cold finger seemed to slide between her shoulder blades. Was someone in the hay loft?

She shook her head. Her imagination was running away with her, making her jump at shadows. But to be sure, she picked up the pitchfork again and climbed the ladder into the loft.

"Meeeeooooow!"

As Mattie stuck her head through the opening into the loft, Cookie's gray tabby cat stood and stretched. She eyed the animal with relief, then started back down.

It was time for this business with Crachet to end. She wouldn't go through life jumping at shadows!

* * *

Damn. Warburton's woman had said the bastard was alive. If shooting square in the chest didn't kill Warburton, what did he have to do to the man to make him die?

Cratchet lay hidden behind the hay and stared at the rafters. This hadn't gone like he'd planned at all. He'd been waiting in her shop when Shirley came back yesterday. After finding out she'd tried to turn him in, he'd dealt with his sister and ridden on out here to finish things off. It hadn't been how he wanted to do it. He'd wanted to take his time and watch Warburton suffer, but Shirley Jean's tattling had made him step up his plans.

Cratchet wrapped his good arm over his middle as a fit of coughing took him, sending fire through the wound in his side and the one in his shoulder.

As the spell subsided, he wondered how Warburton had gotten the drop on him last night. His luck was just plain bad. Like running into those men as he was riding out and his horse stumbling and throwing him off. If the three could catch their arses with both hands, he'd have been in jail.

Crawling into a stump hole, he'd hidden as they'd chased his damn horse through the woods. Then he stumbled back here.

It was time to finish this.

After he rested and regained his strength. He'd have killed the woman when she came into the barn, if he'd been rested.

Tonight. Warburton wouldn't be expecting anything tonight.

Shaking with chills, Cratchet pulled an oilskin he'd found in the tack room around his shoulders and burrowed into the hay, making plans.

Twenty-One

After he'd sent them from the room, Ty heard Angeline's and Nathan's laughter floating down from upstairs. He was glad they were getting past their fears, that he'd been able to reassure them.

God knew, they should have had no faith at all in what he said. He'd let this trouble come to them. Looking back now, he could see the wisest thing would have been to send them away when it started. But arrogant ass that he was, he'd thought he could keep them safer here.

Angeline and Nathan's belief in him stung deep. This morning, when Mattie had let them into the room, they'd looked at him like he was their savior, hugging him like he deserved their love, when he'd failed them so miserably.

It reminded him of when he'd come home from the war, how his father and mother had given him a hero's welcome he didn't deserve, refusing even to talk about John's death or accept that he was to blame.

Ty slowly rolled on his side and pushed up to a sitting position. The room spun and nausea grabbed him, but he fought it back. He needed to get back on his feet. Cratchet was somewhere out there. Plumping his pillows against the headboard, he settled for sitting upright in bed for right now.

Sometime later, a light knock sounded on the bedroom door and Mattie came into the room, carrying a steaming bowl balanced on a tin plate and a cup of coffee. The soup smelled of ham and potatoes, but Ty had no appetite for it.

"Good. You're sitting up. That will make eating easier. I looked for a serving tray." She shook her head. "This is what I came up with."

She set the makeshift tray on a dining room chair she'd brought in earlier for Dr. White. As she unfolded a linen towel she'd had draped over her arm, she looked at him, concern drawing her winged brows together. "How are you feeling?"

Leaning forward, wincing as he lifted his arm, Ty plucked a piece of hay from her hair and studied it. "I could have fed the animals, Mattie." Well, he thought he could have.

Narrowed gray eyes met his as she spread the towel over his lap and up on his chest. "Not if I'd had to tie you down, Ty Warburton."

Catching her wrist, he compelled her to sit on the edge of the bed. "Full of fire," he murmured softly, touching her cheek. Her caring was almost more than he could bear, "Mattie, I don't deserve you."

She had been courageous last night. By kicking Cratchet when she had, Ty knew she had saved his life. If Cratchet had fired the second barrel point-blank, he would have died.

Brave Mattie had made the bastard turn it on her.

Moisture in her eyes, she caught his hand and pressed a warm kiss against his palm."

"Mattie . . ." He pulled her to him, aching because he had failed her so badly — a soul-deep ache that overshadowed the pain in his chest.

She tensed. In his arms was where she longed to be, but she didn't want to hurt him. She gingerly pressed her cheek against his shoulder and found the feel of his warm skin reassuring.

He gently stroked her hair, as if she was delicate and precious. Closing her eyes, she savored the feeling his caresses invoked. But his actions only sprang from friendship. She reminded herself not to read too much into being in his arms.

"You've been through so much," he whispered. "Ah, Mattie, how can I ever make it up to you?"

Mattie thought she felt him press a kiss into her hair. "Is it over now?" she asked.

"I don't know. Listen, I'm so sorry. Sorry I married you. You wouldn't have been caught up in all this if you hadn't been my wife."

"Don't say that!" she said, pulling back. "This wasn't your fault! You can't be responsible for what a rabid dog does!"

He said nothing, but she knew he felt completely responsible. She could see it in his eyes. "No, Ty Warburton. You aren't God. You can't foresee the future or control it if you did."

Mattie stroked his cheek, pale under his tan. She liked the rough feel of his beard under her fingers, harsh and male. She could never get enough of touching him, caressing him, she realized.

A lock of sandy-blond hair had fallen over his forehead, and it looked boyish and endearing. Looking into his eyes, she read his pain and his belief that he had caused all their troubles and she wanted to protest, to find the words to push the self-recrimination out of his mind.

Why did he refuse to see the truth, when he was so very wise in other ways?

She touched his mouth, remembering the feeling of his lips on hers and how his kisses had brought her to life. He'd shown her how deep her misconceptions ran, revealed how much she was missing.

His eyes darkening, Ty kissed her fingers, and shivers of sensation ran up her arm.

"You'd better watch out, Mrs. Warburton. I'll have you in this bed."

"You'd better watch out, Mr. Warburton, I'll have *you* in that bed." Smiling into his eyes, she was proud of herself for making a joke and not blushing.

"Ah, Mattie." He smiled, loving her easiness and laughter, grateful for all the barriers she'd allowed him to pass. "I'd like nothing more. But what I'll be able to do with you when you get in here is uncertain." He looked at his lap and grinned ruefully. "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

"You can't stand alone, Ty. I'd be surprised if that part of you could stand, either."

"Should I use a crutch?"

Mattie blinked. "How would you . . . You can't be. . . ."

Her face flamed as she tried to imagine it, and Ty laughed aloud. The sound soothed something fretful in her soul.

"Oh, Ty. Last night I was afraid I'd never hear you laugh again." She gave in to the need to touch him once more and cupped his cheek. What would she have done if he had died? Now that he'd taught her to live, she needed him as part of her life, always.

"I'm so sorry you ever had reason to worry, Mattie." He caught her hand, pressing it closer.

Looking into his eyes, seeing his concern, she felt such a rush of love she wondered how it could have taken her so long to realize that she loved this man beyond reason. This man and their children were her life!

Afraid he'd read her feelings, certain he didn't want to see them, Mattie pulled her hand free and rose. "Neither of us could have foreseen that this madman would turn our lives upside down."

"Mattie?" Ty tried to fathom the change in her but couldn't. It was as if she suddenly didn't want to be near him.

"I forgot to tell you, I have a hand mirror, if you'd like to shave."

"I need tooth powder and a basin full of hot water, too. It can't be too pleasant downwind of me."

"I'll fetch them after you eat." She straightened the napkin she'd placed on his lap, then put the plate bearing the bowl on it. "You'll have to be careful or the bowl will slide."

"I have it." He caught the side. "Mattie?"

"Yes?" She moved behind the chair and grasped the back.

His gaze holding hers, Ty leaned forward and caught her hand, kissing the back. "Thank you."

Mattie managed a smile. She had Ty's friendship and his gratitude. But how could she make that enough?

After she'd gone, Ty leaned back, staring through the parted drapes. Did she blame him? Of course she did. Who else could she blame?

It all fell squarely on his shoulders.

Determinedly he picked up the spoon and ate the soup without wanting it, without tasting it. He had to eat to get stronger and finish this thing.

* * *

Frowning, Luke smoothed the flat brim of his hat in his hands. "I'm sorry, Warburton. I called it wrong. I thought Cratchet would want time to hide and gloat over infecting your herd, ruining you financially. That's why I sent you back to the ranch alone. When it seemed he was headed into town, I had an idea where he was hiding and I wanted to check it out."

"His sister's," Zack guessed. He hooked his thumbs in his gun belt, which rode below his rounded paunch, and looked smug.

Luke cocked a dark brow at the sheriff. "How did you know?"

Ty looked from one man to the other. "Who?"

"Shirley Aimes." Zack spat tobacco into an empty tin can Mattie had shoved into his hand after letting him and the ranger in to see Ty.

"She was waiting at my place when I got back from Red Creek yesterday afternoon."

Straightening, Luke asked, "Why didn't you tell me before now she turned him in?"

The sheriff smirked. "How was I to know you was a ranger, and not just Ty's hired hand? And she didn't just turn him in, she told us we'd better ride out this way and see to Mattie and the children."

"Cratchet's sister?" A sick feeling twisted in Ty's guts as he imagined Angeline on the train with her. And probably Cratchet, too.

"You've known I was a ranger since this morning, and you're only thinking now I need to know she turned her brother in? Where is Shirley?"

"I carried her back to town when I went to round up some deputies." Zack spit into the can.

"Town?" The look the ranger sent the sheriff could have cut glass. "For Cratchet to get her?"

"Well, what the hell should I have done?" Zack demanded, red-faced, brown spittle on his lower lip. "I had a gall-durn dangerous criminal on the loose I needed to track down!"

Luke stuck his hat on his head. "I have to go see about her, Warburton. There's no telling what Cratchet did when he found out she'd turned him in."

Lowering his chin, the sheriff growled out, "We found where she'd said Cratchet kept a horse hidden in the old Westfall shack on the east road, and there was a sign it had been there not long before we were. I knew we'd just missed him, then."

Pausing in the door, Luke asked, "Did you go back there today and see if the horse was there?"

"No. Why would it be?"

Luke shook his head and left.

"Gall-durned upstart!" Zack said after they'd heard the front door close. Holding the can beneath his lip, he spat again.

Ty asked, "What did you find of his trail? Any sign you hit him last night?"

As Zack went over the details of the night before that Ty hadn't heard, Ty couldn't shake the feeling they were all chasing their tails. Ty knew he'd hit Cratchet, but he might not have hurt him that badly. Zack and his men had gotten off the trail when they'd heard the horse

running toward them in the dark. On a dark night, they'd fired at the sound as the horse passed them, and daylight offered no evidence they'd hit anything.

Cratchet could still be close by, watching the ranch, waiting for an opportunity.

And Ty had never felt so helpless in his life, not even when he'd seen his brother's life slipping away a day at a time.

Mattie stuck her head through the door, her gaze going to Ty first. The assessment he saw in her eyes warmed him.

Satisfied he was okay, she then turned to the sheriff. "I'm sorry to interrupt. One of your deputies was kind enough to hitch up the wagon and bring it around. Consuela would like to take Esteban to her cabin, but she would need your men to go with her and help with him, if that's all right. It's not far."

"Sure." Zack moved to the door and stepped past her. "I'll help, too."

"Could I get you anything, Ty?" Mattie came near the bed and grasped the back of the dining chair, her gaze skittering away from his, like she couldn't bear to look at him.

"I'm fine, Mattie."

As she left, Ty closed his eyes and said a prayer that God would give him strength to get up and protect his family, and maybe he'd regain some worth in his wife's eyes.

* * *

"Ouch!" In the kitchen later, Mattie dropped the long knife she'd been using to cut up green onions and held her finger. The nick was tiny. She sucked the drop of blood away.

Shrieks preceded Angeline and Nathan down the stairs, Spot bounding after them.

"Quiet!" Mattie ordered, a little sharper than she'd intended. Both children were instantly silent, looking at her with uncertain eyes.

Rubbing her temples, she knew the headache there was from simple exhaustion. She needed to rest.

Ty needed it more.

"I'm sorry I yelled," Mattie said to them as they came into the kitchen, subdued. Spot, knowing he wasn't allowed into the kitchen, sat in the open door to the hall and placed one paw inside. "I have a headache. And I think if you are quieter, Ty might sleep."

"We're bored, Mama." Nathan thrust out an aggrieved lower lip.

"Can we go play with Tassie?" Angeline asked eagerly.

"No!" Realizing she'd been brusque again, she shook her head. Just the thought of her children out of her sight filled Mattie with fear. But she didn't want them burdened with that. They were getting over their terror of the night before, and she wanted to encourage that healing. "I mean, there's no one to take you. I've been practicing driving a little, but I wouldn't want to leave Ty. He might need something."

They instantly agreed that it would be better to take care of Ty.

"Papa's brave, isn't he?" Angeline's eyes glimmered with pride and love. "I heard Mr. Luke say that even after he was shot, he was following the bad man to keep him from getting another gun."

"Yes, Ty is brave," Mattie said, her heart swelling. She'd never forget the look of black rage in his eyes when Cratchet was trying to hurt her. Or how fast Ty could have been lost to her when Cratchet pulled the derringer and fired. Feeling tears prickle again, she tried discreetly to dash them from the corners of her eyes.

"Mama, why are you crying? Is . . . Is Mr. Ty going to die?" A look of anguish crossed Nathan's face.

"Is he?" Angeline's tone was frantic.

"No!" Mattie said fiercely. "I mean, he's going to be fine," she said soothingly. "I've just been cutting up onions. That's why I'm crying."

Angeline looked at the onion tops on the cutting board. "I didn't know green onions would make you cry like regular onions."

"Sometimes," Mattie lied. She sniffed and dabbed her eyes on her apron.

"We're still bored," Nathan sighed.

"Tell you what, I might know where a deck of cards is. If you can try to be really quiet, I'll go ask Ty if you can play with them. They're his cards."

Angeline nodded enthusiastically.

"What games do you play with cards?" Nathan asked.

"I know one," Angeline told him. "Or we could build a card house."

"A card house?" Nathan's face lit up as he imagined it. "As tall as me?"

"There probably won't be that many cards." Mattie wiped her hands on her apron. "Wait here. I'll see if Ty has any objections."

She found Ty sitting up in bed, just as she'd left him. Though his head was tilted back and his eyes closed, she sensed he wasn't asleep. She touched his shoulder, and he instantly covered her hand with his.

"Ty?" His light blue eyes opened and met hers, and she felt something warm and wonderful coil around her heart. Not wanting him to see her feelings, she looked away. "I noticed a deck of cards in your things while putting your clothes away. I'd like to let the children play with it, if you wouldn't mind."

Ty patted her hand. "That's a good idea."

"Thank you."

"Mattie?"

She turned back, something in his tone catching at her heart.

He was the one to look away this time. "Leave the door open."

"All right, Ty."

Mattie went into the storeroom where Ty still had his things and slid a tin trunk from under his cot. She found the deck of cards she remembered, under his spare shirts. She also found letters from some town in Illinois she'd never heard of. The last postmark stamped was six months before.

Ty's family? It must be, Mattie decided. She remembered him saying he hadn't had gingerbread since he'd left his father's farm in Illinois. From the number of letters, they wrote to him regularly. Deciding they should be informed that he'd been hurt, she returned the letters to the trunk, making a mental note to contact them when she got a chance.

After giving the cards to the children, they took them upstairs at her suggestion, Spot faithfully tagging along behind. She'd have to have Nathan and Angeline wash the mongrel if he was going to spend so much time inside, she decided.

Turning back to the supper she was preparing, Mattie sauteed the green onions in an iron skillet and added bits of ham when the onions were almost done. Setting the skillet off the heat atop the warming oven, she looked in the larder for her egg basket. It wasn't there.

Hell and damnation! She was tired. It had been a long day. Grabbing her shawl, she went to Ty's door. "I'm sorry. I left the egg basket in the barn, where I'd found a nest of eggs, and I haven't even gone to the hen house and gathered the ones there. My mind is wandering today." She drew the gray wool tightly about her shoulders. "I guess I'd better go get them before dark."

"You don't want to," Ty said shrewdly.

Mattie looked down at the knot she was tying with the ends of the shawl. "It's silly, but I felt scared when I was in the barn earlier. Like someone was watching."

Gritting his teeth, Ty swung his legs off the bed.

"What are you doing?" she asked in alarm.

"I should be able to do something." Ty's face paled with the effort as he stood.

"Oh, yes. You *could* do something! You could start your wound to bleeding again!" She resisted the urge to go to him and help him back in bed. That would only make him feel more like an invalid. "I'll go. It won't take a minute. I'm just feeling spooked, and going out will help me get over it."

Turning on her heel, she ignored his protests.

As Mattie walked swiftly to the barn, the sun was dipping behind the hills to the west. The road that led to the married hands' cabins disappeared behind a grove of hickory and oaks, then peeped and wound over the hills.

The breeze still held a hint of chill, out of the direct rays of the sun, making her hurry her steps. In the distance, she heard creaks of the wagon and the conversations of the sheriff and his men as they returned. It made her feel better to know her family wasn't completely alone. But she guessed they would be soon. Zack would probably leave, though she hoped he'd at least leave a deputy. She wondered if Ty would be upset with her if she asked.

What she really wanted to ask was for her husband to hold her, as tightly as his injuries would allow. And to tell her that he loved her.

Silly thing to wish for, Mattie knew.

Sighing, she went through the door, which she'd left propped open, making a mental note to close it when she left.

As she picked up the egg basket she'd left beside the far end of the hay rack, the fine hair on the back of her neck seemed to rise for no reason. Straightening slowly, she looked around the dim interior.

Ty's paint snorted, then whinnied, jerking its head up and down in an exaggerated nod. The big horse was upset at something. It pawed the stall door.

Mattie turned to run.

Cratchet stepped out from behind the rack, raising a pitchfork in one hand, cutting off her path of escape.

Twenty-Two

As Cratchet moved toward her, his face twisted with hate and rage, Mattie backed away. Whimpering sounds in her ears startled her more. It took her a moment to realize they were her own.

Daring a glance behind, Mattie saw there was nowhere to go. The doors were closed and barred from the outside on this end of the barn. The stalls were on either side. Dropping the egg basket, she ran around the hay rack, but Cratchet beat her to the other side.

He jabbed the pitchfork threateningly, though one arm was stiff at his side. His face was streaked with dirt and hate blazed in his eyes. "Why doncha scream real loud now." He edged forward, the tines of the pitchfork sweeping closer with each swipe.

"No." Shaking her head, Mattie backed away. She wouldn't scream. She wouldn't draw Ty down here. That was what this madman wanted.

"Scream!" He jabbed at her. The tines raked closer still.

"No!"

He lunged suddenly. Afraid to turn, she jumped back. Tripping on the hem of her skirt, Mattie went down hard.

Grinning, Cratchet loomed over her, raising the pitchfork. "Scream!"

Staring up at Cratchet, Mattie prayed she'd have the courage not to cry out, and that if she did, Ty wouldn't hear.

* * *

Back in the house, Ty had tried to ignore the uneasy feeling he'd had since Mattie had left. He sat down on the bed, staring after her. Just sitting upright made him feel dizzy and the pain crushing his chest doubled.

She said that she was going to the barn for the egg basket. She'd be gone only a few minutes.

But Cratchet was out there, somewhere.

Ty knew he had to find her. He'd failed once to keep her safe. He wouldn't fail again. Standing, Ty caught the back of the chair for support, then taking a couple of steps, grabbed the door frame. The world spun dizzily, but he pushed away and staggered into the kitchen. Catching his gun belt, he jerked out his Peacemaker and went down the back steps.

Halfway to the barn, the blackness edging his vision closed in more. It seemed he was looking down a long tunnel, trying to stay focused on the barn. Going down as his knees gave way, Ty cursed then shivered with cold, even though sweat was streaming into his eyes. Bowing his head and catching several deep, painful breaths made the darkness recede a little.

Then lifting his head, he heard a man's voice, indistinct past the roaring in his ears.

And someone cried out.

Mattie needed him!

Ty pushed to his feet again. Gritting his teeth, he tried to run.

Blackness circled his vision, drawing the circle of light ever smaller. He stumbled on the uneven ground. With each step, black rage and fear ripped at his heart.

Tripping, he went down hard a hundred yards from the barn door, a silent scream of pain twisting up through him. Ty pushed up again, scrambling to stand upright and go on, praying he would make it. Before it was too late.

Before it was too late.

* * *

Inside the barn, Mattie watched Cratchet raise the pitchfork higher and rolled away as he stabbed at her legs. Desperately she kept on rolling, until the wooden hay rack blocked her escape.

As the tine stuck in the hard-packed dirt floor, Cratchet yelled in pain. She kept rolling, then got to her knees and crawled, but was hampered by her skirt beneath her knees.

Breathing hard, the outlaw glared at her. "Yer can't get away." He stepped on her skirt. The light of madness glazed his eyes as he

stabbed at her legs again and again, toying with her like a cat toying with a mouse. "I think yer'll yell all right."

Thrashing from side to side, Mattie whimpered in fear. Then gasped in pain as one sharp tine grazed her calf. She couldn't get away.

As he loomed over her again, she realized she was going to die.

"I think yer'll yell if this is stuck in yore guts." Cratchet raised the pitchfork high.

Three explosions sounded almost as one. Cratchet was knocked forward, stumbling with each one, a look of surprise on his face.

Mattie scrambled to her feet as the man stood, caught between life and death. Then he fell facedown on the hay-strewn barn floor.

Pale, wavering on his feet, Ty stood in the doorway, his gun in his hand, a red stain spreading on the center of the white bandage crossing his chest.

Then Ty went down on his knees, gun still at the ready.

Tears streaming down her face, Mattie caught his shoulders when he seemed ready to fall on his face.

"Is he dead, Mattie?" Pain twisted his features and made a rasp of his voice. "*Is he dead?*"

"I think so — "

Trying to remain upright, Ty clutched at her skirts, then sat back on his heels.

"Take the gun." He shoved the pistol into her hands when she shook her head in protest. "Take the gun and make sure he's dead."

Mattie took the weapon from him and went to make certain, approaching Cratchet much as if he had been a snake.

There was no doubt that he was dead.

She hurried back to Ty, who had fallen. Lying on his back, he looked so pale it chilled her heart. Cradling his head in her lap, Mattie sat on the ground, rocking gently, making soft, soothing sounds, while with the heel of her hand she applied pressure to the bandage over the wound in his chest.

She thanked God when the bleeding seemed to stop and Ty was still breathing.

The sheriff arrived minutes later, the deputies in the buckboard a short way behind. "What happened? What were those shots?" Zack stepped down from his horse, tossing his reins over the nearby hitching rail.

"Cratchet was hiding in the barn." Mattie smoothed a blond lock from Ty's forehead. *Please, Lord, let him be all right . . .*

"Good Lord, Cratchet's inside?" Zack stepped away from the door.

"He's dead." She wondered if all the world had run mad. Why would she have been sitting here, her husband in danger, had Cratchet been alive?

Ty had put himself in danger. To save her. And he was still in danger. He still might not overcome the blood loss he'd suffered by reopening his wound.

No! That would be too cruel! Please, please live! She rocked harder, holding back her tears.

Motioning his deputies before him, Zack went inside. He came back out a moment later, a considering look on his heavy-jowled face. "Ty shot him in the back. Cratchet doesn't seem to have been armed."

Mattie looked up at the man without trying to disguise how stupid she found the remark. "Cratchet was trying to stab me with that pitchfork. Ty shot him before he could. Now I think I have Ty's bleeding stopped again and I'd like to get him back inside, if I could get some help with him."

The men looked around for some means to stretch him — Mattie didn't want them to just carry him roughly. Finally, they knocked the pins out of the hinges on the side door of the barn and took it down, then lifted Ty onto it.

As Mattie walked beside the makeshift stretcher, she held Ty's hand and willed him to keep breathing. How could she bear it if he didn't? Then she opened the back door — she was glad to hear the children still upstairs, playing. They didn't seem to have noticed the shots.

How much blood could a man lose and still breathe? Mattie wondered as the two deputies placed the stretcher on the bed, then lifted Ty off it. He was shivering, his forehead and cheeks a pasty-white. His breathing was ragged and fast. *Please, God, let him be all right!*

After they had Ty settled in the bed, Mattie let the men use the wagon to carry Cratchet's body into town. She was glad to get them out from underfoot so she could concentrate on Ty.

She talked to the children, telling them that Cratchet wasn't a danger anymore and explaining that Ty needed all her attention right now. Mattie returned to the bedroom to find Ty shaking harder than

ever, despite the quilts she'd stacked atop him. Her heart wrenched as she watched him suffer.

She brought hot broth and coaxed a few sips into him. The warmth inside him seemed to be what he needed. He stopped shivering and fell into a sound sleep, for a while. All too soon, Mattie awoke beside him to find him shaking with chills again.

All through the long night, she fought for him, coaxing him into taking sips of broth whenever he would, stacking covers atop him and crawling in bed with him, holding him close when he wouldn't. She bathed him in tepid water when sweat broke out. Afterward, when he seemed to be resting easy, she lay down beside him again, so she could be alert to any change.

When she opened her eyes, morning sun filled the window. Lifting her head, she looked around, remembering where she was. She didn't remember crawling under the covers.

When she found Ty looking at her, wonder in his eyes, a thrill played through her and settled in her heart. "You didn't die." She touched his cheek.

"I'm not certain." His voice was a hoarse rasp. One side of his mouth lifted slightly, a ghost of his old wry smile. Then his face darkened. "Cratchet?"

"Won't ever bother us again." She touched Ty's forehead, finding it only a little warm. Surely a good sign. "You risked so much by going out there and reopening your wound!" She caught her lip between her teeth. Mattie couldn't quite find the words to tell him how wonderful she thought he was.

"You worried about me?"

"Of course!" As Ty held her gaze, sparkling feelings rioted inside her. Under that look, she felt shy and beautiful at the same time. And she wanted to tell him again she loved him.

Only the knowledge that he didn't want her love held her back,

Don't be greedy, Mattie. He'd made it plain, after Angeline's mother, he didn't ever want to love again. He'd bound up his heart to keep it safe. And she couldn't blame him.

But hadn't she felt the same way, after her affection for Jonas Idyll turned into fear?

His gaze shifted to the foot of the bed and Mattie saw Nathan lay on Ty's legs, a quilt pulled over him, his thumb near his mouth. Ange-

line was curled up below her own feet, a blanket wrapped around her thin form.

"I must have been exhausted not to have awoken when they climbed into bed," Mattie whispered, lying back on the pillow.

Ty found her hand under the covers. Winding his fingers through hers, he squeezed and closed his eyes, fatigue lining his face.

With her hand in his, Mattie felt everything would be all right.

As long as she didn't let her hopes get too high.

* * *

When Nathan woke up sometime later, Ty felt him stir, then the little boy shook Angeline. Ty had been lying there, thinking of all he might have lost because of his carelessness, all he'd placed in danger. Trying to think of ways to make it up to Mattie and the children.

He opened his eyes again and found Angeline and Nathan watching him.

"Good morning," Ty said. Beside him, Mattie stirred and opened her eyes, her worried gaze moving from Ty to the children.

"We were afraid the bad man would come again," Nathan said. "It was dark, and I woke up and thought Crackek was in the room."

"Cratchet," Angeline corrected. She yawned and sat up, folding her legs beneath her Indian-style and pulling the blanket over her shoulders. "Nathan came into my room and told me, then I got afraid, too." Her eyes filled with tears.

"He'll never bother you again, honey." Still lying down, Mattie held out her arms and the little girl went into them readily, and she stroked the blonde head.

Nathan looked hopefully at Ty, and Ty said, "Come here, but be careful of the bandage."

"Is Crackeck really gone?" Nathan asked, once safely snuggled between Ty and Mattie.

"Very gone," Mattie answered.

Ty said, "He won't bother you again, ever."

* * *

"Whoa." Alma wrapped the reins of the livery stable buggy around the brake handle. Seeing Mattie on the porch, she waved a gloved hand

and hitched her skirts up for the climb down. Tassie tumbled down from the other side and was around the buggy before her mother found the ground.

"This is the first chance I got to come out, without some boarder tuggin' my apron strings, doncha know." She enfolded Mattie in a hug and patted her back. "Ack, you'd think it was months since I'd seen you at the quilting, instead of a couple of weeks!"

"It's good to see you, Alma!" Mattie smiled. "You, too, Tassie."

The twelve-year-old asked, "Where are Angeline and Nathan?"

"Feeding the chickens. Go around back and you'll see the chicken yard, down the lane almost to the bunkhouse. Under the big cottonwood tree."

Tassie took off around the corner at a run, sunbonnet promptly flying off and sailing behind her like a kite, held by its strings around her neck.

"It's good to see you, Alma," Mattie said again. "I feel so isolated out here. I haven't wanted to leave with Ty still weak, but acting like he's got to run the ranch single-handed."

Alma pulled off her gloves. "Zack Thornhill told us all about what happened and how Ty saved you twice. It must have been terrible for you, Mattie!"

"I don't like to talk about it." Crossing her arms over her chest, Mattie hugged herself, remembering the terror she'd felt when she thought Ty was lost to her a second time. "Ty lost a lot of blood and he's still weak, though he won't admit it."

Alma caught both Mattie's hands. "I suppose we should be quiet, if he's resting."

"Resting?" Mattie shook her head. "He's in the barn, repairing tack. As soon as he could stand without falling, he refused to stay abed — no matter what the doctor told him!" She hooked her arm in Alma's. "Come on. This is the first time you've been out. I'll show you the house."

Later, after Mattie and Alma had toured the house, they'd gone out to see the garden. Mattie found the pole beans ready to pick. Alma insisted on helping.

Alma tossed a handful of beans into the spilt-oak basket. "Do you think Ty'll be up to bringing you and the children out to the Founder's Day picnic?"

"He should. It's still a week away."

"You're still worried about him," Alma guessed. "He's mending proper, is he?"

"His wound is healing. But he still blames himself for what Cratchet did." Mattie moved the basket down the row. It felt good to share her worries with Alma. "I've tried every way I know to tell Ty that I don't blame him for anything — he saved all our lives! But hearing me say it seems to make him draw away more." Mattie made a helpless gesture. "Now it's like he's put this distance between him and everything."

"Guilt," Alma said wisely. "You know, a man like Ty Warburton has a weakness, to my way of thinkin'. Used to owning responsibility, he may think everythin' that happens is on his shoulders, when God knows some things ain't nobody's fault. If you just give him all the love you can and let those young'uns show him how much they care, I'm bettin' it has to do him good." Alma moved her basket and started picking off a new vine.

"That's good advice," Mattie agreed. She wiped perspiration from her brow beneath her sunbonnet.

"Ah, so you don't deny you love the man." Alma's eyes twinkled merrily.

"I didn't admit it, either." Mattie studied a bean. Ty hadn't been interested in making love to her since the incident with Cratchet. His guilt again?

Alma winked. "With those wide shoulders and tight beehind, Ty Warburton would be an easy man to love!" She snatched off her sunbonnet and fanned herself vigorously. "The very thought of it! Ack! I've been alone too long, doncha know!"

Although she was blushing to the roots of her hair, Mattie laughed. She would have been appalled at the very thought not long ago. It was thanks to Ty's patient teaching, his caring, she was free of so many false ideas and misconceptions about what was right and wrong between a man and woman.

As she remembered some of the lessons he'd taught her, Mattie snatched off her own sunbonnet and fanned with it. "It is hot, isn't it?"

"Aye, that it is." Frowning, Alma thumped a stink bug off a bean before tossing it into the basket. "I've been meanin' to tell you that Shirley is mendin' well. Though she still looks like death warmed over a slow fire."

"Shirley?"

"You don't know? That nice young ranger, Luke Rivers, brought her to me to take care of, after her brother beat her within an inch of her life."

Mattie put her hand to her throat. "Trent? Beat her?"

"Trent has taken off for parts unknown. But no, it was her other brother. Henry Cratchet. Seems when she found out he was planning to harm you and the children, she went to Zack's place and turned him in."

"His sister." Mattie remembered the red-haired man she'd seen in Shirley's back room, and realized it was Henry Cratchet. "My Lord, Alma. Cratchet knew who Angeline was from the start. He could have harmed her anytime!"

"But he didn't, and I think it might have been a bit of Shirley's influence. She told me she convinced Cratchet on the train that Ty didn't know his daughter, so he wouldn't care if she was kidnapped — 'at's what that polecat wanted to do at first. She said then Cratchet made like he just wanted to get money from Ty, and she went along with getting Ty to co-sign the bank loan for her place. But then her brother told her to go ahead and use the money to open her shop — and she started to worry about what he was really up to, figurin' he had somethin' nasty in mind."

Alma looked Mattie in the eye. "You have a right to do or say whatever you see fit, after the way you've suffered because of Henry Cratchet. But Luke suggested, and I agreed, that there's no good reason to tell people Shirley is Cratchet's sister. It would ruin her in this town. I just put it about that she has the measles, to keep people away, doncha know, until she can heal."

"Does Ty know?" Mattie asked.

"Aye, he must. Luke said Ty had suggested keeping it quiet, so the poor gal could make a life. So Luke had spoken to Thornhill and his deputies." Alma chuckled. "I think he promised Zack if word got out, he'd come back here and run for sheriff, come next election. Lord knows that sheriff's badge is the only thing Zack loves more than talkin' so he just might keep his yapper shut!"

Mattie remembered Luke's visit the day after Cratchet was killed. They had spoken privately as he'd interviewed Ty for his report. She was a little hurt Ty hadn't shared the fact that Shirley was Cratchet's sister. Luke or Zack must have told him,

Talk turned again to the upcoming Founder's Day picnic and dance. Acting mysteriously, Alma seemed to think it important that both Mat-

tie and Ty come, and bring the children, hinting that there was likely to be a surprise they wouldn't want to miss.

Before Alma left, Mattie wrote out a telegram to Ty's folks in Illinois, telling them a little of what had happened and that their son was wounded, but would be all right. Alma promised to send it as soon as she returned to town.

Later, after she'd waved Alma and Tassie off, a basket with half of the beans tucked into the box beside Alma's feet, Mattie held open the door to the barn and Nathan and Angeline raced in before her.

"Papa, Tassie says there's going to be a big picnic for Founder's Day!" Angeline and Nathan rushed up to where Ty sat on a stool in the tack room, her eyes rounding with excitement. "There's going to be games and things!"

Nathan added, "And there's goin' to be sack races" — he frowned — "how do you race a sack?"

"Put a lot of starch in it, I should think," Mattie said, smiling.

Angeline giggled. "Don't be silly, Mama!"

"You get into a sack and hop." Ty put down the buckle he'd been polishing and ruffled the boy's hair. Looking up at Mattie, he asked, "When is all this?"

"Next Saturday," Mattie answered. "And we'll need to get an early start."

"Am I going?" One brow rode up on his forehead as he looked at his wife.

"We'd like it very much if you did."

"Oh, Papa! You can't *not* go. It won't be fun without you there!" Angeline declared.

"And there's gonna be stuff to do 'father and son,' so you gotta come." Nathan looked down and dragged his bare foot across the rough floor. "Only you ain't really my father, I know. But I think it would be all right, don't you?"

"I think it would be fine," Ty said softly.

Angeline said, "Papa, Nathan wants to call you 'Papa' too, because he don't have one, and I call his mama 'Mama.'"

Both children looked at him hopefully. Touched, Ty nodded. "I'd like that." Ty hugged both of them to him. He didn't deserve their love. It was because of him, they'd been through so much fear and uncertainty.

As he hugged Ty, Nathan's face lit with joy. If Mattie hadn't loved Ty already, she would have loved him just for his kindness to her son.

Twenty-Three

Mattie slipped off her chemise and drawers, goose bumps racing over her skin from the kiss of the cool air, followed by the heat of a flush of embarrassment. What she planned to do was take Alma's advice. To love Ty. But as he'd shown no interest in doing more than holding her at night, she had realized it was up to her to get things started. She just hoped he was ready.

Lord knew, she was!

Closing her eyes, she brushed her fingers over her nipple, imagining it was Ty's broad chest brushing against it. A shaft of heat pierced her.

Opening her eyes, she sighed and shrugged into her wrapper. Gathering up her courage, she tied the sash and took bathsheets out of the cupboard.

After putting the bathsheet atop the warming oven on the stove, Mattie turned down the kerosene lamp on the wall and knocked on the door to the bedroom. She went in without waiting for a response and found him reading the ranch ledger. "The tub is waiting and the water is hot."

"I saw you putting it to heat, but I thought it was for the children." Ty closed the wide book and put it aside.

"They're fast asleep. I thought you might like a full bath, now that Doc has said the danger of infection has passed. Come, before the water gets cold."

Ty rose and followed Mattie to the kitchen, the thought of sinking into a warm tub very appealing.

Mattie touched the water, checking it, then shook her fingers.

"Thank you, Mattie."

She met his gaze, then looked away. He noticed she had her wrapper drawn tight and had braided her hair for the night. The dark chocolate braid hung over her shoulder, past the point of her breast. His gaze lingered just for an instant on the sensual curve, then he forced it to the safer territory of the tub.

He'd been wrong to insist on marital rights, when she had never wanted to marry him. He should have hired her as a housekeeper. That way she would never have been a target.

"Dab the sheep tallow from the cup on the stove on your wounds, to keep them from getting wet," Mattie instructed. "My father was a doctor, and he firmly believed in keeping wounds dry as they healed."

As she disappeared into the storeroom, he was struck by the feeling that she was disappointed in him. Well, he couldn't blame her. He was pretty damned disappointed in himself.

Seeing the bathsheets warming and the soap and a cloth placed on an open shelf within reach of the tub, Ty shrugged out of his shirt and denim pants, tossing them over the screen. Then he peeled off his socks, glad he'd had Nathan help him off with his boots earlier. He was still damned sore. His ribs felt like every movement would break them apart.

Ty unwound the bandage around his cracked ribs, sucking in his breath sharply as they throbbed anew at the release. He dabbed the tallow over his wounds, as Mattie had instructed.

The tin tub was small for him, but the warm water felt wonderful. He sank down until it lapped his waist.

The storeroom door opened and Mattie came back into the kitchen. "I'll help you wash your hair. I have water to rinse it with warming on the stove."

His curiosity was aroused. It wasn't so long ago being in the same room with him naked had sent her running. "I could manage, Mattie."

"Nonsense," she said firmly. "If I help, it will be much easier for you."

As she rolled up the sleeves of her wrapper, Ty noticed the sash had loosened and she wore nothing underneath. The naked halves of her breasts were enticingly revealed, almost to the nipples.

"You're not wearing a nightgown," Ty said, feeling his body react in a familiar way. "In the same room as me as I bathe and without your nightgown—I could almost believe you're trying to seduce me." He grinned.

Her blush looked guilty. *But this was Mattie*, his more rational self argued. Mattie wasn't the seducing kind.

Following the line of his gaze, Mattie looked down and delicate roses bloomed in her cheeks. "I thought I might get wet, so I didn't put a gown on." She straightened the wrapper. "Bend forward and I'll pour water over your hair, then you can soap it," she said in a practical tone.

Ty did as ordered, and Mattie dipped water with a tin cup and poured it over his head. It did feel good to have a full bath for a change. He was grateful to Mattie for thinking of it.

After his hair was soaped and rinsed, he looked for the washcloth he'd seen earlier, but couldn't find it.

"May I have the soap?" Mattie held it.

"Why?" He'd expected her to leave after his hair was rinsed.

"To help you wash your back." She met his gaze steadily. "You're still stiff and sore, aren't you?"

"A little." Bemused, he gave her the soap. As she worked up a lather, Ty noticed that her wrapper had parted again. Droplets of water sparkled on her breasts where she'd gotten wet rinsing his hair. The urge to lean forward and lick the drops off made him aware that at least one part of him had recovered fully.

He was thankful when she went around behind him and he was no longer faced with temptation.

And then Mattie started soaping his shoulders and back — not briskly, as he expected, but gently, making circular motions. Next, leaning forward so that her breasts cradled his head, she worked the soap across his chest, concentrating an inordinate amount of time on his pectorals. Ty felt his male nipples pebble and harden under the exquisite soaping, and the tension in his groin hiked up a notch.

"Mattie, I can — "

"Lean forward as far as you can." She cut off his protest. After wetting the cloth again, she applied more soap to it.

Bemused, Ty leaned forward.

Plunging her hand beneath the water, Mattie soaped his back, taking care to avoid the incision on his side. Then caught up in her own daring, she soaped lower, sliding her hand over the top of his firm buttocks. Touching him, even with the cloth between her hand and his flesh, was making warm fires ignite inside her. Mattie cleared her throat. "If you could catch the lip and pull yourself up, I could wash lower."

"I'm afraid," Ty said dryly.

"Suit yourself." Mattie rinsed his back and shoulders, dipping the cloth and squeezing out water over his skin. Then she moved around to the front of the tub and rinsed his chest and upper arms, avoiding any direct contact with his wound.

She was no good at this, Mattie admitted to herself. When she was behind his back, she'd loosened her sash until her wrapper was agape, and, leaning over the tub, she showed all she had beneath it, but Ty didn't act the least bit interested.

"I think I can deal with it from here." He held out his hand for the cloth.

Meeting his gaze, Mattie leaned forward and took his hand, placing it on her breast. "I hope you can," she whispered, fighting back a blush at her own boldness. Where had she found the nerve? she wondered.

Ty's eyes darkened and he stood, still cupping her rounded flesh, water sluicing from his body. His manhood stood out tautly as his gaze moved from her breast to her lips.

"If you can't . . . I mean, if you're too weak . . ." Mattie wet her lips, needing him with every fiber of her body, but feeling very selfish and wrong to manipulate him like this.

His thumb stroked her nipple and she trembled.

"Ah, Mattie." Bending to meet her mouth, he kissed her deeply, his hands going to her shoulders to push the wrapper away.

Mattie let it slide off her arms. She whimpered as he broke the kiss, but it was only for a moment as he stepped out of the tub. Then he was kissing her again. Twining her fingers in his hair, Mattie kissed him back, boldly thrusting her tongue into his mouth, exploring the texture and heat of it. She wanted to give him as much pleasure as he was giving her.

She wanted to love him so well, he'd fall in love with her.

Wordlessly Ty shifted her in his arms. Mattie shivered as the air found dampness on her flesh. When his fingers found the wet center of her, she arched, moaning deep in her throat.

Ty guided her to the cot in the storeroom and sat her down. Getting on his knees by the cot, he kissed her again, urgent and demanding, drawing her forward until her knees were fitted on either side of his lean hips.

Anticipation swirling through her, Mattie dared to hope he did love her. Just a little,

How could he make love to her with such sweetness and passion if he didn't care deeply?

Sex has little to do with love. . . . His words to her the first time they'd made love came back to mind, robbing her of a little of the joy she felt.

Then he laid her back, lifting her thighs, and thrust, filling her completely. And everything except the pleasure of him within her left her mind. Swiftly he brought her to completion, then found his own release.

As Mattie drifted slowly back to earth from the high plain she'd stood on, shimmering and whole, Ty pulled out of her. She wanted to cry out at the loss. Still kneeling, he placed a kiss on her abdomen, then laid his cheek on the spot.

Mattie's fingers found his hair as warmth pooled around her heart. *I love you.* Every fiber of her being wanted to cry out the words. But she sensed it would be the wrong thing to say.

He was perfectly still for the space of a heartbeat, then slowly lifted his head. His expression was tense. "I don't deserve you, Mattie."

"That's not true! Ty, I never knew what a real man was until I married you. You've taught me how to be myself without being afraid. I think you're wonderful and kind and brave and the finest man God ever made."

And I love you, she added silently.

He stood, his startlingly blue eyes haunted and haunting.. "I'm not any of those things."

Tears blurred Mattie's vision and the cool air swirled over her skin as Ty turned and left.

Twenty-Four

"Ma, is Papa going to the picnic with us?"

"I don't know, Nathan. He's been very busy." As he stood before her, Mattie buttoned his shirt.

"What did you say to him to make him mad?" Nathan glared at Mattie, his lower lip thrust out.

As she thought about how to answer the question, Mattie adjusted his suspenders, shortening them so the straps wouldn't continually fall down. "I don't know that I said anything that should have made him mad," she said evasively.

"He hasn't come home before dark a single day this week. It had to be something *somebody* said." Nathan looked unhappily toward the window. "Maybe he didn't like me calling him 'Papa.'"

"It wasn't anything you did or said, Nathan. And it wasn't anything Angeline said, either. If Ty didn't want you to call him 'Papa,' he wouldn't have told you it was okay. He has always been very honest, you know." Mattie hoped she was saying the words Nathan needed to hear. She couldn't account for the change in Ty, but she didn't want Nathan or Angeline to think they were responsible. She didn't really think she was, either.

The real problem lay somewhere inside Ty Warburton.

Since they'd made love the other night, Ty had practically moved out of the house, leaving before dawn and getting in well after dark. When he came to bed, he didn't touch her. She worried that he was overtaxing himself before he'd regained his strength, but when she'd said as much to him, he'd brushed her concern aside.

Today at the picnic, she'd planned to confront him with how his guilt over Cratchet and over the past was affecting the children — if he went.

"There you go." Smoothing his shirt over his narrow shoulders, Mattie looked over how her son looked in the cotton shirt she had finished just last night. His hair was a little long, hanging below his eyebrows. She'd have to take her hair-cutting bowl out tomorrow and trim it up. "You look fine enough for a picnic." She smiled. "Now go see if Angeline needs any help packing the basket. And no sampling!"

Instead of taking off at a run, as she expected, as he usually did, he clomped away, looking at the floor.

"How do you like your new shoes?" Mattie called before he disappeared into the hallway.

"They hurt." He cast a disgruntled glance over his shoulder.

"You can take them off when we get to the picnic."

"Okay." Gazing at the floor again, he clomped into the hall.

Going downstairs, Mattie found Angeline and Nathan in the kitchen. She'd let Angeline pack the oak basket with the food for the picnic. Looking in it, Mattie hid a smile, suspecting the child had wrapped each piece of fried chicken in a separate napkin.

"How did I do, Mama?" Angeline shoved a carrot in beside the food parcels, so that the green top stuck up above the basket.

"It looks good," Mattie commented. "You might put in more than one carrot, and then put the folded tablecloth on top of everything to keep it warm."

Angeline nodded and set about adding more carrots.

"What can I do?" Nathan asked.

"Go help Juan harness the horse to the buggy."

"Yes, ma'am!" Given a chance to do real man's work, Nathan ran out the back door, seeming more like himself.

Mattie took another basket down from a hook on the wall and placed enamelware plates, forks, and cups in it, then added a jug of tea sweetened with honey.

"All finished," Angeline announced. A circle of lacy green carrot tops stuck up above the basket.

"Very nice." Mattie hid her amusement.

"I'm going to get Miss Adelaide. She wants to go on a picnic, too." Angeline skipped from the room to get her doll.

His eyes round with excitement, Nathan rushed inside, leaving the door standing wide behind him. "The horse is all hitched up, but Juan didn't do it. He's going to the picnic with his mama and papa."

Mattie picked up the basket. "If Juan isn't going to drive us, I think I can manage. I've been practicing."

"Mama, you don't know *gee* from *haw* yet," Nathan said derisively, giving her a very doubtful look.

"I'll drive you," Ty said, pulling on his gloves as he came through the open door. He moved to the table and picked up the basket, cocking a questioning eyebrow at the decorative carrots.

Caught off guard, Mattie could only stare. He wore a fresh white shirt with a string tie, black leather vest, and black denim pants. When had he come inside and dressed? It must have been this morning early, while she was getting the carrots and milk from Cookie.

Tall and broad shouldered, a lock of sandy-blond hair falling over his forehead from beneath his hat, Mattie thought Ty had never looked so fine. And her heart ached to see him and not tell him how much she loved him.

"You've been so busy, I thought you wouldn't have time." Mattie straightened her spine, unwilling to let just the sight of him over-set her.

Reaching out, he took the basket she held, too. "Is there anything else?" Ty wanted to reach out to Mattie and touch the stray curl by her cheek.

"Angeline has gone to get her doll." Mattie dropped her gaze, as if she was uncertain how to react to him.

"Nathan, will you help Angeline?" he asked.

Nodding, the boy took off at his usual exuberant pace.

"Tell her to wear her sunbonnet!" Mattie called after him.

Ty looked at Mattie. "After you."

"You go on. I have to get my bonnet and parasol. That blanket on the table is to go, too." Her back straight, head held high, Mattie swept past him.

Seeing the pride in her carriage as she disappeared into the hall, his heart squeezed painfully. Damn, he had hurt her. He'd have to explain that he'd needed time to sort out his feelings, and he had spent a hellish week, wrestling with his demons. He wasn't sure who had won.

The thing which he'd had to come to grips with was his feelings for Mattie. He'd never wanted to love her.

When he'd held her the other night after making love to her, the truth had slammed into him and made him want to run as far and as

fast as he could. But at the same time, there was nowhere he wanted to be more than in her arms.

He loved Mattie.

God help him, he didn't want to. He didn't want to think of her laughter and gentleness and crave being near her night and day. He hadn't wanted to ever feel this vulnerable again.

Cratchet had almost killed Mattie. Ty knew his life would be over if anything happened to her. Or to the children. And something could happen. Loving someone couldn't keep them safe.

He'd loved John, but John had died because of his selfish love for Lyla. He'd loved his parents, but he'd let them down, causing his brother's death.

Now he realized he loved Mattie with a depth and intensity that made what he'd felt for Lyla pale to insignificance. And he knew the truth — he'd never be worthy of Mattie. After trying to deny it to himself, push the feelings from his mind and heart, he'd reluctantly accepted the truth. He could never not love her.

When she returned moments later, wearing her bonnet and carrying her old black parasol, Ty was still waiting. He carried the baskets and followed her outside.

Ignoring the hand he held out to aid her, Mattie climbed into the buggy, and Ty passed her the picnic baskets. When he went around to the other side and climbed up, he found she'd set one between them. She opened her parasol and pointedly placed it on the shoulder that was nearest to him, creating another barrier to closeness.

Recognizing that it was hurt instead of anger that glittered in her wide gray eyes, Ty shook his head, damning his stupidity. "I'm sorry, Mattie."

"For what?"

"For everything." Ty sighed and resettled his hat on his head, wishing he was good with words so he could ease her hurt. "I was wrong to shut you out."

Her eyes searched his, her expression doubtful, and he felt her lack of faith in what he said. Cupping her cheek with his gloved hand, he said, "Mattie, I don't blame you — "

"Well, I am glad to hear it, Ty Warburton! Because I blame you — "

Laughing, Nathan and Angeline tumbled through the door, but stopped short when they heard Mattie's angry words, looking from one adult to the other uncertainly.

"We'll talk about this later, Mattie." Ty picked up the reins as the two climbed upon the short tailboard, Angeline's doll secure in the crook of her arm. "Ready?"

"Yes, Papa," Angeline said. Nathan nodded solemnly.

"You see, Adelaide, if you are very good, wishes come true and good things happen," Angeline told her doll.

As she listened, Mattie made a wish of her own. She wished the child's words were true.

Ty slapped the reins on the gelding's rump and the horse started forward.

The town had been founded by a man named John Stingly, who had built a trading post by the ford on the creek.

Every year the town celebrated the day Stingly's trading post opened with a picnic by the creek, near the mineral springs that gave the town its name.

"Whoa!" Ty pulled back on the reins, stopping the horse beneath the spreading limbs of a live oak. "This looks like a good spot to spread the blanket."

He had barely set the brake before Nathan and Angeline were squirming and begging permission to go investigate the springs.

"I've never seen them, Mama! Is the water really yellow?" Angeline asked.

"I said it was yellow," Nathan declared, affronted that his word was questioned. He looked at Mattie. "Can I show her, Mama?"

"Can he?" Angeline seconded.

"It's *may* I and *may* he. Yes, but give me Miss Adelaide." Taking Angeline's doll for safe-keeping, Mattie added, "Don't get your shoes muddy, and if you pull them off, bring them to me."

The pair barely held still long enough to listen. Chorusing "Yes, ma'am," they were off like shots to find where a couple of tiny springs of bad-smelling water bubbled out of the bluff. The water trickled down to the shallow creek, turning the sand around it yellow as it went and creating a yellow scum over an eddy of the otherwise clear creek. Some of the older people in the area claimed the springs could cure everything from hair-loss to a bilious liver, but Mattie had her doubts.

Ty went around to her side of the buggy to help her down. Avoiding his bright blue gaze, Mattie handed him the baskets instead. Then grabbing a handful of her old calico skirt — Shirley had been too ill to sew a

new dress for her — Mattie lifted it up out of her way and stepped onto the hub of the wheel, ignoring the hand Ty held out to help her.

He caught her elbow and helped her anyway, his touch burning through the thin sleeve of her white cotton blouse.

Would his touch always set her aflame? Mattie wondered, pulling free. Why couldn't she have been content with the physical closeness he'd been all too willing to give? Why had she been so foolish as to fall in love with him, when she knew that was the one thing he never wanted from her?

"Thank you." Turning her back to Ty, she reached back for the blanket she'd left on the seat.

When she looked back around, he was standing close enough that she could smell his shaving soap. "If you don't want to spread the blanket out here, I'll help you move to a more private spot." The low timbre of his voice seemed to suggest far more than his innocuous words.

"This is fine." Mattie didn't raise her gaze past his mouth. A mistake, she realized immediately, as she remembered the feel of his lips on hers.

No! He wasn't going to get back in her good graces until they talked. She couldn't bear him disappearing into a black mood again.

"All right." As Ty took the horse's bridle and led the animal away to the line of horses and wagons in the shade of low-hanging limbs on the edge of the clearing, Mattie looked over the growing crowd. Spotting Alma as she spread a gingham cloth over one of the plank tables that had been erected on sawhorses, Mattie waved. Alma waved back and pointed Mattie out to Tassie.

Picking up her basket of food, Mattie started toward them and the makeshift tables where the food would be spread out. Tassie ran to meet her and helped carry the basket the last part of the way.

"Where are Nathan and Angeline? Are they excited?" the twelve-year-old asked.

"They went to see the springs. They're excited about the picnic and games." Mattie frowned, feeling she had missed something.

Tassie helped Mattie heft the large basket onto the table. "They don't know about Mr. Ty?" she asked, eyes rounded with excitement.

Alma gave her daughter a warning glance. "Ack! Now doancha be jerkin' any cats outta bags now, miss! Why doncha go now and find those young'uns before the games begin?"

As Tassie ran off, the cuffs of her breeches showing beneath her calico skirt, Mattie asked, "What's going on?"

"Now it's just a little surprise, doncha know." Looking in the direction Mattie came from, she said, "Now don't be tellin' me that good-looking husband of yours didn't come?"

"He's bringing the horse and buggy out to where the other horses are tied." Mattie cocked a brow. "I'm starting to think I should be jealous, Alma. You come out to the ranch to check on how Ty's recoverin', then when I see you again, he's the first thing you ask about." She took out the folded gingham cloth she'd packed atop the food.

"If I was ten years younger, maybe you'd have somethin' to worry about." Winking, Alma took the end of Mattie's tablecloth, helping her spread it over the next section of planks. "I sent your telegram to Ty's parents straightaway as I got back to town."

"Oh?" Mattie had almost forgotten about the message she'd given Alma to send. "Was there a reply?"

"Well, I, uh . . ." Alma carefully smoothed the tablecloth.

Watching the frown that formed on her forehead, Mattie had an uneasy feeling. "Was there?"

"*Was there* what?" Rosalee Wilkerson asked, stopping at Alma's elbow. A sight in a yellow calico dress, matching parasol, and chipped straw bonnet, her gaze bounced avidly from Mattie to Alma.

"Never mind, Rosalee." Alma gave her a warning look.

"What's going on, Alma?" Mattie put her hand to her throat as a premonition of disaster made it hard to breathe. Though as she looked around, she could see nothing threatening. The crowd was growing as more and more buggies arrived as well as people on foot. More dishes were being added to the tables. No threat was visible.

Laughter and cheering erupted as several older boys lined up for a footrace. Tassie, Angeline, and Nathan were among the onlookers. Clara and Beth were at the far end of the plank table, chatting and arranging bowls they'd brought. Peggy and her granddaughter waved to Mattie as they made their way toward the tables. Most of the men had gathered around where horseshoes were being tossed at wooden stakes.

The mayor's fancy two-seater buggy drew up on the other side of the meadow, completely opposite of where the other horses were tied. Even at a distance, Mattie recognized the rotund figure of the mayor

as he helped his wife alight. After a word with a second couple in the buggy, the mayor took his wife's arm and escorted her toward the tables. The other couple followed more slowly.

Following the line of Mattie's gaze, Rosalee said, "Of course, you've met Ty's mother and father, haven't you?"

"Who?" Mattie looked past Rosalee. Ty was coming toward them. He had to stop twice to shake men's hands, the look on his face darkening each time.

"His mother and father. Quite a feat to get them here in a little more than a week's time. Of course, it was only possible because of the railroad my Slim helped to bring in. Wonderful people, Ty's mother and father! Bringing them here as a surprise was the least we could do to honor our hero!"

Twenty-Five

"No, tell me you didn't do this?" Mattie caught Alma's hand. She didn't know just what Ty would do or say, but with the guilt he'd carried for so long, he was bound to dislike this. He wanted no one to call him "hero."

"I am guilty," Alma said contritely. "I sent that telegram to Ty's parents like you asked, and an answer came back, doncha know, thankin' me for relayin' the message and sayin' they were comin' on the train as soon as possible." Alma sighed. "I told the sewin' circle — we'd been talkin' about how heroic Ty was and planning to do somethin' to honor him at the picnic — and the idea took off to surprise him. The whole town has been conspirin' to make this 'Ty Warburton Day' instead of Founder's Day!"

"The mayor and a small delegation, including Slim and me, met Ty's folks at the train," Rosalee added. "They are ever so nice — except for having Yankee accents of course. I never realized Ty was a Yankee. He don't talk funny. Anyway, Mr. and Mrs. Warburton fell right in with our plan to honor Ty for the way he faced down that dangerous outlaw!"

Mattie shook her head. "You don't know what you've done." Her gaze went to her husband as he approached them.

"You mean Ty won't like it?" Alma asked.

"Won't like what?" Ty asked, coming up behind her.

"Ack!" Alma jumped and put a hand to her heart, then turned to glare. "I'd as soon you didn't do that, Ty Warburton!"

"Hello, Ty." Rosalee twirled her parasol, an innocent look on her face.

Ty hooked his thumbs in his pockets, his expression wary as he looked from Alma's slightly flushed face to Rosalee, then met Mattie's gaze. "What's going on, ladies?"

"Now, Ty, whatever makes you ask that?" Looking up at him, Rosalee batted thick eyelashes.

"Four men have stopped me to shake my hand and talk about Cratchet," Ty said. "Mattie?"

"I haven't been in town, Ty, until today." It sounded lame to her own ears. He continued to look at her, patiently waiting for more. Mattie stammered, "I mean, I — "

"Aaaaaeeeeiiii!"

"Watch out, there!" Alma snapped as a boy bumped into her. Not pausing to apologize, he took off again, his twin brother right behind.

"Robert Jr. and Ned!" Closing her parasol and shaking it threateningly, Rosalee took off after her twin eight-year-olds.

"I'd better find Tassie," Alma said. "It'll be time to eat soon."

"She's with Angeline and Nathan, waiting their turn on the 'flying Jenny' Joe made for the children." Ty nodded toward the open meadow, where the footraces were still going on. Behind the boys running, several children clung on either end of a thick plank, which had been attached to a stump by a spike. The children screamed in delight as a couple of bigger kids pushed it around, spinning the thing as fast as they could make it go.

Alma hurried off.

"Hey, Ty!" A man with muttonchop whiskers pushed between two women carrying pies toward the table. "I just wanted to shake the hand of the man who laid Cratchet under!" The man grabbed Ty's hand and pumped. "It's nice to know we won't all be murdered in our beds!"

As he turned to Mattie and nodded, she found there was a strong scent of cider on the man's breath. "Three, right in the heart!" He made a gun out of his forefinger and thumb and closed one eye, taking mock aim. "*Pow, pow, pow!* You must be mighty proud to be married to a hero, ma'am!"

"Excuse me, Cragger. You're upsetting my wife." Ty caught Mattie's elbow and led her away from the man.

"I'm sorry, Mattie."

Suddenly she found herself alone with her husband. A situation that felt darned uncomfortable. She glanced toward the mayor's buggy. Ty's parents still stood near it. They seemed to be watching her and Ty. Oh Lord, should she warn him?

"What's wrong?"

When she shook her head, he stopped and placed his finger under her chin, lifting it up so she had no choice but to meet his gaze.

"When I first came up to you as you talked with Alma and Rosalee, you looked like you'd just been invited to a hanging — your own. And there's all the slaps on the back I've been getting. You must know I don't feel comfortable with anyone calling me a hero. Especially not after what I put you and the children through."

"You didn't put us through anything, Ty. Cratchet did."

"No. I should have found him sooner — and if I hadn't forced you into getting married, you would have never been a target." His expression was bleak.

"Ty — " Catching back what she was about to say, she managed a small smile and wound her fingers together. "Look, I'm not certain what's going to happen. Really. But everyone seems mad to make a hero out of you."

"Then I should leave." His face was stone-hard.

"Ty, I . . . Don't leave. Not yet. I mean, think of the children . . . " She shrugged.

"All right." He sighed. "I'll stay."

Her gaze slipped past him. People were starting to crowd the tables. "I'd better go find Angeline and Nathan, if you'll get our plates and meet us back by that last table. That's where I put that big bowl of chicken and dumplings I brought."

"Your chicken and dumplings?" Ty's expression lightened.

"Seasoned with parsley and green onions."

"A woman who can cook and has her own hip bath — I was damned lucky to get you, Mattie."

"I hope you always feel that way," she said, as she moved away.

It was going to be okay, Ty thought, watching Mattie make her way across the meadow toward the children, moving through the people drifting toward the tables. She was going to forgive him for failing to keep her safe.

Then they could start again.

Ty brought the plates from where they'd left the blanket and Mattie approached him with the children in tow, as everyone was gathering around the food tables.

Spotting him, Angeline ran to where he was, Nathan on her heels. "Did you see me ride the 'Jenny,' Papa? Did you? Billy Collins pushed it real fast, and I thought I might fly right off!"

"I saw a blur with long blonde braids — you mean that was you whirling around?" Ty raised his brows as his daughter nodded.

"I rode it, too!" Nathan stated. "It was fun!"

"Weren't you afraid?" Ty asked.

Angeline shook her head. "I wasn't afraid."

"Me, neither," Nathan declared, puffing out his chest.

"It was fun. Want to ride it after we eat, Mr. T — I mean Papa?" He looked up eagerly. "I can show you how to hold on."

"Not me." Ty laughed. "I'd be afraid."

Frowning in disbelief, Nathan said, "Not you. Billy Collins says you're the bravest man since Jim Bowie. He says you killed that old Cricket and he was a real bad man — but I already knew that."

Stunned, Ty didn't know what to say.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The mayor paused and noisily cleared his throat. "Can I have everyone's attention?"

Angeline sighed. "When Mr. Chantland does that, it means he's going to be talking for a long, long time, and he sometimes even forgets to let us out of school on time."

Standing nearby, the mayor's wife laughed and turned to Angeline. "I fear you're right, dear. When Mr. Sudmore does that, it means the same thing." She smiled. "And I'll just bet you're as hungry as I am." She tweaked the girl's cheek.

"I guess so." Angeline smiled back and blushed at the adult attention.

"Lovely child," she told Ty.

"Yes, she is." Holding his daughter's blue-gray gaze, he felt a swelling pride.

"I'm certain your parents are very proud of her." Mrs. Sudmore turned her attention back to her husband.

Wondering why the woman mentioned his mother and father, Ty glanced at Angeline. He had written his parents about Angeline and about his marriage, but little more than the bare details.

"I love you, Papa." Angeline gave him a swift hug around his middle, but pushed away just as quickly. "Oh, I'm sorry! I hope I didn't hurt you. Where you got hurt, I mean."

Ty's heart had pinched painfully, but his wound was okay. "No, Angeline. I'm almost good as new." He placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her around in front of him. "Let's listen to the mayor."

Mayor Sudmore had climbed up on a crate someone had provided. "As we come together today to celebrate and thank God for the founding of our town, I can't help but think about all the heroes it has taken to settle this great state! Texas has a tradition of heroes — "

Looking upset, Mattie caught Ty's arm, and he wound his fingers through hers.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

" — Men like Sam Houston, Jim Bowie, Davy Crockett! And now, our own *Ty Warburton!*"

As applause erupted around them, Mattie looked helplessly up into her husband's darkening face. His blue gaze bore into hers.

"You knew about this, Mattie?"

"No. Not before we came."

As the applause died, the mayor went on. "We're starting a tradition today of recognizing whomever has done the most for our town over the past year. Ty Warburton, would you come up here, please, and accept this token of our esteem. This award is for *Most Honored Citizen.*" He held up a red, white, and blue ribbon.

As more applause erupted, Mattie thought at first Ty would refuse. Maybe even leave. As the applause continued, growing louder, people began urging Ty to "Go on up."

"Go on, Papa!" Angeline smiled, hero worship in her eyes.

Ty looked down at his daughter, then moved to the makeshift podium and turned to face the crowd, his expression strained.

Even as Mattie ached for him, she noticed the couple from the mayor's buggy, Ty's parents, were now at the edge of the crowd, looking on proudly.

As the applause died down, Ty said, his voice devoid of emotion, "I appreciate all of you as friends and neighbors. We do have a wonderful town, earned through our own sweat and blood and toil."

"*Here! Here!*" Applause erupted again.

Ty held up his hand. "But I can't accept this for what I've done. To protect my family, I killed a man. There's nothing heroic or noble about that."

The crowd quieted suddenly, murmuring.

The mayor stepped nearer Ty with the ribbon.

"Don't pin that on me." Ty's tone was ice.

"Ty, you're too modest," the mayor insisted nervously. "Come now. Your parents have ridden the train a long ways to surprise you

and see you honored today." He pointed at the couple at the edge of the crowd.

Shock on his face, Ty brushed the mayor aside and took off toward them. The mayor was left holding the ribbon and looking at a loss.

The crowd sucked in around the Warburtons, hiding what was happening from Mattie's view. Murmurs arose. Everyone seemed uncertain what should come next.

Spotting Reverend Michaels, Mattie said loudly, "Let's let the Reverend say grace now and have our meal."

Though she knew she'd eat nothing herself. The tension in her stomach had created a knot that felt like a cannonball.

"Are they really Papa's parents?" Angeline asked uncertainly.

A glance showed Ty leading his parents away from the crowd. "Yes, they are, dear. Here." Mattie gave the children plates. "Hold these while I serve you."

"Will I meet them?" Angeline asked, still looking over her shoulder.

"Yes, I'm certain you will." Mattie wished she could be as certain about other things — like what Ty would do now. "Do you want the wishbone piece?" she asked as she lifted the cloth from atop the basket of fried chicken they'd brought.

Angeline nodded enthusiastically and Mattie dug amid the many napkin-wrapped pieces until she located the vee-shaped piece and placed it on the child's plate.

"I want a drumstick!" Nathan held his plate up, standing on his tiptoes to peer into the basket.

"Sure, dear." Mattie placed one on his plate and moved down the table of food. "How about some potato salad? And a piece of this corn bread — Alma made it."

Nathan and Angeline nodded eagerly. As she continued to serve them, she hoped Ty would take all this in stride.

Rosalee made her way to Mattie's side. "I think it was very poor spirited of Ty to act like that — after all the trouble we took to arrange all this!"

"Next time you might ask before you go to the trouble!" Mattie snapped and continued serving the children's plates.

"Well!"

Paying no attention as Rosalee went off in a huff, Mattie had settled the children on the blanket she'd spread out earlier and poured cups

of sweet tea for everyone. Picking at her own plate, she waited for Ty to bring his parents to meet them.

She didn't have long to wait before he approached with the couple.

"Mattie, this is my mother and father, Adelaide and Harvey Warburton." Ty's expression was reserved.

"Hello." She shook hands with them. Their smiles were warm and genuine, and she felt herself relax slightly.

After Ty introduced the children, his father, tall as Ty but with gray hair, held out his arms to them. "I've waited for grandchildren far too long not to get a hug now that I have them!"

"After me!" Ty's mother told him, stepping in front of him.

Angeline and Nathan received the hugs, but were a little awkward with them as they asked questions about school and made small talk. The youngsters looked happy to escape and join the sack race and other events when they were started back up.

"I'm sorry," Mattie apologized. "Meeting you has been so unexpected for them."

Ty's parents seemed to understand. "It will take them some time to get to know us," Adelaide said, smiling as she watched Nathan hopping in a burlap bag. Shorter than the rest of the field, he made two hops to everyone else's one.

"Surprising them like this wasn't the best idea," Harvey said thoughtfully. He looked at his son. "You didn't take to it, either, it seems."

"I'm very glad to see you," Ty protested. "And to have the chance to introduce Mattie to you both."

"Well, perhaps it wasn't wise to keep our visit as a surprise, but the mayor was persuasive," said Adelaide. "We are very proud that you're being honored for bringing a ruthless outlaw to justice! We wouldn't have missed the ceremony — even though we should have known you'd be too modest to accept the ribbon."

Mattie's gaze flew to Ty's face, which went tense, though he made no comment. Afterward conversation became stilted as they watched the children's games.

After a time, Ty suggested that he take his parents back to Alma's, where they were rooming. Though they plainly weren't ready to leave, they fell in with the plan. After hugging Mattie and promising to come out to the ranch and visit the next day, they let Ty lead them away.

Frowning, Mattie watched as Ty spoke with Manuel, then the mayor, then he and his parents got into the mayor's buggy.

She'd wanted to offer them to come out to the ranch and stay, but she thought it best to talk with Ty first and tell him what she planned. Where his parents were concerned, he'd had enough surprises for one day.

Mattie's heart sank as she caught the disappointed looks on Nathan and Angeline's faces as they saw the three leaving. They were learning they couldn't count on Ty to spend a lot of time with them before something took him away.

"Mama, why did Papa leave and take Grandmother and Grandfather?" Angeline asked after running back to where Mattie sat on the blanket.

"Yeah, Mama, why?" Nathan asked, his lip thrust out slightly.

"I don't know." Mattie wanted to offer some reason to make the children feel better, but maybe that wasn't wise. Would Ty always be disappointing them and she making excuses for his behavior? "If I had to guess, I'd say it's because he hasn't seen his mama and papa in a long time and he wanted to visit with them alone."

"Maybe." Angeline seemed to think about it, fishing the wishbone she'd saved from lunch from her pocket. "Maybe he just doesn't want to be around us." The child looked near to tears.

"That's not true," Mattie declared. "What are you going to wish for?" she asked to change the subject.

"You can't tell before you pull or it won't come true!" Angeline turned to Nathan and held up the wishbone. "Make a wish!"

The boy nodded. "Okay."

Adding to Angeline's disappointment, she got the short end.

"Well, I guess it's okay, as long as we wished for the same thing," Angeline said, staring at it.

"I wished for a pony." Nathan pocketed his end of the split bone.

Angeline glared at him, her hands on her hips. "You were supposed to wish Papa would be happy again and we'd be a real family! I told you when I saved the wishbone!"

Nathan's lower lip thrust out. "I'm sorry."

Watching the exchange, Mattie felt her heart twist. So, they did feel Ty's unhappiness.

The pair returned to where the other children were, but some of their earlier exuberance seemed to have left them. As the afternoon

wore on, clouds darkened the sky and the wind picked up. Tassie ran over to where Mattie sat and told her, due to the impending rain, everyone had decided that the dance that night should be postponed. Many people were already leaving.

Growing impatient, Mattie waited for Ty to return. When Manuel and Conseula's son approached, she knew it wouldn't happen.

"Miz Mattie, when you are ready, I'll drive your buggy. Before Mr. Ty left, he asked me to see you home if he didn't get back before the weather turned," Juan said.

Twenty-Six

They stayed for a while longer. Mattie clapped and cheered and urged the children on as they hopped in the sack race, then the egg relay. Tassie outran all the boys, winning the footrace handily. Angeline and Nathan cheered for her, but generally their enthusiasm had fallen by the wayside with Ty's departure.

Mattie tried hard not to blame Ty for disappointing them, but she couldn't help feeling a flare of resentment. By leaving, he'd cast a pall over their day, just as surely as the gathering clouds in the west had blocked out the sun.

Later, as Mattie looked out her kitchen window at the rain pounding down in sheets, she wondered where the sunshine had gone. They had left early because of the threatening clouds, and the rain had caught them before they reached the ranch. They were all forced to huddle under oilskin slickers Ty had put in the buggy.

Once they were home, she rushed the children inside and sent them to dry off, telling Juan to come back for something warm to drink after going on to the barn to tend to the horse.

After making a pyramid of kindling in the stove, Mattie lit it with a match, then stacked short pieces of oak on the grate over the flame. She planned to heat the tea that had been left over from the picnic and serve it hot to Juan and the children. It would take the chill away.

But she doubted hot tea would do anything for the chill she felt. This chill had settled in the region of her heart.

Ty had disappointed them again. She knew he wrestled with his own demons, but she could no longer forgive how he hurt and disappointed their children because of it.

It was time she told Ty Warburton a few things, she decided. And she would hold nothing back. Not even the fact that she loved him.

It was late when she heard Ty come in. Mattie sat in the little-used parlor, sewing a patch on a pair of Nathan's trousers. A stack of mending she'd finished sat on the couch beside her.

Putting down her mending, she listened as he closed the kitchen door. He paused and she imagined him hanging up his hat and oil-skin, then his steps sounded in the hall.

His steps paused outside the parlor door. No doubt, he saw the light under it. As the clock over the mantel ticked the seconds off, Mattie sat in the soft circle of light cast by the fancy lamp's milk-glass shade, waiting.

The parlor door swung open. Ty stood in the doorway. "Are you ready for bed?"

"No." She rose.

"A pity. I think I am." Ty came to her and caught her shoulders, smoothing his hands over them. He craved her warm touch and her understanding. "You're still dressed. You should be in your wrapper." He bent and kissed her neck. "Easier to take off."

Feeling tears prickle, Mattie said, "And you should be sober. I smell whiskey on your breath!"

"In case you're wondering, I'm not drunk." Though he'd thought about it.

"You should have been home with your family. The children wondered where you were. Do you know how many excuses I've had to make to them for you?" She pulled free of his grasp on her shoulders.

"My family is the reason I stopped into the saloon for a drink, but I stopped at one." Ty sat on a wing chair, his shoulders slumped. "My mother and father have made me into a golden hero. All they talk about is the *bravery* of their wonderful son." He shook his head derisively. "They ignore the fact that Cratchet almost killed you and my children, and it was because of me, you were in danger to start with."

His voice was as bleak as a winter wind whistling through a canyon, and Mattie's heart twisted as she glimpsed the pain in his soul. She wanted to go to Ty and put her arms around him, to tell him everything would be all right.

But she knew deep down that it would only grant Ty temporary solace if she did. It wouldn't heal the guilt eating away at his soul.

He had to make that choice — go forward, or let the past forever haunt him.

"Where are your parents?" Mattie asked.

"I left them at Alma's."

"Why didn't you bring them home with you?"

He looked up at her. "The truth is I wasn't ready for them — I didn't want to face them over the breakfast table this morning." He sighed. "I'll bring them out tomorrow."

"You should have brought them out tonight. I would have told them the truth." Fisting her hands in her skirt, Mattie said a silent prayer for the courage to do what she had to, then said coldly, "I would have told them that you're the biggest coward in Texas."

Not wanting to see how her words hurt him, Mattie turned and stared into the fireplace, though there was nothing but cold ashes in the hearth.

* * *

In the room directly above the parlor, Angeline put her hand over her mouth, but couldn't prevent a hurt cry from escaping. Sitting on the cold hearth with her, Nathan shushed her with his finger to his lips. Because Angeline said she was afraid, Mattie had left a candle burning in the hearth every night since Cratchet came to the ranch. It now flickered between the two youngsters, throwing odd shadows around the room.

"I can't believe Mama's being so mean!" Angeline whispered. She had crept out of bed when she'd heard Ty come home and awakened her brother.

"She's not mean!" Nathan's lower lip thrust out and he eyed his new sister askance.

"She's being mean to Papa." Angeline clutched Miss Adelaide tightly. "She was mad at him this morning, too."

They both leaned nearer the fireplace when Ty's voice drifted up through.

"Because I let Cratchet get to you and the children."

"He sounds so sad," Angeline whispered.

"Ty, you couldn't have known what Cratchet would do, and I'm tired of hearing you beat yourself with it! Cratchet discovered who Angeline was on the train and followed her to you. If I hadn't married you, I might not have been there when Cratchet tried to hurt her! I can't be sorry for that.

"Cratchet didn't hurt me because you saved me, then you saved me a second time. You took a bullet for me, Ty, trying to protect me. And it was the bravest thing I've ever seen!

"What I am sorry for — and I am very very sorry for it! — is that I'm married to a man who won't put the past behind him and get on with his life!"

"Mattie . . ."

"Don't touch me."

"You're just mad because I've had a drink."

"Don't touch me! I'd just as soon you left, now."

"Mama is being awful mean!" Angeline sniffed.

Nathan nodded sadly. *"She's awful mad. And Papa's been drinking."* They both jumped as a door slammed somewhere below.

"Tassie said when her papa came home drinking, her mama said mean things to her papa and he left. He's never going to come back again." Angeline bowed her head. Her tears fell on Miss Adelaide.

"No! That's not going to happen to Mama and Papa!" Nathan said stoutly.

"How do you know?" Angeline shook her head. *"I wished for a real family. I wished on a falling star on my birthday."*

"I'm real." Nathan sniffed and wiped his nose on his nightshirt sleeve.

"But we're not a real family. I don't know what it is but something is missing. We're just people who live in the same house. And if Mama goes away, she'll take you with her, and leave me." Fresh tears fell. Angeline buried her face against Miss Adelaide and sobbed.

"You'll have your papa," Nathan pointed out, patting her shoulder awkwardly.

Angeline sniffed and dried her tears on her sleeve, trying to be happy about that. Her papa was wonderful and handsome and brave — no matter that Mama told him he was a coward. But Angeline wasn't sure he loved her. She got the feeling when he looked at her that he was disappointed somehow.

Smoothing her doll's clothing, Angeline said, *"If I had only gotten the long end of the wishbone at the picnic!"* She looked at Nathan accusingly. *"I wouldn't have wished for a pony!"*

Nathan looked contrite.

She stood up and brushed off her nightgown. "What are we going to do, Nathan? I don't want Mama and you to go away. I want us to be a perfect family."

Nathan got to his feet, his eyes brimming. "I don't want to go away!" He dashed into the adjoining bedroom and closed the door.

Hugging Miss Adelaide close, Angeline climbed into bed.

* * *

Mattie stirred the hot, bubbling grits, then lifted the pot from the stove and set it atop the warming over, where it was cooler, while she checked her biscuits. Finding them golden brown, she lifted them out. Her finger slipped off the hot pad and she touched the hot pan.

"Ouch!" She shook her finger, then stuck it in her mouth. Tears prickled her eyes, but she didn't let them fall. They had nothing to do with her finger.

"Did you hurt yourself bad?" Nathan asked from his seat at the table.

"No. Not at all." Mattie managed a smile and started taking the biscuits out of the pan and placing them on a plate.

"There's a rainbow!" Angeline said, rushing into the kitchen. Seeing Nathan already at the table, she rushed on excitedly. "A big, beautiful rainbow! It goes from one hilltop to another!" She added, a meaningful note in her voice, "If you find the end of the rainbow, you can make a wish that *has* to come true!"

"I thought a pot of gold was at the end of the rainbow." Mattie set the warm biscuits on the table.

"That's a childish fairy tale," Angeline said authoritatively. "Pots of gold aren't just sitting around."

Her heart warmed, Mattie smiled. Was there anything more precious than a child? Just to be argumentative, she said, "But I thought the leprechauns hid their gold there."

"Oh, no." Angeline shook her head. "Leprechauns have invisible gold, so you couldn't find it. But if you find the end of the rainbow, they'll grant your wish."

"Really?" Nathan scrambled down from his chair. "I want to see!"

Angeline grabbed his hand and hauled him out of the kitchen.

"How about breakfast?" Mattie called after them.

Her son reappeared. "Ah, Mama, can I just go see out on the front porch? I'll hurry back!" Nathan's brown eyes were pools of pleading.

"It's a really big one — I never saw a rainbow so big!" Angeline added, sticking her head back into the kitchen.

Mattie sighed. "Hurry back. The grits will get cold."

Had she done the right thing last night?

In the suddenly empty kitchen, the question came back to haunt her once again. Had she?

No, she feared. She shouldn't have tried to talk with Ty last night. His parents' pride in him was salt on an old wound. She should have been more patient.

There was no use wishing her words back now, she sadly concluded. He'd slept in the storeroom last night and had left at first light, waking her and telling her tersely that, since the rain had stopped, he was going to fetch his parents to the ranch.

Mattie sighed. She could be happy — if only she could heal her husband's pain. Or maybe if she didn't love him quite so much . . .

When Nathan and Angeline came back and climbed up to the table, an air of excitement clung about them.

"Mama, are we going to church today?" Nathan asked as Mattie placed plates of grits and eggs on the table.

"Not today. Ty is going to get his mother and father from Alma's and bring them here, so we can visit."

Angeline asked, "Are they going to live here with us?"

Caught off guard by the question, Mattie shook her head. "No. I don't think so. Why?"

"Because Judy and Timmy Crager's grandmother lives with them," Nathan said, around a mouthful of food.

The little girl stirred her food around. "If we aren't going to church, can we go outside and play until Papa gets back with Grandmother and Grandfather?" She looked up hopefully.

"No." Mattie brought her coffee to the table and sat down. "It's wet and muddy out. And when I went out to get eggs this morning, I saw Cookie at the barn and he said he didn't believe the rain was over."

"But we'll be really really careful not to get muddy!"

"No!" Mattie said firmly. "You two played and had fun outside all yesterday. Today isn't a good day and I want you to stay inside."

"Yes, ma'am," both children said at once, looking none to pleased about it. A secret look passed between the two, then they dug into their food as if starved, or racing to see how fast they could finish.

Deciding what she should cook for her in-laws, Mattie took a sip of her coffee, then set it aside and went to the larder to get out the last ham.

* * *

"No, thankee, Ty. I'll not be intrudin'," Cookie refused Ty's invitation to come in. He handed Ty a napkin-wrapped dish through the back door.

"Thank you," Ty said. It was warm and smelled of cinnamon and apples.

Cookie nodded, his sharp, bearded chin going up and down. "I tole yer missus I'd have an extra, since Mornin' Pete and Sandy Gig went out line-ridin' this mornin' — though they ought'n notta done it, an' that's a fact!"

"Why not?" Ty picked up on the older man's concern.

"Bad weather's not over — not by a long shot." He squinted up at the fast-moving clouds overhead as if for confirmation. "Wind's still outta the southeast and air's warm and wet as piss. That's what I tole yore missus." Cookie's pointed chin bobbed up and down, then he flushed red. "Not 'at about warm and wet as piss, Ty! I didn't mean no —"

"I know you wouldn't, Cookie Thank you, again."

The older man nodded and turned back for the bunkhouse.

Ty put the pie on the table and strode back to the parlor. He'd barely introduced Mattie to his parents when Cookie had knocked. Ty didn't want her to feel awkward with them. Lord knew, he felt awkward enough.

When he opened the parlor door, Mattie was apologizing because she couldn't offer his parents tea, since she and Ty had had no time to get a proper tea service since they were married.

His mother clasped Mattie's hand, giving her a warm smile. "Don't be silly, dear. It's enough to meet you and know my son has someone to love and care for him, now. After all the brave things he's done, he deserves a happy home with warmth and love." She turned to Ty. "And we have grandchildren at last! To think, we'd almost despaired,

then Ty wrote us about Angeline and that he was getting married to a woman who had a son — well, my prayers were answered!”

His father pushed away from the mantel. “Quite right, my dear. Well, Ty, if you can round them up, perhaps we can visit those children?”

“Yes, we brought presents!” Ty’s mother beamed.

“Mrs. Warburton, you didn’t have to do that.”

“I know. That’s always the best reason to give a present.” The older woman’s blue eyes twinkled. “And formality seems so out of place between us. Please call me ‘Adelaide.’”

“Adelaide,” Mattie said. “Like Angeline’s doll.”

“Truly?” Adelaide turned to Ty.

“Angeline asked me your name when Mattie gave her the doll,” Ty said. He looked at Mattie. “Where are Angeline and Nathan?”

“Upstairs. I can’t fathom why they aren’t down here yet. I called them when I heard the buggy on the drive.” Mattie started to rise.

“Stay, Mattie. I’ll get them.” As Ty went upstairs, he found it curiously quiet. After calling them and checking both rooms, he knew why.

As she heard Ty’s hurried footsteps coming back down the stairs, Mattie sensed that something was wrong. Her gaze flew to his face the instant the parlor door opened.

“The children aren’t upstairs,” he told her. As if punctuating his words, a rising wind outside moaned around the corner of the house.

Twenty-Seven

"Not upstairs? Then where are they?" Rising, Mattie's gaze locked on her husband's.

"I don't know." Ty crossed the parlor to her, his expression stone. "This was on Angeline's bed."

Mattie took the carefully lettered note and read aloud:

"Dear Mama and Papa, Do not worry. We will be back in a little while. We have to find the end of the rainbow, so everything will be okay and no one will fight.

"Oh, Ty! They must have heard us last night." Mattie's heart was in her throat, almost choking her. "There was a rainbow earlier — when I looked out of the kitchen door, it seemed to sit on that tall hill to the west."

"I saw it," Ty said grimly.

"But if they try to go there . . . If they try to go there . . . The woods and the creek — *Ty!*"

The sky had been darkening since Ty got back to the ranch. A booming of distant thunder warned of more bad weather — just as Cookie had foretold.

Hugging Mattie, Ty said against her hair, "Don't worry. I'm going out to find them. They couldn't have gone far."

"I'll go, too." Harvey stood.

"There's an extra oilskin in the storeroom, off the kitchen," Ty said. Looking back at Mattie, he smoothed the little curls beside her face. "We'll find them," he promised, cupping her cheek for an instant before starting after his father.

Mattie rushed after them, but stood in the kitchen feeling ineffectual while they snatched a few things from the storeroom — a blanket, extra oilskin ponchos, and two canteens.

As the men left, heading out on foot, Mattie watched from the kitchen door until they disappeared into the trees, their heads bent as they watched the ground for footprints. She was encouraged when they seemed to find something just at the tree line.

But could they follow any trail into the woods? Surely they would lose it. . . .

Adelaide came up behind her and put a motherly arm around Mattie's shoulders. "Ty will find them."

Staring at the wet woods where the men disappeared, Mattie felt anything but reassured. Strong wind bent the pine limbs, thrashing the trees to and fro. A parade of dark clouds rushed overhead. The tops of hickories and oaks seemed to rake the swiftly moving cloud bottoms.

"They'll be cold and wet when they get back," she said, turning away to keep from crying as she imagined Nathan and Angeline shivering, soaked through to the skin. "Everyone will need hot soup to warm them, especially the children."

Busy. She had to stay busy.

"An excellent idea," Adelaide said, her bright tone at odds with the worried line between her fine brows. "I see you have a ham boiling. A nice bean soup with it would be just the thing. If you have an extra apron, I'd like to help."

Mattie felt like an automaton, working in the kitchen beside her mother-in-law, performing familiar tasks without realizing she was doing them. They chatted about inconsequential things — what the winter weather had been like in Illinois, and the best way to make bread rise when the weather was cool and damp. Anything at all but what was uppermost on both their minds.

The weather was growing steadily worse.

Skies darkened steadily until Mattie lit the lantern hanging from the ceiling. The wind howled around the house. Mattie fisted her hands into her apron as lightning seemed to flash with her every heartbeat and crashing thunder vibrated the house, rattling the windows.

"How long have they been gone?" Mattie asked, trying to concentrate on measuring out the ingredients for biscuits.

"A little more than a half hour." Adelaide clicked the cover closed on the watch pinned to her shoulder. "My mother gave this to me. I was going to give this to Angeline," she said, running her finger over the beaded metal.

Lightning crackled and thunder crashed at the same time. With a cry, Mattie jumped, knocking the bowl of flour and lard to the floor. She stared at it for an instant. Another simultaneous flash and boom jolted her.

Drawn to the kitchen door, Mattie opened it. Wind blasted her with cold and damp and she had trouble keeping the door from being slammed wide.

Between the dark hills and darker sky was a thin band of eerie green light. As she watched, a dark cone from the clouds reached down, sucking at the ground.

Tornado! A killer storm!

And everyone she loved was out in it!

Mattie bolted the door closed. "Come, Adelaide. We need to find shelter. It's too late to get to the root cellar." Taking her mother-in-law by the hand, she rushed her into the storeroom, closing the door after them.

"Here. Here's a cot." Trembling herself, Mattie guided the older woman until she was seated beside her. Without windows, the storm was only slightly less frightening. The crash of thunder and the howl of the wind seemed magnified by the darkness. Choking with fear, the dark seemed to steal Mattie's breath.

But it wasn't herself she was afraid for. It was her children and her husband, out in the teeth of the storm. And her father-in-law.

As if her thoughts reflected Mattie's, Adelaide said, "Ty and Harvey will find the children. They will be all right. They have to be all right!" She hugged herself and rocked back and forth. "I've already lost John."

"They will be fine." Mattie was fighting her own fears, but tried to sound reassuring.

"Yes, you're right. Ty will bring them all home, just as he did his squadron during the war, when they were cut off from their company at the first battle of Bull Run. Did he ever tell you about that?"

"No." Mattie wished the wind would stop. But the howl was growing louder.

"No, he wouldn't. He's never been a braggart. His father and I would never have known, but we read it in the paper — reprinted from a Washington paper, which had sent a reporter to the front. Well, Ty's squadron was outflanked and cut off from the main army. They were pinned down for an hour and it seemed the Rebs would just pick

the men off, one by one. But Ty rode out alone, whooping and hollering, diverting the Rebs' attention and drawing their fire on himself. Then his squadron dashed out in all directions, like a covey of startled quail. Most all the men escaped and made it back to their lines."

Mattie could hear the pride in Adelaide's voice. She sensed more than saw her smile in the light stealing under the door.

"I have his medals. He said he didn't want them — he was always far too modest."

Mattie knew she had to say something, for her husband's sake. When he returned, he needed to sort these things out with his parents, the things that haunted him and had made him pull away from everyone all these years.

Most of all, he needed to forgive himself for his brother's death. Obviously Adelaide didn't blame him for that.

If Ty came back . . .

No! Mattie swallowed down a hot, sick feeling. He would come back.

He would! And their children and Ty's father!

As if to mock her, the whole house started to vibrate with the fury of the storm. There was a crash of glass somewhere in the front and the howling wind grew wilder, sounding like a speeding train that was about to run over the house. Smaller crashes followed the first.

Mattie focused her attention on the one thing she could do something about at the moment. "Ty doesn't think of himself as a hero."

"As I said, he's too modest —"

"No." Mattie caught the older woman's hand in the dark, "No. He says he's responsible for John's death, and that guilt weighs like a millstone on his heart! He can't forgive himself for it — and it hurts him most when you call him heroic. It's almost more than he can bear!"

Adelaide was utterly still for an instant. "Oh, no . . . Oh, my God, no." The whispered words were barely audible over the roaring wind.

Feeling the older woman tremble, Mattie said reassuringly, "The storm will be over soon, Adelaide. We'll be all right."

The two women stayed in the storeroom, even after the wind had fallen and a steady rain had settled in. By unspoken agreement, neither seemed anxious to leave their small sanctuary.

A heavy knock on the kitchen door galvanized Mattie into action.

"I hope that's Ty and Harvey!" Adelaide said, following her from the storeroom.

Avoiding the biscuit dough on the floor, Mattie hurried to answer it.

Pecos Jim stood on the steps in an enveloping oilskin, squinting up at her from under his wide-brimmed hat. "E'ry one all right in here?"

Her heart plummeting in disappointment, Mattie nodded. "Come in out of the rain."

It was all right, she told herself. Ty was used to living with the elements. He and his father had found the children and taken shelter somewhere.

She stood back so Jim could pass. Only after he had did she realize the magnitude of the destruction wrought by the storm. Limbs and boards and leaves were thickly scattered over the area. The buckboard lay upside down, one wheel vainly spinning. The old dominecker hen wandered around in a circle, lost, all her tail feathers missing.

Her gaze moved up the hill, her dread growing. Trees were broken, snapped off halfway up their trunks, or uprooted. It was as though a giant scythe had cut a swath to the top of the hill, and on the next hill beyond. Looking out over the debris-strewn landscape what little hope her heart had held on to was lost.

"I need to gabber at Ty," Pecos Jim said. "We got a right fine mess, yessiree. Half the barn roof is off, 'n that old walnut tree by the bunkhouse fell over on it, puttin' Cookie in a takin'. Still, thank the Almighty, looks like no one was hurt."

When no one spoke, Jim looked from Mattie to her mother-in-law. "Som'ot's wrong, I take it. Where's Ty?"

"The children are gone," Mattie said, forcing the words past dry lips. "He went out searching for them. Before the storm."

The old man shook his head. "Don't you worry, Miz Mattie. I'll go round up some men and we'll find 'em right enough. All of 'em." He patted her shoulder awkwardly and hurried away.

Twenty-Eight

Before Jim could organize the men and leave, Ty and his father came back. When Mattie heard his voice, she flew outside.

Ty was safe!

But he and his father were alone. One look at Ty's face made her heart fall. The tight, white lines told her he had no news of the children.

"Oh, Ty." He looked totally exhausted. Mattie hugged him fiercely, unmindful of the falling rain and his wet rain gear. "When the tornado came, I thought I'd lost you and . . . and what of Angeline and Nathan?" she asked, fighting back tears.

Ty led her toward the house and stopped just inside the kitchen door. "We didn't find them before the storm struck, Mattie." His voice broke and he wrapped her in a crushing hug.

"They'll be all right, Ty. I know they will," she said against his shoulder.

"This happened because I was a fool! I let the past keep me apart from you and them. They kept wishing for a real father to go with the wonderful mother they had, and I was too wrapped up in my guilt to listen," Ty said hoarsely.

"We were both wrong. But it's useless to go over it now. Now the only important thing is that you are all right and we're going to find the children."

Forcing herself to step back out of the shelter of her husband's arms, Mattie asked, "What will we do now?"

"Jim's got what ranch hands he could together. After I eat, we'll make a wider search. Don't worry, Mattie, we *will* find them." His gaze was fierce.

Mattie felt Ty said the last as much to reassure himself as her. She nodded as if she had no doubt of it, but inside her stomach was knotted so she could barely breathe. "I know we will."

As she hurried to get Ty a bowl of hot soup and a biscuit with ham in it, Ty spoke with Pecos Jim, telling Jim how he wanted the men to fan out in a line, so they wouldn't miss anything.

As Ty talked to the older man, Ty's father and mother came into the kitchen and the older Warburton sat down. Mattie hurried to get him soup, too, while Adelaide served him ham and biscuits.

After eating quickly, the men left.

Standing in the door, as she had before the storm struck, Mattie watched them disappear into the tree line. Feeling too empty to pray, she sent up hopes. As she stood there, one hope was answered as the rain stopped. There was a knife-thin line of blue sky over the hills.

"With so many men, it won't be long now." Adelaide put her arm around Mattie's shoulders and squeezed.

"Surely they will be found quickly." Mattie felt her smile trembling and turned away. "Let's see what we can do in the house. Someone said that one of the front windows is smashed in." Cleaning up the glass and drying up water would give her something to do to keep busy.

At dark, the men returned, silent and tired.

With the roof smashed in on the kitchen of the bunkhouse, Cookie had brought his supplies to the house in a wheelbarrow and set up his big cook pot outside the kitchen. He had enough stew to feed a small army. As Mattie dished the men's plates and poured them coffee, she was all too aware that they avoided her gaze.

They held no hope, Mattie realized, a stone beating where her heart should have been. Feeling so brittle that she thought she would break if she was touched, Mattie continued to serve plates and coffee, and then helped clean up, keeping busy. Though try as she might, she couldn't keep the dark scenes from haunting her mind.

A long time after dark, Ty returned, his face etched in tense white lines. Mattie poured him coffee and gave him a plate of stew and he thanked her without meeting her eyes. Going inside with him, she sat with him in silence at the kitchen table as he ate.

After a few moments, he pushed his half-finished food away. "The sky has cleared off and the wind shifted to the north. It will be colder tonight. Maybe even frost."

"I know." Mattie knotted her cold fingers together.

Ty's gaze hooked hers. "We found some tracks by the creek that hadn't been completely washed away by the rain. Spot's with them. They'll huddle with the dog tonight and stay warm."

"By the creek." Mattie put her hand to her mouth, wanting to cry. "Do you really think they'll be all right?" she asked through her fingers.

Looking into her eyes, Ty couldn't lie and say "yes" — no matter how much he wanted to do just that. The tracks had seemed to lead into the swollen water.

He studied his coffee. "We have to keep hoping, Mattie." Rising, he squeezed her shoulder, and went outside.

Ty instructed Jim to ride out to find Manuel and the rest of the hands and bring them back to join the search, and then he sent another hand to the Thornhill place to tell Zack to bring help from town.

Aided by the light of an almost full moon, Ty went back into the woods, calling out for the children. Mattie stood at the kitchen door, listening to him until his voice faded into the distance. Then she wrapped a blanket around herself and sat in a chair in the parlor. Above her, her in-laws moved around in Angeline's room, where Mattie had put them to sleep. Ty had refused to let his father go back out in the dark, telling him he'd be needed tomorrow.

Unwilling to close her eyes, she watched the fire until it died. By morning, she had come to one conclusion that warmed her heart — if the children could be found, Ty would do it. He'd turn over heaven and hell until they were safe.

By full daylight, fifty men from the ranch and town were in the woods, searching, and Mattie was grateful for each and every one.

Alma and some of the other women came out and helped Cookie, brewing endless pots of coffee from the supplies they brought with them, cooking a washpot of hot stew, and unwrapping bread and other food they'd brought from home. The men searched in shifts, taking one area at a time, so they wouldn't miss anything.

As the search continued, Mattie waited, working until she was swaying on her feet and Alma insisted she go inside and rest. They had to be found soon, Alma assured her.

The day wore on, and the crowd grew more subdued. Mattie went to the kitchen door, looking out at the little groups huddled in the yard. It had grown cooler, and she heard the women murmuring about a late freeze.

Turning away from the kitchen door, Mattie wrapped her shawl more tightly about her, but it did nothing to dispel the cold fear she felt inside.

"I brought a bit of cider, Mattie, if you'd care for a cup. You'll not sleep again tonight if you have more coffee." Alma lifted a crockery jug out of a basket she'd brought from her house.

"I couldn't, Alma." Mattie looked out of the open door. The sun crept below the hills, and fear clogged her throat, making it hard to swallow. "Can they survive a second night? It's so cold, Alma. They'll have gotten wet in the rain yesterday."

"I'll not say it looks good. But you can't give up hope!"

An hour later, a rippling cheer from the people outside brought Mattie back to the kitchen door. Ty was coming out of the woods, with Angeline in his arms and Spot at his side. Harvey had Nathan. As she took in what was happening, everyone rushed to meet them, and Mattie raced down the steps and across the grass. People had closed in around them, but she pushed between them.

"Ty!"

"Mattie!" He rushed toward her, and Angeline stirred in his arms.

"Mama?" Nathan fought to get down from Harvey's arms and he let the boy have his way. "Oh, Mama!"

Her son flew into her skirts, and Mattie scooped him up, muddy clothes and all. She hugged him, then turned and hugged Ty and Angeline, crying silent tears of joy.

"Oh, Mama! Are you real mad?" Nathan sniffed.

"I was really afraid!" Mattie said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm real sorry! The more we walked, the farther away the rainbow got. Then it disappeared and the sky got dark. And it started raining and thundering. I got scared. Nathan did, too," Angeline said through her tears.

"Did not!" Nathan wiped his cheeks.

"Did too!"

"What did you do?" Mattie wiped her own eyes, trying to stop crying. One look at Ty's wet cheeks started her tears anew.

"Spot found this hole in the side of a hill. It wasn't very big, but we all got in it. He kept us warm, just like he did Esteban when he was hurt." Nathan looked down at the big yellow dog. "Didn't you, boy?"

Spot barked and looked proud of himself, tongue lolling.

Mattie could have kissed the beast. Instead, she hugged her son and daughter again. "I'll bet you're hungry."

Both nodded against her embrace.

Ty shifted Angeline in his arms. "Let's get them into the house."

Later, after the children were safely inside, being given hot food and dry clothes, Ty shook hands with everyone who had helped and thanked them. Then he went inside, pulling his muddied boots off at the door, almost tired enough to fall asleep on his feet.

Smiling, Mattie wrapped her arm around his waist and guided him to the table, where a hot bowl of stew waited.

"Thank you. Where are the children?" he asked.

"They've eaten. Your mother and Alma are helping them wash off and get to bed. Your father fell asleep on the bunk in the storeroom. He was too exhausted to pull his boots off."

"I know just how he feels." Ty spooned a few mouthfuls of stew down, then pushed the bowl away, too tired to eat. Mattie set a fragrant, steaming cup beside him, and he lifted a questioning brow.

"Alma brought cider. I heated it to help warm you."

She sat down with her own cup. Frowning at the amber liquid, she said, "I know you're tired, Ty, but I think we need to talk about some things. And I wouldn't want to put it off."

"I know." He sighed and sipped the cider, feeling warmth spread through his belly. "As I looked for the children, I had a block of ice in my belly. I thought I'd never be warm again. All I wanted to do was to find them, safe, and get back to you and say I'm sorry, Mattie. I've been so wrapped up in the past, I almost lost the future. There's nothing so important to me as you and our children." Holding her gaze, he caught her hands across the table.

Seeing his sincerity, Mattie said, "I'm happy you feel that way. But there's more you have to do. You have to let go of the past or it will always cast a shadow over our lives. Put John's death behind you."

"I know, Mattie. I'll try. But my mother and father hold me up like some paragon, when the truth makes me sick to my stomach —"

"That's because we know the truth, Ty." His mother stood in the door to the hall, clasping her hands nervously.

"Mother!" His eyes were bleak. "No, don't —"

"We know the truth, Ty. *But you don't.*"

"What do you mean?"

"You aren't responsible for John's death," she said earnestly. "I never knew you felt like you were. You never talked about what you were feeling — oh, how was I to know? I would have told you! How you must have suffered!" The older woman caught her son's shoulders. "Ty, you weren't responsible for his death!" Adelaide insisted. "But John . . . oh, there's no other way to say this. If I had known how keeping the truth hidden would hurt you — but I didn't know, you see."

"Know what, Mother?"

"John was the one responsible for your being in prison. He confessed it all in his last letter — mailed the morning you were captured, by the date."

"No." Ty pushed up from the table.

"It's true," his mother insisted. "It was the last time we heard from him. He confessed he had plotted with that woman you married for you to be captured . . . because he was in love with your wife."

"No." Ty shook his head. "He was my brother. He wouldn't — "

"He couldn't go through with it, Ty! He wrote to us that he was going along with you to wherever it was the trap was set and he was going to protect you."

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, Ty turned to the window and looked out at the deepening gloom. He wanted to shout at his mother that she was wrong, that his brother would never have betrayed him.

"It was in a gristmill," Ty said. "Lyla had been missing for two days, and I received a note from her to meet her at a gristmill near the plantation."

In his mind's eye, Ty saw John striding after him as he'd mounted his horse. "*Wait up, Ty!*" John had paused long enough to give the quartermaster, who was standing in front of his tent, a letter before sprinting to where two mounted soldiers waited with his horse.

"I'm going with you." Nodding at the soldiers he was bringing along, he added, *"Them, too. You never know what you might run into."*

"No." Ty shook his head. "It's not true. If it was, he would just have told me about the trap. Neither of us would have been captured, and that soldier wouldn't have been killed as we tried to fight our way free of the Rebs."

"I fear it is true, Ty." His mother had tears on her cheeks. "I never wanted you to know your brother's guilt, to shame his memory." She sighed, twisting her fingers together. "I never knew how heavy your

burden was, or I would have told you long before now. Yes, John conspired with that woman to have you captured. He wanted her for himself. He wrote that after your marriage you went on some special assignment to the general — “

“Yes. For six weeks.”

Adelaide smoothed a lock of hair of Ty’s forehead. “John said that you had asked him to take care of that woman while you were gone, see that she and her family had what they needed. And that he’d never intended to fall in love with her. . . .”

Ty could imagine Lyla playing John as she’d played him. After the fight at the mill, when they were tied up, he remembered her looking from him to John, as if surprised, then saying: “*Take both of them away!*”

“Ty, I never knew the guilt you carried. Needlessly. Your father and I didn’t want to tell you about John’s betrayal, so we told you only how proud we were of you! I see now, by trying to spare you, we hurt you terribly.”

As Adelaide cried against his shoulder, he met Mattie’s wide gray gaze and held out his free hand to her. She came to him, and he wrapped her in his embrace, too.

“I wish I had realized . . . I should have told you sooner,” his mother said, drawing away and dabbing at her eyes.

“You’ve told me now.” And it felt as though he’d been let out of prison. Again.

Mattie smiled, her heart full to overflowing. Ty was freed of the guilt that had shackled him to the past. Maybe in time, his heart would even heal enough that he could love again.

Could love her.

Mattie stepped out of Ty’s embrace. “The children are asleep?” she asked Adelaide.

“I left them regaling Alma with their adventures, between yawns.”

“I’m going upstairs. I want to be near them.” Mattie turned for the hall.

Ty caught her hand. “I’ll join you, after I get cleaned up.”

Mattie smiled and hurried away.

Alma refused to stay the night. Because it was late, Ty insisted that Pecos Jim and Willie drive her back to the boardinghouse. His mother had awakened his father long enough to convince him to pull off his boots and clothes, covering him with a blanket.

After Ty had cleaned up, he went upstairs and found his wife, still dressed, lying beside his children, all three peacefully asleep. A lamp on the bedside table cast a soft golden light over them.

Lying down on the other side of Nathan, Ty propped on his elbow, content to gaze at his children, making them silent promises and promising himself he'd repeat them when they were listening.

And he'd have a long talk with Mattie.

If it wasn't already too late to gain her trust.

Twenty-Nine

Mattie finished tying a white ribbon into a bow in Angeline's hair. "There! You'll be the prettiest little girl at the dance."

Angeline pirouetted in front of the cheval mirror, smiling as she inspected her new green checked dress and white pinafore. "I feel pretty."

She gave Mattie an enthusiastic hug. "Thank you, Mama! You know, when I was living at that old orphanage, you were just the kind of mama I wished for."

"Thank you. That's the nicest compliment I've ever had," Mattie said as the child pulled away.

Standing by the fireplace, Ty felt his throat tighten as he looked on. Then his daughter moved to him with a wide smile and held up her arms. Ty scooped her up.

"And you're just the kind of papa I wished for," she said shyly. Ty felt tears slip down his cheeks as he returned his daughter's hug.

"That's nice. Because you are the perfect daughter."

Nathan stuck his head inside the door to his sister's bedroom. "Angeline, will you hurry? Grandpa and Grandma are waiting in the buggy!"

Still holding his daughter, Ty knelt on one knee. "Come here, Nathan."

The boy complied and Ty hugged both of them. "I love you two. Very, very much." He kissed their cheeks, then released them. "Go on. Your grandparents are waiting to show you off at the dance. We'll be along shortly."

As the echo of their footsteps on the stairs died out, Ty stepped up behind Mattie, who'd moved to the window and was looking out. Between kisses on her neck, Ty added softly, "If I can't talk your mother into staying home."

Mattie closed her eyes. Watching Ty with their children, she'd felt such a surge of love, it had stolen her' breath. At least he'd learned to show the children his affection.

Knowing that, she could forgive him for not loving her. But, oh, it wasn't easy.

His hands found her breasts and began caressing as he drew her back against him. "What do you say, Mrs. Warburton?"

Not waiting for an answer, he turned her around and kissed her deeply, igniting deep fires within. Framing his face with her hands, Mattie returned his kiss, boldly thrusting her tongue into his mouth in response to his forays.

He settled her between his thighs and pressed his arousal against her softness. "For a week, I've tried to find time to be alone with you. But with my mother and father and the children, and everyone coming by . . ."

"I know. I've wanted you, too. But we'll be late. Your mother and father will worry." She tried to pull back.

Grinning, Ty held her fast. "I whispered to my father that we might not make it."

"You didn't! But he'll know what we're doing!" Mattie felt a blush growing on her cheeks.

"It's all right, Mattie." Ty laughed. "We are married. Anyway, that's not really why I want to be alone with you — though now that the idea has presented itself, it has its appeal." He nuzzled her neck again.

"Then why do you? Want to be alone with me, that is?"

Ty pulled back, his gaze capturing hers. What Mattie read in his eyes did funny things to the rhythm of her heart. "I wanted quiet, uninterrupted time to tell you how very much I love you, Mattie."

"You do?" Mattie put her hand to her throat, certain her heart would jump out of it from sheer happiness.

"Yes, I do. Though why I should have denied it so long and run from it as I did, I don't really know. You're the best thing that ever happened to me. I love you."

"Oh, Ty! I love you so much!" She hugged him fiercely.

"You love me?" He hardly dared to believe it was true. Mattie loved him.

"Yes! I didn't think. . . . I didn't dare hope —"

"Let's discuss it later," he whispered. "But Ty —"

He silenced her with his lips.

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed *Marrying Mattie*! This story and these characters are very close to my heart.

From the time I read *Little Women* and *Tom Sawyer* in grade school, historic America has fascinated me, and in my opinion, no other period or place lends itself to romance better than the American West. It was populated by bigger-than-life characters and tamed by heroes and heroines who had dreams and dared to pursue them — and sometimes by people like Ty and Mattie, who found love was worth fighting for.

For reasons of plot, I speeded up the availability of train service to the Texas interior by a short period of time.

I love to hear from readers. You can write to me c/o Zebra Books.

Victoria Dark